

Thoughts from Heathnet on Gorse

Extracts from Nibblers online discussion group

We use a cut/collect flail mower to control areas of european gorse. Yes, for a few years we were left with dense mats of gorse, but after 4 years of persistent (very low) cuts the gorse is giving way to heather and, in places grey hair grass. Gradually the gorse appears to become gnarled and fragile.

Adam

Sorry to drift away from the thread slightly, but who is the supplier/manufacturer of your collecting flail mower?

Henry

Do sheep eat the young gorse shoots? They certainly seem to 'topiary' the gorse bushes on Dartmoor (or maybe it's the ponies). Gorse is potentially very nutritious (and fixes N).

Dr F.W. Kirkham

They do on ours. The combination of sheep and cattle reduce the need to cut and collect again as the trampling combined with the munching seems to kill the Gorse, especially the older stands that were cut.

Rob Havard

Maybe the height of the bottom of the topiary will tell you if it is sheep or ponies. The typical East African acacia is due to giraffe.

Is there a spray for gorse control ?
RM

Flail mower is ryetec (not sure on the spelling but can find the number if you want). We looked at a couple and this was by far the best at the time. They will come and give a demo if you require. Ours will mow birch and gorse up to 2 to 4" but we have seen a 6" diameter oak tree mown (slowly, and with care).

Adam Hamilton
Countryside Ranger
CLACS

I have been watching this debate with some interest and would just like to add that I hope there is a little bit of regard to the tremendous value of gorse as a wildlife habitat. It attracts several species of bird as a nesting habitat and in winter it is excellent cover for roosting birds. It teems with insects and is generally a rather special plant.

Almost every Longtailed tit and linnet nest I have ever found is in gorse. (I do nest records for the BTO) If you are cutting it bear in mind that Long-tailed Tits will be building nests in late March so they will have selected their territory by early March or sooner. Unfortunately it is only a pioneer species and will quickly develop into woodland if left unmanaged. Incidentally in times past times a man could be fined for stealing gorse off the Common?

It was valued for firing bread ovens and kilns because it burns very hot. It was also crushed to feed to livestock, yes, I found this hard to believe until I saw a gorse crusher in an

agricultural museum in Jersey. The only animals that I ever saw tackle it were Herdwicks but that was only in early spring when the shoots were still soft, they breed em tough in the Lake District!.

Oh and when gorse is in flower kissing is in season. I think that's the gist of it.

It can be controlled by burning and the heat actually encourages the seed to germinate.

Anyway, please do not underrate this valuable wildlife resource.

Thanks

Frank Mawby

Chairman Watchtree Nature Reserve Ltd

Fair comment Frank

From memory, PhD research on Dartford warbler ecology derived a 5-10% range of gorse cover (*Europaeus*, though it ought to apply to *Gallii* too?) in mature dry heath as optimum for breeding habitat, whereas larger stands of dense compact gorse are important for winter survival.

Also, but this time memory fails me, there are a number of micro-moths that are dependent on gorse

Season's greetings

Nigel Symes

Plus of course the gorse shield bug, though this can be supported by other legumes.

Henry

Very interesting. I was about to get round to blotting out an ever increasing couple of patches. Nearby is wall/bank favoured by adders so maybe they like it as well

Richard M

I have photographs of 'topiaried' gorse bushes on Moel Famau (N.E. Wales) in which the bushes are reduced to half spheres, about 30cm tall at the highest point. As far as I am aware only sheep grazed that area of Moel Famau, but there may have been a few ponies that I didn't see.

Hebridean sheep will nibble the tips of gorse bushes, and mine were doing so yesterday when let into a new grazing compartment, but that may have just been exploratory. However, around here gorse is still in flower, so what with Frank's folklore and the impending mistletoe season kissing can go unimpeded!

Hebrideans will also strip gorse bark, but I don't know whether it does any lasting damage to the bush.

Richard Small

Liverpool John Moores University

Hi

No it is the sheep which topiary the bushes on Moel Famau and you can see the same effect across the upland fringe and coastal belt of North and West Wales. When grazing is reduced these sphere tend to sprout long shoots from the top so end up looking like a bizarre mohican haircut. Pony grazing does not seem to produce the same weird growth form

presumably because they take growth from the whole bush.

Jan Sherry
Heathland Ecologist
Thanks Frank

Yes gorse used to be cut as a winter fodder crop and then milled, in much the same way that corn would have been milled.

Back breaking work carried out at the crack of dawn and, so I'm told, in order that it didn't rot down after milling, it had to be cut and milled and fed to livestock during the same day. So no wonder no one's doing it any more.

Still, any of you keen emulators of tradition fancy a crack at it?

Paul Sinnadurai

Just to add to this we've just used a cut and collect flail on some rather leggy old gorse.

We aim to cut approx 1/5 of the total area of gorse each year and for gorse and other scrub to cover no more than 10-15% of the total area of heath on the site. By cutting a mosaic of areas we're creating a diversity of densities and age structures that would have previously been carried out by commoners who were utilising Gorse for a multitude of uses.

Following the flailing work we were left with a carpet of crushed gorse that our Exmoor ponies were desperate to get stuck into, so the principle of crushing works.

Other past uses of Gorse.....

Firing bread ovens has been mentioned as the gorse burns hot but it was also used as it leaves very little residue behind.

Large bushes were used for drying of clothes on a windy day – the clothes were draped over the bush and the thorns prevented articles of clothing being blown away whilst the structure of the bush allowed air to circulate both sides of the article.

See Chris Howkin's book "Heathland Harvest" for even more uses of gorse.

Regards

Andrew Storey
Head Warden - Hindhead Commons
National Trust

recall mention of a patented gorse crushing machine somewhere, suggesting it was both important and widespread forage.

Nigel Symes

Firing bread ovens has been mentioned as the gorse burns hot but it was also used as it leaves very little residue behind.

And, I believe, also for scalding milk - an early form of pasteurisation for much the same reasons.

Ian
