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Rush management



Damp pasture with scattered rush tussocks provides ideal habitat, but too much cover can be detrimental.

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. 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 and wildlife. There is no benefit to birds or livestock in allowing infestations to cover more than one-third of a field's area.

BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE

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

Any field that is prone to rush infestation is likely to be useful for breeding waders because they will select grasslands with damp soils. Different species select fields with different sward heights. Lapwings select fields with a short sward and scattered tussocks that conceal their nests and chicks, while leaving their all-round view uninhibited.

At the other extreme, the snipe prefers a higher level of concealment in a taller sward. So a wide variety of sward heights is beneficial. 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 waders, is made more difficult.

HOW CAN I MANAGE RUSH COVER?

MANAGEMENT BY TOPPING

- Cutting the whole field after the last wader chicks have fledged is the most effective first step in controlling rush infestation. The earliest timing will depend on the birds present. If you are unsure, you may consider late July 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.
- It is often impractical to cut rushes in rocky areas or 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.

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.
- Rush cover should be topped after the last wader chicks have fledged, from late July onwards. Cattle can then be introduced to graze the aftermath.
- In the late summer, there is no longer any danger of cattle trampling nests, so a high stock 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.

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 wader chicks have fledged.
- When the rush regrowth 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, or a backpack sprayer. As with all pesticides, the label should be read carefully before use.

KEY POINTS

- Small-scale rush cover benefits breeding birds, so do not aim for complete eradication.
- There is a range of management methods to choose from.
- Any field with rush cover is highly likely to attract important breeding birds if appropriate grazing management can be introduced.

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



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