BACK FROM THE BRINK

Colour in the Margins with words

Poems and creative writing activities for threatened species in our arable farmlands

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for Back From The Brink

This booklet is your passport to Colour in the Margins With Words!

Part of the Colour in the Margins project, these activities will guide you to think and write creatively about the plants and animals that live in your local area, especially in the edges and hedgerows of arable fields.

We would encourage you to print off this booklet and get out and about in nature!

The activities are suitable for both children and adults (children under 8 might need a bit more help from an adult).

You can also draw if you like.

The booklet includes some poems inspired by the species Colour in the Margins is working with, which you might like to read these for inspiration.

We would love to see what you come up with, so please do share and tag us on social media - @naturebftb

Walk in someone else's shoes… or roots!

Go outside and have a look at the animals, insects and plants around you. Choose one of them, and imagine what a day in its life would be like…

Where does it live?

What would it see?

What would it hear?

What does it like and dislike?

Does it have any hobbies?

Who are its friends?

Flowers in your mind

Write about a memory that you have involving flowers in the wild. Where did you see them? What were you doing? What did you feel? What did the flowers look, smell, feel, sound like? If they had a taste, what do you imagine it would be?

To see a World in a Grain of Sand And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
(William Blake)

Look at a flower or seed under a magnifying glass (or a microscope if you have one!). Describe what you see as if it was a landscape – is it on Earth? An alien landscape? Does it have any inhabitants?

Corn life

Corn dollies are figures made from straw, created to celebrate the harvest. Write a life story for a corn dolly: where did they come from? What are their ambitions?

Writing ecosystem

Write the first line of a poem about nature here. Ask your friends and family to contribute a line each until you have a completed poem!

Hold Fast

Poems by Katherine McMahon

To write these poems, I trailed the places where some of the most threatened wildflowers have been seen – and then sown, encouraged, and taken care of. I focussed mostly on corn buttercup and red hemp-nettle.

Driving through Scarborough, the Vale of Pickering, and the Wolds, I visited fields, old quarries, nature reserves, and forests. At the same time, I read about the wildflowers: I found out more about the reasons for their decline, and the possibilities for coexistence; I read about the traditions surrounding them, such as putting speedwell seeds in the seams of clothes for journeys; I learned about the ecosystems they support, and the efforts of farmers and conservationists to create spaces in our arable landscapes for them to flourish.

I grew up in this area. During this project, I've thought a lot about what it means to be from this landscape, and what it means to be connected to it. As an LGBTQ+ person, I left in part to find more community (as many of us do). But there's no escaping the sense of responsibility and affection I feel for these places (and I'm not sure I'd want to).

I feel more part of the ecosystem as a result of following these important and beautiful plants. I hope the poems will give you a sense of connection to them too.

Homecoming

The first breath of cold clean air
at the threshold of the station
and here I am.

I spiral my head in the car
to look up at the constellations
awkward in the window
gasping in their indifferent light.

I am small here.
The ghosts are longing to be big enough.

I chose to leave,
and I am here to chase
tiny things which left
with no goodbye, just
disappeared like witches
in clouds of herbicide.

I will not see them here: the seasons
are all wrong. But I follow my roots
to theirs, say their names like spells:

red hemp-nettle
corn buttercup
interrupted brome.

I see pheasants, but no pheasant's eye.
The ghosts of speedwells
wish me good travels; I long
for their seeds as charms in my seams.

I feel them like sisters
tied through our rhizomes,
my mother's leeks built from the same soil
more of it in me with every bowl of soup I eat.

I left, too, because I didn't fit
with the order here: I was too queer
to stay. They were unproductive,
disorderly, just weeds.

We scattered parts behind to hold fast
to the possibility
of returning.

Pheasant's Eye

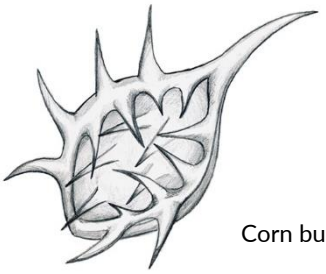
Corn buttercup

Driving, December fog:
turned earth
right to the horizon
all else gone.

It takes effort
to see summer green
to see old mix-and-match colours
among furrows, along edges.

Hypnotised by fog and road,
driving with only stopped-short
headlight beams, crystallised:
trusting that the road is still there,

like dreaming
corn buttercup
finding seeds,
and planting.



Corn buttercup

Edgelands

It's amazing how suddenly
a landscape can immerse you:
forest trails spread with
shed needles, intense pale orange
that the camera has no hope of capturing.
The trees draw in,
all shadow and paint,
the tree stumps slate slick with rain.
It is the only real place:
the winding path,
mosses and bracken and shrubs,
bare, wet trees rushing upwards
like slow dark fireworks.

