



REEDBEDS FOR BITTERNS

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MONEY MATTERS



A huge amount of work has been done to create new wetlands and restore existing wetland at 19 sites around England in the last 3 years. This new habitat is attracting many visitors - human and winged.

The low-lying islands and spits at **Wigan Flashes (Lancashire)**, where soil has been spread at or below water level to provide ideal conditions for reed, is packed with waders such as lapwing and ringed plovers.

Lakenheath Fen is a 7 year old wetland in Cambridgeshire, with a mix of scrub, reedbed, grazing marsh, ditches and pools. This May, Belgian visitors were delighted to see up to 24 hobbies (a scarce falcon) swooping to catch mayflies, amongst 1000's of swifts and a pair of marsh harriers.

At **Minsmere**, a fifty year old reedbed, bearded tits breed happily along side 10 booming male bitterns, whilst water voles are safe from mink within the reedbed.



To celebrate this diversity, we are producing a new leaflet, available this summer from the address on page 4.

One of the key lessons of this project is just how valuable the early stages of a wetland are for many species and how important it is that we keep on mimicking nature to create more of it. As more and bigger new wetlands are created, we need to find ways of managing these sites sustainably - that is both in a cost effective way and by finding a use for the renewable "products" that these sites can produce. We are looking for ways of generating an income from wetlands that will at least offset the costs of managing them and ideally act as an economic incentive for their management and creation. Some of the current ideas are outlined on page 3.

Sarah Alsbury - Project Manager





?? THE END OF LIFE AS WE KNOW IT??

A sword hangs over the future of the LIFE grant fund. The European Commission is currently proposing to abolish LIFE.

It argues that it is costly to run and that funds for the implementation of the EU's Biodiversity Strategy and Natura 2000 will be available from agri-environment, rural development and structural funds.

It is true that the money has been, and probably will be, available through these means. However, the latter two funds do not usually ring-fence money for nature conservation and the amounts available and eligible organisations will vary greatly across the EU.

LIFE was unique in being available to government, private and non-governmental organisations and provided a means to focus on European nature conservation priorities. The Bittern is just one species that is recovering thanks in a large part to LIFE.

There has, therefore, been a good deal of discussion about the proposal. The European Parliament is asking for a dedicated biodiversity programme with a very large budget. The Commission is sticking to its original proposal. The Council, which has the ultimate say, is finding it very difficult to reach a consensus.

The decision is, therefore, still in the balance.

MANAGING REEDBEDS



Ham Wall, Somerset

One of the key issues that all reserve managers face is how to manage a site with limited resources. In the final year of the project we are, therefore, focussing on various management options for maintaining wet reedbed. The traditional prescription for reedbed, when managed for conservation, is reed-cutting on a seven year rotation. The aim behind this is to halt succession and to re-juvenate reed growth by removing accumulated litter. This is usually

done with a hand-held mower and a team of volunteers. Most reserves find, with the best will in the world, that they can manage about 3 hectares a year due to weather and time constraints. So, given that we don't just want 20-30 ha sites, questions arise about how to achieve the same ends in a more effective way.

And then someone asked the question:



'So what does reed-cutting actually achieve?'

Even with the litter layer thoroughly raked out, reed cutting by itself is not going to totally hold back succession. The evidence for reed cutting as a habitat requirement for wildlife is surprisingly thin and requires more research. On balance, some shorter rotation cutting (less than 7 years) may have value for putting structure into a reedbed to favour a range of species that like to use the edge. However, there are a large number of birds, insects and mammals that use the 'interior' and won't use cut areas. Some reed cutting may still be useful then, but how much, where and when all need to be thought through.



The level of water throughout a year is crucial to the management of a reedbed. Many of our reedbeds were becoming dryer through succession and litter build-up, and one of the simplest ways of rehabilitating them is to raise water levels. This ensures that there is plenty of the water/reedbed edge, where bitterns can catch fish in the breeding season. However, permanently raised water levels may be detrimental. Mimicking natural drawdown by drying out reedbeds in early autumn may be beneficial in

promoting oxidation of reed litter. In addition, increased winter water levels and through-put of water assist with the flushing of organic material.

