

# GRASS MANAGEMENT FOR HORSE OWNERS

**T**he Chiltern Hills were designated an Area of Outstanding Natural beauty (AONB) in 1965 by the government in recognition that the Chilterns countryside is amongst the finest in England and Wales. This leaflet, part of the Chilterns Landowners' Guide, is intended to provide you with some basic information to help you maintain and enhance your local landscape. Horses and ponies can have an effect on wildlife and the landscape; therefore their owners/keepers determine whether or not this effect is a positive or a negative one. This brief guide is intended to provide owners and keepers with some basic advice on grassland management.

## How many horses and ponies per acre?

The Chilterns is divided into distinct landscape types, from the steep slopes of the escarpment at Ivinghoe Beacon to the rolling, enclosed and wooded landscape of the valleys and ridges such as Hambleden Valley. Each area has different soil conditions, dictating the number of horses & ponies that can be kept on a given area. On the poor chalk soils of the Chilterns, 2 acres per horse would be preferable to 1.

- Different types and sizes of horses and ponies have different needs, and this must be taken into consideration.
- Overgrazed paddocks are detrimental to the look of the countryside.
- Overgrazing increases the risk of harmful worms accumulating in the pasture threatening your horse's health.
- Overgrazing during winter often causes 'poaching' (where land loses grass cover becoming very muddy). This can lead to diseases such as mud fever, which can cause lameness.
- Poaching provides the ideal environment for damaging weeds such as docks, nettles, thistles and ragwort to set seed.
- Lack of grass cover causes valuable nutrients to be lost from the soil.



valuable wildlife haven for field and bank voles and over-wintering insects.

*Far right: Poaching caused by too many horses & excessive rain*

*Regularly move hay feeders to prevent poaching*

## Pasture management

Grazing management for horses and ponies is a difficult balance between the desire for grass cover in the winter months, and ensuring that grass intake by ponies during the spring and summer months is restricted. Grazing is by far the cheapest and healthiest form of food for your horse so it pays to manage it well.

- Typically, grass grows five times faster in May than it does in September.
- An excess of grazing could be closed off for hay making. Old meadows rich in grasses, wildflowers and clover make excellent nutritious hay. It is worth getting to know the local farmer who might be able to do this for you.
- Where mineral licks or hay are provided, move them around so that no one area becomes poached.
- If you do feed in the field, try to clear up the buckets and bowls afterward. Brightly coloured buckets look unnatural in the countryside, and can be damaged/blown away if left.
- Where possible, try to leave a 1-2m wide strip of rough grass on the field margins between fencing and hedges to provide a

### IMPORTANT NOTE!

If any of the land you graze is rich in flowers and different grasses, for example an old hay meadow, it will benefit from being managed slightly differently than normal grassland. 'Species rich' grassland is very rare in the Chilterns and the UK and is very important for wildlife. It hasn't had much fertiliser or chemical sprays applied to it in the past and for that reason is often referred to as being 'unimproved'. Horse and pony owners and keepers can play a role in maintaining any existing 'unimproved' grassland they control, and

ensuring that other grassland rich on flowers and grasses ('species rich') is not unnecessarily 'improved'. Such improvement includes activities like spraying with chemicals, drainage and artificial fertiliser application. It is not always necessary to carry out these operations, and consideration should be given to any existing wildlife and the landscape setting before they are undertaken. Regular topping is damaging to flower meadows and should be avoided. Please contact us for more details.

## Weeds

Not all plants apart from grass are weeds! Other plants could be classified as herbs, many of which are extremely palatable and beneficial to horses.

- Weeds such as ragwort are poisonous and must be removed, ideally by hand pulling and burning. Familiarise yourself with the plant so you do not destroy beneficial plants in error.
- Other invasive plants considered weeds are those which horses will not eat like docks, thistles and nettles. Small areas of thistles and nettles can be left for wildlife.
- Regular cutting or 'topping' of the paddock should stop them seeding and spreading but it may be necessary to dig them up to completely kill them.
- Spot treating using a knapsack sprayer with a herbicide such as glyphosate (Roundup™) will also kill weeds it comes into contact with, but the pasture cannot then be grazed for a given period. Take expert advice if in doubt.

## Grassland Operations

- Rolling in spring levels the surface and can promote early grass growth BUT on wet or heavy soils can cause compaction restricting drainage and grass growth. Proceed with caution!
- Harrowing in early spring before the growing season pulls up dead grass from the base of the healthy grass so that air, water and nutrients can more easily reach the soil.
- Topping or mowing the grass regularly improves the appearance of paddocks and encourages growth of grasses. If you have a flower rich meadow it is best avoided as it will eventually lead to the loss of beneficial flowers and herbs.
- These operations can be carried out with equipment towed behind a quad bike or ask your local livestock farmer.
- Grassland operations must not be carried out if ground nesting birds such as Lapwing are present, and should only be done when the soil conditions are right.

**Keeping the grass height to 5cm(2-3 inches) during the growing season and 2 cm (1 inch) in the winter, will have a huge impact on ground conditions, especially in winter, protecting the ground from the effect of horses feet.**

## Fertilisers

- Avoid artificial fertilisers wherever possible. They can lead to a loss of wildlife habitat, and the rich grazing they cause may lead to obesity, particularly in ponies, which in turn causes potentially lethal laminitis.
- Before fertilising, a soil test should be taken to establish an actual need. Soil should be tested to find its pH, which should be 6.5, and the balance of essential elements potash, phosphate and nitrogen. If these elements are not in balance, it may be necessary to apply an organic compound fertiliser to the grazing, which must then be rested until they have been washed into the soil.
- Flower rich grassland is an extremely rare habitat and can be damaged by fertilising. Please consult the AONB office for further information.

## Dung

A typical horse weighing about 450 kg, produces around 20 kg of manure per day, or around nine tonnes per year. If the horse is in his field for even half the day, this is four and a half tonnes of manure on his one-hectare paddock!

- Picking up droppings regularly reduces the worm burden; you may even be able to worm less, (consult your vet).
- Collecting droppings reduces dunging areas where horses won't graze putting pressure on remaining areas. Dunging areas are poor in beneficial plant species and often weedy due to over-enrichment with nutrients.
- Store droppings responsibly on a muck heap out of site (and scent) of neighbours if possible. Keep well away from a watercourse/ditch to avoid pollution (and possible legal action by the Environment Agency).
- Avoid tipping droppings in hedge bottoms/ditches/woodland edges which will smother and kill wild flowers many of which are now rare or even legally protected.
- If you have lots of horses you may want to purchase a special machine for picking up droppings. Smaller versions can be towed behind an ATV.



## Resting the grassland

- The key to good grassland management is to rotate the grazing.
- Paddocks should be rested to allow the grass to recover for two to three weeks at a time. Ideally, paddocks should be rested for six months but this is rarely feasible.
- Resting paddocks from autumn through to the mid-summer completely breaks the life cycle of most of the internal parasites.
- Even smaller paddocks can be sub-divided with temporary brown or green electric tape to rest them.
- Riding on grassland can damage the sward, so it is preferable to exercise elsewhere if possible.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION,  
PLEASE CONTACT**

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