



Grassland Management Guidelines continued

Mix or alternate grazing with other livestock	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Grazing grassland with sheep and cattle will help prevent the formation of ungrazed latrine areas and help to control parasitic worms.
Restrict weed control by mechanical methods or spot treatment with herbicide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Follow manufacturers' guidelines for use and safe disposal of containers.
Chain harrow outside the bird nesting season and flowering time of plants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Chain harrows are sometimes used to break up matted swards and spread dung but harrowing can encourage the invasion of weeds if too much bare ground is created.

Useful websites:

A Strategy for the Horse Industry in England and Wales
www.defra.gov.uk/rural/horses/topics/strategy.htm

The National Equine Welfare Council
www.newc.co.uk/codes/industry.php

English Nature
www.english-nature.org.uk

Copies of the Cotswolds Limestone Grassland Strategy, Limestone Grassland Information Leaflet, Landscape Character Assessment and Local Distinctiveness Guide are available on our website: www.cotswoldsaonb.org.uk

This fact sheet is part of a series:

Horses, Grassland Management and Nature Conservation
 Communities and Limestone Grassland Management
 Limestone Grassland Management for the Smallholder
 Limestone Grassland Restoration Case Studies

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For further guidance on special features of the AONB contact us at:



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This fact sheet is intended for horse owners and land managers in the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). It is designed to encourage active involvement in conservation of the Cotswolds landscape and, specifically, limestone grassland sites which are increasingly being used as horse pasture.

Horses and the AONB

Horses have always been an important part of the rural landscape and landowners who keep them have a fundamental role to play in countryside stewardship. Land used for grazing, gallops, access routes, fencing and equine buildings all impact on both the visual and physical nature of the environment. There are measures that can be taken by the horse industry which would help to protect and enhance the natural environment.

The Cotswolds Conservation Board has a duty of care to insure that impacts upon the landscape quality and character are sensitively monitored and controlled. The formation of paddocks, particularly by sub-division of larger fields with inappropriate fencing, can pose a real threat to the rolling nature of the landscape. Consideration must be given to ensuring that field boundaries are in keeping with the local landscape character. The Cotswolds Conservation Board supports, where possible, the restoration of traditional, natural field boundaries which benefit wildlife, landscape and the welfare of grazing animals.

Protecting Limestone Grasslands

Limestone grassland can be defined as species-rich, agriculturally unimproved grasslands occurring on limestone soils and has been identified as a priority habitat nationally, regionally and locally. Over 50% of the UK's total remaining Jurassic limestone grasslands (cG5) are in the Cotswolds AONB so their conservation is a high priority. An increasing number are now used as horse pasture.

Limestone grasslands are wonderful places for wildlife, containing a rich variety of plants and insects and providing feeding and nesting places for birds. Once common in the countryside, they were maintained by a long tradition of low-intensity grazing or hay cutting.

The most important ones have been notified as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and all activities on these sites need English Nature consent. However, many more limestone grasslands have no formal protection so the role that landowners play is vital.

Horse owners and conservation

Horse and pony owners can play an important part in conserving the limestone grasslands. Conservation fits well with good horse management and hardy native ponies can be good conservation grazing animals as they tackle coarse grasses and help control scrub. Domestic horses and ponies are less suitable as they graze more selectively, though this can be overcome by good sward management. (Sward: an expanse of turf or grass.)

If you would like to use your ponies to help with conservation grazing in the Cotswolds please contact the Cotswolds Conservation Board.

Limestone grassland sites near you can be found by selecting ‘habitat inventories’ at Defra’s multi-agency geographical information centre web site at www.magic.gov.uk.

A Guide to Animal Welfare in Nature Conservation can be downloaded from www.grazinganimalsproject.org.uk

Natural grazing

Grazing horses on unimproved grassland has its benefits. Often, horse and pony owners do not want grass enriched with fertilizers because lush grazing can lead to obesity and the danger of laminitis; (see the National Equine Welfare Council website below for further information).

Limestone grassland and old pastures provide a natural ‘herb mix’ rich in minerals. Hay made from these fields is highly valued.

Poor pasture management can be very damaging to limestone grasslands. It is important to consider the density of animals on your land. If there is insufficient land for the grazing animals, the grasses and wildflowers are grazed very hard and sensitive plant species are often lost.

Areas of bare, trampled ground increase and problem weeds, particularly thistles, docks and poisonous ragwort, readily take hold. Dunging becomes concentrated in latrine areas which are left ungrazed, putting more pressure on the remaining grassland.

Latrine areas are poor in plant species because they are over-enriched with nutrients from the dung. Such ‘horse-sick’ pastures are of little or no value to horse keepers or for nature conservation.

Grassland Management Guidelines

Control grazing levels and do not over-graze	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Aim to keep sward height of at least five centimetres through most of the grazing period and not less than two to five centimetres at the end of a grazing period. ■ Rotating grazing round different fields or sub-dividing fields prevents over grazing.
Avoid supplementary feeding in the field	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Animals gathering at feeding places cause areas of bare ground, allowing weeds to spread. ■ The feed itself smothers growing plants and thus increases bare ground in the field.
Remove animals when the ground is wet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Poaching; (hoof disturbance of soil) destroys the grassland and encourages weeds, like thistles, to spread. ■ Muddy conditions can cause health problems such as ‘mud fever’ in horses and ponies that are left on wet ground for long periods.
Maintain existing drainage systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Low intensity traditional management has often included surface drainage by ditches. Maintenance of these by careful clearing out in the winter months will help conserve the wildlife of old meadows and pastures.
Avoid the use of artificial fertilisers Do not plough and reseed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Artificial fertilisers will eliminate the rich variety of plants that grow in old pasture and meadows and it is very important that they are not used. ■ Small applications of farmyard manure are preferable for traditional hay meadows.
Remove dung regularly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Dung removal helps to prevent the establishment of ungrazed, latrine areas, which contain few plants species and are of little value for grazing. ■ Removal of dung contributes to the control of parasitic worms that affect horses and ponies.
Remove tall ungrazed grass where latrines are forming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Mow and remove grass regularly.
Manage and restore traditional field boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Well maintained field boundaries provide shelter for horses and are also important wildlife habitats.