

Soay sheep grazing behaviour

Extracts from Nibblers online discussion group

While there is a bit of a lull in messages.

We have recently put 20 Soays on about 10 acre enclosure on Flitwick Moor which is birch wood, birch scrub wet areas of mire and about 40% drier grassland..all previously ungrazed so quite long. They have been all round the site but have also concentrated on some areas leaving fairly well eaten patches up to about 10 metres across...could be where they have spent the night but not the dung that i would have expected. It looks like they have just decided to eat each area down...early days yet as have only been on a couple of weeks... but i wondered if anyone else had noticed a tendency to do this? good for stuctural diversity!

Graham Bellamy

Beds WT

This is a perfect demonstration of what is supposed to happen according to classical grazing theory, Graham. Presented with an immediate excess of herbage, the grazing animal chooses certain areas that it thinks it likes best and eats the top leafy layers of those. Meantime, all areas that are not subject to this initial defoliation continue to grow and mature unhindered. Having worked round the site eating their most preferred patches the animals are then more inclined to return to these previously grazed areas subsequently. This is because the new shoots that will have begun to form as a direct result of the initial defoliation within the grazed areas are now much more palatable and nutritious than the ones in the patches that had been rejected at the outset and have thus been allowed to become more mature, fibrous and unpalatable in the meantime. These older patches will only get grazed when the rate at which new shoots are being eaten exceeds the rate at which they are being produced within the lawn patches and the grazers are forced to top up from elsewhere within the grazing mosaic.

Does this make sense? There was a paper in Grass and Forage Science recently that explained it very well; I'll see if I can find the reference if you are interested).

best wishes

Bill
