

## **Pigs and Bracken**

### **Extracts from Nibblers online discussion group**

I've been asked by an owner/occupier of part of the Duddon Valley Woodlands SSSI (upland oak and mixed ash woodland) if he can put out a couple of pigs (not sure of the breed as yet). The area concerned is approx. 17ha and although it is relatively open there is limited regeneration partly because of the extensive bracken cover. Until recently, the area was also grazed by sheep coming in off the fell above.

I understand that pigs can be useful in breaking up bracken and scarifying the ground to promote seedling establishment. However, I'm trying to ascertain what time of year would be best (or conversely whether there is a particular time to avoid), what length of time the pigs should be left to graze at any one time, and whether supplementary feeding is necessary.

If you have any useful advice I'd be more than grateful!

Many thanks

Rachel

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Hi, there's no quick answer to that one, but the first question for him is "How good are the fences?"

More than happy to talk at enormous length; even prepared to visit (Duddon Valley is one of my favourite places; should have been in Cumbria this week; could be there in January or February) or show him what pigs can do up here on Islay. He will almost certainly do better with more than two pigs for an area that size and - as a Trustee of the Middle White Pig Trust - I would strongly advise him to go for a pure bred traditional breed.

Chloe

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Hello,

I have also tried to find out about what's good/bad for the habitat when you put pigs into woodland... any feedback welcome.

People seem to have a romantic view based on wild pigs, but as soon as you deal with modern farm stock densities, surely this is not good for the ground flora, etc? I have seen pigs clear woodland of nettles and other ground flora, and yet leave *Arum maculatum* (lords and ladies) which is poisonous and luckily tastes awful.

I would suggest that brief visits in autumn are best suited to pigs to avoid flowering times but being able to eat fungi, beech mast, etc, and that groups should be small. Winter might be OK too, but by Jan/Feb you may have sensitive shoots of bluebell etc, damaged by rooting pigs. However if the bracken is so dominant that you have no other flora (!) then perhaps the pigs will be perfect in early spring too, when the fresh bracken is coming back up. (When bracken is least toxic?)

Regards - Jason.

Jason Ball  
Sheepdrove Farm

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Pigs here chewed up a small area to total destruction so you may need to let them in and then electric fence off the favourite bit and make them start again.

Not my pigs so am no expert. Badgers are said to jump ship when pigs turn up, but that is

gossip only.  
RM

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Pigs have been used both intensively on 1/2ha bracken plots and extensively, approx 20ha, in a mixed grazing scheme on Burnham Beeches. In both circumstances they will break up and scarify the ground but do not seem particularly interesting in tree seedlings. That said, our lowland situation provides lots of other natural and more tasty food.

With respect to bracken, the pig did not seem interested in it unless confined to small areas although they will collect bracken litter to make warm nests as the weather gets colder eventually retiring to their arc with bundles of heather and bracken in the winter.

When confined to small plots the pigs have broken up bracken stands. Confining the pigs to small areas needs to be monitored and the pigs removed before complete destruction, at what point may depend on what else there is in the plot you want to protect. Repeat confinement may be necessary but my feeling is that it would have to stop to allow things to get going again.

We did not use supplementary feed as it was not necessary but it can be helpful at directing the pigs attention to specific areas.

Importantly, bracken is toxic, preventing the uptake of vitamin b and thus should not be the only food available. As I said earlier, there is lots of other tasty food about on the Beeches and so this was not a problem for us but it may affect the time of year you use pigs if not using supplementary feed.

Our pigs did pull up and chew some fairly sizeable tree roots so be prepared. This may seem a bit destructive but this does not seem to have affected the trees, yet! And I did select the plots to avoid any trees of interest so it didn't matter if some got damaged, which should any suffer it will provide a bit more standing dead wood. Also there was little if no other interest within the two small plots to worry about.

The pigs are turned out annually on an extensive basis between September and Xmas, following the tradition of pannage, and were confined to the small plots, one in the spring and one in September/October.

If you are going to enclose the pigs on a bracken stand, for practical reasons it may be easier to do so when the bracken is either not emerged to very short or when it has wilted - making it easier to get your fences up.

Also, remember that pigs need shelter and using Tamworths in bracken can make them hard to find.

Good luck

Mark Cleaver  
Keeper, Burnham Beeches

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The trick is all in the timing - there comes a point where productive becomes destructive. Very important to have an exit route planned, or at least somewhere to evacuate them when they have done almost all you need.

If you are firm about the daily feeding routine, you can direct the pigs to where you want

them to be - no troughs; scatter the pigs nuts broadcast.

Chloe

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