

Why well managed horse pasture is good for the environment

Agricultural grass swards are dominated by two or three productive species including ryegrasses, timothy and white clover. These are not well suited to the digestive systems of horses and do not provide valuable wildlife habitat. Conversely, species rich pasture with a variety of herbs and grasses is preferred by horses but is also excellent habitat for wildlife:

- Flower rich meadows provide nectar and invertebrate food plants for different butterfly, bee and other insect species.
- Farmland birds such as lapwing, curlew and snipe will favour damper fields with lots of insects to feed their chicks.
- Rare plants are often found in old pastures which do not receive fertiliser or chemical treatments.
- Historic features such as ridge and furrow grassland, veteran trees and ancient remains often survive in unimproved pasture which has never been ploughed.

What you can do...

Five things to remember when managing your pasture:

1. Each horse needs an average of one hectare of grassland (2.5 acres) to meet its nutritional needs in a year – this can be reduced if hay/haylage is bought in.
2. Try to rest each field for a minimum of 3 months over the summer.
3. Avoid overgrazing in winter – create a surfaced winter turnout area in an unobtrusive site or limit turnout to a few hours each day.

4. Control pernicious weeds such as docks and thistle either by pulling out or by chemical control methods but always seek professional advice before applying chemicals.

5. Remove droppings if possible or chain harrow when ground conditions are dry and hot or frosty.

Safe and secure field boundaries are essential but may not always blend in with the landscape. Try to:

- Use green tape and posts where possible.
- Plant hedges for permanent boundaries and consider using permanent wooden posts for semi-permanent sub-divisions.
- Maintain your fences using suitable materials – make-shift wire solutions are unsightly and often pose a danger to your horse.

Think about water and waste:

People and wildlife need clean water but streams, springs and ponds can become polluted by soil sediment, manures or waste haylage.



Make sure:

- Manure heaps are sited away from streams, ponds or springs.
- Feeding of hay and haylage takes place away from the banks of watercourses.
- Horses graze away from streams, lakes and rivers during the winter to avoid poaching of banks which can cause soil erosion.



Cannock Chase AONB - a landscape of inspiration



Paul Massey

Do you keep horses around the Chase?

If so, we need your help to keep Cannock Chase special and to protect this precious landscape. Read on to find out more about how you can improve your horse's pasture and enhance the local landscape.

Cannock Chase AONB – Why is it Special?

An Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is exactly what it says – a precious landscape whose distinctive character and natural beauty is so outstanding it is in the nation's interest to conserve it.

Cannock Chase was designated as an AONB in 1958 and it is the smallest of the 38 AONBs in England and Wales. It is the largest surviving area of lowland heath in the Midlands. Lowland heath is internationally scarce and is a threatened wildlife habitat.

The historic landscape of the Chase and its wildlife dates back thousands of years. Wild deer still roam the Chase and probably descend from the original herd introduced in Norman times for hunting.

The Cannock Chase Management Plan sets out the policies and objectives so this living, working environment and the economic and recreational pressures which go with it can be balanced with the needs of a beautiful landscape.

Over the last two decades, the number of horses kept on the Chase has increased exponentially. Now 'horsiculture' accounts for a larger area of land within the AONB than agriculture. The use of land for stabling, grazing and exercise facilities such as manèges and cross country courses can have an impact on the landscape if not managed carefully.

This leaflet provides practical guidance to horse owners who manage land to help them improve the value of their horse's environment but also enhance the local landscape and offer a better habitat for wildlife.

What are the issues?

Overgrazing – There is always too little grass or too much – the perennial problem for horse owners. In winter, it is difficult not to graze pasture bare where horses are turned out every day. In summer, those with native ponies have to keep the sward short to reduce the risk of laminitis.

Overgrazing often leads to the creation of poached areas and weed infestations and so paddocks look untidy. It is also bad news for horses as they are more likely to pick up worms from over-grazed pasture and are unlikely to be able to consume enough grass to meet their nutritional needs, meaning supplementary feeding will be necessary.

Poaching – is unsightly and can contribute to an increase in the incidence of skin diseases and hoof problems.

Weed infestations – invasive weed species such as docks, thistles, nettles and ragwort will often colonise bare ground, especially where phosphate and nitrogen levels in the soil are high. As these species can out-compete grass under these conditions, they can soon grow profusely in horse pasture. Fields which are full of weeds are unattractive and the weeds grow at the expense of grass so reduce the overall feed value of the pasture. Some weeds such as ragwort, are poisonous.

Unightly fencing – electric tape can be a safe way to sub-divide fields but can be intrusive if it is white and used extensively.

Pasture clutter – show jumps, buckets and discarded equipment not only look messy but can also pose a danger to horses where they have sharp edges or horses can become trapped. Ensuring that everything is tidied into one cordoned off area improves the appearance of horse pasture and can prevent injury.

