

Grazing for wildlife in the Isles of Scilly

An exciting project called 'Waves of Heath' is restoring 592 hectares (1,463 acres) of lowland heathland in Scilly, controlling scrub by cutting, rolling and burning. The re-establishment of grazing on some heathland sites is also an aim of the project and this leaflet provides background information on:

- Grazing History
- Why is grazing important
- Livestock Containment
- Access for people
- Selection and numbers of livestock
- The current situation and our future plans.

This land management project is being carried out by the Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust, with support from the Heritage Lottery Fund through Tomorrow's Heathland Heritage, English Nature, the Duchy of Cornwall and Tresco Estate.

Grazing History

Scilly's landscapes, habitats and species have evolved over millennia and have been influenced by land use and exposure to the elements.

Over recent centuries cattle, horses, ponies and donkeys were used in agriculture and for transport. The grazing of the headlands, 'downs', coastal fringes and even the uninhabited islands was integral to the islands' economy.

Gorse was cut for firewood and bracken cut for animal bedding; areas of gorse and scrub were burned over the winter. The combination of land use on nutrient-poor and often thin soil, resulted in vegetation that varied in height and age structure. This produced a patchwork of habitats consisting of heather and maritime grassland, with

Picture of old Bryher - copyright Gibson



scattered gorse and bracken, providing a home for a diverse range of plants and animals.

Changes in lifestyle and the island economy led to the closing of the islands' abattoir and dairy. Grazing of heathland ceased, causing a gradual but steady loss of open habitats.

Gorse and bracken became dominant and years of growth have increased soil nutrition and depth, favouring bramble and weeds over more sensitive heathland flora. Footpaths, archaeology and landscape features have become overgrown and hidden from sight.

Why is grazing important?

Grazing maintains the richness and diversity of wildlife sites and controls invasive species. Animal dung and patches of bare earth from hoof prints are good for insects, which in turn feed birds, shrews and bats. Grazing

Grazing wildlife sites helps prevent scrub invasion, which damages or hides wildlife and archaeological features and reduces access for walkers.

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The re-introduction of livestock on wildlife sites has the potential to increase local incomes and jobs, provide additional grazing land for local farmers and provide a local and environmentally friendly source of high quality food.

Much progress has been made in improving our heathland sites using machinery, hand tools and by burning, which has helped start the restoration process. This work will be greatly complemented by grazing and secure a more sustainable future of our wildlife sites.



Shetland ponies on Bryher - IOSWT

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The disadvantages of mechanical techniques are that on large areas and in the long-term they are more expensive, produce a uniform result, don't remove nutrients, look artificial, and are less environmentally friendly.

Use of machinery is restricted by access and site features, and does not bring the benefits to plants and insects that grazing does, such as varied vegetation height and age structure, hoof prints and dung. These micro habitats, so beneficial to wildlife, cannot be imitated by machinery or by hand.

Livestock containment

In the past, when the 'downs' and headlands were grazed and most farms kept livestock. Hedges, dry-stone walls, fences and gates were maintained in good condition. Animals were tethered or allowed to roam freely. On St. Martin's it is said that stock was kept *out* of gardens and fields, not *inside* grazed areas.

As grazing has dwindled, this infrastructure has fallen into disrepair or has disappeared. Whilst it is clearly necessary to contain grazing livestock, we also feel it is very important to minimise the impact this containment



Volunteers clearing gorse litter from heathland - IOSWT

We aim to manage our wildlife sites in an effective and sustainable manner in keeping with modern Scilly.

has on visually, ecologically and archaeologically sensitive areas.

The options open to us are:

- repairing and reusing existing dry-stone walls. This is not always possible where stone has been removed or walls are not high enough.
- standard three-strand wire, plain or barbed, on wooden posts.
- electric fences on a combination of wooden posts and metal/plastic posts.

In the past, tethering of stock was a common practice; this is not a favoured method on wildlife sites, as it restricts the natural behaviour of livestock and limits the extent of the area grazed.

