



Case Study 9.5. Management of reed sweet grass and common reed through grazing and mowing at Hockley Meadows/Winnall Moors



In the absence of cutting or grazing, fen meadow habitat can transition into reedbed. If the surrounding landscape already has a lot of reedbed it is worth prioritising meadow and pasture on your land. This will safeguard botanically rich habitat and bring the land into management; abandoned areas can soon become difficult to manage due to raised water levels, scrub establishment and the unknown. “Do I really want to risk taking machinery / put animals in there?” can become a question.

At Hampshire and the Isle of Wight Wildlife Trusts Winnall Moors reserve, three different management techniques have been trialled to try and manage reed sweet grass *Phalaris arundinacea* and common reed *Phragmites australis*:

- 1. Repeatedly graze an area from April – October, to transition to grassland / tall herb fen.**
- 2. Graze from late Aug – October to accommodate reedbed species breeding cycle e.g. reed and sedge warblers.**
- 3. Re-establishing the full extent of a hay meadow via cutting in May and December in conjunction with hay cutting and aftermath grazing.**

1. Grazing from April-October

H&IOW WT graze the areas transitioning back towards grassland from late April, as soon as the growth can sustain the animals. The farm manager is usually keen to put the cattle out on their summer grazing so a few animals are retained, which start on the reedbed areas before the main herd arrive on the pasture in May. These areas are stock fenced if possible, or



electric fencing used to create a compartment, although it is important to carefully consider the impacts if you have breeding birds, mammals and invertebrates which would be adversely affected. Grazing in late June would guarantee plenty of forage but the electric fence route would require clearing in early May, to establish the line. It would need a scythe / strim again later in the summer, but at least the route would be in before nests are established and wouldn't risk smashing through nests.

Here are Daisy and Daffodil on the *Phalaris* and *Phragmites* fen at Hockley Meadows. They usually graze in the neighbouring field. As and when the fen vegetation can be grazed for two weeks they are called in with a bucket of nuts. They are checked a few times a week (daily checks done by volunteers) and then moved out before they run out of forage, or flatten or graze the entire unit.



Sometimes the grazing lasts for less time than anticipated so the regular checks help them move them off promptly. The Trust have been doing this for 3 years and have learned that younger animals jump out. The Hampshire gate is left open for them to come and go. They readily spend time in the area, especially if they are called in. Remember that with anything new, you are trying to get the measure of it. Observe and experiment to learn how you arrive at the result.



2. Grazing from late Aug – October

Here are the five boys (18 month-old steers) in the reedbed at Winnall Moors. This is important breeding ground for warblers. The Trust graze post bird nesting at the end of August/early September, until mid October before the reeds die back. They cut the electric fence route with a brush cutter. The field drains provide the drinking water. If necessary, you can provide them with a high protein urea and molasses lick to help them digest the woody forage. These areas are grazed every 3 -4 years so the wooden posts are left in to mark the grazing unit and Rappa polybraid on hand reels with metal and plastic electric fence stakes is used.

At Winnall Moors, the 0.8 & 0.2 ha area of reed canary grass and common reed is easier to graze as they combine to make a decent sized compartment that lasts for a month.

The cattle are happier and stay put if they are in a mini herd that has been established before moving in. One or two will jump or swim from their herd back to the main group if they are separated. Daisy and Daffodil are old girls so they are good at staying where they are put and know how to graze. Younger stock, unfamiliar with the reedbed diet benefit from an older aunt teaching them how. We keep older non-



breeding cows for this purpose.

The units vary from 400 -800 m perimeter. A solar panel and battery on the energiser help keep the fence on and the cattle inside if any reeds fall onto the fence line. You need steady, bucket trained cattle to lead them in to an area like that! It's quite a job, but once you've cracked it and seen the results it is highly motivating.

3. Cutting in May and December in conjunction with hay cutting and aftermath grazing.

Over time, a significant area of hay meadow can be lost due to year on year reed encroachment. While a 10 m margin may be safeguarded for warblers, it can inadvertently become a 20 -30 m edge which causes problems. Once reeds have established they outcompete other flora, and you lose the close knit 'carpet' of leaf and root that holds the weight of machinery.

For haymaking, three to four passes are required to cut, turn, row up and bale. The sward needs to be able to support this. If it doesn't you will get stuck and damage the soil structure. Over the course of five years the Trust has won back a significant area at Winnall Moors.

The process starts in the winter. Cut and remove the reeds to establish the line of where you are establishing the hay meadow. We do this before Christmas, to avoid disturbing overwintering waders, such as snipe, in the colder part of the year. Then in mid May, cut the Phragmites re-growth once it's over 0.5m tall. We have a two person team, one walking in front and one operating the power scythe on a walk behind tractor unit. The person in front can look out for nests, young roe kids and stumps and advise the operator where to go.

The Trust only cut where they cut and raked up the previous winter, so you feel confident on the terrain and the cuttings can be left to frizzle in the sun. This has not been tried with Phalaris - it may be too fleshy not to rake up. It could sit and form a mulch, suppressing growth of the sward.

Above is a photo from early June at Winnall Moors. This 'sets the line' for the tractor operative when hay making. They know to include everything up to and including that cut area and to stay out of the reedbed. Even if it's grown back you can easily see the line. The aftermath is then grazed from August onwards, by which time most warblers have fledged their young. If you are successful at re-establishing the grassland sward you will find that over time you can just cut the line in winter and it is not necessary to rake off the cut material.

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