The effectiveness of opening up rush patches on encouraging breeding common snipe *Gallinago gallinago* at Rogersceugh Farm, Campfield Marsh RSPB reserve, Cumbria, England

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SUMMARY

An area of improved grassland was dominated by rushes *Juncus* spp. and purple moor-grass *Molinia caerulea*. In order to try and attract breeding common snipe *Gallinago gallinago*, the rush was cut in 2003 with tractor mounted mowers and then grazed. In addition, 18 small scrapes were dug and higher water levels were maintained. The number of snipe increased from one nesting pair in 2003 to 11 nesting pairs in both 2004 and 2005.

BACKGROUND

Throughout the UK, common snipe *Gallinago gallinago* are undergoing a large population decline of between 25-49% in both breeding population and range over the last 25 years. Snipe feed by probing for invertebrates deep in soft, damp soil using their long bills. They also require wet marshy grassland areas with tussocks of taller vegetation for nesting.

Figure 1. All the rush on the improved grassland was cut with tractor mounted mowers.

ACTION

Study site: Rogersceugh Farm in Cumbria, north-west England, is a traditionally managed farm incorporating approximately 60 ha of reclaimed peatland. The RSPB purchased the farm in order to raise water levels on the adjacent raised mire whilst at the same time managing the agricultural land to encourage breeding common snipe.

An area of 42.3 ha of the farmland is on peat reclaimed from the adjacent bog and managed as improved grassland. The soft peat soil is ideal substrate for feeding snipe and made the site suitable to attempt habitat manipulation to improve breeding numbers of this bird. In recent years the farm had become quite run-down and much of the grassland on peat was suffering (from a farming point of view) from collapsed drains and was mostly covered in waist high rush *Juncus* spp. and purple moor-grass *Molinia caerulea*. A breeding wader survey was carried out in 2003 prior to the purchase of the farm by the RSPB. Before any species-specific management had been implemented only one pair of breeding snipe was located on the farm.

Management: In October 2003, all the rush on the improved grassland was cut with tractor mounted mowers as short as possible (Fig. 1) followed by the initiation of a more robust grazing regime in the following spring (2004). Cattle were introduced at 1 livestock unit/ha between April and July, then as many as could be sourced up until the end of November to try and limit regrowth of vegetation. During this

period, the necessary infrastructure (dams, bunds and sluices) was installed to maintain higher water levels on the peaty ground throughout the year.

During February and March 2004, 18 small scrapes were dug (using tracked machinery) across the site, each scrape being approximately 10 x 10 m. These were to provide muddy edges and open water for snipe to forage. The guiding principal as to where to locate these scrapes was governed by where there were low lying areas with water already close to surface and areas which had the thickest rush cover. If the scrapes were on top of underground tile drains, these were then broken open at the same time. The scrapes were spread following these principals over the whole area.

In October 2004, further rush cutting was carried out in those areas where there had been significant rush grow-back. Additionally, a further 12 small scrapes were dug across the area at this time. Similar work was undertaken in autumn 2005, again knocking back any late season rush growth.

The RSPB were already managing a similar site, of approximately 21 ha, at North Plain, also part of Campfield Marsh Reserve for breeding waders. Between 1995 and 2004, there had always been just 1 pair of snipe nesting in this area. Management was geared around raised water levels and grazing to create the desired habitats and sward condition. Rush control was limited to cutting approximately one third of the area each year, with some of the densest areas of rush never touched due to access problems where the ground was too wet. In the winter of 2004/2005, following the same principals as mentioned for Rogersceugh, 12 small scrapes were created randomly across the site and all of the rush was cut, with the first cut in late August and a second cut in early October.

CONSEQUENCES

None of the management interventions can be taken as independent actions as they all contribute in some way to the overall result. However, the various management interventions at Rogersceugh Farm produced positive results with the number of breeding common snipe using the area increasing from the solitary pair in 2003 to 11 pairs in 2004. Eleven nesting pairs were also present in 2005.

In 2005, common snipe numbers increased from one to three breeding pairs at nearby North Plain, Campfield Marsh Reserve following the introduction of the previously described management.