



Horses, grasslands & nature conservation

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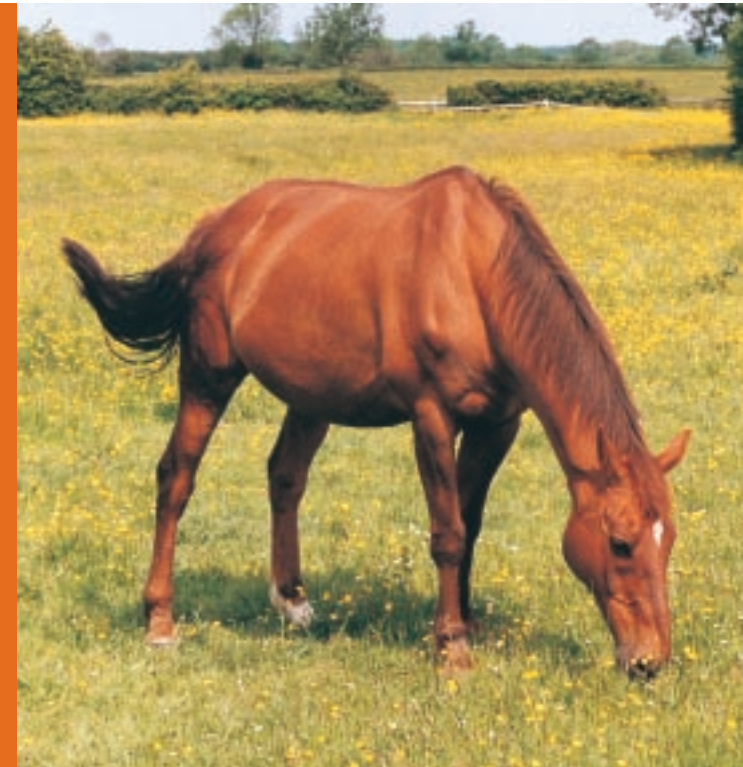
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Horses, grasslands & nature conservation

How horse and pony owners can look after old meadows and pastures that are important for wildlife.

Old meadows and pastures are wonderful places for wildlife. They contain a rich variety of plants and insects and provide feeding and nesting places for birds. These grasslands were once common in the countryside and were maintained by a long tradition of low-intensity grazing or hay-making. However, over the last fifty years farming has become more intensive and most of these rich wildlife habitats have been lost through ploughing, reseeding or treatment with chemical fertiliser and herbicides. Such agriculturally improved grasslands support very few plant and animal species.



A grassland sward made up of many different grasses and wildflowers. Peter Wakely / English Nature



An old meadow with green-winged orchids. Peter Wakely / English Nature

Conservation of those remaining old meadows and pastures is therefore extremely important. Certain fields that are particularly rich in wildlife have been notified as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and others are managed as nature reserves.

Some of these old grasslands are used as horse pasture or meadow. Horse and pony owners can play an important part in conserving these grasslands because conservation fits in well with good horse management.

Often horse and pony owners do not want grass enriched with fertilisers because lush grazing can lead to obesity and the danger of laminitis. Old meadows and pastures provide a natural “herb-mix” rich in minerals, and hay made from these fields is highly prized. At the same time, these grasslands benefit from the continuation of grazing and hay-making, which keep them from disappearing under bramble and scrub.

However, poor grassland management can be very damaging. One of the main problems is over-grazing. If there is insufficient land for the grazing animals the grasses and wildflowers are grazed very hard and sensitive plant species are lost from the sward. Areas of bare, trampled ground increase and problem weeds, particularly thistles, docks and

A fine old meadow in early summer. Peter Wakely / English Nature



Over-grazed sward and problem weeds in a horse-sick pasture. R. Jefferson / English Nature

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

If you are lucky enough to have old meadows and pastures for your horses and ponies, you can conserve their rich wildlife and at the same time practice good horse management by keeping to the following guidelines:

Control grazing levels and do not over-graze



Field grasshoppers live where the sward is not too short. R. S. Key

It is vitally important that you do not over-graze your pasture if you want to maintain its quality as a source of food for your horses and ponies and in addition

ensure that its wildlife is conserved. By not allowing your pasture to become over-grazed, you will minimise the related problems of latrine development, increases in bare ground and the spread of weeds like ragwort. Aim to keep a sward height of at least five centimetres (two inches) through most of the grazing period and not less than two to five centimetres (one to two inches) at the end of a grazing period. Rotating grazing round different fields or sub-dividing fields is a good way of preventing over-grazing. Your animals can be moved to the next area or field before the first one is grazed below

five centimetres (two inches) and the first one can then be rested and the grassland allowed to grow again. If you graze fields after a hay crop has been taken from them, it is important to keep to the same guidelines on sward height as for permanent pastures.

