

Habitat Management

Habitat Management in the Spring

Purpose	To provide good practice guidance for managing habitats in the spring
Deliver to	All operational staff

Notes for managers/trainers: This TBT should be delivered in, or just before, the Spring.

As the days start to get longer and warmer, many species will start to emerge from hibernation. This Toolbox Talk covers some good practice pointers that we need to follow to protect wildlife as species come out of hibernation and become more active:

What Are the Key Things to Remember in Spring?

- Records show that spring now arrives 11 days earlier than it did 40 years ago due to climate change.
- Signs of spring include budburst on trees, the emergence of flowers and the appearance of the first butterfly.
- Periods of mild weather can encourage species to emerge from hibernation earlier than they normally would.
- Hedgehogs, small mammals, reptiles and amphibians start to emerge in the spring, having spent the winter hibernating in features such as old tree stumps and dead wood, under piles of leaf litter or moss and in dense areas of vegetation and scrub.
- **This means that it is good practice to check habitats before starting work, and to be careful when working close to habitats where wildlife may be present, such as vegetation, hedgerows, ditches and trees.**

Good practice guidelines for springtime habitat management:

Vegetation Management:

- Avoid strimming or mowing too closely to features such as woodpiles or tree stumps – this ensures that species have some cover when they wake from hibernation and helps to protect them from predators.
- If you are mowing, avoid creating uniform and widespread areas of vegetation/grasses that are all one height. Leaving a mosaic of different heights is much more beneficial for biodiversity.
- Long grass, hedgerows and shrubs are good places for hedgehogs. Always check these areas before mowing, flailing or strimming.
- The bird nesting season starts in March and runs until August. Clearance and construction works impacting on hedgerows should be avoided during this time to prevent disturbance to nesting birds. Under the Wildlife & Countryside Act it is an offence to disturb/destroy a bird, nest, eggs or young.
- If a hedgerow needs trimming, try and wait until after the berries have been eaten in early winter, but before the bird nesting season starts in spring.
- Bats emerge from hibernation in the spring. Under the Wildlife & Countryside Act it is an offence to disturb bats, and to destroy or disturb a roost, even if the roost is not in use. Roosts can be found in trees and hedgerows, in buildings and tunnels, and under bridges.

Meadow Management:

- Meadows should be harrowed or rolled between February and early March to avoid disturbing wildlife, including ground nesting birds and queen bees.
- Wildflower seed can be sown in spring – March and April are the best months if the soil is heavy, as waterlogging can cause seeds to rot over the winter.
- An early spring hay cut suppresses coarse grasses and can be good for encouraging wildflower diversity later in the year.

Pond and Waterway Management:

- Ponds should not be disturbed in mid-winter or early spring – disturbance can expose hibernating amphibians to extreme cold, meaning they may not survive. The best time to carry out pond maintenance work is in the autumn (September – October).
- Don't move frogspawn between ponds or other waterbodies as this can transfer disease and have a severe impact on local amphibian populations.

Invasive Species:

- Treatment of invasive plants such as Himalayan balsam and giant hogweed can start in the spring.
- Treatment should start when the plant is actively growing but before the plant flowers and sets seed. Treatment will vary depending on species. Check the relevant guidelines for advice before starting work.

Pests and Diseases:

- The warmer spring weather allows pests and diseases to thrive. Some of the key pests and diseases that we need to look out for include:
- **Oak Processionary Moth:** Caterpillars of the OPM start to move about in late spring, forming nose-to-tail processions. The OPM is a notifiable pest and any sightings must be reported to the Forestry Commission.
- The larvae of many other pest species, such as the **Gypsy Moth** and **Asian Longhorn Beetle**, start to appear in the spring (*See Supporting Notes for an ID guide*).

Tree Diseases:

- Spring is the best time to spot wilting leaves caused by Ash Dieback (Chalara).
- Bleeding from the bark, one of the main symptoms of Acute Oak Dieback, appears in the spring.
- **If you think that you may have found signs of a pest or disease, you must notify your supervisor.**

Habitat Enhancements:

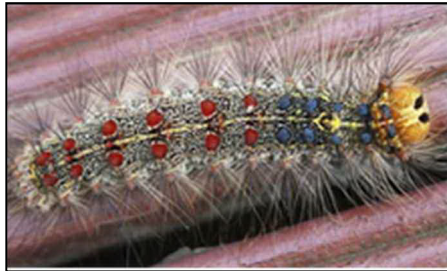
- Although autumn is the best time to install nest boxes, it is not too late to put up boxes in the spring as small birds, such as blue tits, will still look at potential nesting sites in February and March.
- Arisings from vegetation cutting or mowing can be used to create egg-laying heaps for grass snakes. Heaps should be replenished in April and May, but should be left undisturbed over the winter to avoid disturbing hibernating reptiles.

Supporting notes:

a) What species can be seen in spring?

- Look out for the arrival of migrants such as swallows and sand martins.
- Butterflies should start to appear from mid-March depending on the weather. The Brimstone butterfly is often the first to be seen.
- The RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch is the largest survey of its kind in the world and takes place in late winter/early spring. The data collected by the survey is used in the conservation of bird species.

b) Invasive species mentioned in the Toolbox Talk



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