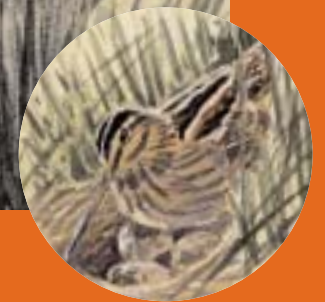


Illustrated guide to grassland condition

Damp tussocky grassland for snipe





Using the guides

What are the guides for?

These illustrated guides are to help show you what wildlife needs in terms of grassland structure and condition. The illustrations build on the more formal written prescriptions of agri-environment agreements, to help describe the results expected from these schemes, that will benefit wildlife.

The guides are based on the belief that **you**, the land managers, farmers and graziers, are crucial in achieving wildlife conservation. We recognise that successful conservation relies on harnessing your detailed knowledge of your land and livestock, together with your observations of the subtle effects of seasonal variations of the climate from year to year. We believe that these new guides will help combine your skills as land managers with our increasingly detailed understanding of the ecological requirements of our wild plants and animals.

What's in the guides?

The guides concentrate largely on describing the **structural features** of a grassland sward (eg variation in height, amount of tussock, open short sward or bare ground). This structure is crucial at key times of year, in

determining the wildlife (both fauna and, to some extent, flora) that can live there.

For each wildlife interest, we provide illustrations and descriptions of the grassland at three key times of year:

- spring - just as you are about to put stock on the land as the grass begins to grow,
- early summer - when many wild animals will be breeding and the majority of plants will be in full flower; and
- autumn or early winter - when you may be seeking to take your stock off for the winter.

We have steered clear of giving detailed advice on stocking rates, as you are likely to be the best judge of the management needed to achieve these results. The only exception to this is where research has clearly shown that stocking rates over a certain critical level lead to high losses of the eggs and chicks of ground nesting birds through damage by trampling.

How to use the guides

The guides should be used in conjunction with a visit from a Conservation adviser. The adviser will help you identify which particular fields the guides are relevant to,

and discuss with you how to get the best for wildlife from your grassland. They are intended for use on grasslands that already have some conservation value.

We ask you to manage your stock so as to try to ensure that the sward in your field(s) looks as close as possible to that illustrated in the guide at each of these three key times. A copy of the guides should be kept as a reference so that over time they will help you to check on the improving wildlife value of your grassland.

Your help needed

These illustrated guides are a trial approach, and we would greatly appreciate feedback about the usefulness, technical content, style and format of the guides. Please send any comments you have to Christine Reid, English Nature, Northminster House, Peterborough, PE1 1UA, or feedback through your Conservation Adviser.

We hope that you benefit from using the guides and that they will help you enjoy more of the wildlife that occurs on your land.

July 2002.

These guides have been written and produced by TellTale (peter@telltale.co.uk) on behalf of English Nature. Illustrations: Dan Powell. Design: cda.

DEFRA
Department for
**Environment,
Food & Rural Affairs**

helping deliver your
agri-environment scheme agreement

Damp tussocky grassland for snipe – April

Snipe require soft damp ground, tussocky sward structure and preferably large open fields not surrounded by trees.

April: Key Points

How will snipe use the fields in April?

Snipe will continue to use wet / damp tussocky fields for feeding and will be displaying and setting up breeding territories. Snipe may start to lay their first eggs as early as mid April.

Sward structure

It is essential to maintain the ideal open tussocky sward structure created in the autumn through into July, to provide cover for nests and young chicks.

Wetness

A high water table is important to ensure the soil is soft enough for snipe to probe for earthworms and crane fly larvae.

Stock

In order to maintain the sward structure created in autumn and to avoid trampling any early nests or young, it is ideal to avoid grazing until June. If this is not possible, stocking rate should be very low (less than 0.75 cows /ha) to minimise trampling damage (see notes for May-July).

Watch out for...

Snipe displaying above your field making a distinctive vibrating sound (called drumming) as they dive. This will tell you they are looking to breed in your field.

Trees

Like other waders, snipe do not like breeding in fields surrounded by trees. This is because their eggs and chicks are very vulnerable to predators such as crows, which use trees as look out posts to spot their prey from.

Landscape view



Too short

How much of the field should look like this?

Some drier grassland around damp areas.

Effect of this sward on snipe

Not enough cover for snipe to feel safe. Ground may also be too dry for snipe to probe into.



Kingcup flowering due to low levels of grazing

Ideal structure for snipe

How much of the field should look like this?

As much as possible.

Effect of this sward on snipe

Ideal cover for feeding, roosting and breeding, but not too dense to stop birds seeing approaching danger. Snipe will nest in shorter sward amongst tussocks.



