Nit-grass

Gastridium ventricosum

Nationally Scarce

IDENTIFICATION:

Nit-grass is an erect grass up to 50 cm tall which usually grows in tufts. The leaves are up to 10 cm long and 4 mm wide, but are usually smaller, with a short ligule. The flowers are borne in a compact terminal spike which is spear-shaped and tapers to a point. The lemmas usually have a bent awn up to 4 mm in length.

Similar species: Other grasses of arable land with flowers in compact spikes are the very common Black-grass which has long, cylindrical spikes, and Annual Vernal-grass which has distinctive tufts of hairs at the junction of leaf and stem.

Associated uncommon species: Lesser Quaking-grass also occurs at its only known site in Hampshire.

HABITAT:

Arable field margins, set-aside, drought-prone calcareous grassland especially near the coast.

SOIL TYPE:

Thin soils over (usually) Jurassic or Carboniferous limestones; calcareous clays where these are well-drained or prone to summer drought; and sometimes other soil types.

MANAGEMENT REQUIREMENTS:

Autumn cultivation.

Nit-grass: spikelet × 10

DISTRIBUTION:

As an arable species, Nit-grass was formerly widespread in the south and east of England. It now occurs in one known arable site in Hampshire. It has also recently occurred in set-aside land in Dorset and Somerset.

LIFE CYCLE:

Flowers from May to September.

Seed longevity is unknown.

Germination is mainly in the autumn, although seedlings can be killed by hard frosts.

J F M A M J J A S O N D

REASONS FOR DECLINE:

Nit-grass has declined in arable habitats, probably as a result of increases in the amounts of nitrogen used and the development of competitive crop varieties. It may also be susceptible to grass-weed herbicides. However, it has increased in recent years in set-aside fields.