The means of stock containment will be assessed and carried out on a site-by-site basis, taking into account physical characteristics of the site and the type of stock to be used.

Due to the importance of archaeology on the islands, all permanent fencing and wall repair will be referred

to English Heritage for Scheduled Monument Consent before being carried out.

Access for people

Care will be taken to ensure that all permissive footpaths, tracks and paths will remain open, including access for vehicles and paths for horse riders.

The choice and type of gate or stile, and the material that they are made of, will be given careful consideration and will take into account the use and nature of the route.

Where practically possible, we will use pram and wheelchair-friendly gates. We will also try to contain livestock in a way that offers alternative routes for walkers or horse riders.

Dog walkers are welcome on wildlife sites but there is a need to keep dogs under close control on sites where grazing is occurring. A dog that chases livestock can cause distress, injury or death for the animals concerned. A Countryside Agency leaflet 'You and your dog in the countryside' is available from the Trust or Tourist Information Centre and offers useful advice.



Controlled burning on Bryher - IOSWT

Grazing maintains the essential qualities of the environment that forms a key asset for the economically important tourism industry, and conserves internationally important habitats and species in the most sustainable and natural way.

Grazing cannot be imitated by machinery or hand.

Selection and numbers of livestock

Traditional breeds of animals are the most suitable for grazing wildlife sites as they thrive and naturally keep good health on these areas. Some traditional breeds of cattle are very placid compared to modern breeds and are good for grazing sites with public access.

Livestock graze in different ways. For example cattle tend to tear at grass and, as they are relatively heavier than other types of livestock, they do more trampling, creating an open and varied habitat structure. Ponies on the other hand tend to bite very close to the ground creating a level 'lawn' like structure.

Different types of livestock have different plant preferences. Ponies tend to be fussier eaters than cattle and some types of cattle will happily eat ivy and brambles. A combination of cattle and ponies is best suited to restoration grazing and this will be introduced on some wildlife sites. Goats, donkeys and sheep have different characteristics and are not initially being considered.

Wherever possible we would like to encourage neighbouring farmers to keep suitable breeds of cattle and, by

agreement, integrate the grazing of adjoining wildlife sites with their own farmland.

Where this is not possible the Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust will keep a conservation herd of cattle and ponies. A conservation herd is made up of different age ranges, some individuals living out their natural lives. Older animals are used to site conditions and know where to forage for food and find shelter; they also have a calming effect on younger animals.

The number of livestock on a site will differ depending on the condition and sensitivity of the habitats present. Stocking density will be kept very low compared to normal agricultural practice.

A large area with a few animals will be grazed for longer periods whereas a small site will be grazed more quickly and animals will not be kept on site

Good animal welfare is important to us. We will follow nationally recognised codes of best practice and animal welfare, including the 5 freedoms:

- Freedom from hunger & thirst,
- Freedom from discomfort.
- Freedom from pain, injury or disease.
- Freedom to express normal behaviour.
- Freedom from fear and distress.



Eyebright - IOSWT

for as long. A site may be grazed for as little as a couple of weeks or as long as several months.

Drinking water for the animals will also be site dependent and will be provided by a combination of movable and permanent troughs.

Grazing is already taking place on several wildlife sites at present:

- Gweal Hill, Bryher - three Shetland ponies
- Wingletang Down/Castella Down/Browarth Point, St Agnes - cattle
- Bant's Carn, St. Mary's - cattle.

The current situation

In 2003 the Isles of Scilly Wildlife Trust produced a 10 year Habitat Management Plan which highlighted the pressing need to re-establish grazing on wildlife sites.

The Trust, together with farmers, are collaborating on grazing plans and with funding for fencing from the 'Waves of Heath' project and the possibility of an abattoir on St. Mary's, grazing of wildlife sites is one step closer.

The Trust has held community meetings on St. Agnes, Bryher and St. Martin's to discuss land management plans. We have had many meetings with individuals and farmers on all islands and have established significant interest from people who wish to graze Trust land.

