



**Nidderdale**  
National  
Landscape



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# **A GUIDE TO**

## **grassland management for**

### **wading birds**



Before using this resource, you may want to use our '**types of grassland found in Nidderdale National Landscape**' guide to better understand what type of grassland you currently own/manage. With this knowledge you will be better equipped to create a species-rich grassland suited to your field.

## WHAT ARE WADING BIRDS?

They are a group of birds associated with wet habitats including shallow waters, bogs, wet grassland and muddy shorelines. Waders usually have a long bill and long legs, however, species do break this generalisation.

Nidderdale National Landscape (NNL) is a nationally important hotspot for wading birds. Common wading birds spotted in the NNL include curlew, lapwing, oystercatchers, redshank and snipe. Several of these species, notably curlew and lapwing, are on the UK's Red List for birds, meaning their populations have suffered steep declines in recent decades. Even though NNL is an area that supports wading birds, declines are still being seen in their breeding success – not many chicks are surviving to adulthood.

To help support these vulnerable birds, it is important to create habitats where wading birds can both search for food and nest.

Most waders, such as curlews are specially adapted to search in wet areas for prey underground with their long bills. Others, like lapwing, catch aquatic insects swimming in pools of water. The important thing to notice is that wet habitats benefit wading birds.

Wading birds occupy a variety of different habitats throughout the year. In Spring, many leave the UK's shoreline to spend their summers in the interior of the UK. In Nidderdale, waders feed and breed in:

- **Purple moor grass and rush pasture**
- **Hay meadows**
- **Bog/moorland**
- **Semi-improved and improved grasslands (silage)**

See "**Types of grassland within Nidderdale National Landscape**" for more information on grassland types

## HOW TO HELP WADING BIRDS?

Wading birds face many challenges with modern agricultural techniques. Improved grasslands (silage/haylage) can be mown 3 times in a year, and if a wading bird has nested there in spring, nests can be

destroyed and chicks unable to move fast enough get killed. Using heavy machinery causes soil compaction which can make it hard for waders to probe the ground looking for food. Draining the landscape removes important wet areas that provide waders with food and makes the ground drier and harder to probe. So, waders are dealing with a lot, but good grassland management can provide them with all the resources they need.

Below are grassland management techniques that will help provide waders with both feeding and breeding habitats. This document will primarily focus on grassland management that supports curlew and lapwing populations, but these management techniques will also benefit a wide variety of other wading bird species such as oystercatchers, redshank and snipe.



Lapwing (top right) and Curlew are both wading birds found in Nidderdale National Landscape

# MOWING

## When and where to mow:

If you don't mow your grasslands yourself, these techniques may not apply to you. However, you can always ask whoever is mowing your grassland to consider them. You could always mow your grassland with a scythe if you think that would be manageable.

Ideally, **mow later in the year** outside of the breeding bird season (1<sup>st</sup> April - 31<sup>st</sup> July) so chicks have hopefully fledged the nest before mowing commences.

Identify nests and **avoid mowing a 20m<sup>2</sup> area** around them. Installing a temporary fence to help locate nesting sites can be beneficial.

**Stagger mowing fields** at different times so that there is a mixture of tall and short vegetation throughout the year.

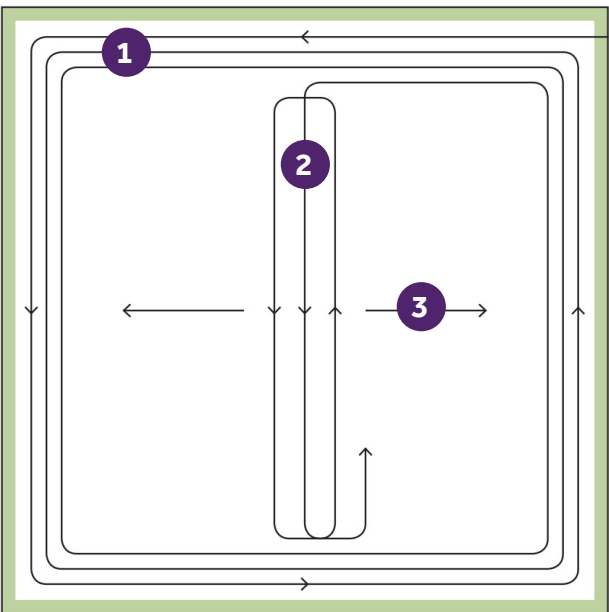
**Leave some of a grassland unmown** to provide cover during autumn and winter months.

**Avoid mowing at night** as wading birds are more at risk of being killed.

## How to mow a field to protect wading birds:

Mowing from the outside of a field inwards can prevent chicks from being able to escape, potentially killing them. Following the next 3 steps can minimise the threat to chick survival:

1. Mow slowly around the outside of a field at least four times to create a clean area for chicks to escape to.
2. After this mow through the middle of a field to split it up into two halves.
3. Then mow out towards the edges in a circular pattern.



Method of mowing field to minimise negative impacts to wading birds. Credit [Northern Upland Chain Local Nature Partnership Curlew Advisory Leaflet](#)

# GRAZING

If you don't have any livestock yourself, these techniques may not apply to you. However, you can always ask whoever is grazing your grassland to consider them.

