

- In specific circumstances herbicide control may be inappropriate or restricted by legislation. Please seek advice in advance if the land involved is designated (eg SSSI), wildlife-rich (eg County Wildlife Site), registered organic or supported by an ELS or HLS scheme. Rush control by any method on a SSSI should always be based upon prior consultation with your Natural England advisor.
- Rush control with herbicide on uncultivated land and / or semi-natural areas may require consent from Natural England under the Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations (2006). Further information can be found at: www.naturalengland.org.uk

Sources of funding

- Species-rich rush pastures are a priority habitat that can attract grants from Higher Level Stewardship. Low input options and rush pasture options are also available under Entry Level Stewardship. Both schemes are administered by Natural England.
- The Working Wetlands Small Grant Award may be able to support specific works on rush pastures, especially if they are part of an overall management plan to improve habitat for wildlife.
- The Working Wetlands project also has a low ground pressure tractor and flail-mower which is available to farmers for managing soft-rush problems – contact the Working Wetlands team for more details.

Sources of information

- **The Working Wetlands team:**
tel 01409 221823;
email working.wetlands@devonwildlifetrust.org
- **Natural England – for general enquiries about Stewardship options for your land:**
tel 0300 060 1118;
email iss.bristol@naturalengland.org.uk

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Advice note | Managing rushes



Some Culm grasslands are dominated by purple moor-grass (known locally as 'white-grass') and others by rushes. Rushes thrive on the poorly draining acid soils. If left unmanaged they can become very dominant and reduce grazing quality and wildlife value.

Different types of rushes

There are two different types of rushes regularly found in the Culm, and it is important to identify which type is present before deciding on appropriate management.

- **Jointed rushes (either sharp-flowered rush or jointed rush) are beneficial, rarely dominant, and cattle will happily graze them. They are often a good indicator of wildlife-rich grassland.**

TIP – if you run your finger along the length of a leaf spike, you will feel regular partitions.

- **Soft-rush and compact rush can be problem species - when left unmanaged they can dominate a field. They grow in dense clumps, are unpalatable to stock and may require management.**

TIP – if the leaf spike is filled with pith, with no partitions, you probably have soft-rush.



Sharp-flowered rush. Photo, Rob Wolton



Soft-rush. Photo, Rob Wolton

Points to consider when topping / mowing rushes

One early cut (before April) followed by cattle grazing in the summer, and late summer cuts will help control rushes. Thorough checks need to be made for ground-nesting birds before commencing work.

Try to cut from the centre of the field outwards to allow wildlife to escape. Avoid cutting entire fields in one season – one third of the area of rushes on rotation is ideal.

A lower cut gives better results (with mowers being preferable to toppers) Cuttings should be collected and not left on the ground as a thick smothering thatch. Cuttings can be baled and used as a bedding supplement.

Good rush management



The need for soft-rush management

Some soft-rush is desirable for wildlife. A field with rush cover of between 20 - 40% provides ideal conditions for wintering birds such as snipe and breeding birds such as meadow pipit and skylark.

Rushes provide very poor grazing and reduce the quality of hay, making forage inaccessible and harbouring parasites. The sharp leaves of rushes can cause the condition 'New Forest Eye', and in dense stands they smother flowering plants.

Control by cutting

Mowing or topping will help to control soft-rush particularly when used in conjunction with aftermath grazing. Cutting twice a year is required to reduce rush dominance. The dilemma is that cutting can itself be very damaging to wildlife and repeated tractor access to wet fields will cause soil compaction and a reduction in grass yields.

Herbicide control

Herbicide control (subject to restrictions of agri-environment schemes or organic status, etc) by weed wiping can be an efficient and cost-effective tool in the control of soft-rush. Properly done, it can be less disruptive to wildlife than regular cutting. It also involves fewer machinery passes over the years resulting in less soil compaction.

Soft-rush in need of management



Mechanical rush management



Herbicide weed-wiping



Points to consider when treating rushes

Only weed-wiping equipment should be used to target soft-rush – spray application of herbicide is harder to control and will result in the loss of beneficial non-target plants.

To ensure rushes are effectively targeted, herbs and grasses should be grazed down to very low levels prior to weed-wiping.

It is essential when using any pesticides to adhere to guidance on the label and follow best practice guidance. The use of 'wettors' may also be required.

www.pesticides.gov.uk

www.defra.gov.uk/environment/quality/chemicals/pesticides/

Always consider using an experienced contractor.