

Farm Wildlife – if you’ve got it, flaunt it!

The varied habitats of our working farms need to be shown to support key species to qualify for grant aid. Caroline Blew reports on what needs to be done and explains how a project to produce a responsible horse owners’ guide to land management became reality.

NATIONAL PICTURE

The plight of farmland birds has been high up the political agenda for many years, and although some species are showing signs of recovery, others are still struggling. The newly formed Natural England has continued to stress the importance of farm wildlife and has listed its targets clearly in its aim to achieve a healthy natural environment. Two national targets affecting farmers are to:

- Reverse the long term decline in the number of farmland birds by 2020.
- Restore or re-create an additional 3,750 hectares of priority agricultural habitats as detailed in the national Biodiversity Action Plan

Other species such as great crested newts, water voles and rare arable plants get less specific publicity but are high priority local and national Biodiversity Action Plan species in their own right, with their own specific targets and recommendations. Over the last 20 years, agri environment schemes have helped to improve habitats for threatened farmland species. However, if these schemes are to continue in the future, the Treasury needs to feel confident that the payments to farmers are both good value for money and delivering vital environmental gain on the ground. The current delay in signing off the England Rural Development Programme (ERDP) adds to the speculation that the size of the pot of money for environmental payments to farmers and landowners is by no means certain, and the level of competition for what monies are available will increase.

GETTING GRANT AID

If landowners and farmers are in a “Classic Scheme”, such as Countryside Stewardship (CSS) or Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESA), there is no guarantee of automatic acceptance into the new Higher Level Scheme (HLS) when a current agreement expires. The current points scoring threshold for HLS has been set challengingly high and only those applications safely reaching the mid to high 20s could be described as strong candidates. There are, however, certain measures that can be undertaken to help improve the chances that an application will be successful. Identifying and recording key species present on the farm is crucial. Being able to demonstrate the presence of priority Biodiversity Action Plan species that are in the HLS targeting statements, provides a real case for proving both value for money and actual results. It also helps to show the public that taxpayers money is being well spent.

Accurate farm surveys can be difficult and time consuming requiring specialist knowledge for correct identification. However, building a record of those key species currently present is not only rewarding and interesting to know but will be a base-line for comparisons in the future. In Suffolk, FWAG advisers have taken the first steps in offering our members a comprehensive surveying service. This has involved specialist training and obtaining official licences for surveying specific species such as great crested newt, water vole and bats. Several farmers have already requested farmland bird surveys and these will be carried out between May and July this year. Individual farm reports are also available for landowners wishing to enhance their current environmental management targeted at a range of key species.

If you would like more information on farm surveys, please contact your local FWAG office. Details of these can be found on the FWAG website or by calling 024 7669 6699.

“HORSEWISE”

Suffolk Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group have developed a project to encourage landowners to improve the standard of equine grazing, limit the negative impact on the landscape and help the environment. The “Horsewise Report” offers constructive advice and encourages landowners to manage their land in the best possible way for their horses, and the environment. The report also gives information on grants, such as the Single Farm Payment and Environmental Stewardship, which are available on land grazed by horses.

BACKGROUND

Changing land use and ownership has seen an increase in the number of horses kept in Suffolk. Often this land use blends in well with the local landscape as pastures are well managed and fencing is well maintained and sensitively designed and sited. However, horses have a bad reputation as grazers. They are fussy and damaging eaters, who can make their pastures ‘horse sick’. ‘Horsiculture’ has entered the language as a pejorative word, conjuring up images of overgrazed and weedy pastures, gappy hedges and flapping electric tape, collapsing gates and muddy gateways. The effects of new field patterns, erection of stables and field shelters and weed infestations can have a negative effect on wildlife and landscape. However, there are many ways to avoid or minimise these problems and maximize the benefit to wildlife and the local landscape.

THE PROBLEM

The horse’s reputation is bad mainly because we keep it in unnatural conditions and very often at too high a density for the amount of land. Careful management can overcome many of the problems of horses confined to pasture. However, even where fencing and pasture management is done well, horse managers may not be following best practice either for their horses or for their grass. High quality, fertilised grass is not necessarily good for horses. It is often too rich, leading to colic and laminitis, and joint deformities in youngstock. The horse is an athlete, not a milk or meat producer and it is not a ruminant, so its feeding requirements are fundamentally different to sheep and cattle. Its preferences for certain grasses and other plants also differ from that generally recommended for agricultural animals.

A WAY FORWARD

As land managers, horse owners therefore need to consider the overall effect of their management on the wider environment. Because grassland management seems such an everyday and straightforward task, it is often undertaken with little thought or understanding of the consequences. When grassland is managed for horses we may be destroying a rare plant community, the nesting habitat of a declining bird species, or the home and food of countless other animals without being aware of it. We may be damaging historical remains, polluting water or adding to atmospheric gases. In doing this, we may not even be achieving the immediate aim of providing the best pasture for our horses.

As well as advising on pasture management, the “Horsewise” Report covers such issues as:

- Poaching of gateways and water troughs
- Fencing
- Exercise Equipment
- Manure disposal and storage
- Managing hedges, ditches and ponds
- Grants

This project’s aims are to encourage people to look differently at yards and pasture, no matter how much land or how many horses they have.

If you would like a copy of the “Horsewise” report, please contact Caroline Blew at Suffolk FWAG on 01473 652800 or email suffolk@fwag.org.uk.

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Suffolk FWAG is part of an independent UK charity, which is dedicated to providing environmental and wildlife conservation advice to farmers and landowners.