Too dense

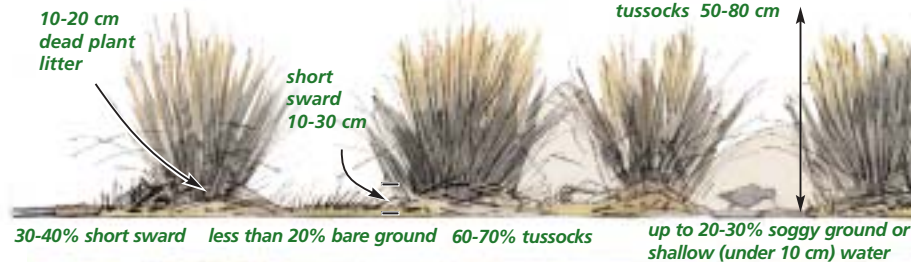
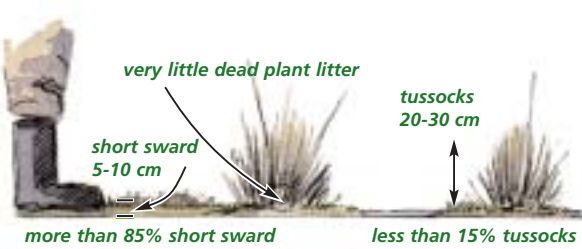
How much of the field should look like this?

Less than 20% of the damp areas.

Effect of this sward on snipe

Snipe avoid continuous dense tall vegetation. Too dense for birds to move around in or to see out from, not suitable for nesting.

Cross section



Above





Damp tussocky grassland for snipe – May to July

Snipe require soft damp ground, tussocky sward structure and preferably large open fields not surrounded by trees.

May to July: Key Points

How will snipe use the fields in May to July?

Breeding continues well into July (sometimes as late as mid August).

Sward structure

The same ideal tussocky structure continues to be important; to hide late nests and chicks and provide cover for roosting.

Wetness

In early summer, the amount of damp ground will be shrinking. Surviving areas of high water table with the correct sward structure are particularly valuable as feeding areas.

Stock

The eggs and young chicks of snipe are very vulnerable to being killed by trampling. However, some grazing is often needed from June onwards to prevent the sward growing too high. Research has shown that grazing at low densities (less than 0.75cows/ ha.) until at least mid July minimises trampling losses. Normal grazing can then be reintroduced, but take care to leave enough re-growth to provide the appropriate structure in October.

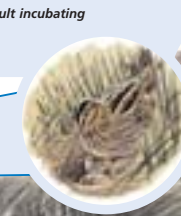
Watch out for...

Nests and young. Birds will be much quieter when they are incubating eggs. Once hatched the flightless young stay near the nest and hide amongst tussocks. Adult birds feed the chicks for the first week before they can feed themselves. Listen out for their sharp alarm calls warning their chicks to take cover.

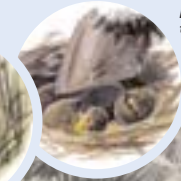
Trampling damage

Snipe nest in shallow scrapes in slightly shorter grass amongst tussocks. Stock densities above 0.75 cows /ha. cause major egg and chick losses. Cattle trample fewer nests than sheep (per quantity of vegetation eaten).

Nest with adult incubating



Nest and eggs being trampled



Landscape view



Too short



Ideal structure for snipe



Too dense



Flowers such as Lesser Spearwort flowering due to low grazing pressure.

How much of the field should look like this?

Some drier grassland around damp areas.

Effect of this sward on snipe

Not enough cover for snipe to feel safe. Ground may also be too dry for snipe to probe into.

How much of the field should look like this?

As much as possible.

Effect of this sward on snipe

Ideal cover to hide nests and young chicks but still open enough for birds to see approaching danger. Shorter swards between tussocks and open muddy margins of shallow pools, are important for feeding, especially for the chicks once they have started to feed themselves.

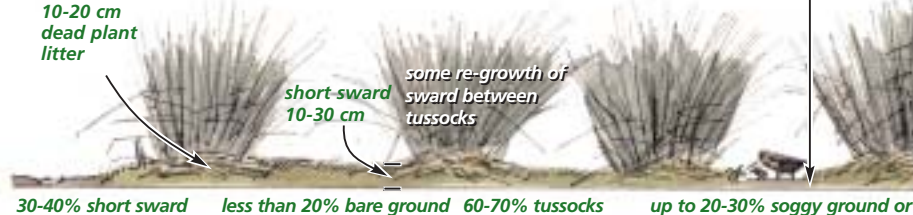
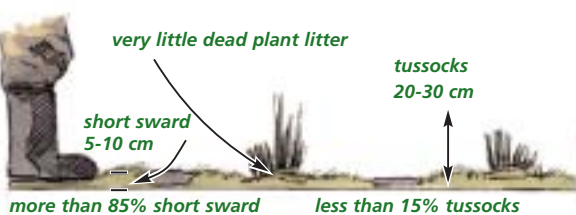
How much of the field should look like this?

