

Wetland Biomass to Bioenergy – a blog on the open days

By Sally Mills, RSPB Reserves Bioenergy Project Manager



The open days in the Somerset Levels and Moors and East Anglia were really well received, with a number of participants attending each, intrigued to find out more of the complexities around managing some of the UK's most sensitive wetlands.

The days aimed to provide opportunities for delegates interested in the Biomass to Bioenergy competition to meet some of the Site Managers from the wetland consortium and to learn about the practical conditions that wetland managers across the country are dealing with to maintain both nationally and internationally important sites for nature conservation.

Somerset

The morning in Somerset included visits to Somerset Wildlife Trust's Westhay Moor ([ST 45607 43744](#)) where delegates were shown wet reedbed and the operation of the Truxor, an amphibious cutter. Discussions were held around the difficulties of managing sites with dense reed typically cut on a 7 year rotation, wet but solid substrate and the disposal of cut material.

Westhay Moor also enabled delegates to see mire habitat, the management of which needs to consider maintaining the delicate vegetation tussock structure and soft substrates.

Visits to Natural England's Shapwick Heath and RSPB's Ham Wall Reserves ([BA6 9SX](#)) demonstrated the scale of habitat management, both large wetland sites offering a mosaic of habitats, from wet woodland to reedbed. Although in some areas ground conditions were soft, the vast areas of reedbed were on clay which made travelling a little easier. The disposal of material in relation to the techniques used for cutting was discussed, this together with transportation, storage and the physical properties of the vegetation and its appropriateness to different disposal methods.

The day concluded with a visit over the Polden Ridge to the southern levels and moors to RSPB's Greylake Reserve ([ST 39913 34639](#)). Very different from what had been seen so far, this wet grassland site on peat presented many challenges. Managed for breeding waders the desired habitat was for tightly grazed grassland with dispersed tussocks, the high water table encouraged successional species such as soft rush which out competed the softer desirable grasses.



Discussions were held around the ability to harvest soft rush like common reed as seen at the three previous sites and once again the nature of the disposal that would be suitable to the waxy, pithy rush.

Eastern England



The Eastern England open day began at Natural England's Bure Marshes ([TG338162](#)) where a number of delegates saw a selection of habitats all on delicate peat substrate, from fen through to willow scrub.

One of the many topics talked about, was the use of mixed vegetation types to generate energy, the difficulties of access and the possible use of waterways for transport together with the desirable times of year for harvesting.

A trip to Buttle Marsh ([TG 37261 18012](#)) hosted by the Broads Authority enabled delegates to look at wet grassland with tussock forming soft rush through to reedbed. There was also the opportunity to see the current harvesting machine – the Fen Harvester and discuss issues around different cut and collection methods and [the research already undertaken by the Broads Authority](#).

The day concluded with a trip over the border into Suffolk to RSPB's Lakenheath, ([IP27 9AD](#)) a large reedbed site created from scratch, with good water control and big expanses of dense reed. This site presented the scale of habitat management, together with consideration of new avenues for energy use in relation to reserve visitor centres and offices. This included scope for income generation and a vehicle through which to tell the biomass to bioenergy story – specifically, how management of these sites could not only benefit the wildlife they are important for but provide material that could contribute towards green energy targets.