



A brief guide to choosing livestock for conservation grazing



Sheep grazing a traditional orchard © Kent Wildlife Trust

This leaflet is designed to give owners of small sites, with particular reference to meadows and pastures, some general advice on what livestock to use when grazing their land and the main issues they will need to consider if they have not used livestock before. It assumes that the primary objective of the grazing is to manage the land for nature conservation purposes.

Conservation grazing

The decision to graze a site can be fraught with difficulties and will depend partly on the nature of your site and what you are trying to achieve. However, it will also depend on whether you can find a willing grazer to put his or her livestock on the site and at a time of year which suits you, or whether you are planning to buy your own livestock.

There are many different breeds to choose from, each with its own good points: some may be excellent browsers and can deal

with coarse grasses, saplings and scrub, others will do better on wildflower-rich grasslands. Some will be hardy, some will deal better with people and dogs. It is important to know where the animals have grazed in the past, since livestock tends to favour and do better on the diet on which it was reared.

From an economic point of view, some conservation breeds are better 'finishers' than others: they tend to put on weight well, will produce a reasonable amount of meat, even from poor quality grazing, and so you should be able to sell them on.

The needs of your livestock will vary according to many factors such as breed, age (older animals may be losing teeth and unable to cope with tough vegetation), breeding status, weather conditions, need for water or shade, ability to climb steep slopes or use wet ground (cattle and horses are unwilling to graze on steep slopes). All these factors have an impact on how the site will be grazed over time.

This advice sheet contains information about the following topics:

- importance of conservation grazing
- different types of livestock, how they graze and how this will impact on your site
- livestock units and grazing intensity
- tips on finding a grazer and what to ask them (and what information they will need from you)
- choosing livestock for sites with public access
- legislation and keeping livestock
- references and further reading
- further advice



Goats tackling saplings and scrub on chalk grassland © Kent Wildlife Trust



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Your living landscape. Your living seas.



Konic © Kent Wildlife Trust



Herdwick ewe and lambs © Kent Wildlife Trust

Different types of livestock, how they graze and how this will impact on your site

One of the reasons that native breeds tend to be chosen for sites where conservation is a key objective is that they tend to be suited to particular conditions such as harsh weather conditions, wet grassland, steep slopes and low quality grazing. For a list of native breeds at risk, please see Further Reading.

Sheep

- although they have a reputation for grazing vegetation very close to the ground, in actual fact this is generally as a result of over-stocking: if the numbers of sheep are fairly low for the area, then they can produce a varied sward structure
- they have thin mobile lips and can graze very close to the ground and nibble at the grass sward without touching wildflowers. However, they are highly selective grazers, tend to like eating



Hebridean sheep © Kent Wildlife Trust

flowering heads and buds of herbaceous species and can graze out desirable species.

- some species are better browsers than others, but they all need some grass and herbaceous vegetation to satisfy their nutritional needs (unlike goats)
- they tend to leave grass stems, avoid tall and tussocky vegetation and leave dead vegetation (cuttings)
- age too can make a difference and older sheep (4-5 years) might struggle with coarser or woody vegetation
- their short legs mean that they may trample tall vegetation
- they have smaller feet than cattle or horses and are therefore less likely to cause poaching
- they tend to cope well with sites on steep slopes

Breeds to look out for: Herdwicks are fairly easy to handle, will tackle vegetation such as nettles and scrub, make good mothers so need very little attention during lambing and are good finishers; they have a fine fleece which is less likely to get caught in wire and bramble. Hebrideans, Southdowns, Welsh mountain badger face, Shetlands and Soays are also breeds to consider.

Cattle

- cattle do not graze selectively, which is good for creating diverse flower-rich swards; they can also push through scrub and eat taller, coarser vegetation and cut/dead vegetation
- they don't graze too close to the ground and are therefore less likely to create bare patches than horses

- they leave areas of more tussocky vegetation, which are beneficial to invertebrates and small mammals
- not so good at coping with sites on steep slopes
- need more forage per animal and therefore might not be appropriate for very small sites

Breeds to look out for: Dexters, Sussex, British Whites, South Devons, Short Horns and Shetlands

Horses and ponies

- horses can graze very close to the ground and so can leave bare patches of ground
- they are selective grazers and will leave some areas untouched, resulting in stands of taller vegetation
- they will eat tall grass, grass stems, and dead/cut vegetation
- they tend to defecate in specific areas (latrine areas) which causes a build-up of nutrient
- need more forage per animal and, as for cattle, might cause small sites to become overgrazed

Breeds to look out for: Konic, Dartmoor, Exmoor, New Forest, Shetland

Goats

- they are good browsers and can get all their nutritional needs from scrub; however, they are not at all selective and can easily overgraze a site
- they are excellent jumpers and very difficult to keep inside a fence if they want to get out!