The path spits me out
near a sawmill, the sharp-sweet
smell of cut timber taking
over, the thump and buzz
rushing back in.

The sudden nature
reserve is guarded:
Hebridean sheep look at me warily and trot
away. They are eating the scrub through winter
so the flowers can come through.
An earthwork guards the top side.
I dream of slow worms
in the dry stone wall.

Red hemp-nettle was found here
when we thought it might be gone,
quietly open-mouthed,
sudden whisper.

Now the sheep make space for it.
Welcomed, it blooms
with company,
with limestone beneath,
solid teeth above.

Red hemp-nettle

Hope

It's a skein of fat Canada geese
rambling leisurely across the flooded road
ignoring your car's inching,
and the bus coming the other way;
it's laughing and laughing
at how much they don't give a damn
by yourself
in the driver's seat.

It's fourteen plants
from thirteen precious seeds
a miracle worthy of scriptures
still to be written
about those who persevere.

It's *grows on basic scree*.

It's a new technique for collection
one hundred seeds in a biscuit tin,
then thousands for the seedbank.

It's one more hedgerow;
it's knowing that the old ones
were homes, it's knowing that
we have always grown up together.

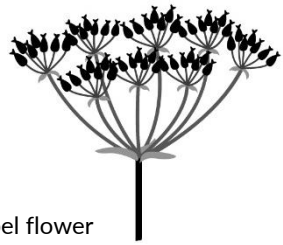
It's thinking it's so quiet
then closing my eyes to hear half a dozen
different kinds of bird:

even though I know there should be more
there is so much life in the silver needles
threading subtle shades
through crow's caw.

It's 'quarry (dis)' on the map
and forest on the eye
and ankle-turning stones on the feet
and being grateful for their grip
when the mud sets in.

It's the brindled feather
saved by my father
laid on a small cloth.

It's the old man with the wire-haired
dogs saying, you won't see many flowers
round here now, but if you go up
High Dale or Low Dale there are big banks
along the roads where primulas grow
and they're that sheltered
that on a day like this
they might just open
for a moment.



Umbel flower

Colour in the Margins

Encouraging arable wildlife in our landscapes

What is the habitat for the Colour in the Margins project?

The colourful hues of cornfield flowers were once a familiar part of our arable landscape. Sadly they are also the fastest declining suite of plants in the UK. Fascinating, sometimes rare, and often overlooked - they are frequently threatened by the arable farming on which they depend. This has a knock-on effect for other wildlife, including ground beetles, bats and birds.

Why is this habitat at risk?

Arable habitats have been affected by modern farming practices such as the increased use of herbicides and fertilisers, changes from spring to autumn growing, and increased competition from modern crop varieties. These have reduced the chances that cornfield flowers have to spread and grow.

How we'll colour-in the margins

This Back from the Brink project, led by Plantlife, will focus on 13 species; 10 plants, and three ground beetles. Conservation work for these will have benefits for many other threatened species,

particularly 14 birds, two bryophytes, eight mammals, three insects and eight other arable plants. We will develop ways to reintroduce and manage for these species, and will bring them back to suitable sites. We will work with farmers and landowners to encourage them to take up these techniques.

We aim to capture community recollections of animals and plants of the arable landscape, arrange farm visits, and provide training workshops, advice and guidance for farmers. We will introduce people to the habitats by a programme of activities and volunteering.

What we're aiming for

By the end of the project, we aim to have successfully reintroduced arable species at key sites and improved the way people manage arable habitats. We will have reconnected people with the farmed environment, encouraging them to appreciate the importance of arable wildlife, both for its cultural value, and also for its part in a larger ecosystem.

Call for volunteers

Colour in the Margins are looking for volunteers to help us to survey for arable plants on farmland. These surveys will help to build on our records by mapping species distribution, highlighting patterns of decline and identifying sites in need of focused conservation management.

We will be supporting volunteers at every botanical skill level with training workshops and going out with project staff to learn hands-on.

To register your interest in recording arable plants as part of the Colour in the Margins project or to find out more about volunteering with us please contact us at colourinthemargins@plantlife.org.uk.

We need your Arable Stories!

Have you had a close encounter with boxing hares or been spellbound by the song of the skylark on a recent farmland walk? Do you have fond memories of making corn dollies or helping at harvest time? Is there an old wives tale you live by today that harks back to arable roots?

Recollections past or present, we would love to hear from you!

We invite you to share with us your stories which could be anything from your encounters with farmland wildlife to your memories on an arable farm.

Please get in touch with us to find out more about this project and how you can get involved. Please send your arable stories, photos or videos to colourinthemargins@plantlife.org.uk.

Front cover image: Red Hemp-nettle at Cholderton Estate © W Legg

Back cover image: Corn Bunting © rspb-images.com

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