

Gamekeeper turned poacher?

It's well known that following the comprehensive spending review last October the HLS budgets were one of many areas where cuts were made. However it was not entirely obvious just how big or small the cuts were to be.

The picture is now somewhat clearer and the national budget is to continue to decrease year on year until the end of the RDPE in 2013 (£9.1 million in 2012 in East Anglia and South East); it is just that it will not be rising at quite the rate it was originally. Although the budgets are no longer to be worked out on a purely regional basis the South East is well placed to access its fair share of grant funding with many target areas such as the South Downs National Park, the North Kent Marshes and the North Wessex Downs located within it.

One of the key habitats that is always much targeted in HLS is coastal and floodplain grazing marsh. This rather idiosyncratic term describes the low lying grassland which can very often be found throughout the South East either flanking larger rivers or behind coastal sea walls. During the summer months such places are, generally speaking, a picture of bucolic calm with lush pastures and grazing livestock. It is in the winter when they offer a bleak and windswept solitude that they become particularly close to my heart. Transformed to a Dickensian panorama these very wet places are very often frequented only by the odd wildfowler (and, of course, the wildfowl he pursues). In certain areas these varying but harmonious qualities may once again be threatened by the looming presence of coastal access which seems to have reappeared despite rumours of its demise at the end of last year.

Until last month I was an HLS adviser for Natural England in Sussex spending much of my time



that although some of the land lay wet during the winter, relatively little by way of wildfowl and waders actually used it. Following a change in ownership in 2003 and the renewal of the CSS scheme some radical changes were made which included the removal of the open access and a thorough overhaul of the hydrology of the site that included the digging of scrapes, installing new sluices and, in particular, the redirection of the water coming onto site by creating a new ditch (this ensured that neighbours would not be adversely affected by any raising of water levels). The result of all this effort has been substantial with not only significant numbers of birds wintering but also the return of breeding

lapwing, redshank and little ringed plover. These efforts were recognised in 2008 when the owners won the Purdey Gold Award for game conservation.

This, of course, is all well and good but what about the finances? If arable land came into HLS now in similar circumstances it would be eligible for between £285 and £355/ha and this, on what may well be unreliable ground for cereal cropping, is not only a good return but a guaranteed one also.

Given the variety of interests vying for these wetland areas it is encouraging to note that at least one issue has been resolved. There has been some disagreement in the past over the issue of shooting, and wildfowling in particular, on such land. This has now been resolved, with Natural England staff having access to fairly clear guidance on the subject which, in brief, allows for sustainable amounts of shooting and also acknowledges that, very often, it is the ground which is shot over that offers the best habitat; it is after all in the shooting man's interest to provide the optimum habitat to attract the birds.

involved with agri-environment agreements in the Arun valley. Although much of the middle reach is just such a bucolic oasis, designated SSSI and/or SPA (Special Protection Area) to boot, there were also plenty of areas where grassland had, in the past, been drained and turned over to arable. In these latter areas there have been many notable success stories where wet grassland has been recreated in relatively short time (this is in distinct contrast to

many schemes seeking to recreate, say, species rich chalk grassland, which may take decades to achieve even quite modest results).

One particularly good example of what can be achieved is a 32 ha site to the south of Pulborough which until 1993 was tillage land. It was then reverted to grass under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme but with open access as the key objective which meant, perhaps unsurprisingly,



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