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Tim Melling (rspb-images.com)

Damp pasture with scattered rush tussocks provides ideal habitat for birds like the lapwing.

Damp grassland on farmland is a very important breeding habitat for lapwings, curlews, redshanks, snipe and reed buntings. Rushes are a natural component of many wet grasslands, but certain species can infest if fields are neglected or the sward is poached. Although low levels of rush provide cover for nesting and concealing chicks, heavy infestations have an adverse impact. Management should be considered when infestations cover more than one-third of a field's area. As well as reducing a field's value to waders, rush infestation significantly reduces the grazing value of a field.

BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE

Management of rush-infested pasture will improve breeding habitat for waders

Fields prone to rush infestation are often damp, and as such may provide breeding habitat for waders. Different waders prefer different sward structures.

Lapwings select fields with a short sward that provides an open, all-round view and scattered tussocks that will help conceal their nests and chicks. At the other extreme, the snipe prefers a higher level of concealment in taller vegetation, with smaller areas of short vegetation for feeding.

As a general guide, once rush cover exceeds a third of a field's area, its value for breeding waders is reduced. Lapwings and redshanks will be put off at lower levels of infestation than curlews and snipe.

GUIDELINES OVERLEAF

HOW CAN I MANAGE RUSH COVER?

- There are more than 20 species of rush in the UK, some of which can be of particular ecological importance. Four species that can be invasive on farmland are the tussock-forming soft and hard rushes, and the creeping rushes, articulated and sharp-flowered rush.
- Rushes can become particularly prevalent if fields are neglected or the sward is broken through poaching or re-seeding. Exposed soil allows rush seeds in the seed bank the chance to establish.
- Factors influencing whether management of rushes should be carried out and the most appropriate method include:
 - site objectives
 - botanical diversity of the sward
 - feasibility of different options due to the site's wetness and topography
 - relative costs.
- Management will be an ongoing process, based on good sward husbandry that avoids poaching and permanently saturated soil, and the methods below:

ELS OELS HLS Cutting

Cutting rushes after the last wader chicks have fledged is an effective first step in managing rushes. The earliest timing will depend on the birds present. Snipe are the latest to breed, but should have fledged by August. Removing cuttings from the field is desirable, particularly where a lot of vegetation has been cut. Cuttings can mulch down to create new niches for rush regeneration.

Cut rushes as low as possible for the best results. Drum mowers achieve a very low cut, but on rough terrain more robust machinery such as flail mowers will reduce wear. When cutting rushes, it is important not to cut too low and scalp the sward, as this will stimulate germination of the seed bank. Leave around a third of vegetation uncut around scrapes. A single cut will have little impact on rushes and should be followed by one or a combination of the measures below:

Cutting rushes again – around four to eight weeks after the first cut will help reduce rush cover in the following year.

Grazing

In some circumstances, a single cut followed by grazing may be sufficient. Creeping rushes are more readily grazed than tussock rushes. Cattle are generally better than sheep at suppressing rushes. Stock should not be held on fields after they have grazed off non-rush vegetation: as rushes have low nutritional value, stock will lose condition. It also increases the likelihood of poaching.

HLS Herbicides

Herbicides are perhaps best used when restorative measures are required in heavily rush-infested fields. MCPA and glyphosate are two approved chemicals very effective in managing rushes. However, both are broad-spectrum herbicides that will also kill other, non-target, plants.

The most appropriate method of applying herbicide is through a contact applicator, such as a weed wiper. Advantages of weed wipers include:

- targeted application of chemical avoids aquatic habitats and non-target vegetation
- low volume of herbicide and water used
- can be towed with a quad bike, reducing poaching in wet areas
- no spray drift, allowing large working window and safer application.

A significant height differential is required between the rushes and surrounding vegetation so that herbicide can be easily applied to rushes without killing non-target vegetation. Mature rushes can be weed wiped, but rush re-growth after cutting is more susceptible to herbicide. As with all pesticides, the label should be read carefully before use.

KEY POINTS

- If rush cover exceeds a third of a field's area, its value to breeding waders is reduced.
- There are a number of methods available to reduce rush infestations.
- Ongoing management should avoid poaching and permanently saturated soils.

KEY

ELS = Entry Level Stewardship

OELS = Organic Entry Level Stewardship

HLS = Higher Level Stewardship

For full details, refer to Defra scheme handbooks.

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



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