

HOW GREEN IS YOUR AIRFIELD?

By Liveryman Steve Slater

The whole of the transportation sector is coming under increasing scrutiny in terms of its environmental performance. While some of this may be driven more by political rhetoric than fact, the simple fact is that the aviation sector offers a high-profile target for activists. Yet we have some very positive stories to tell. I'll leave it to those who are better qualified to demonstrate the huge technological advances in airframes and engines that enable aircraft today to operate with unprecedented reductions in noise, emissions and fuel usage in comparison with their predecessors. We've also got future developments in fuel chemistry and in airspace design and management that will further reduce our environmental impact in future years.

I will though, focus on a more fundamental area. Have you ever thought that the aviation community is the custodian of some of the largest environmental sanctuaries in the UK - our airfields themselves?

Even apparent concrete jungles like Heathrow or major military bases have large areas of grass, or other open spaces. While they have to minimise wildlife and bird conflict with aircraft, there is increasing evidence from local nature and environmental surveys that all airfields are important as low-insecticide, low-herbicide, sanctuaries for plants, insects and associated wildlife. Civil or military, large or small, I would hazard a guess that whichever airfield you call in on, it is the largest open green space you will visit that day.

It is not surprising therefore that the curtilage of many airfields - the areas away from hangars, aprons, clubhouses and workshops - is increasingly recognised as important 'open green space'. Even when an airfield is surrounded by so-called "green" fields, the business

pressures on most farmers today mean that the surrounding land is likely to be subject of intensive agriculture. It is likely that just one or two crop species are being grown on ground which is regularly sprayed with fertilisers, herbicides

or insecticides to increase yields. Effectively they form a monoculture with far less biological diversity than on the neighbouring aerodrome.

In contrast, there is no incentive for an airfield operator to make the grass grow faster!

Airfields offer a wide range of sustainable and diverse wildlife habitats, both in their margins and, with grass airfields,

on the runways themselves. I wonder how many of us have taxied out to the sight of hares on the aerodrome, sometimes scuttling away or pressing themselves into the longer grass for cover? Or between aircraft movements, you have been serenaded by skylarks somewhere in the blue skies above. They're all proof of an airfield's ecological credentials.

The mixture of close-mown runways and longer grass margins with wildflowers is a perfect wildlife sanctuary, with the airfield's perimeter and infield providing nesting cover for birds such as skylarks and lapwings, and animals such as hares and voles. At the resurrected former World War One grass airfield at Stow Maries in Essex, an English Nature survey listed no fewer than 105 species of plants and flowers. They in turn create an eco-system with other protected species such as sparrowhawks and owls taking advantage of the food chain.

More recently, Bodmin Airfield in Cornwall was recognised as an exciting new 'donor' site for repopulating other meadow areas after it was found that the airfield is one of the largest remaining traditional hay meadows in the southwest of England. It was an outcome completely arrived at by accident, rather than by design. The reason is that for the past few decades it has had no herbicides, pesticides or fertilisers spread across it, and unlike the runways and taxiways, the outfield is only cut once a year. The airfield is now providing ecologists with valuable green hay and yellow rattle seed - hand-collected this summer - which are now being used to re-establish traditional meadows.

The Light Aircraft Association has set up a working group, headed by Liveryman Steve Slater and Freeman Anne Hughes to identify other airfields that might offer similar benefits. So: "How green is YOUR airfield?"



The mixture of meadow grasses and flowers at Popham makes it a natural haven for insects and small mammals.



Turweston Aerodrome in Northamptonshire has a mix of shrub planting and solar arrays, which make the airfield carbon neutral, more than offsetting emissions from aircraft operations.