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Derbyshire Wildlife Trust is a registered charity with more than 10,000 members supporting its work to protect the county's wildlife.

To find out how to join, visit our website or phone 01773 881188.

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Further Information

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Agate & Brooks (2001-2003) *Waterways and Wetland: a practical handbook*. BTCV.

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Derbyshire Wildlife Trust



Ditches are often the most significant wetland habitat across large parts of the countryside, particularly in areas of arable farmland.

With their mix of permanent water and relatively undisturbed rough vegetation, they can provide important refuges for small mammals, including harvest mice and water voles and nesting birds such as reed bunting and sedge warbler. A well managed, wet ditch can also develop a rich flora of wetland plants, including many species that are in decline as other wetlands are lost.

ditch management

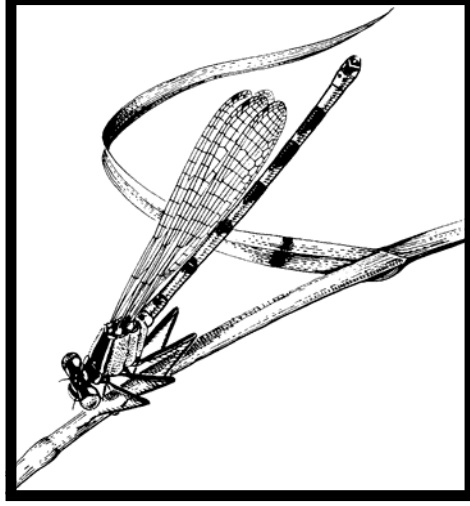


ditch management

Why manage ditches?

Without regular management, ditches become increasingly choked with vegetation. Litter and silt accumulate and the ditches eventually dry up and scrub over. Much of their value for agriculture and land management is in their ability to drain the land and provide flood alleviation. Without routine management, this drainage capacity is therefore lost along with much of their importance for wildlife.

The wildlife value of all ditches can be improved without hindering their primary drainage function. Effective and sensitive management may also help to reduce farm costs.



How often do ditches need managing?

Ditch management is best done by rotation. This helps to maintain a diverse community of plants and animals in the ditch as well as spreading the machinery costs. The length and type of rotation will be dependent on local conditions such as the rate of siltation, flood defence requirements, ditch profile and the presence or absence of grazing stock.

However, possible options for ditch maintenance cycles include:

- Light maintenance along the whole length of the ditch every year
- A two-year cycle, cutting half of the channel width each year and leaving the opposite bank uncut
- Less frequent routine maintenance with control of particularly vigorous emergent plants more often as necessary
- Radical clearing of 10-20% of the ditch length every year.

The highest diversity of aquatic plants is most often associated with drainage channels managed every three to five years.

Timing

The optimum time for ditch dredging and cutting of bankside vegetation is late summer or early autumn. This will be after the bird breeding season, after the plants have seeded and when water levels are at their lowest. This also allows some vegetation to recover before winter.

Sympathetic options for ditch management



- Clear the ditch from only one side (if it is relatively wide) or for only half its length in any particular year



- Use a sinuous dredging route or scallop the vegetation to create meanders



- Leave 10 metre blocks of vegetation every 30 metres or so

Cut channel vegetation should be temporarily left on the top of the bank, to allow aquatic invertebrates to crawl back into the water.

If possible, manage ditches to create as many different habitats as possible, from reed-dominated ditches to bare gravel and open water.

Margins alongside ditches will act as buffers from farm operations and provide additional habitat, as well as reducing the amount of agricultural chemicals that end up in the water.

Ditch junctions are excellent places to create ponds, as water tends to drain back to these areas. Ponds can be created during routine maintenance by deepening and widening ditches at suitable points.