

Views About Management



A statement of English Nature's views about the management of King's Sedgemoor Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

This statement represents English Nature's views about the management of the SSSI for nature conservation. This statement sets out, in principle, our views on how the site's special conservation interest can be conserved and enhanced. English Nature has a duty to notify the owners and occupiers of the SSSI of its views about the management of the land.

Not all of the management principles will be equally appropriate to all parts of the SSSI. Also, there may be other management activities, additional to our current views, which can be beneficial to the conservation and enhancement of the features of interest.

The management views set out below do not constitute consent for any operation. English Nature's written consent is still required before carrying out any operation likely to damage the features of special interest (see your SSSI notification papers for a list of these operations). English Nature welcomes consultation with owners, occupiers and users of the SSSI to ensure that the management of this site conserves and enhances the features of interest, and to ensure that all necessary prior consents are obtained.

Management Principles

Wet grassland with botanical and breeding and wintering bird interests

Wet grasslands occur on land that is subject to periodic flooding or has a seasonally high water table and is waterlogged for much of the year. They often support a botanically rich sward and a diverse invertebrate community, and are also an important habitat for breeding waders and wintering wildfowl. Maintaining the requirements of each of these interests is an important part of wet grassland management.

In areas where the aim of management is to maintain the botanical interest, each year's growth of vegetation must be removed to prevent the sward becoming dominated by vigorous grasses and rushes which lower its botanical richness. This is traditionally achieved by grazing, with cattle the preferred stock as they are tolerant of wet conditions, able to control tall grasses and rank vegetation, and produce a structurally diverse sward. Grazing usually takes place at times between late spring and early autumn, but the precise timing and intensity will depend on local conditions and requirements, such as the need to avoid trampling ground-nesting birds. Heavy poaching should be avoided but light trampling can be beneficial in breaking down leaf litter and providing areas for seed germination.

Any changes in the historic water level regime which has created the important plant communities should be made with extreme care. Both prolonged waterlogging and prolonged soil dryness can deleteriously affect the composition of the grassland sward. Areas of standing water should generally not be present between March and August as these grasslands require a well aerated root zone during the growing season. However careful management of summer ditch water levels is often necessary to prevent the surface soil becoming too dry.

Sympathetic grazing is also required in areas where the aim of management is to maintain suitable habitat for wintering birds, but partial winter flooding is also important. A mosaic of winter flooded grassland and permanently un-flooded grassland is desirable, with both temporary and permanent pools present. The maintenance of a mosaic of shallow surface pools and un-flooded areas during the winter will provide roosting and feeding habitat for wintering wildfowl and waders. From April onwards, the area of standing surface water should be reduced to increase the area available for nesting waders and also by concentrating aquatic invertebrates in small pools to provide suitable feeding areas for their young. Some shallow areas of flooding should be maintained until late June to provide patches of bare muddy ground on which the birds and their young can feed as raised sward height makes feeding on the drier areas more difficult.

The birds using these features are directly vulnerable to disturbance, which can cause them to lose time spent feeding or drive them to areas with a poorer supply of food. Management should seek to minimise any harmful disturbance, especially at times when bird populations are under stress, such as during severely cold conditions. Predators, especially crows and related species, should be controlled and this may be best achieved by limiting their nesting sites. Agricultural operations should generally be avoided before mid-June to minimise disturbance to breeding birds and prevent nest destruction.

Ditches

Ditches are artificial habitats created by land drainage, or occasionally by the channelisation of small streams. They may represent the only remaining freshwater habitat within former wetland areas, and often support a wide range of aquatic plant and animal (in particular invertebrate) species that would have previously been more widespread in ponds and wetlands.

If left unmanaged, silt accumulates in the bottom of the ditches, and emergent plants such as reeds are able to colonise across the width of the ditch, leading to a loss of aquatic plant diversity and a gradual drying out of the ditch. To prevent this, periodical removal of sediment and vegetation may be necessary to return the ditch to an early stage of the management cycle. Occasional removal of scrub from the ditches at this site is also necessary. Ideally, ditch management should be undertaken on a rotation, creating a series of different management stages across a site at any one time. All stages of the management cycle have wildlife interest; recently cleared ditches are good for plants and animals which favour newly created habitats and cannot tolerate competition with other species; middle-stage ditches support a rich aquatic plant flora; and late-stage ditches may be important for a variety of invertebrates. The removal of both sediment and vegetation is usually better than

simply cutting the vegetation, which does not recreate the earliest stages of the ditch management cycle. Where possible, management should aim to create shallow shelving margins rather than steep ditch sides. Where water voles are known to be present, the relevant good practice guidelines for ditch management and conservation should be followed.

Most ditch systems are subject to water level control, which should be managed to ensure that there is a sufficient depth of water (0.3-0.5m) in ditches throughout the year. Rapid or extreme changes in water level should be avoided unless they are known to be important to plant or animal communities relying on such fluctuations.

Ditches are susceptible to increased levels of nutrients which can cause a loss of aquatic plants and increases in algal growth. Other activities that can lead to this include the control or removal of aquatic plants, or the introduction of species such as bottom feeding coarse fish which uproot plants and disturb ditch sediments. Ditches are also susceptible to invasion by non-native aquatic plants such as floating pennywort and water fern, which are able to grow rapidly taking up available habitat and smothering other plants. Some native plants including a number of duckweed species are also able to take over in this way (although such growths are usually exacerbated by increased nutrients in the water) and management may be necessary to control such invasions where they cause a problem.

All habitats

The habitats within this site are highly sensitive to inorganic fertilisers and pesticides, applications of which should be avoided both within the site itself and within adjacent surrounding areas. Access to the site, and any recreational activities within, may also need to be managed.