Less than 20% of the damp areas.

Effect of this sward on snipe

Too dense for birds to nest in or move around in.

Cross section



Above



Damp tussocky grassland for snipe – October onwards

Snipe require soft damp ground, tussocky sward structure and preferably large open fields not surrounded by trees.



October onwards: Key Points

How will snipe use the fields in winter?

Individuals or small parties of snipe may use these types of fields for feeding and roosting.

Sward structure

It is essential to create the sward structure for spring breeding in the autumn / early winter. Therefore take stock off once the ideal structure has been created.

Wetness

In winter, snipe will use both damp fields and those with some surface flooding so long as they have the right sward structure.

Stock type

Rough beef cattle (or beef cattle and some sheep) are best at creating the vegetation structure needed by snipe.

Watch out for...

Snipe are very secretive and tend to sit very tight. Watch out for birds flying out low and fast when disturbed close to - this may be the only time you will know snipe are using your field.

Poaching

Some bare ground from individual hoof prints is desirable. But too much poaching leading to larger areas of puddled ground is not. Best to remove stock in very wet weather or when you see several patches of mud more than about 1 square metre developing.

Ideal



Too much poaching

Landscape view



Too short

How much of the field should look like this?

Some drier grassland around damp areas.

Effect of this sward on snipe

Not enough cover for snipe to feel safe. Ground may also be too dry for snipe to probe into.



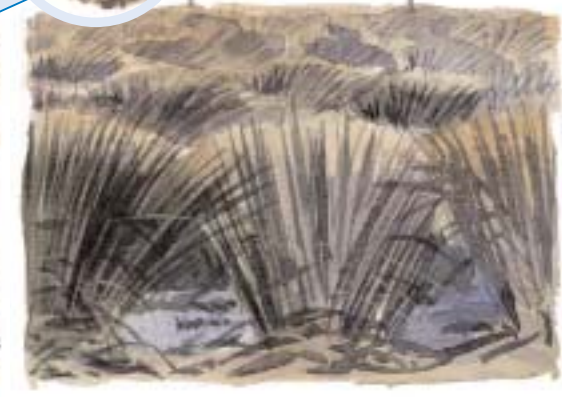
Ideal structure for snipe

How much of the field should look like this?

As much as possible.

Effect of this sward on snipe

Ideal cover for feeding and roosting, but birds can still see approaching danger.



Too dense

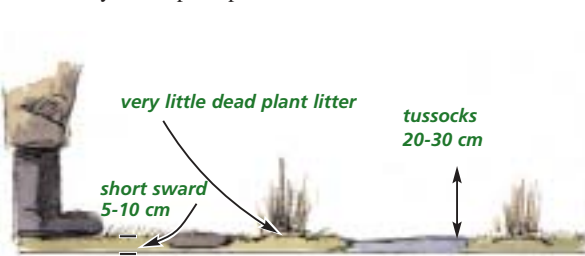
How much of the field should look like this?

Less than 20% of the damp areas.

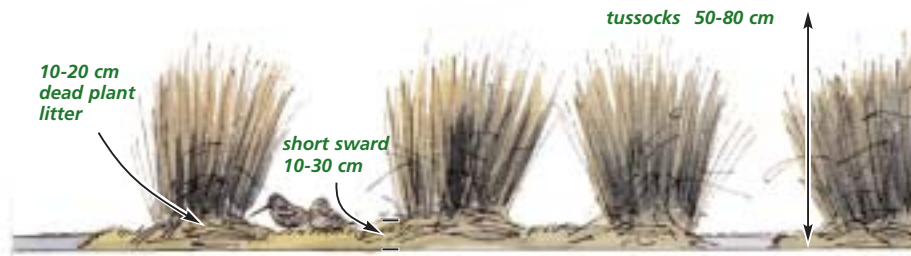
Effect of this sward on snipe

Too dense for birds to move around in or to see out from.

Cross section



more than 85% short sward less than 15% tussocks



30-40% short sward less than 20% bare ground 60-70% tussocks around 50-60% standing water



more than 70% tussocks variable amount of standing water

Above

