

Local Wildlife Sites – South East Wales Project

The following information outlines the best practice guidelines for managing the habitat type listed below in a manner that is sympathetic to wildlife. It is part of a series relating to various habitat types and management issues that have been produced by your local Wildlife Trusts.

No.9 Saltmarsh and Coastal Grazing Marsh

What is Saltmarsh and Coastal Grazing Marsh?

Saltmarshes generally form in estuaries or other areas of more sheltered coastline. They are composed of mud and sand that has settled in these more sheltered areas and become vegetated. Saltmarshes have different zones of habitat dependent on the distance from the shoreline, with each zone supporting a distinct associated plant community. Grazing marsh is defined as pasture or meadow that is regularly flooded by the sea and includes a network of ditches to maintain water levels. They are frequently found on the higher levels of saltmarsh and the less agriculturally improved examples can be highly species-rich.



Sea Lavender



Saltmarsh and Coastal Grazing Marsh



Greater Sea-spurrey

What wildlife does it support?

The mix of marine, freshwater and terrestrial creates a unique habitat. Due to their specialist nature and relatively restricted distribution, these habitats are host to a considerable number of rare/scarce plant species. They are also rich in invertebrate life that in turn supports large numbers of animals, such as wildfowl and waders including Lapwing, Redshank and Curlew. They are also important habitats for species such as Otters and Short-eared Owls.



Redshank



Short-eared Owl



Curlew

Why preserve/enhance it?

Saltmarshes are a fantastic and very localised habitat and you can justifiably feel proud to have on your land such a superb resource for wildlife. These saltmarsh habitats are so special, vulnerable and rare within a European context that they are afforded special protection. It is therefore of great importance that they are protected/enhanced and we would very much like to assist you in achieving this goal, by both highlighting the threats to this habitat and providing management recommendations.

Threats

The following can all lead to the loss/degradation of this habitat:

- Land reclamation for agriculture or development.
- Coastal defences.
- Rising sea-levels.
- Coastal erosion.
- Development i.e. building of roads.
- Changes to coastal dynamics resulting in more or less sediment deposition thus altering saltmarsh.
- Agricultural improvement - drainage, ploughing, reseeding, fertiliser or herbicide treatment.
- Inappropriate levels of grazing, typically too intensive not giving wild flowers chance to flourish.
- Change of livestock to inappropriate types for conditions/season.

Management Recommendations

The following is recommended to ensure the valuable Saltmarsh habitat is managed sympathetically for wildlife and is thus preserved and/or enhanced:

Preservation/Enhancement of Saltmarsh

If the saltmarsh/grazing marsh is already species rich there may be no need to alter the current regime (grazed/ungrazed). It should be noted that many saltmarshes are species rich and have no level of management (grazing) and as such should stay this way. If alterations are required then the best-practice guidelines for grazing throughout the year are (exact timings will vary from site to site and sometimes year to year):

- Grazing regimes will be dependent on the conservation objectives for the site.
- Light grazing is preferred as this is closer to a natural un-grazed system and provides structural diversity, whilst still allowing grazing intolerant plants to persist.
- Stocking levels should be 0.7LSU/ha/yr (approx. 2-3 sheep and 0.7-1 cattle) through April-October.
- Hardy breeds that can withstand wet conditions are best. Water Buffalo are preferable to cattle but cattle are preferable to ponies/horses in wetter areas.
- Areas grazed can be rotated by the use of electric fencing to prevent too much soil compaction and poaching. Eroded areas need to be fenced off from grazing, as erosion will increase rapidly if not managed.
- Supplementary feeding should be restricted to prevent localised poaching and nutrient enrichment.
- Please note that it is important that stocking densities are continually monitored as each site will vary due to environmental conditions and historical grazing. With too high a stocking rate species richness can decrease and sedimentation can be reduced. With too low a stocking rate species of the lower saltmarsh may spread higher and different vegetation patterns can develop.

No fertilisers should be used, which will increase soil fertility and encourage the out competition of wildflowers by vigorous coarse grasses and weedy species.

There may be further issues that are reducing/threatening the ecological value of your Saltmarsh and/or Coastal Grazing Marsh such as:

- **Invasive species control**

- ❖ The main plant which is a concern in saltmarsh habitat is the Common Cord Grass (*Spartina anglica*). It is difficult to get rid of, with manual removal by hand during its establishment phase being the most effective. Once it is fully established the only effective treatment is herbicide (Dalapon is best) and smothering with black plastic sheeting.
- ❖ Japanese Knotweed and Himalayan Balsam may also occur on saltmarsh. Himalayan Balsam can also be controlled by hand-pulling before it sets seed but Japanese Knotweed will require spot treatment with a suitable herbicide.

Refer to separate Toolkits – No. 13 & 14 Invasive Weed Control for more detail.

- **Erosion**

- ❖ Grazing and in some instances recreational pressure can lead to localised erosion.
- ❖ Measures to prevent erosion can be either altering the grazing regimes or if caused by recreational pressure then appropriate signage may remedy the problem.
- ❖ If restoring any areas once the cause of erosion has been addressed, then natural colonisation is always the preferred option. If planting is undertaken to aid the re-colonisation then only native species that are already present in the wider saltmarsh should be used.

Should you require any further advice regarding the management of your Local Wildlife Site please do not hesitate to contact your local Wildlife Trust:

Gwent Wildlife Trust

Tel: 01600 740600

e-mail: info@gwentwildlife.org

Wildlife Trust of South & West Wales

Tel: 01656 724100

e-mail: info@welshwildlife.org

Other toolkits available are:

No.1 Neutral Grassland (Hay Meadows)

No.2 Neutral Grassland (Pasture)

No.3 Acid Grassland

No.4 Calcareous Grassland

No.5 Marshy Grassland

No.6 Marsh Grassland (with Marsh Fritillary)

No.7 Heath

No.8 Hedgerows

No.10 Ponds & Lakes

No.11 Scrub clearance

No.12 Bracken control

No.13 Invasive weed control (natives – thistle, dock etc.)

No.14 Invasive weed control (aliens – Japanese Knotweed, Himalayan Balsam etc.)

Further useful documents include:

- ❖ *Saltmarsh Management Manual (Defra/Environment Agency):* <http://cdn.environment-agency.gov.uk/scho0307bmkh-e-e.pdf>
- ❖ *Management of Coastal Saltmarsh for invertebrates:* <http://www.buglife.org.uk/advice-and-publications/advice-on-managing-bap-habitats/coastal-saltmarsh>
- ❖ *Further advice on grazing:* www.grazinganimalsproject.org.uk/

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