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HLS agreement visit 14th August 2015

The ditches are looking fantastic following the much-needed restoration. They have been rapidly recolonized (as you would expect) by aquatic plants, including notable species such as water soldier, frogbit and water parsnip, and the spoil is now barely visible. You have been tackling the inevitable flush of thistles on the spoil banks by topping and spot spraying with a knapsack. In some places, the thistle cover is too great to manage with a knapsack on foot, so you propose to control these by spot spraying with a lance from a quad bike. This is acceptable as long as you follow the relevant procedures for chemical use and avoid any species-rich areas. The latter are unlikely to occur on the spoil banks, with the exception of field 3484, where the thistles are not abundant enough to warrant this anyway.

Field 3484, next to the footpath, is looking particularly good, with a rich fen meadow-type sward including meadowsweet, meadow rue, purple loosestrife, orchids and quaking grass (among others). The species-rich strip present at the start of the agreement appears to have increased both in area and plant diversity. You topped this area in late March, and have only lightly grazed it since, which seems to have worked well. The area will now be grazed, prior to the BAM Nuttalls improvements on the flood wall. Late season grazing (post-July) is needed to maintain the species-richness and structural diversity of this habitat type, so I would recommend maintaining a similar regime in future years.

It is good to hear that Shoveler nested on this marsh, and a Shelduck has nested in the straw bales for the second year running. The bales do need to be removed, but if you wish to retain a small pile (max. 5x5 metres in area?) for the pair to nest in future years, this would be acceptable from our point of view. I appreciate that this may not be possible if they are impeding the work on the floodwall.

The rest of the marshes are also improving steadily. Field 7856 is grazed by highlands which have done an excellent job of controlling the excess rush cover and encouraging a more species-rich sward. I would encourage you to remove them this winter, unless there is a very strong flush of late-season grass growth.

The marshes grazed by redpolls are definitely responding to the improved management, but there are still some significant areas of dense soft rush, which you propose to top and aftermath graze this autumn. Cattle will be removed in late October and the marshes will be topped again in March (ground conditions-permitting) to enable the stock to graze them properly, as opposed to trampling down the rank vegetation and creating a thick mat of ungrazed vegetation. The alternative would be to increase the stocking density earlier in the year, but this could result in the more open, species-rich areas being overgrazed in the flowering season. For this reason, I think a combination of topping and low intensity grazing is favourable for the time being.

You grazed with a herd of 25 redpoll cows plus bull and calves at foot this year, but we agreed that the HK15 field could support an additional herd of 10 cows (or their equivalent in stores / yearlings) from 1st April, which could move onto the other fields from July to help keep up with the grass and rush growth on the rest of the site. The grazier was unable to supply the additional animals this year, but can do so next year, so I would prefer to see how you get on with a total of 36 (plus calves) before we discuss increasing the stocking rate any further.

I hope this covers everything we discussed, but if not, please do get in touch. In summary, I am very pleased with the improvements you have made since the start of the agreement, and look forward to visiting again in future years.

Yours sincerely

Lead Adviser
Land Management team – Norfolk and Suffolk