Managing Paddocks for Horses and Wildflowers

Talk presented in Castlemorton Village Hall on 13th July 2023 by Anne Harris from Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust.

This was a very useful talk to horse-owners and other interested people, on how to manage equine paddocks for the benefit of both horses and wildlife. Anne is a keen horsewoman herself, keeping two horses, and is therefore able to talk from the perspective of the horse owner and the expert who understands how our struggling wild flowers, and the fauna that depends on them, can be helped to thrive.



<u>Wildflower Meadows – Techniques for enhancement of paddocks for horses, ponies and wildlife.</u>

Before the second world war and the introduction of herbicide and chemical fertilizers, most meadows and pastures were full of wildflowers and grasses in good balance. Horses would have grazed selectively on the plants that benefitted them or tasted the best. There is evidence that a diverse range of grasses and wildflowers is a healthier diet for horses and may convey greater worm resistance to them. It also reduces the need to buy costly herb supplements. These days, many pastures / paddocks are comprised of a limited sward of selected grasses, and many are over-grazed. Bare, overgrazed ground is an invitation for docks, thistles and nettles to become established (although these do have benefits for insects).

Anne explained to us how rotational strip grazing of each meadow, using electric fencing, allows grasses and wildflowers to grow well in the un-grazed sections. Once the grass/wildflower strip has grown and been allowed to flower, then the horses can be allowed back on to it or it can be cut for hay later. Some sections should be allowed to go to seed to ensure the seeds are re-sown for future seasons.



Grasses that are grazed to a very short length of just a centimetre or so, take much longer to recover and grow again, so it is best to only allow the grass in any section to be grazed to about 50% of its full height before fencing off that section. This allows you to get more out of your paddocks and also allows wildflowers to flourish. Healthy grass growth and a range of wildflowers, many of which have deep, penetrating roots, gives stronger root growth and gives paddocks both greater resilience to drought and improved drainage.

Anne noted that strip grazing should be done across a slope, rather than down it, as this avoids excessively muddy areas occurring. We were shown a photo of her meadow with strips of grasses at different lengths, some with wildflowers in flower.



Allowing hay rattle to grow and run to seed helps to weaken very lush grass growth and thus allow wildflowers to compete and thrive, which is beneficial to both the diversity of the flowers in the meadow, and the diet of the horses and ponies. Hay rattle is semi-parasitic on the grasses and the seeds won't grow if sown onto bare ground. The hay rattle seed will germinate the following spring after the seed falls, or is sown, in late summer. However, hay rattle may need controlling if it becomes dominant.

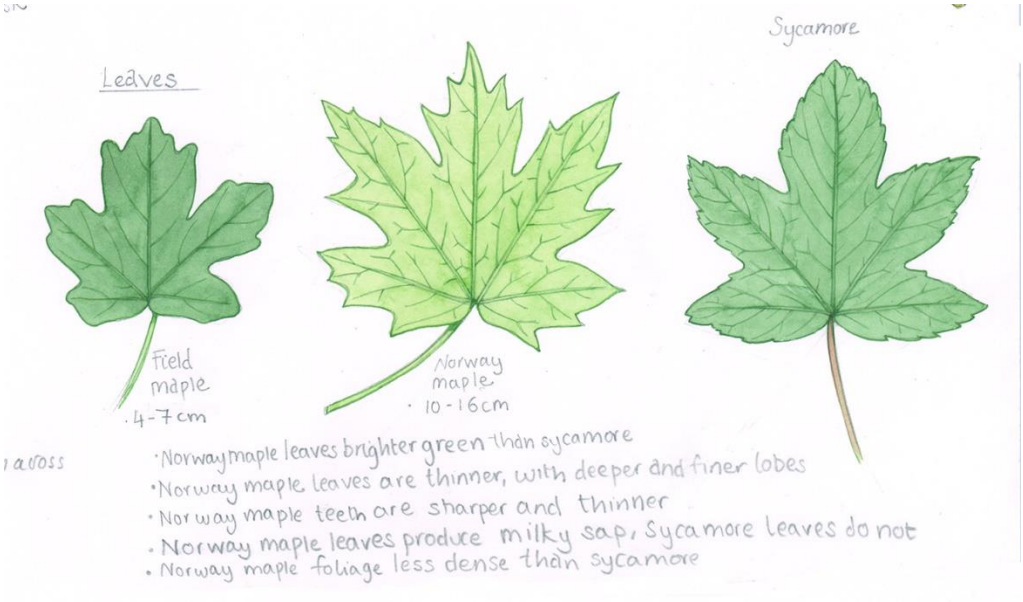
<u>Wildflowers and the health of horses and ponies</u>

Members of the audience were keen to hear more about wildflowers that may be detrimental to the health of their horses and ponies. Anne said that the only plants considered to be important to avoid in the paddock / meadow are ragwort and sycamore seedlings. Horses and ponies will largely avoid other flowers that won't suit them, such as buttercups, through selective grazing.

<u>Sycamore seedlings</u>

Anne talked about the benefits of sycamore trees to wildlife, particularly to insects that enjoy honeydew from the aphids that favour them and birds which eat the aphids, but also the threat to horses and ponies from the seeds and seedlings. She suggested fencing off any areas where

sycamore trees could shed their seeds onto the paddock and removing any seedlings that germinate in the paddock, preferably by pulling. If it seems necessary to remove a sycamore tree, then ideally two other trees of native species should be planted to replace the lost habitat. The figure below shows how to identify sycamore trees compared to the similar species of Norway Maple and Field Maple, neither of which present a problem and are beautiful trees which should not be removed.



An alternative downloadable pdf identification sheet is available **using the link below**.

Managing paddocks for insects.

Our native **dung beetles** and other grassland insects are under threat due to changes in general farming practices, such as: the reduction of animals grazing outside and therefore a reduction in available dung, monocultures: pesticide use and the use of toxic wormers and parasite control treatments in animals that do graze outside. People who maintain areas for grazing animals therefore have an opportunity to help our beleaguered dung beetles and soil fauna by making sure the habitat is as safe as possible. Anne provided a fact sheet to help equine owners and graziers do just that. A downloadable pdf version is available **using the link below** and more details follow:



Anne said that dung beetles move in and operate very quickly once poo has been deposited and may have taken all that they require within 48 hours or so. Therefore, in order to provide some dung for the dung beetles, she poo-picks in rotation over a couple of days, **along with regular worm checks. This practice does not** increase the worm burden on her land and therefore she has no need to use toxic chemicals. For people who do struggle with parasites and worms amongst their horses and ponies, then there are a number of different chemicals that are unlikely to impact dung beetles. The fact sheet explains which ones in detail but basically, any chemicals ending in 'ole' are the least likely to cause a problem. Anne suggested that

if worming is necessary, then best practice is to only worm when necessary, and not prophylactically (routine preventative dosing).

Anne talked about how too much dung left on the ground can increase the fertility of the meadow, as well as increasing the parasite burden. With increasing fertility, the grasses tend to grow too lushly and out-compete the wildflowers and the sugar levels in the grass may increase to the detriment of a horse's health. Throwing poo into hedgerows will increase the fertility in that area and allow nettles and docks to flourish, which then spread out into the paddock. Although these plants are also good for insects and butterflies, you may prefer to see the diversity of wildflowers, in which case, aim to keep the soil fertility down. It is best to remove the dung to a designated area.

It was a very positive talk which demonstrated that with thoughtful paddock management its possible to have a diverse environment and healthier horses.

