

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Access

I would like to access an interesting looking plot on my map, but I cannot find out who owns the land, what should I do?

It can be tricky to find out who owns areas of land. If in doubt, try and find an alternative plot. If you are keen to survey that particular plot, and would like to pursue getting landowner permission, try asking around locally – the local post office can sometimes be helpful, as can the library. If there are limited numbers of houses near your plots you could try asking if you feel comfortable doing so. If your square falls within a National Park or AONB, then it is possible that staff at those organisations will be able to help with ownership enquiries.

If you have identified a landowner, you can download a letter from the NPMS web page (see [here](#)) that explains the scheme to land owners and requests their permission for you to access their land. If you can't find out who owns the land, there may be other suitable plots that you can find out the ownership of. If you can't gain access to any of the plots in your 1 km square, and there are no accessible options for self-selected plots either, then please let us know and we will try to find you an alternative square.

What do I do if access restrictions have changed between years and I can no longer access my plot?

We understand that sometimes access may become impossible. If access is prohibited due to safety factors, then in no circumstance should you jeopardise your safety e.g. if your plot is near the edge of a maritime cliff and erosion has occurred. If the access restriction is temporary, you can record the inaccessibility this year but return to the plot in subsequent years to see if recording can commence again. If there is no way you will ever be able to access your plot again then record this fact and select a new plot within your square if at all possible.

What do I do if I cannot find 5 suitable plots within my 1km square? (e.g. due to heavily restricted access?)

We have recommended a combination of 3 square plots and 2 linear plots, however, ultimately the number and composition of your plots will be determined by the nature of your square. Don't forget that the first port of call if you cannot access the plots displayed on your map is to self-select plots in other locations (see page 10 of the [survey guidance booklet](#), 2nd ed.)

If only a smaller number of plots can be done (e.g. 2 or 3) then please just survey this number of plots – don't forget that you could do 5 linear plots, for example, particularly if there are numerous lanes or paths in your square, but little access to actual parcels of land. These linear plots could be streams, hedgerows, arable field margins, or even linear grassland plots on broad verges.

The plots in my square are dull, can I have a new square?

In this situation we would encourage you to continue surveying the 'dull' square, because these are habitats that could potentially improve in the future; don't forget that general records of plants that you record in your square can also be submitted via the 'Extra species entry' option on the website. An additional option is to apply for an additional square: in this case you could then survey each square in alternate years, hopefully increasing your chances of encountering a greater diversity of plants!

2. Grid references and locating plots

How do I work out the grid references for my plots?

It is not essential to provide a 10 figure grid reference, 6 figures is often sufficient and it is more important that you are able to re-find your plots in subsequent years; sketches and photographs will be useful for this. However, for those of you who are interested in using GPS units to aid in plot location, please see this [crib sheet](#).

Do I have to use GPS? I don't own one and I don't want to buy one.

No, you don't have to use a GPS. It will hopefully be possible to get close to at least 3 of the plot locations

marked on the map using landscape features and topography, although this may be difficult in open landscapes. We ask that you do your best to reach the plot locations specified on the map but appreciate that it may be hard to find them exactly. The important thing is to find the **same** plot location in the years following, wherever you place it in the first year. If you don't have a GPS, please take care to produce detailed field sketches and take photographs as you won't have any detailed GPS coordinates to help you re-find your plot in subsequent years.

Various mobile phone apps are also available that allow you to use your phone to get grid reference information. One option is listed below:

https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=uk.co.torvusconsultants.gridreferencefree.OS&gl=UK&utm_source=emea_OO

The free BRC iRecord biological recording app also uses GPS to obtain a grid reference for your location:

<https://irecord.org.uk/app>

How do I work out where the grid on the map is on the ground?

The map of your kilometre square will have an Ordnance Survey grid reference number in the top left hand corner, made up of two letters followed by four numbers. This will locate your 1km square within the British or Irish grid. You can use the Ordnance Survey website to view your square within a larger map: type your 1 km grid reference into the search box at <https://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/osmaps/>. Another option is this website: <http://www.cucaera.co.uk/grp/>. To work out where the edges and corners of your 1km square lie, try to use landscape features such as road intersections, field corners, fence lines or water bodies. Map reading is of course a key element of the NPMS, and we hope that the exercise will increase surveyors' understanding and enjoyment of this important outdoor skill.

What do I do if there are no linear features near to the intersections when I get there?

It may help to locate linear features using the map before arriving on site in your square, as potentially suitable rivers, field boundaries and roads will often be clear on the map or from satellite imagery e.g. on Google maps. If you cannot find any suitable linear features intersected by the gridlines shown on your map, you can follow protocol A for self-selection of plots outlined on [page 10 of the survey guidance](#).

I am having difficulty finding where the plots are on the ground, how accurate do I have to be?

We appreciate that it may be difficult to find your plot precisely, particularly if you are in an open landscape with few clearly defined features. We only ask that you do your best to establish plots within the boxes marked on your map where these contain NPMS habitats. The most important thing to do is to keep a clear record of where your plot is in the first year, so you can find the same plot in successive years. It is the consistency in plot recording that is especially important.

3. Carrying out the survey

Do I have to survey twice?

We do ask that you try to survey your plots twice a year, once in late spring or early summer and once in late summer. In the first year of surveying, you may wish to make an additional reconnaissance visit in order to confirm where your plots are and to get to know your square. Surveying twice per year will help us get a clearer idea of any changes in vegetation and will help to ensure that plants are not missed due to seasonal changes.

