



Above: Damp pasture with scattered rush tussocks provides ideal habitat for birds like the lapwing.

Damp grassland on farmland is a very important breeding habitat for lapwings, curlews, redshanks and snipe. Rush infestation is a common problem in damp grassland areas. Low levels of rush cover benefit breeding birds, as the tussocks provide places for birds to nest in and help hide chicks. Heavy infestations have an adverse impact on the value of grazing pasture and there is no benefit to birds from rushes covering more than one third of a field's area.

BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE

Management to maintain limited rush cover helps to provide good breeding habitat for wading birds.

Fields that are prone to rush infestation are likely to be the fields that breeding wading birds choose, as they select grasslands with damp soils. Different species prefer grasslands with different sward heights.

Lapwings select fields with a short sward, which allows a good all-round view, and scattered tussocks to conceal their nests and chicks. Snipe, though, prefer to be more concealed in a tall

sward. A wide range of sward heights is beneficial.

Rush tussocks provide useful cover but, if it is too extensive, the field will lack the shorter areas needed for feeding. Managing grazing is essential to maintain grassland for breeding wading birds and this becomes more difficult if rushes occupy more than one third of a field's area. Damp pasture with 20–30% rush cover could attract a variety of breeding waders, including lapwings, redshanks, snipe and curlews.

HOW CAN I MANAGE RUSH COVER?

By topping

- Topping areas of the field after the last wader chicks have fledged is the most effective first step in controlling rush infestation. The best time to do this depends on the birds using the field. August is a safe time to cut, as the latest chicks (usually snipe) will have fledged by then and the rushes won't have set seed.
- Where the options detailed below are not possible, a second cut, four to eight weeks later, will help to reduce rush cover in the following year.
- It may be impractical to cut rushes in the wetter flushes, in which case these may be left if they only comprise a small proportion of the field area. If the rushes cover a larger area, they can be controlled by cattle trampling during aftermath grazing.
- Heavy rolling after topping helps to destroy the root balls of rush and should be carried out after the last cut of the year. This is most effective in the wetter areas of the field.
- You can sometimes top wetter areas during hard frosts. There is then little re-growth of the rushes before the spring, providing ideal conditions for nesting lapwings.
- Annual topping is important.
- Removing cuttings from the field is desirable as cuttings can mulch down to create new niches for rush regeneration.
- Cut rushes as low as possible for best results.

By topping and cattle grazing

- Livestock don't tend to graze rushes, but cattle can destroy tussocks by trampling. If cattle are available, they can be used to restore a very rushy pasture to a more open grassy sward. This is especially effective when the rushes have been cut low to the ground.
- Cattle can graze the aftermath. This late in the season, there is no danger of cattle trampling nests, so a higher stock density can be used. If the stock density is too high, the resultant poaching will damage the rest of the sward and the soil. Rushes can become particularly prevalent where soil is exposed by poaching.
- Where the rush sward has been opened up and includes a lot of grass, graze before topping. This reduces the amount of cut material left to rot, which can kill grasses and impede drainage if not removed.

By topping and flooding

- Where the water level can be raised and lowered, cutting followed by flooding is a cheap and efficient method of killing the root ball of rushes. Raise the water level after cutting, so no green regrowth is above the water level.

By topping and herbicides

- Broad spectrum herbicides may destroy non-target plants. Where ground conditions allow, use a weed-wiper to reduce impacts on non-target plants. Consult SEPA about the use of herbicides in or near water.
- Glyphosate and MCPA may be used in this way and is particularly effective when used on re-growing rush. In both cases, read the product label carefully before use.

By reseeding

- In some areas, it may be appropriate to manage rushes by reseeding grassland on a long-term cycle.
- Natural re-invasion of rushes after reseeding provides a succession of increasing rush density which favours lapwings initially, and redshanks and snipe subsequently.
- Using lime when reseeding helps to suppress rush growth.
- An Environmental Impact Assessment may be needed before reseeding. Check with SGRPID if you are unsure.

KEY POINTS

- If rush cover exceeds a third of a field's area, its value to breeding waders is reduced.
- There are a number of methods available to reduce rush infestations.
- Financial incentives through agri-environment schemes may be available to help farmers introduce some of these management practices. See contact information for sources of current advice.

See also the RSPB Scotland advisory sheets on:

- Curlew
- Snipe
- Lapwing
- Redshank
- Farmland waders in Scotland
- Managing grassland for waders

For answers to all of your farm wildlife enquiries, visit www.farmwildlife.info

RSPB Scotland is part of the RSPB, the UK charity that speaks out for birds and wildlife, tackling the problems that threaten our environment. Nature is amazing - help us keep it that way.

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



The Advisory Manager,
RSPB Scotland, Dunedin House,
25 Ravelston Terrace, Edinburgh
EH4 3TP Tel: 0131 311 6500



Supporting the
land-based industries
for over a century
SAC (Scottish Agricultural
College), King's Buildings, West
Mains Road, Edinburgh EH9 3JG
Tel: 0131 535 4000



NFU Scotland, Head Office, Rural
Centre - West Mains, Ingliston,
Midlothian EH28 8LT Tel: 0131 472 4000



Scottish Natural Heritage
All of nature for all of Scotland
Scottish Natural Heritage,
Great Glen House, Leachkin Road,
Inverness, IV3 8NW
Tel: 01463 725000

Front cover picture by Mark Hancock
(rspb-images.com)

The Royal Society for the Protection of
Birds (RSPB) is a registered charity:
England and Wales no. 207076,
Scotland no. SC037654
775-0140-09-10