

Species-rich grassland has been reduced in extent by 97% in the last 50 years and losses are continuing. Much of this is due to agricultural improvement as well as loss resulting from development and neglect. Species-rich grassland is often abundant with insects and can be very important for birds and bats.

General guidelines for the grazing management of lowland meadows:

Aim to graze between mid-April until end-October or mid-November depending on the season; earlier or later grazing in wet weather may seriously poach the pasture and allow thistles or nettles to invade.

Consider adjusting stocking rates: with a higher rate in the spring and early summer, reducing towards the autumn as grass growth declines. This lowers the risk of overgrazing and poaching. Lowering stocking densities will allow wildflowers to set-seed.

In the event that thistles or nettles encroach, consider regular topping the affected area before flowering.



Grazing cattle (traditional breeds)



Species-rich meadow

If chain harrowing or rolling, aim to do this early in the year (by early March) to avoid damage to ground nesting birds. Avoid damage to anthills. Chain harrowing can be beneficial where a meadow has been under managed and there is a build-up of dead material.

Do not apply inorganic fertiliser and slurry as they encourage vigorous grass growth, out competing flowering plants.

Apply well-rotted farmyard manure if required, perhaps a light dose every 3-4 years, this supports the soil fertility and is less likely to prevent growth of legumes present in the sward.

Avoid supplementary stock feeding, as this can lead to nutrient enrichment as well as excessive poaching. If supplementary feeding is unavoidable the feeding station should be relocated regularly (away from environmentally sensitive features such as rivers and streams and gateways and steep ground).



Exmoor pony

Manage scrub encroachment and clear scrub if it is abundant. Some scrub along the field margins or scattered within the site is beneficial providing habitat for insects and birds. Scrub clearance should be carried out in winter (October – March) to avoid disturbing nesting birds. Scrub is an important wildlife habitat.

Do not carry out further drainage activity. Light ditch management may be required where existing ditches become heavily silted or overgrown.

Avermectin boluses for parasite control in cattle prevent the development of insect populations that rapidly break down the dung. Such insects are a vital food supply for bats. Choose sensitive alternatives (details can be obtained from Natural England in their leaflet *Managing Landscapes for the Greater Horseshoe Bat: detailed recommendations recommendations*).

Sources of further information and funding may be available from:

Natural England: Countryside Stewardship management options/capital works grants

Web address: <https://www.gov.uk/countryside-stewardship-grants>

Email: devon@naturalengland.org.uk

Tel: 0300 0601110

Natural England Publication: *Lowland Grassland Management Handbook*

Website: <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/35034>

A very useful handbook (free to download) providing information on all aspects of lowland meadow management

Devon Wildlife Trust

Website: www.devonwildlifetrust.org

Email: contactus@devonwildlifetrust.org

Tel: 01392 279244

Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group

Website: <https://www.fwagsw.org.uk/>

Email: info@fwagsw.org.uk

Tel: 01823 660684



Heath spotted orchid