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LAND MANAGEMENT FOR WILDLIFE

Gorse



C H Gomersall (rspb-images.com)



David Tipling (rspb-images.com)

Gorse is ideal for a range of nesting birds, including linnets (above left)

Gorse scrub occurs wherever the soils are light and free draining, in areas that are relatively free from severe frosts. Gorse is very important for birds and for invertebrates. However, it does have the potential to encroach on to otherwise valuable land. Gorse is relatively short-lived (up to 25 years), but with careful management, its vigour and value for wildlife can be maintained.

There are three species of gorse in Britain. Common gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) is the most familiar and widespread, and has the most robust growth character. Western gorse (*Ulex gallii*) is frequent in the western half of Britain and occurs along the East Anglian coast; it is relatively low-growing yet robust.

Dwarf gorse (*Ulex minor*) is a low-growing sprawling shrub that is a relatively uncommon component of the heathland shrub layer in central southern and eastern Britain. This leaflet discusses the first two species together, whereas dwarf gorse is best treated as part of the heathland dwarf shrub community.

BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE

Compact gorse is ideal for a range of nesting heathland, downland and farmland birds, including the Dartford warbler, stonechat, linnets and yellowhammer. The dense structure also provides important refuge for these birds in harsh weather, and is essential for the survival of Dartford warblers in winter.

Gorse is important for invertebrates; it is in flower for long periods, so is an important nectar source in early spring and early winter, when little else is in flower. A number of scarce invertebrates are dependent on it.

What conditions does gorse need?

Gorse thrives on free-draining, low-fertility soils and can be out-competed in nutrient-rich conditions. It seeds freely and readily colonises disturbed ground, so can be highly invasive in open areas. This also means that, in appropriate areas, it can also be easily cultivated.

Common gorse is not restricted to acidic soils; it also grows well on free-draining limestone and chalk soils. However, it does not tolerate frequent frosts so is not found at altitude in the north.

GUIDELINES OVERLEAF

MANAGING GORSE

How much, and where should it be?

- Gorse is valuable as scattered bushes or as discrete clumps of up to 0.25 ha.
- A maximum of 10% gorse cover is usually appropriate on priority habitats or farmed land.
- 5% cover of common gorse in mature heath is ideal for Dartford warblers.
- Large continuous patches colonising open habitats could shade out herbaceous interest, and might not be appropriate.
- Gorse hedges provide nest sites and stock proofing.
- For wildlife, gorse is best located in sheltered areas, away from frost hollows.
- Avoid wet ground; the growth will usually be straggly and of little value to nesting birds.

Encouraging gorse

Establishing gorse should be relatively straightforward if a few principles are followed.

- Prepare a fine loose seedbed of dry, low-fertility soil, free from competing vegetation, using for example a rotovator.
- Areas like former bracken beds and cleared scrub are ideal. Avoid areas of important vegetation like heather.
- Collect seeds (in litter) from existing gorse areas; broadcast and tread in.
- Water in dry weather until the seedlings are growing strongly.
- Young plants can be translocated. Dig these out, avoiding damage to the roots and plant into areas free of competition.
- For small clumps of gorse, plant seedlings in clusters of 10-15 plants so sufficient survive.

- For larger stands, plant well spaced clusters, 1-1.5 m apart; these will grow together rather than compete with each other.

Restoring old and degenerate stands

Old gorse is relatively poor for wildlife, and accumulated plant debris increases soil fertility, aiding colonisation by for example bracken, and increases fire risk.

- Very old gorse rarely regenerates when cut, however, a large bank of seeds is usually in the soil beneath. This germinates when the gorse and loose organic litter is removed.
- Burning old gorse can be dangerous, because of the high volume of combustible material. But where safe, the fire exposes and heats the seeds, encouraging germination.
- Alternatively, cut old gorse and burn with loose litter in small fires across the restoration area to encourage seed germination.

Maintaining gorse

Gorse bushes and stands start to lose their compactness after about 10 years and begin to degenerate, losing their value for wildlife and their ability to regenerate.

- Plan to ensure continuity of gorse in good condition across the site.
- Manage large stands in small coups to create age diversity. Manage all gorse in a rotation across the site, starting with the most mature bushes and stands first.
- Cut gorse to ground level and remove or burn together with the accumulated plant litter to remove fertility that could help bracken to

colonise. Most cut stumps will regenerate within a year.

- Preferably cut by chainsaw or clearing saw, but larger stands could be flailed, although the large volumes of shredded gorse need to be removed.
- Patches isolated from other vegetation could be burnt with extreme caution, as gorse is very flammable. Burning removes most of the accumulated litter, so helps to remove nutrients, and seeds to germinate.
- High rabbit populations often suppress regeneration, so recently cut stands may need protecting with appropriate fencing.
- Control bracken – otherwise it will grow up quickly and shade developing gorse.
- Gorse hedges can be maintained by trimming.

Controlling gorse

Gorse can be restricted or removed relatively easily depending on local conditions.

- Cutting the gorse to ground level and treating the cut stumps with an approved herbicide has low impact on surrounding vegetation and archaeological features.
- Livestock, deer or rabbits will control regeneration where the surrounding vegetation has low palatability.
- Repeated cutting could take several years to control gorse.
- Grubbing-out gorse with the rootstock is effective, but can lead to weed colonisation, and is not appropriate for archaeological features.

KEY POINTS

- Common and western gorse are very valuable nest sites for a range of heathland, downland and farmland birds, as well as for invertebrates. Conserving gorse is therefore important.
- Management is essential to maintain gorse in good condition, and cutting or burning will encourage regrowth, but arisings need to be removed.
- Burning gorse is hazardous and needs extreme care and preparation.
- Agri-environment grant aid schemes can fund gorse management where it is a component of suitable landscapes. Contact Natural England for guidance on funding.

You can get further information on this and other ways of managing your land for wildlife from:



The RSPB, Conservation Management Advice,
UK Headquarters, The Lodge, Sandy,
Bedfordshire SG19 2DL
Tel: 01767 680551
www.rspb.org.uk/countryside/advice

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