Grazing fits in with the ideals of the AONB and the criteria of its management plan, in helping to maintain Scilly as a living and working place and by preserving key landscape features.



Common Blue on Heather - Bryan Thomas



Our plans to re-introduce grazing on wildlife sites is supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, English Nature, English Heritage, Countryside Agency, Defra, Duchy of Cornwall, AONB, Tresco Estate, Mainland Marketing/Specific Project for Agriculture on Scilly and local farmers.

It is also our wish to deal sensitively with and accommodate local concerns, through seeking informed views and support from locals and visitors.

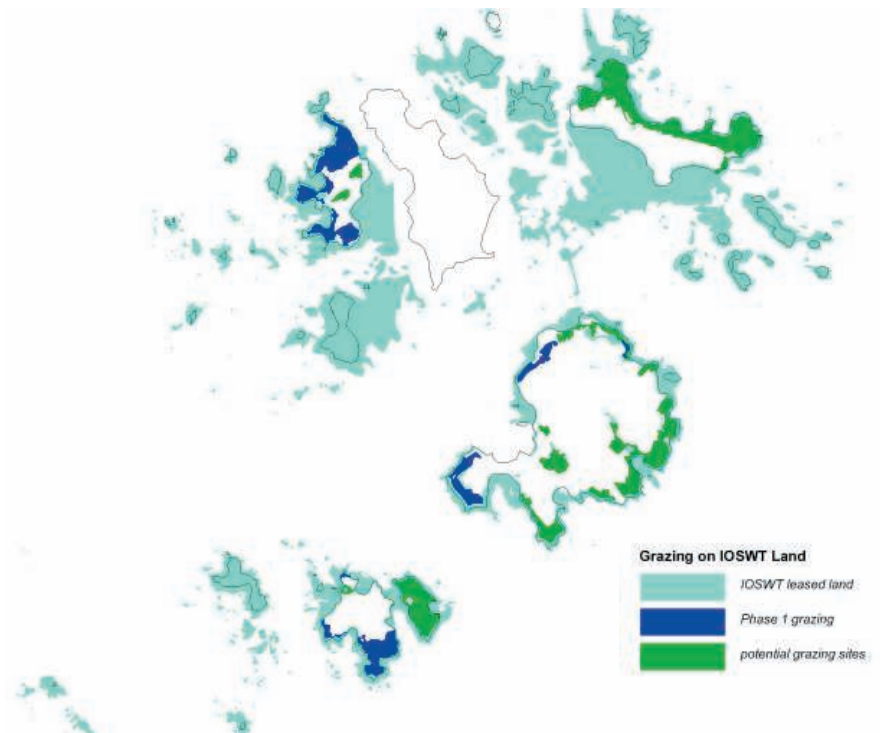
Our future plans

- Bryher – extend the current grazing scheme to Shipman Head Down, Great Pool, Heathy Hill and Samson Hill with the addition of a few Red Ruby cattle and three more Shetland ponies
- St. Agnes - replace and rebuild dry-stone walls and improve stiles,

gates and fencing for ongoing grazing on Wingletang Down.

- St. Mary's - Re-establish fences and graze the Garrison, Bant's Carn and Innisidgen. Establish grazing with local farmers where possible.
- Continue liaison with farmers and graziers to seek further grazing agreements.
- Seek further funding for site management.
- Continue to monitor and review site management.

Our vision is that effective and sustainable land management will be achieved by a gradual reintroduction of grazing livestock onto wildlife sites, managed by members of the local community as part of their livelihoods. This will integrate with the traditional management of these sites and will compliment intensive mechanical management work.



This leaflet has been produced to provide a background to our plans for the re-introduction of grazing to wildlife sites. As our plans evolve into tangible proposals, we will present these for public consultation. We have already held community meetings on the off islands and we will hold an open day on St. Mary's at which our plans will be presented and views sought. We will hold additional off island meetings in the future. Recently we held a further community meeting on Bryher to discuss the extension of grazing on the island.