



Pasture Management for Horses and Wildlife

Old pastures are wonderful places for wildlife. These grasslands were once common in the countryside and were maintained by a long tradition of low intensity grazing. Over the last seventy years farming has become more intensive and most of these rich habitats have been lost through ploughing, reseeding or treatment with fertilisers and herbicides. Agriculturally improved grasslands support very few plant and animal species. The conservation of remaining old grasslands is therefore very important.

Horse owners and conservation

Often horse and pony owners do not want grass enriched with fertilisers because lush grazing can lead to obesity, joint problems in young stock, and laminitis, a potentially fatal disease. Old pastures provide a natural herb mix, rich in minerals, high in fibre and low in protein, which is the best diet for horses and ponies.

Poor grassland management

One of the main risks in managing grasslands with horses is over-grazing.

- Grasses and wildflowers are grazed very hard and sensitive plant species are lost from the sward, reducing pasture quality for your horses and ponies.
- Areas of bare, trampled ground increase; and problem weeds, particularly thistles, docks and ragwort, readily establish.



The risk of harmful worms building up is greater in overgrazed paddocks. Grasslands grazed by horses tend to develop latrine areas.

- These are areas where horses return to defecate and urinate, but they avoid grazing.
- These latrines will spread if not managed, putting more pressure on remaining grassland.
- Latrine areas are poor in plant species, holding mainly coarse grasses and weeds as they are over-enriched with nutrients from dung.



Helen Baczkowska

Amy Lewis

Good grassland management

Following good grassland management practices will help you maintain and improve grazing quality for your horses and ponies. Remember that horse and pony owners can play an important part in conserving pastures because conservation fits well with good horse management.

Control grazing levels and do not overgraze.

Aim to keep a sward height of at least 5cm (2in) through most of the grazing period and not less than 2–5cm (1–2in) at the end of the grazing period. Rotating grazing round different fields or subdividing fields will prevent overgrazing and allow pasture to rest.

Mix or alternate grazing with other livestock if possible.

Sheep and cattle will help prevent the formation of latrine areas and help to control parasitic worms.

Avoid supplementary feeding in the field.

Supplementary feeding smothers growing plants. Furthermore, animals gathering at feeding places increase bare ground where weeds will spread.

Avoid the use of artificial fertilisers and do not plough and reseed.

Artificial fertilisers will destroy the rich variety of plants that grow in old pastures and can cause health problems in your horses and ponies.

Remove animals when the ground is wet.

Poaching (hoof disturbance of soil) destroys grassland and encourages weeds like thistles and docks to spread. Muddy conditions can cause bacterial infections (e.g. mud fever) in horses and ponies that are left on wet ground for long periods.

Chain harrow outside the bird nesting season and flowering time of the plants.

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.

Remove tall ungrazed grass where latrines are forming.

Mow grass regularly to prevent establishment of latrine areas. Cuttings must be removed as they can be harmful to horses and ponies if eaten.



Ross Hoddinott/2020VISION

Remove dung regularly.

Remove dung to prevent the establishment of ungrazed latrine areas and control parasitic worms that affect horses and ponies.

Restrict weed control to mechanical methods or spot treatment with herbicide.

Blanket spraying with herbicide will destroy ALL plants in the pasture. Heavy infestations of docks, thistles and nettles can be managed by regular cutting to weaken them and prevent them spreading; but it may be necessary to dig them up to kill them. Ragwort should be pulled, dug or spot-treated and never cut. All ragwort pulled or dug should be removed from the pasture immediately as it is toxic to horses.

Spot treating with a herbicide will kill weeds on contact. Follow the manufacturer's guidelines. The best management to prevent weeds establishing is to control grazing levels with care and remove animals in wet weather to maintain good vegetation cover.

Green Recovery Challenge Fund



Saving **Norfolk's Wildlife** for the Future