

**HORSE PASTURE MANAGEMENT NOTES from Chilterns Chalk Grassland
Day June 15 2012
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Contrary to popular belief, horses and ponies are ideal grazers for semi-natural grassland. The problem generally lies with a lack of knowledge and understanding by the owners on how grass should be managed. Many people keep their horses on other people's land as part of a livery business where horses are often stocked too densely and spare grazing to allow pasture to be rested is not available. In addition to this, grass is often viewed as a turnout/exercise area for a horse rather than a source of food or of benefit to biodiversity. There is definitely potential to educate horse-owners to appreciate their grassland and manage it better for their horse and for wildlife.

In addition to biodiversity concerns, horse grazing can have a big impact on the local landscape with use of white tape electric fencing, excessive subdivision of fields into small paddocks, field shelters and exercise arenas. This was apparent at the stud we visited on the last visit before lunch.

Selectivity

- Horse are not ruminants so need longer grazing than cows and sheep (i.e. 12 – 18 hours)
- They are very selective grazers, unlike sheep and cattle, and also browsers (there is evidence of some learned behaviour from their mother as to what plants they will browse ; e.g Exmoor ponies often browse gorse)
- They graze very close; as close as rabbits, closer than any other livestock.
- Horses require constant supply of small amounts of low protein, high-fibre food so semi-natural pasture is ideal. The exception to this is high performance competition horses or breeding thoroughbreds.
- Horses are not suited to high protein, high sugar grasses used by agricultural systems (i.e. rye grasses and white clover); these cause health problems particularly laminitis; very common in native breed ponies.
- Horses prefer youngest growth and actively search out new shoots and crop very closely and return to preferred areas time after time.
- Leafiness preferred to steminess
- Avoid flowers (unlike sheep) although often eat thistle and dandelion flower heads.
- The majority of horses and ponies will require supplementary feeding in winter with hay and possibly concentrates depending on how much work they are doing.

Stocking rate

Stocking rates for horses depend on many factors including the size of the animal, what it is used for, is it a native breed or a thoroughbred fertility of the soil and whether the grass is used for grazing as well as making hay or exercising.

The 1 acre per horse that has been quoted for years is not usually sufficient. 2 acres is better but owners get nervous when faced with the prospect of having too much grass because of a condition called laminitis. (see below)

Latrines

- Horse is the only domestic animal to create these areas it returns to defecate and urinate – won't graze here (in wild and captivity). This is to reduce re-infection by parasites excreted in the droppings.
- Without intervention fields grazed by horses become a mixture of longer rank grass (the latrines) and closer grazed 'lawns'. This can be beneficial for some invertebrates species but droppings need managing (by picking up droppings regularly) otherwise the latrine areas tend to expand and dominate.
- Latrine areas are nutrient rich so can cause problems with nettles.
- Horse will graze latrines droppings removed or if they are very hungry; not advisable though due to increased risk of worms.
- Latrines expand with mares and geldings as they face out when using latrine whereas stallions "back in".
- The majority of grazing will be mares and geldings apart from on stud farms)
- Avoid ivermectins in semi –natural grasslands to reduce damage to invertebrates; having faecal counts done by a vet is best practice as worming can be done according to parasite numbers rather than as routine.

Resting and Social

- Horses spend considerable time resting and indulging in social + grooming behaviour
- Mutual grooming or group behaviour can lead to poaching in winter whilst rolling can create bare patches in summer; these are prone to becoming infested with injurious weeds such as dock and ragwort.
- Can be important to restrict access to valuable grass in winter
- If possible use sacrificial areas on less valuable land which can be resown if required.
- Consider possible reinforcement using mesh, hardcore dug under the grass around gateways to reduce poaching.
- Fence walking can destroy grass – avoid solitary grazing – horses need company.

Shelter

- Important requirement from full sun or cold winds and rain
- Tree / hedges can be sufficient but watch out for poisonous plants; also horses congregating under trees can destroy grass cover
- Need to protect your hedges and trees although allowing browsing can be useful way of maintaining the height.
- Horses can strip bark-this is usually a sign of mineral deficiency or boredom although some horses just seem to enjoy it.
- Poisonous trees and shrubs include yew; oak; alder; laburnum; box; privet; holly; juniper; buckthorn; western red cedar; robinia. Horses can eat St John's Wort; its not poisonous but it causes photo sensitivity so may cause some individuals to be sunburnt particularly horses with white coats, white or pink noses. Ragwort is also poisonous although generally avoided unless horses are very hungry or it is in their hay when it becomes palatable.

For more information see Managing Grass for Horses: The Responsible Owner's Guide by Elizabeth O'Beirne-Ranelagh who was working for FWAG in Cambridgeshire.