

# Illustrated guide to managing lowland wet grassland for snipe

Snipe are medium sized, mottled brown wading birds with short legs and long straight bills. In lowland wet grassland their numbers have declined steeply in the past twenty-five years. Getting the condition of lowland wet grassland right at key times of the year should help to increase snipe numbers. The condition in autumn as stock come off the land for the winter is critical because it influences the conditions in the spring when the breeding season begins and in early summer when chicks are being reared.



Adult snipe with chicks and (inset) egg

## October onwards

### Look out for snipe

You might see small parties of snipe feeding and roosting in your field at this time of year, but they are very secretive and sit very tight. When disturbed they fly out in a zig-zag fashion and this may be the only way you know they are using your field.

### Wet areas

Snipe require soft damp ground, a tussocky sward and large open fields not surrounded by trees. They will use fields with some surface flooding as long as the sward structure is right. Wet areas should not be drained.

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### Ideal structure October onwards

When you remove stock from the field for the winter aim for a tall tussocky sward that provides cover for feeding and roosting snipe. This structure will also provide essential cover for breeding snipe in the spring.

### Hoof prints

Some bare ground from individual hoof prints is desirable but too much poaching that leads to larger areas of puddled ground is not. It is best to remove stock in very wet weather.



Hoof prints are valuable for feeding



Ideal conditions for most of the field



Cross section showing what most of the field should look like

### The structure is good for snipe where:

- Tussocks 50-80 cm tall cover between 60-70% of the area.
- A short sward between 5-15 cm tall covers between 30-40% of the area.
- Bare ground is less than 10%.
- Standing water covers less than 60% of the area.



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### Too short October onwards



Sward too short

Drier areas of the field can be this short, but it is too short for the wet areas. Where the sward is too short there will not be enough cover for snipe to feel safe.



Cross section of too short sward

#### The sward is too short for snipe if:

- A short sward, 5-10 cm tall covers more than 85% of the area.
- There is very little dead plant litter.
- Tussocks 20-30 cm tall cover less than less than 15% of the area.

### Too rank October onwards



Too rank for main area of the field

Only small areas of the field should look like this as it is too dense for birds to move around in or to see out from.



Cross section of too dense sward

#### The sward is too rank for snipe if:

- There is very little room for any short sward.
- Tussocks 50-80 cm tall cover more than 70% of the area.

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### April

#### Ideal structure in April

An ideal structure will have a tall, open tussocky sward with cover for snipe to feed, roost and breed.

It will be not so dense that birds cannot see approaching danger. Snipe will nest in the shorter sward amongst tussocks.



Most of the field should look like this



Cross section showing what the main area of the field should be like

#### Conditions should be ideal for snipe if:

- A short sward 5-15 cm high covers 30-40% of the area.
- Tussocks 50-80 cm tall cover 60-70% of the area.
- Bare ground covers less than 10%.
- Soggy ground or shallow water (to a maximum depth of 10 cm) covers 20-30% of the ground.



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### In April look out for...

In April snipe display and make a distinctive vibrating sound known as drumming as they dive. This tells you that they are looking to breed nearby. They start to lay eggs as early as mid-April.



Snipe drumming

### Trampling

It is best to avoid grazing until June to maintain the sward structure and avoid trampling early nests or young. If this is not possible, the stocking rate should be very low to minimise damage.



Nest and eggs being trampled

### Trees

Like other waders, snipe do not like breeding in fields surrounded by trees. Their eggs and chicks are very vulnerable to predators such as crows which use trees as look out posts.

### Flooding and wet areas



Where the grazing pressure is low marsh marigold and lesser spearwort may grow in wet areas

Damp or wet soil is crucial to enable snipe to find the earthworms and insect grubs they feed on. You can test to see if the ground is suitable for snipe to feed by pushing a large (6") nail into the soil.

Snipe feeding habitat should be kept moist and soft, with a water-table maintained 20-30 cm below the soil surface from March to August. On nature reserves this is done by damming and water-release into ditches.

Latest research suggests that fields that have some areas that never flood have a better chance of retaining their snipe than those where there has been blanket flooding. This is because the dry areas act as a refuge for earthworms and because any summer flooding could delay nesting and destroy nests.

Dry areas can be provided by controlling water through sluices and channels; by creating dry banks, ridges or mounds and by introducing localised wet features. However, these are expensive undertakings and will require consent so they are unlikely to be practical on most sites.

If you can prevent fields from flooding 1-2 years in every 10 it should allow earthworm populations to persist. Earthworms will also benefit by reducing the time the flooding persists. If you can prevent water levels from rising and falling rapidly soil fauna will have more chance of escaping to drier areas and of producing life stages better adapted to surviving inundation.