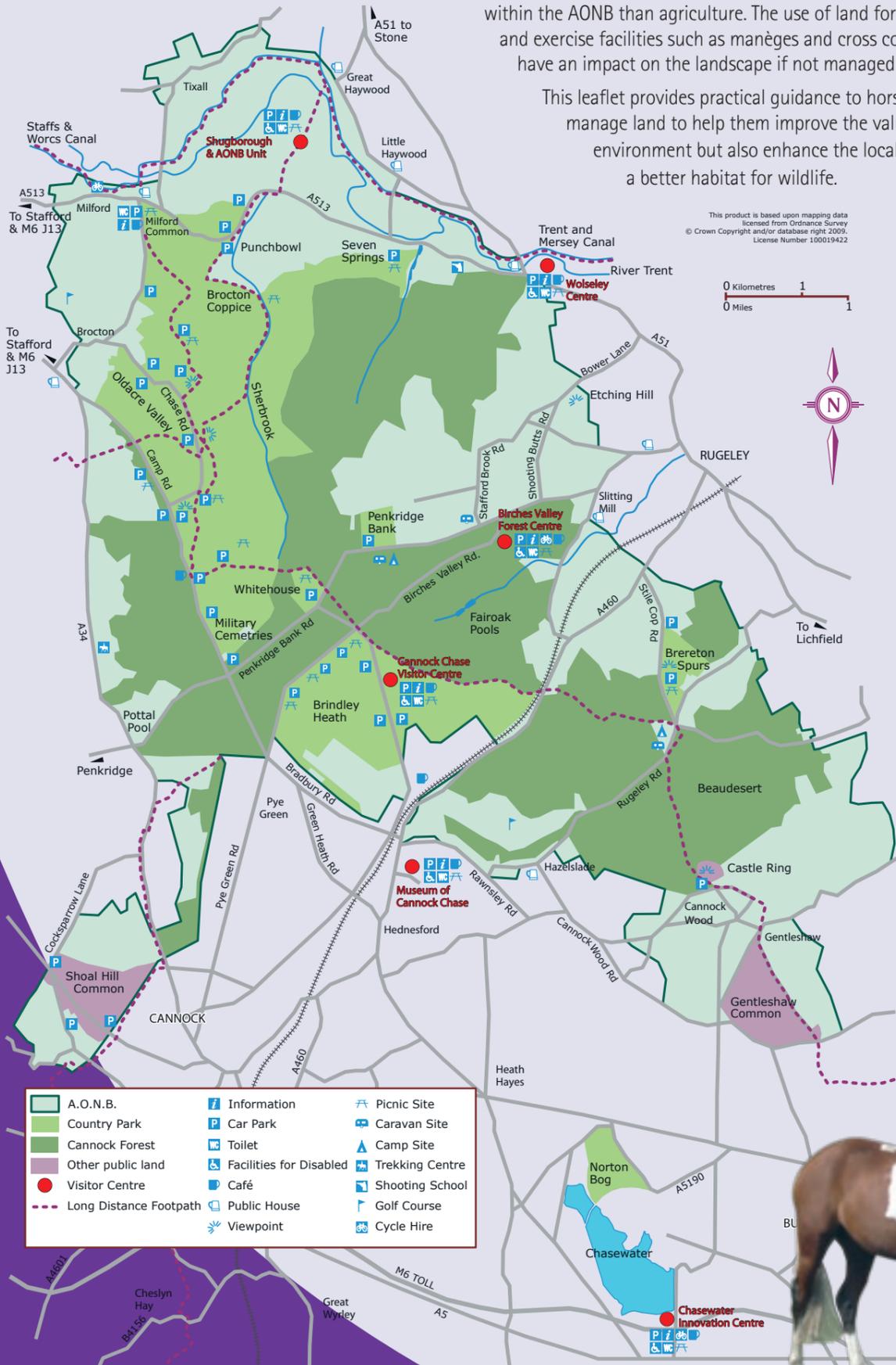
Healthy Pasture Healthy Horse

If you are managing your grassland appropriately, it will be:

- Weed free.
- Allowed to grow to a height of between 2.5 cm and 6 cm.
- Full of a variety of beneficial grasses and flowering species.
- A dense sward which is resistant to poaching.
- Able to provide almost all of a horse's nutritional requirements over the summer months.

Well managed pasture will help you to keep your horse healthy. The incidence of several of the most common horse ailments can be reduced by maintaining healthy grassland, including:

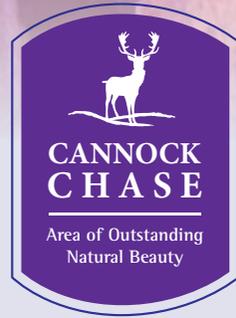
- Skin infections – bacteria causing cracked heels and mud fever are known to thrive in wet, muddy conditions. Horses which have to stand in wet, poached areas for long periods of time are more likely to suffer from these problems as well as hoof abscesses and thrush.
- Worm burden can be reduced in adult horses where pasture is:
 - o Rested for a continuous period of at least six months within each year.
 - o Grazed rotationally with sheep and cattle as well as horses.
 - o Cleared of droppings regularly OR harrowed during dry or frosty conditions.
 - o Not over-grazed as a shortage of herbage can force horses to eat grass from latrine (toilet) areas.
- Digestive disorders – horses have evolved over millions of years to eat a high fibre diet with small amounts of protein. Providing good quality grazing will enable horses to gain the range of nutrients they require in the form best suited to their digestive system, thus reducing the incidence of colic and other illnesses.
- Obesity and laminitis – horses which consume quantities of ryegrasses which are rich in sugars, particularly fructans, are more likely to become overweight and suffer from laminitis than those which graze species rich, unimproved swards containing less productive grass species



Riding on the Chase

The network of bridleways across Cannock Chase provides some of the most extensive and picturesque off-road riding in England. Riders are warmly welcomed to ride on the Chase but are asked to:

- Only use bridleways and designated concessionary routes for horses.
- Stick to the waymarked routes – riding across heathland and other valuable habitats can cause damage to rare plant communities and disturb wildlife.
- Show consideration to other users, especially children and older people; please pass walkers and cyclists in a walk or trot and give them room.
- When ground conditions are especially wet, consider using alternative routes which will not become churned up.
- Never ride on footpaths or private land.



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Natural England, West Midlands: for details of agri-environment schemes, guidance on the management of SSSI's and further information about public rights of way and open access.
Tel: 0845 600 3078

Email: enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk
Or visit: www.naturalengland.org.uk

British Horse Society
Tel: 0844 848 1666, email enquiry@bhs.org.uk
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Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Horse Sense in the AONB



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