My plots are quite far apart, can I survey over a couple of days if I cannot get to them all on one day?

Yes, this is not a problem. However, if you have made arrangements with a landowner to access private land on a specific day, then you should check that it is acceptable for you to access their land on two separate days.

Can I record species that are not on the list?

If you are recording at Wildflower or Indicator Level, we ask that you focus on recording species on the habitat-appropriate species list. There is, however, an area on the website on which you can enter records of other species you find if you do record additional information ('Extra species entry' under the 'Request squares and enter data' menu option). Plant species observations recorded in this way will enter into a general database maintained at the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology's Biological Records Centre, and will be published to the [NBN Atlas](#), but these data will not be used to create the main indicators of wildflower

diversity that the NPMS is aiming to create.

If you are recording at the 'Inventory Level', please record all the species in your plot, including those that are not flowering.

I can't find any of the species on the list in my plot. Do you still need me to record this?

Yes please. It is valuable information to know that there are none of the species on the habitat-appropriate list; for example, it can be an important insight into showing that that habitat is in a poor condition and impoverished. It is also important to record plots that have the potential to improve in the future – plots that improve over 10 or 20 years are crucial for indicating changes in the countryside.

However, it is also important to make sure that you are using the appropriate species list for that habitat – remember that if you are not sure which fine-scale habitat you are looking at, you can use the broader-habitat species lists.

I have found a species and I am unsure exactly what it is; I have taken photos and written descriptions of it. Is there anyone who can help me identify it?

If you have a problem with ID of a species and the species guides cannot help you, then you can take a look online when you get home or email the photos to support@npms.org.uk or your mentor and we will try to help. Another option would be to use a website such as <https://uk.inaturalist.org/>, which allows a user to submit photos, which are then identified by a community of enthusiastic naturalists; X or bluesky can also be used for a similar purpose. [Google images](#) can also be a useful tool if you have a rough idea of a species' ID. Numerous plant ID phone apps also exist. PI@ntNet is one of the most accurate for NW Europe: https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=org.plantnet&hl=en_GB

If you have a Facebook account, you are more than welcome to join the NPMS support closed Facebook group for volunteers and mentors. This is a great place to post pictures and ask for ID help, as well as sharing other queries, experiences and advice. Find it here: [Facebook Support](#)

What do I do if I return to my plot one year and it is no longer one of the NPMS habitats?

This is important information to record as it signifies a change in habitat. Any supplementary information you can record about the change is useful e.g. whether it is no longer an NPMS habitat due to changes in agriculture, or due to construction work of some sort. We ask that you return to the plot in the years following the discovery to check that the plot is no longer an NPMS habitat; future changes may cause a reversion to a habitat included in the scheme, this is especially likely for arable plots. It is not necessary to choose a replacement plot if you find you cannot record one of yours due to a habitat change. An exception to this would be if the land has undergone construction work and it is clear that it will not return to a semi-natural NPMS habitat within the next 10 years. If this is the case, then record this fact and choose a new plot to record. This is all important information for quantifying change in plant diversity at the national level.

I set up some plots last year, but I cannot record my plot this year. I will be able to record it in subsequent years, what should I do? (i.e. I need to miss a year)

If your circumstances mean that you cannot record your established plots this year, but you will be able to record them in subsequent years, then please do so. However, if you need to miss several years or are uncertain that you will be able to continue recording, please let us know and we can ask another volunteer to record your plots.

What is a flush?

A flush is an area of boggy ground, usually on a slope below a spring or next to a small watercourse. They are fed by ground water that isn't confined to a channel and are therefore often permanently wet or soggy with a covering of mosses and usually only very sparse cover of wildflowers, grasses and sedges. Flushes often grade imperceptibly into larger mires, marshes and swamps on level ground. The 2nd ed. of the NPMS Survey Guidance contains more information on flushes, [pp. 45–47](#). See also our [general resources PDF](#), which lists links to coverage of specific NPMS habitats in our newsletters, YouTube account, and elsewhere.

What does the 'indicator' column in the Species Lists booklet mean?

The plusses and minuses refer to whether the species listed is a positive or a negative indicator of the health

of that particular habitat. If you are recording at the 'Indicator Level' then please use the whole list for the fine-scale habitat in question.

Should I record trees that overhang but are not rooted in my plot?

Recorders should address all vertical layers overlapping the plot for the species that they are recording (for inventory recorders this will include shrubs and trees).

4. Data entry

How do I enter my data online?

Full guidance on the online data entry is provided here:

[Data Entry Guide](#)

You can also find instructional YouTube videos of the process and creating plots here:

[YouTube video](#)

The 'Indicator', 'Inventory' and 'Extra species entry' data entry forms do not have the latest scientific ('Stace 3') names available, is this an error?

No, this is intended. The website uses the UK Species Inventory species list, maintained by the Natural History Museum and the National Biodiversity Network. The NPMS website will be updated with the latest accepted scientific names in the future, for the meantime please use the scientific names from the second edition of the *New Flora of the British Isles* (Stace, 1997) or use common names. For 'Indicator' species features in the NPMS Species ID Guide, the older scientific names are given in parentheses for convenience.

If your question has not been answered then please contact the NPMS Volunteer Coordinator on 07711 922098 or 07399 299770, or email support@npms.org.uk

We will update this FAQ document periodically, so, if you feel that additional questions should be dealt with here, please let us know.