Avoid supplementary feeding in the field

It is very important not to use supplementary feeding in your old meadow or pasture as a substitute for taking animals off when there is insufficient grass available. This will result in all the problems associated with over-grazing. In addition, animals gathering at feeding places cause areas of bare ground to increase and these allow weeds to spread. The feed itself also smothers growing plants and thus increases bare ground in the field.

Remove animals when the ground is wet

Wet ground is very prone to being churned up or poached by the hooves of horses and ponies. This poaching destroys the sward and encourages weeds like thistles to spread. Muddy conditions can also cause health problems such as 'mud fever' in horses and ponies that are left on wet ground for long periods.



Common blue butterflies like flowery pastures that are not over-grazed. R.S. Key



An old pasture where grazing is carefully controlled so the sward does not become shorter than 5cm (2"). R. Jefferson / English Nature

Maintain existing drainage systems

Low intensity traditional management has often included surface drainage by ditches or dykes. Maintenance of these by careful clearing out will help to conserve the wildlife of old meadows and pastures. However, the deepening of existing ditches or the installation of new drains, including sub-surface pipes are likely to damage these grasslands and could prove hazardous for grazing animals.

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

Artificial fertilisers will eliminate the rich variety of plants that grow in old pastures and meadows and it is therefore very important that they are not used. If you make hay from some fields, it may be necessary to apply occasional dressings of well-rotted farmyard manure (not more than 20 tonnes per hectare/2.5 acres, every three to five years), to replace nutrients removed in the hay crop.

Pick up dung regularly

This should be done daily if possible or at a minimum of twice weekly in summer and once a week in winter. Dung removal helps to prevent the establishment of ungrazed, latrine areas which contain few plant species and are of little value for grazing. Removal of dung also contributes to the control of parasitic worms that affect horses and ponies, when combined with an appropriate worming programme.

Cut and remove tall ungrazed grass where latrines are forming

Cutting tall ungrazed grass helps to prevent the establishment of latrines. Cuttings must be removed as they can be harmful to horses and ponies if eaten. Ragwort is especially dangerous; it is poisonous not only when alive but also when dead and dying. Furthermore, if left on the ground, cuttings will smother growing plants and contribute to the damaging over-enrichment of the soil.

Supplementary feeding in the field or leaving animals on pastures in wet conditions results in churned up mud. The British Horse Society



Mix or alternate grazing with other livestock where possible

Grazing grassland with sheep and cattle will help prevent the formation of ungrazed latrine areas and help to control parasitic worms.

Restrict weed control to mechanical methods or spot treatment with herbicide

Blanket spraying with herbicide will destroy other plants as well as the problem plants, which are usually docks, thistles and ragwort. Careful control of grazing levels and removal of animals in wet weather will maintain a good cover of vegetation and will limit the spread of problem weeds. Follow the manufacturers' instructions about any requirements for removal of animals when carrying out spot treatment with herbicide. Whatever weed control method is used, make sure that all dead or dying weeds are taken away from the pasture before horses and ponies are returned to it.

Chain harrow outside bird nesting season and flowering time of 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. If harrowing is necessary, avoid the vulnerable time for ground nesting birds and early flowering plants, such as green-winged orchid, which is between late-winter and mid-July.

Remember!
Good horse and pony management is good conservation

There may be grants available to help you manage your horse pastures and meadows for conservation whilst continuing to use them to graze your animals. Old meadows and pastures are eligible for the Countryside Stewardship Scheme which is run by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, assistance on SSSIs may be available from English Nature.

Even if you do not have an old meadow or pasture, good grassland management practices will help you to maintain and improve the quality of your grazing area for your horses and ponies. Some horses and ponies have special requirements, for instance some animals are prone to laminitis. Advice on these requirements and general horse care and pasture management can be obtained from the British Horse Society on receipt of a stamped addressed envelope.

Green-winged orchids are found in old meadows and pastures. Peter Wakely / English Nature.



Further information and advice about old meadows and pastures and their management by horse and pony owners can be obtained from:

The British Horse Society (Welfare Department)

Stoneleigh Deer Park, Kenilworth, Warwick, CV8 2XZ.
(01926) 707805

English Nature Local Team offices:

Beds, Cambs and Northants

Peterborough (01733) 405850

Cornwall

Truro (01872) 265710

Cumbria

Kendall (01539) 792800

Devon

Exeter (01392) 889770

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Arne (01929) 557450

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