There are other options for managing reedbeds:

- ✿ Mechanised cutting – there are a number of machines on the market that can cut large amounts of reed quickly
- ✿ Commercial cutting – working with commercial reed-cutters to take a crop from the reedbed
- ✿ Burning – used traditionally to “restore” a reedbed for a commercial cut; can be used to do small patches instead of cutting

- ✿ Grazing – used much more on the continent but a number of sites now using ponies, cattle and water buffalo
- ✿ Bed-lowering – digging out the rhizome/litter layer to varying depths to create open water or restore wet reedbed

For more information on this big and complex area, please contact Graham White, RSPB Wetlands Adviser on 01767 680551, e-mail: graham.white@rspb.org.uk who can supply a summary/discussion document.

VALUING REED AS A PRODUCT

Reedbeds do contribute to the local economy. Agri-environment payments are available for the creation and management of reedbeds. They also attract visitors, who spend money in the local economy. For example, **Leighton Moss** is estimated to generate 0.7 million in the local area from visitors. But are there ways of managing a site for wildlife conservation, which also produce a valuable product?

Thatching



Traditionally, reedbeds were kept and maintained to provide reed for thatching. There is still a big demand for thatching reed and yet about 80% is imported to the UK. There are a number of reasons for this and it may not be a suitable option for some sites. However, where local cutters and/or thatchers are around, it is worth making contact to explore the potential

Composting



At **Ham Wall, Somerset**, the RSPB is carrying out a composting trial. Managing the reserve produces large amounts of green matter, which is currently either left to rot in piles or burnt on site. Composting is a potential means to both remove this matter from the site and find a sustainable use for it and maybe even generate some income. It also fits in well with the local situation, as Ham Wall is being developed on old peat extraction pits. So reed, poor quality hay bales and cow manure have been shredded and put into a 60m green plastic sausage. A pipe with holes in it runs the length of the sausage, attached to a fan, which ensures that the material is well aerated. The composting process is expected to take 3 months.

Biofuel

The use of reed and other material as a biofuel is being investigated. The Broads Authority is applying to build a generator to take the material that is generated from the management of their land, which isn't used for thatching. The RSPB is investigating the pelleting of reed for use in their biofuel burner at **Old Moor Reserve, Barnsley**. Pellets are easier to handle and have a higher calorific value than just burning dry reed.



Grazing

Grazing of reedbeds with cattle or horses is common practice on the continent. At **Hickling Broad, Norfolk** and **Minsmere, Suffolk** Konik ponies are being used. They are creating a more varied structure and opening up patches in the reedbeds edge by digging up rhizome in winter.



Cattle and water buffalo are also being tried – at **Rye Meads, Hertfordshire**, for example. So bittern-friendly beef and mozzarella are future options

POOLE HARBOUR



Poole Harbour is a picturesque natural harbour, and attracts many visitors and birds. In the summer, common terns and Mediterranean gulls breed here. In the winter, the mudflats and saltmarsh provide feeding and resting places for up to 30,000 wading birds, ducks

and geese. This includes the second largest wintering population of avocets. The harbour's natural areas are so important for wildlife that they are protected under European law (the Natura 2000 network) and under international law under the Ramsar convention.



From the bitterns' point of view, Poole Harbour offers a huge banqueting area with England's largest reedbed. Bitterns can be seen occasionally around the harbour in winter but, as most of the reedbeds are tidal, none have nested yet. It's unusual for bitterns to nest in tidal reedbeds in the UK.

However, in recent years, a number of people have heard booming males around the harbour – the first sign that bitterns are thinking of breeding in an area. On the Humber estuary, bitterns nest in small freshwater reedbeds (some as small as two football pitches) and feed on the tidal habitats nearby. Thanks to work by organisations including the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust and the Environment Agency, bitterns regularly breed along the estuary.

The RSPB own and manages large areas of heathland, tidal reedbed and shoreline at Poole Harbour. There are

also small patches of freshwater reedbed, which give us the opportunity to follow the successes of the Humber estuary. We plan to restore an existing area of reedbed at **Arne reserve** as a potential nesting site, and to raise water levels by repairing banks and sluices. We will also dig new pools for fish to provide more feeding areas for bitterns. These, alongside the foraging areas in the nearby tidal habitats, we hope will provide enough of the right habitat for bitterns to nest.



NEW HANDBOOK ON BITTERNS AND REEDBED MANAGEMENT

We are working with German and French partners to produce a new handbook. It will capture the results of the most recent ecological research and practical experience around Europe. We are holding a seminar in December 2005 to present the draft chapters – please contact us if you are interested.

For more information and to request a leaflet please contact:

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Herts & Middlesex



Broads Authority



Lee Valley Park