Grazing with cattle on rough or wet grassland is preferable over sheep as they create a more diverse habitat structure. However, if sheep are the only available livestock, then that is still ok. Not grazing land at all can cause grasslands to form a dense sward or scrub up, which is unsuitable for waders.

Ideally, livestock will be excluded from a field where waders are present and nesting. However, if unable to avoid using a field, keep stocking densities low to reduce the risk of trampling. No more than 0.6 livestock units per hectare should be applied in a field where wading birds are nesting (see table below). Installing a temporary electric fence around nests can protect them from trampling by livestock – these fenced areas should be a minimum of 20m<sup>2</sup>.

Animal numbers are converted into livestock units as follows: LUs	
Cattle over 2 years	1.0
Cattle over 6 months to 2 years	0.6
Lowland ewe and lamb; ram	0.12
Store lamb, hill ewe and lamb; hogg; teg	0.08
Horse	1.0
Pony / Donkey	0.8
Goat	0.12

Standard livestock unit measures. Credit [Annex 6C: Convert livestock numbers into Livestock Units - GOV.UK](#)





© Kate White

*Established pond with floating aquatic vegetation and rough edges.*

## PROTECT AND CREATE WET AREAS

There may be some areas like this on your grassland already, if so, protect them from drainage and disturbance. If wet areas are lacking from your grassland and the area is suitable, creating new wet habitats such as ponds or shallow scrapes is an amazing way to increase aquatic invertebrate numbers for chicks to eat.

Having wet grassland and open water areas such as ponds and scrapes are really important for waders. Damp, soft ground is easier to probe to look for insect larvae and worms.

Ideally, scrapes should be 20m<sup>2</sup> and no deeper than 45cm with gently sloping edges.

Excavated material needs to be removed or made as flat as possible so that birds have an unhindered view to see predators.

Ground works within semi-natural habitats and protected landscapes require an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) to be completed prior to anything starting. It is advised to speak with a member of NNL's team to discuss options prior to any works being completed (contact details at the bottom of the document). Information can be found on the Gov.uk website - [Environmental Impact Assessment - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/environmental-impact-assessment)

## CONTROLLING RUSHES AND TUSSOCKY VEGETATION

Having some tussocky vegetation is important for waders as they hide within it from predators, but too

much can prevent them from using a grassland as their field of vision is impaired and therefore risk of predation increased. It is important to control rushes and other tussocky vegetation to create a habitat with both open, grassy areas and denser vegetation scattered throughout.

**Mow after mid-August** to protect wading birds that are breeding late in the year. If possible, **mow at different times** to create vegetation of differing ages. This will increase the vegetation structure.

**Mow rushes and tussocky vegetation to create irregular edges**, not straight rectangular lines. Having denser vegetation by open grassy areas enables waders, especially chicks, to quickly find cover from predators or bad weather.

**Grazing areas after mowing in the Autumn** will help keep rushes short for the following spring.



© Graham Megson

*Well managed rush pasture with open grassy areas and tussocky vegetation interspersed.*

## REDUCING DISTURBANCE

Whether you are moving on foot, quad bike or tractor, it is important to take care when moving through a field with nesting waders to reduce disturbance as parents are chicks can become separated.

If you need to regularly move through a grassland, try and **stick to a specific route each time**. This will help waders identify where not to nest, so you are more likely to avoid them.

**If you have a dog, keep it on a lead when walking during the breeding season.** Dogs may not directly kill waders but can disturb nests when running around.

Livestock, specifically sheep, have been observed eating wader eggs. This may be a result of malnourishment, so providing mineral blocks can minimise the occurrence of egg eating.

## IMPROVING SOIL HEALTH

Improving soil health can help increase invertebrate numbers and reduce soil compaction, helping create grasslands for waders to feed within.

**Spreading farmyard manure can boost invertebrate numbers**, but careful not to spread too much. 12.5 tonnes per hectare per year is recommended by the government. Spreading should only occur either before or after the breeding bird season (April – July). If livestock are present on a grassland, these will be adding manure to the area, so you may not need to spread additional manure.

**If moving over land with a machine, try to use a specific route** to concentrate any soil compaction to those areas.



© Healthy Soils - Herefordshire Meadows

*Healthy soil with aerated soil and plant with different rooting depths.*

## SUPPORTING INVERTEBRATES

To support invertebrates in your grasslands, it is advised not to use worming products.

## RESOURCES

Below is a list of other resources available on the internet to gather information from.

- [Northern Upland Chain: Managing habitat for Curlew](#)
- [Farm Advisory Service: Grassland for waders management calendar](#)
- [Environmental Impact Assessment - GOV.UK](#)
- [Rules for farmers and land managers to prevent water pollution - GOV.UK](#)
- [Farm Advisory Service: Developing grazing plans for the conservation of semi-natural habitats](#)

## FUNDING

To help fund grassland management, try and take advantage of agri-environment schemes. These can help fund restoration works and ongoing management. Below are two funding schemes which you may be eligible for.

**Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI):** [Sustainable Farming Incentive: guidance for applicants and agreement holders](#)

**Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier (CSHT):** [Countryside Stewardship Higher Tier](#)

## Contact us

If you have any questions about managing your grasslands, please get in touch with our team:

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A partnership project  
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Dales Millennium Trust

