

Ivy and Grazing

Extracts from Nibblers online discussion group

Dear Nibblers

A few years ago there was an interesting discussion on livestock eating ivy.

I manage some woodlands in south Devon which contain numerous roe deer and are also visited by the local farmers' flocks of "free-range" sheep. Whenever an ivy-clad tree or branch falls to the ground, the ivy leaves are quickly stripped by the deer and sheep. However, I have noticed that the patches of ivy growing on the woodland floor are not eaten.

I believe ivy has 3 forms: grows on the ground, climbs trees/walls and has self-supporting branches. The ground hugging ivy tends to have darker leaves than the 2 aerial forms and I wonder if these leaves are not particularly palatable or even slightly toxic (would make sense when considering the plant's evolution).

Any comments or opposing observations?

Peter Chapman

The Vincent Wildlife Trust

Hi Peter,

I have put cattle on Warton Crag, an SSSI in N Lancashire for the last 10 years. One of the first things they like to do upon accessing one part of the reserve is disappear off into the woodlands and eat as much ivy as they can find including the leaves growing on the ground. They never make a very good job of eating them, perhaps because they quickly get soiled by the trampling. To date none have taken any harm by it.

best wishes

Bill

Hi -

Our cattle eat ivy climbing trees and walls, and anything they can reach of the flowering (branching) parts -- as well as what we trim off the house and stables each year. I'm pretty sure they eat it off the ground too. They eat as much as they can get of it, and show no ill effects -- but they do that with quite a few toxic things...

This is all *Hedera helix* -- I don't know whether diploid or tetraploid, but I guess the former round here. I don't think they've had the opportunity to try Canary ivy (the big-leaved, sprawling garden one -- can't remember its proper name).

Could the plants not eaten off the ground be the tetraploid form? The two kinds are generally treated as the same species, but arguably they ought to be two, as they can't breed, are physically different, and have somewhat different ecology and distributions. I think you could have both in Devon.

Richard

There is a subspecies of ivy, *Hedera helix hibernica* (Irish ivy) which has a greater tendency to grow prostrate with occasional self supporting stems. The whitish hairs of *helix* tend to be yellowish-brown on the ssp and the leaf marbling is often absent on this too. I have not read anything to suggest differing palatability though.

I know Warton Crag well and took some pictures there last summer when it looked more like Lebanon than Lancashire.

Regards,

Henry

I think ivy sorts out constipation. Our stock like others always go for ivy on fallen trees.

Richard M