Breeds to look out for: Pygmy goats



Dexter calf © Kent Wildlife Trust



Shetland cattle © Kent Wildlife Trust



Sussex cattle © Kent Wildlife Trust

Livestock units and grazing intensity

Stocking density will affect how the animals graze: if there are large numbers of animals on site, then they will graze differently than if they are more spread out. For example, they may have little choice but to move onto less palatable vegetation once they have finished using the resource in their preferred areas.

The term 'livestock unit' or LU is often referred to as a way of determining what stocking density can be used on a given area of land and with what type of livestock:

- 1 sheep (including ewe with a suckling lamb) or goat = 0.15 LU
- male bovine animals and heifers older than 24 months, suckler cows, dairy cows = 1.0 LU
- male bovine animals and heifers from 6 months to 24 months = 0.6 LU
- heifers that calve at under 24 months old count as 1.0 LU from the date of calving in some circumstances
- horses or ponies (6 months and over) = 1 LU

So, for example, the stocking density of 10 sheep grazing on 3ha is $(0.15 \text{ LU} \times 10 \text{ animals}) / 3 \text{ ha} = 0.5 \text{ LU/ha}$. Stocking density is sometimes specified as an annual equivalent.

It may be worth noting that some sites may suffer from grazing by rabbits and deer. These species can have a significant impact on a site, so do not underestimate their grazing intensity (a hind is equal to 0.3 LU therefore twice that of a sheep).



Fallow deer © Kent Wildlife Trust

Finding a grazier

It can be difficult to find a local grazier to graze your site, so be prepared to be flexible as to when the livestock are put on and taken off. You will need to make sure there is decent access for a vehicle and trailer to back up, a water supply, and fencing appropriate for the type of livestock. Try your local farmers, agricultural colleges, breed societies, agricultural machinery shops, the Soil Association and any local school farms. The Grazing Animals Project website has a UK-wide database of people with livestock available or land available to be grazed (www.stockkeep.co.uk) and there is also the RAMSAK website which offers a similar service for Sussex and Kent. Depending on the site (quality of the grassland, access, fencing and water supply), you may be able to charge them for using it. Once you have found a suitable grazier, it is a good idea to draw up a grazing licence (grazing agreement).

Key points to check with grazier:

- Type of livestock wanted and time of year when you need it
- Who is responsible for checking on the livestock, any paperwork, water supplies, mending fencing (who is responsible for damages if livestock escapes?) and use of supplementary feeding (the stock will eat this before they tackle coarse vegetation and might create poaching areas around the feed station!)
- Are you charging them for grazing the site?
- Map showing exact boundary, number of acres and access points (can they back up a trailer?)
- Maximum stocking rate to avoid poaching or overgrazing



Unloading sheep from a trailer © Kent Wildlife Trust

Human disturbance and dog attacks

Horses and cattle tend to be more able to ward off dog attacks than sheep or goats and therefore tend to be favoured in urban areas or areas with high numbers of dog walkers. However, this can cause upset on sites which have not been grazed before and where the public is used to being able to walk without worrying about livestock.

Horses can be a problem if they are grazing a site where there is a regularly used bridle route (horses have a strong instinct to herd with other horses). Goats are not generally suitable for sites with public access because they can get too friendly with members of the public and can also get quite aggressive with dogs (although they can be as prone to attacks from dogs as sheep).



Dogs must be kept on a lead when around livestock © Kent Wildlife Trust

Legislation and keeping livestock on your land

If you have not used livestock before, you are advised to check on the DEFRA website for details. If you use sheep, cattle, goats, pigs or deer on your land, then you will need to do the following:

- register your landholding with the Rural Land Registry
- obtain a CPH (County Parish Holding number) from the Rural Payments Agency
- become a registered keeper

However, if a local grazier is bringing their livestock onto your land, then they will need to obtain a temporary CPH number and they will be the registered keepers. Horses are not classified as livestock and many of these regulations do not apply to them.



Livestock needs checking on a daily basis © T Fisher

Further reading and references

Kent Wildlife Trust

Land Management Advice Series

Management of small pastures;
Management of neutral grassland;
Control of ragwort, thistles and other problem plants;
Management of chalk grassland;
Management of acid grassland.

The Grazing Animals Project (G.A.P.)

Many free advice sheets can be downloaded, including information on finding graziers and breed profiles. The G.A.P email discussion forum (Nibblers) covers a whole range of conservation grazing topics and is well worth a look: <http://www.grazinganimalsproject.org.uk>

RAMSAK

<http://www.ramsak.co.uk>

D.E.F.R.A. websites

- Rural Payments Agency
<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/rural-payments-agency>
- Animal Health
<http://animalhealth.defra.gov.uk/keeping-animals>

Natural England

<http://www.naturalengland.gov.uk/>

Higher Level Stewardship - Environmental Stewardship Handbook (3rd edition) with particular reference to the 'Approved list of native breeds at risk' on pages 74-75.

Obtaining further advice

For further information, please contact the Trust's Land Management Advice Service by calling 01622 662012 or by emailing info@kentwildlife.org.uk



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