



Bedfordshire  
Cambridgeshire  
Northamptonshire  
Peterborough



# Pasture Management

for horses and wildlife

Protecting wildlife  
close to home

Old pastures are wonderful places for wildlife. These grasslands were once common in the countryside and were maintained by a long tradition of low intensity grazing. However over the last fifty years farming has become more intensive and most of these rich wildlife habitats have been lost through ploughing, reseeding or treatment with fertilisers and herbicides. These agriculturally improved grasslands support very few plants and animal species.

## Horse owners and conservation

Often horse and pony owners do not want grass enriched with fertilisers because lush grazing can lead to obesity, joint problems in young stock and laminitis, a potentially fatal disease. Old pastures provide a natural 'herb-mix' rich in minerals, high in fibre and low in protein which is the best diet for horses and ponies.

## Problems with poor grassland management

### Over-grazing

One of the main problems is over-grazing. Grasses and wildflowers are grazed very hard and sensitive plant species are lost from the sward, which reduces pasture quality for horses and ponies. Areas of bare, trampled ground increase and problem weeds, particularly thistles, docks and poisonous ragwort, readily establish. The risk of harmful worms building up is greater in overgrazed paddocks.



Over-grazed and poached paddock

### Latrine Areas

Grasslands grazed by horses tend to develop latrine areas. These are areas where the horse returns to defecate and urinate, but where it avoids grazing. These latrines will spread, if not managed, which puts more pressure on the remaining grassland. Latrine areas are poor in plant species and contain mainly coarse grasses and weeds because they are over-enriched with nutrients from the dung.

## Good grassland management

### Control grazing levels and do not overgraze

Aim to keep a sward height of at least 5cm (2in) through most of the grazing period and not less than 2-5cm (1-2in) at the end of a grazing period. Rotating grazing round different fields or subdividing fields prevents overgrazing, and allows the pasture to rest.

### Remove animals when the ground is wet

Poaching (hoof disturbance of soil) destroys the grassland and encourages weeds like thistles, ragwort and docks to spread. Muddy conditions can cause bacterial infections (e.g. mud fever) in horses and ponies that are left on wet ground for long periods.

### **Avoid supplementary feeding in the field**

Supplementary feeding smothers growing plants. Furthermore, animals gathering at feeding places create bare ground where weeds will spread.

### **Avoid the use of artificial fertilisers and do not plough and reseed**

Artificial fertilisers will destroy the rich variety of plants that grow in old pastures and can cause health problems in your horses and ponies.

### **Remove dung regularly**

Removing dung prevents the establishment of ungrazed latrine areas and helps control parasitic worms that affect horses and ponies.

### **Remove tall ungrazed grass where latrines are forming**

Mow grass regularly which helps to prevent establishment of latrine areas. Cuttings must be removed as they can be harmful to horses and ponies if eaten.

### **Mixed or alternative grazing with other livestock if possible**

Sheep and cattle will help prevent the formation of latrine areas and help to control parasitic worms.

### **Restrict weed control to mechanical methods or spot treatment with herbicide**

Blanket spraying with herbicide is not advised as it will destroy other plants as well as the problem plants. Heavy infestations of docks, thistles and nettles can be managed by regular cutting which helps weaken and prevent them spreading but it may be necessary to dig them up to completely kill them. Spot treating with an herbicide (e.g. Roundup) will also kill weeds on contact. Follow the manufacturers' guidelines. The best management to prevent weeds establishing is to carefully control grazing levels and remove animals in wet weather to maintain good vegetation cover.

### **Chain harrow outside the bird nesting season and flowering time of plants**

Chain harrows are sometimes used to break up matted swards and spread dung but harrowing can encourage the invasion of weeds if too much bare ground is created. Only harrow if absolutely necessary.



- Following good grassland management practices will help you maintain and improve the grazing area quality for your horses and ponies.
- Owners of horse pastures can receive funding from the Environmental Stewardship Scheme. Contact your local Wildlife Trust for more information.
- The Wildlife Trust provides free information and advice on managing your pastures for both your animals and the wildlife.
- Remember that horse and pony owners can play an important part in conserving pastures because conservation fits in well with good horse management.

## GrazeBeds

### **GrazeBeds website links landowners and graziers**

This website acts as a match making service to link available stock to land in Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire.

If you would like to view or register your land or animals on the website for FREE then visit

[www.grazebeds.org.uk](http://www.grazebeds.org.uk) or contact Laura Downton at the Wildlife Trust.

## Local Seed Initiative

The Wildlife Trust Local Seed Initiative is a partnership with Emorsgate Wild Seeds, local farmers, landowners and agricultural contractors working to restore species-rich grassland. The project relies upon using seed from existing species-rich meadows to diversify meadows that need restoration. If you think your site may be suitable as a donor site or have grassland in need of restoration please contact Christa Perry at the Wildlife Trust.

## County Wildlife Sites

County Wildlife Sites (CWS) are areas of land important for their wildlife. Found on public and private land they play a vital role in the conservation of the UK's natural heritage.



**Good pasture management**

## Contact Details

For further information about pasture management and County Wildlife Sites contact your nearest Wildlife Sites Officer.

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