

Cattle grazing with Bilberry and Adders

Extracts from Nibblers online discussion group

Hi,

We are looking to graze an area of acid grassland which has recently been cleared of large scrub etc. The site is unusual for this area in that adjacent to the acid grass and heather community is an oak woodland with bilberry understorey.

Our concern is this, we would like to graze the site as we do with our other heaths and wetlands but are unsure if we should exclude the bilberry wood. We have no idea what impact cattle have on bilberry.

The site also has a reasonable adder population, does anyone have experience of grazing within adder habitats, would the adders be put at risk by this?

Any ideas would be great.

Adam Hamilton
Countryside Ranger
CLACS

Hi Adam

Delighted to hear you are grazing your heaths etc and proposing to extend into the new areas. Bilberry is relatively palatable to livestock compared to other ericaceous shrubs. Here in the New Forest it's certainly eaten by ponies (and deer) and I'm sure also by cattle although I can't recall seeing them eat it recently. The effect of the frequent exposure to grazing/browsing on the bilberry is to suppress its growth form to a low 'carpet' usually 10-15cms high, over shorter acid grassland turf. It still flowers and fruits but not in great quantity. It can be taller in areas of high bracken cover, as the bracken tends to protect it and these areas are less favoured by the animals, but it doesn't form the much taller (40-50cms) branched bushes found in ungrazed heathlands/acid woodlands.

Whether you should graze the wood depends on a) its history, b) its current conservation value/interest, and c) the management objectives. Unless there are clear indications that it was fenced off historically and had eg a well managed coppice understorey it may well have been a wood pasture, in which case reintroducing grazing may be appropriate.

You can expect the size of the bilberry to be somewhat reduced (depending on its current vigour and the grazing pressure) but it wouldn't be eliminated. If it is historic wood pasture I'd anticipate that the wider benefits of restoring more traditional management/structure to the woodland would offset the 'negative' effects on the bilberry.

Re adders - we have large numbers of these (and other reptiles) in the New Forest and they appear to co-exist happily with the livestock. In theory it would be possible for an animal to eg step on a hibernaculum but in practice livestock density on heathlands is low and the reptiles are usually well buried to protect themselves from frost so it's unlikely to be a problem. In summer the reptiles generally move away from approaching danger so again it's not a problem. Occasionally over-inquisitive dogs get bitten but generally not livestock as far as I'm aware.

I keep cattle myself on both the New Forest and a number of other heathland sites and have seen no evidence of detrimental effects either way. On small sites with rare reptiles (eg smooth snakes or sand lizards) potentially at risk there is always the option of fencing off

specific small areas as hibernacula or breeding sites. However it's worth noting that cattle tend not to graze/trample across a heathland site uniformly in the way they would in an improved grass field, especially if the heather/vegetation is fairly tall. They tend to follow a network of paths and gaps in the vegetation and graze around them as far as they can reach, leaving significant areas untrampled and hence safe refuges for reptiles.

Hope this helps.

Rue

I had a lamb killed by an adder the night before it went to market which did not improve adders popularity . The bite was on the body side of its "armpit " .

If you have tracking through the grazing this tends to attract adder which want to sun themselves. Whether it is realistic to make sunning spots off the track I have no idea. Four pin pricks are the characteristic of snake bite. Adders do inhabit heavily vegetated areas including bracken but need sunning places apparently

If you have to suppress bracken, spraying it with a helicopter is very effective as the down wash blows the asulox into the fronds but then you must graze pretty hard to prevent regeneration.

Does anyone know good guidelines to prevent bracken poisoning, as its palatability decreases with age and only hungry cattle seem at risk. Is it actually poisonous or is it the shredded stems that perforate the gut of the beast, like the chinese method of blotting their enemies by feeding them sliced bamboo splinters.

I thought bracken was most toxic when young and juicy

RM

A few years ago we grazed a W16 upland oak woodland and open moorland site which has bilberry in both habitats,as well as areas of acid grassland. The site had no recent history of grazing (definitely not known within the last 80 years). We grazed with a small number of Exmoor ponies (5 over 24 hectares) all year round over the entire site. Generally we found the habitat quality improved by increased heather regeneration - most likely through light trampling. The problems we had were they focused grazing in grassland areas (maybe what you're looking for anyway) and they seemed to have quite an impact due to trampling on a population of cow-wheat, which was near to an established path the ponies used regularly. We dealt with the latter problem by a bit of dead hedging. We also got quite a bit of trampling in the winter around gateways/troughs etc. The ponies were excellent at managing the habitats overall although, if they'd stayed on over the longer term, I would have looked at supplementing in late spring/early summer with cattle. Unfortunately the woman who owned the Exmoors has moved away and now i'm hoping to establish cattle grazing next spring. But generally i found that since stock levels were low and if i had taken them off over winter i don't think there would have been much negative impact on bilberry.

Unfortunately we don't yet have a regime that does the job we wanted which was to control invading scrub in the open moorland areas. It'll be a long time before we have a satisfactory regime that does anything near to everything we want. If your sites big enough and you can start of with a small number then i'd suggest giving it a go.

Helen Gee
Reserves Manager

RSPB Abernethy Reserve have recently trialled cattle in plots throughout the heather / blaeberry pinewood so may have some valuable data. In general, believe that light and timely cattle grazing in moderation will be valuable.

Alison McKnight

Author wrote:

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Adam -

I'm not sure about bilberry under a canopy -- I think Rue is right on this though (and I'm not just saying that because she'll be home in a minute...).

However, I think grazing must be good for bilberry in the open, as (like shade) it tends to suppress heather a bit more. The best bilberry I can think of on the New Forest is on an area where there are always lots of cattle throughout the year (cattle only eat much heather in winter when there's no grass).

In a previous life I notified a lot of the military heaths in West Surrey as SSSIs, and I did a bit of research on their history. A very interesting thing I discovered was that bilberry harvesting was a major source of income for the Surrey villages before the military took over, large quantities of "whorts" (or hurts) being sent to market in London. However, nowadays bilberry is rarely dominant in the area except under pine, where it doesn't fruit much -- I think you'd have trouble gathering enough for a pot of jam in most years. I suspect therefore that the grazing allowed it to dominate in open ground, and it then fruited profusely.

Incidentally, the commons rights were clearly worth a lot at the time. They were bought out by the military (I think about 1840) for £14,000 -- a very great deal of money to poor folk then (something like £10 million in today's money -- see <http://eh.net/hmit/ukcompare/>).

Richard
