



for birds  
for people  
for ever



**Damp pasture with scattered rush tussocks provides ideal habitat for birds like lapwings.**

*Damp grassland on farmland is a very important breeding habitat for lapwings, curlews, redshanks, snipe and reed buntings. A common problem in damp grassland areas is rush infestation. Although low levels of rush cover are beneficial to breeding birds, as the tussocks provide cover for nesting and for concealing chicks, heavy infestations have an adverse impact on the value of grazing pasture. Management should be considered when infestations cover more than one-third of a field's area.*

## **BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE**

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### **Management to maintain limited rush cover should help to provide a good breeding habitat for wading birds**

Fields prone to rush infestation are often damp, and as such are good potential habitat for breeding wading birds, such as lapwings, curlews, snipe and redshanks. Different species have different habitat requirements and their specific requirements are detailed overleaf.

Rushes can provide tussocks that are useful for cover, but if they create dense cover then the field will lack the shorter areas that are useful for feeding. If rushes take up more than one-third of a field's area then grazing management, which is essential to maintaining the grassland for breeding wading birds, is made more difficult.

## HOW CAN I MANAGE RUSH COVER?

### MANAGEMENT BY TOPPING

- Topping the whole field after the last wading bird chicks have fledged is the most effective first step in controlling rush infestation. It is best if the cuttings can be removed from the field. The earliest timing will depend on the birds present. If you are unsure, August is a safe time to cut as the last snipe chicks will have fledged by then.
- Where the other options detailed below are not available, then a second cut, four to eight weeks later, will help to reduce rush cover in the following year. A single cut may maintain the current level of rush cover.
- It may be impractical to cut rushes in the wettest flushes, so these may be left if they form a small proportion of the field area, or they can be controlled by cattle trampling during aftermath grazing.
- On sites with nesting lapwings, the main aim should be to retain a short sward throughout the winter. If a mild winter allows re-growth it will be necessary to introduce stock to knock it back by late February, or you can cut the rush again in February to provide the low sward required by lapwings in early spring.

### MANAGEMENT BY TOPPING AND CATTLE GRAZING

- Livestock tend not to graze rushes, but cattle can destroy tussocks by trampling. If cattle are available, they can be used to restore a heavily infested rushy pasture to a more open grassy sward. This is especially effective after cutting the rush low to the ground as they may eat some of the young growth.
- Rush cover should be topped after the last wading bird chicks have fledged (as mentioned above, August is a safe month to cut). Cattle can then be introduced to graze the aftermath.
- In late summer, there is no longer any danger of cattle trampling nests, so a high stocking

density can be used to trample the rushes. If the stock density is too high, however, the resultant poaching will damage the rest of the sward.

- Stocking densities should be sufficient to produce the required conditions by early March, when wading birds begin to breed. Electric fencing could be used to control grazing in areas where rush dominates.
- On wet sites consider grazing with water buffalo, or ponies such as Konik, Polski or Welsh Mountain.

### MANAGEMENT BY TOPPING AND FLOODING

- On lowland wet grassland, where the water level can be raised, cutting followed by flooding is a cheap and efficient method of killing the root ball of rushes. To be effective, the water level should be raised immediately after cutting.

### MANAGEMENT BY TOPPING AND HERBICIDES

- Herbicide control should only be used as a last resort since the approved chemicals are all broad-spectrum herbicides that will also destroy other non-target plants.
- The rushes should be topped in August, or after the last wading bird chicks have fledged.
- When the rush re-growth stands higher than the other vegetation in the field, then glyphosate should be applied using a weed-wiper set above the height of the rest of the sward. As with all pesticides, the label should be read carefully before use.

### MANAGEMENT FOR KEY WADING BIRD SPECIES

#### For lapwings:

- Nesting lapwings need an open habitat to see approaching predators.
- Completely cut or graze down rushes over the winter to form a uniformly short sward over the whole site by late February or early March when lapwings set up territories.

- By late February or early March:
  - Rush height must be less than 5 cm.
  - The ground should be grazed tightly to expose soil within the sward, hoof-marked, or poached in places.
- Use light stocking levels from mid-March to the end of June.
- Pony grazing in winter at a high stocking rate is good for rush management and could be coupled with sheep grazing to provide suitable lapwing nesting habitat.

#### For curlews:

- Breeding curlews need moderately tall rushes for nesting and damp, unimproved pasture with abundant soil invertebrates nearby.
- Aim to create a mosaic of short vegetation for feeding and patches of taller, tussocky vegetation for nesting. The best way to create this is by grazing damp, rushy pasture with cattle at low stocking densities.

#### For snipe:

- Snipe need soft insect-rich soil and thick cover for nesting and concealment throughout the year, eg bogs and poorly drained pastures subject to high rainfall or annual winter flooding (such as floodplain grassland).
- Maintain or create suitable nesting habitat along the margins of watercourses with light grazing, preferably by cattle, from late summer onwards.
- Use light stocking levels from mid-March to the end of July to maintain tall vegetation during the breeding season. Grazing by cattle from late summer onwards will provide a tussocky sward for nesting and feeding the following spring.

**For redshanks:** see the RSPB farming for wildlife in Wales sheet 'Redshank'.

## KEY POINTS

- Different wading bird species have different requirements.
- Damp fields with rush cover may hold important breeding birds if appropriate grazing management can be introduced.
- Small-scale rush cover benefits breeding birds, so do not aim for complete eradication.
- There is a range of management methods to choose from.

Many of these guidelines may be funded by Tir Gofal, the agri-environment scheme for Wales. Get further info from:



Advisory Officer, The RSPB, North Wales Office, Maes y Ffynnon, Penrhosgarnedd, Bangor, Gwynedd LL57 2DW.  
Tel: 01248 363800



The Game Conservancy Trust, Fordingbridge, Hampshire SP6 1EF.  
Tel: 01425 652381



Farming Connect, Y Lanfa, Trefechan, Aberystwyth, Ceredigion SY23 1AS.  
Tel: 08456 000 813



Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group Cymru, Ffordd Arran, Dolgellau, Gwynedd LL40 1LW.  
Tel: 01341 421456



Countryside Council for Wales, Maes y Ffynnon, Penrhosgarnedd, Bangor, Gwynedd LL57 2DW.  
Tel: 01248 385500