

# North Somerset Wetland Programme

Avon Wildlife Trust have been carrying out conservation work on the North Somerset Levels and Moors since 1995 and directly manage six nature reserves in the area.



North Somerset levels and moors

Portbury Wharf is an important wetland bird reserve for this region, which has seen widescale declines in wading birds across the levels over the last 20 years.

Our current 3 year programme (2011-2014) is surveying aquatic invertebrate and plant communities, and surrounding grassland across the levels and moors to assess their biodiversity status and management condition. We are also working with land managers interested in maintaining and restoring this valuable wetland habitat.

## Managing for Wetland Birds



This project is part of Avon Wildlife Trust's expanding Living Landscape programme

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**NORTH SOMERSET  
WETLAND PROGRAMME**



# Local wetland birds



# Levels management

Grazing marshes crossed with drainage ditches form an integral part of the biological and cultural heritage of North Somerset, creating a wetland system rich in wildlife. Birds use this habitat in different ways and features of importance vary for species: winter fields are used by over-wintering wildfowl and wading birds, and in spring and summer, birds feed and nest in the diverse aquatic vegetation of the bankside and grassland.

Wetland birds have varied habitat preferences so it is unlikely that a single field would support all local species. Variation in management according to the individual site and local species requirements is important to help support thriving bird populations.



Arthur Grosset

## Snipe

*Gallinago gallinago*

Snipe breed and nest in damp pasture with tall tussocky vegetation up to 25cm, and even small suitable field corners can be used. However, they also require short vegetation for feeding (less than 10cm) probing the soil for invertebrates, particularly earthworms.

Adults with young only move short distances so require a mosaic of habitats, and are more vulnerable to dry soil conditions in summer. Heavily grazed and mowed fields are not favoured, especially during breeding.

High surface water, tussocks and short grassland – ideal for redshank and lapwing



## Profiling

To create wetter conditions within fields, scrapes and shallow pools can be dug out so allowing areas to gather surface water more effectively. Many fields in the North Somerset Levels and Moors have historical gripes (long foot-wide shallow open drains) running within fields which provide variety in habitat and wet, soft soil for feeding birds. Understanding the soil type and how water drains off the land is crucial before attempting to re-wet fields.

## Lapwing

Lapwing nest on spring-tilled arable land or short grazed grassland with low stocking rates, ideally with a variety of short (to 10cm) grasses, occasional taller tussocks, and bare/dung patches for camouflage. They are not as sensitive to wet/dry conditions, but prefer larger fields with surface water and high ditch levels.

*Vanellus vanellus*



Darin Smith

Lapwing primarily feed on earthworms, crane fly larvae, and insects. Chicks feed on grassland and muddy margins of pools, ditches and scrapes.

## Water level

North Somerset has a vast network of ditches that channel water between sea, rivers and fields. Management of high levels in summer allows water to be penned in to keep fields damp for wetland birds and act as 'wet fences' for stock. However, good control of water levels is important to prevent over-flooding, which can drown young chicks, remove feeding and nesting areas, and create dangerous conditions for cattle to graze.



Sluice to control ditch water levels

## Redshank



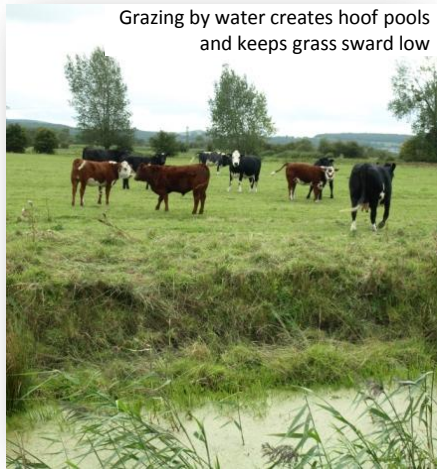
Tom Marshall

*Tringa totanus*

Redshank breed on wet grasslands, particularly coastal grazing marshes with low/no grazing, nesting April to June. They require grass/rush tussocks for nesting, and a mosaic sward of short, damp grassland for feeding (5-15cm). Surface water is an important requirement as they feed on insects, crustaceans and molluscs at the edges of pools and ditches.

They are a very mobile species where adults will move chicks up to 2km to feed.

Grazing by water creates hoof pools and keeps grass sward low



## Grazing

Grazing wet fields with stock creates variation in sward height and density. Cattle create more bare ground, poached pools, tussock and shorter sward patches, whereas sheep create more uniform denser vegetation and have less impact on soil.

The density of stock is important. Too many cattle will over-poach the soil leaving little vegetation, too few will not create pools and low grass patches. Too many sheep will not give enough variety in structure whereas low densities create good structural variety.

Land managers have to regularly review and adapt stocking levels according to field conditions.