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### Too short in April



Sward too short

Drier areas of the field can be this short but it is too short for wet areas as there is not enough cover for snipe to feel safe.



Cross section of sward too short

#### The sward is too short for snipe if:

- A sward 5-10 cm tall covers more than 85% of the area.
- There is very little dead plant litter.
- Tussocks 20-30 cm tall cover less than 15% of the area.

### Too dense in April



Sward too dense for main area of field

Only small areas should be this dense as it is too dense for birds to move around in or to see out from and it is not suitable for nesting.



Cross section of sward too rank

#### The sward is too long for snipe if:

- There is very little room for any short sward.
- Tussocks 50-80 cm tall cover more than 70% of the area.

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### May to July

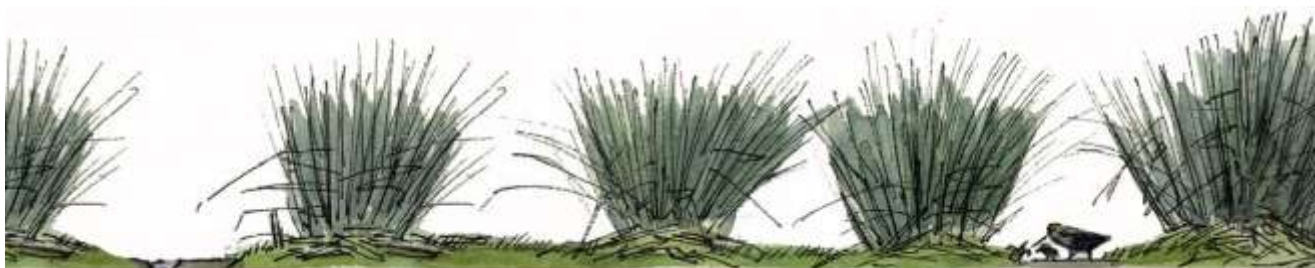
#### Ideal structure May to July

Aim for a tall, open, tussocky sward with sufficient cover to hide nests and young chicks, but open enough for birds to see approaching danger.

A shorter sward among the tussocks and the open muddy margins of shallow pools are important for feeding, especially for the chicks.



Most of the field should look like this



Cross section of ideal sward structure for the majority of the field

#### The structure should be ideal for snipe where:

- A short sward 5-15 cm tall covers 30-40% of the area.
- Tussocks 50-80 cm tall cover 60-70% of the area.

- There is some re-growth of sward between tussocks.
- Bare ground is less than 10% of the area.
- Soggy ground or shallow water (to a maximum depth of 10 cm) covers 20-30% of the area.



## Illustrated guide to managing lowland wet grassland for snipe

### Too short in May and June



Sward too short for the main area of the field

Drier areas of the field can be this short but aim for the ideal structure in wet areas as there is not enough cover for snipe to feel safe.



Cross section of sward too short

#### The sward is too short for snipe if:

- A short sward, 5-10 cm tall on more than 85% of the area.
- Very little dead plant litter.
- Tussocks on less than 15% of the area and only 20-30 cm tall.

### Too dense in May and June



Sward too dense for the main area of the field

Only small areas of the field should look like this as it is too dense for birds to nest or move around in.



Cross section of sward too dense

#### The sward is too long for snipe if:

- There is very little room for any short sward.
- Tussocks 50-80 cm tall cover more than 70% of the area.



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### Wet areas in May to June

In early summer the amount of ground damp enough for snipe to feed in will be shrinking. Surviving wet areas with the correct sward structure are therefore particularly valuable.

### Look out for snipe

There will be less to see in May and June as birds incubate their eggs. You are unlikely to notice that snipe are present apart from drumming or calling birds.

Breeding will continue until mid-July or later.

### Grazing in May and June

Trampling by stock can cause major egg and chick losses. However, some grazing is often needed from June to prevent the sward growing too tall. Research has shown that grazing at low densities until at least mid-July minimises trampling. Normal grazing can then be reintroduced, but take care to leave enough re-growth to create the appropriate structure in October.

### Further information

Natural England Technical Information Notes are available to download from the Natural England website at [www.naturalengland.org.uk](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk).

For enquiries please contact the Natural England Helpline on 0845 600 3078 or email [enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk).

### Environmental Stewardship Agreements

This guidance has been developed to support Environmental Stewardship agreements. It does not replace an agreement and you must continue to follow the prescriptions and specifications.

The outcomes shown may not be appropriate or suitable for all sites. Please consult scheme handbooks or your Natural England adviser for further information.



Nest with adult incubating

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