



Original thinking... applied



Bracken Control Case Studies

Cutting: Tractor and Remote Controlled Equipment



This is a summary of the information that has been kindly provided by people with current experience of controlling bracken using hand pulling and whipping in different parts of the UK. It provides some real-world experience to supplement the preliminary guidance about each control method.

The detail is limited by the amount of information available. More case study

information is welcomed to allow us to add to the guidance. Please email details to: **Bracken@naturalengland.org.uk**

Where contributors have given their permission to share the information they provided, this can be accessed via the link at the end of the document.

Highlights

- Effective control can be achieved by cutting regularly, at least twice each year, through the season for several years. This approach has worked well on historic sites.
 - If cutting between May and August, bird nesting sites must be avoided. A walkover survey should be carried out to identify any nests and avoid these areas, to prevent disturbance of nesting birds. These areas could then be treated later in the season.
 - Cutting in June, at the crozier unfurling stage, was found to be significantly more effective than later treatment in mid-July - August.
 - Remote controlled cutters can operate on steep slopes and in dense vegetation where it would not be safe for manned equipment to work.
 - After cutting in May-July the bracken will regrow in 5-7 weeks.
 - Young bracken plants can be attractive to grazing animals, which can lead to bracken poisoning. Monitor livestock grazing sites post cutting.
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Case Studies

Historic England Sites

Field trials in Northumberland and Devon from 2013 until 2020 compared cutting once, (using a tractor or quad towed topper or brushcutter in late July) with bruising of bracken. For the bruising, a quad-towed basher was used in late July when only one treatment was required. Where two treatments were undertaken per year, the first was in June with a follow-up when the re-growth was tall enough to bruise again (September at the latest) on historic sites.

Cutting was found to be more effective than bruising and reduced bracken density by 80% after 8 years in Northumberland and by 30% after 3 years in Devon, with improved understorey cover.

In relation to the historic environment, cutting, (double) bruising and cattle caused disturbance and displacement of the part-buried features of interest.

There is a link to the full trial report (Monitoring of bracken control methods and their impact on the historic environment) in the case study information.

Historic Environment Scotland (HES) Site

Cutting bracken on a historic site using tractor mounted machinery has proved to be effective.

RSPB Reserves

Remote controlled cutters are in use at Lake Vrynwy (Powys) and Eastern Moors (Peak District).

A sit-on, brush-cutter is in use at Gwenffrwdinas in Carmarthenshire.

Case Studies

Woodland Ride clearance North Yorkshire

Regular cutting of a ½ acre plot within a woodland ride has cleared bracken effectively.

At the start, the ride had 100% bracken cover. Cutting was carried out twice per year for approximately 10 years using tractor mounted equipment. Other vegetation has replaced the bracken, and the area is now used for rearing pheasants. Photographs of the cleared area are in the link below.

The shading of the adjacent woodland may have helped by weakening the bracken.

Croasdale Farm Forest of Bowland

The aim was to increase biodiversity within SSSI moorland habitat. In July 2023, a trial commenced to assess the success of a single cut of bracken on open moorland with steeply sloping ground using a scrub-cutter with chains mounted onto a dual-wheeled tractor.

Follow up control was carried out using a powered strimmer in September. Cattle were allowed to graze in the cleared areas. By January 2024, *Juncus* sp. had started to re-establish.

The conclusions were that consideration should be given to carrying out two cuts: the first in May/June, and the second in July/August, as the fronds start to unfurl. More frequent cuts could be beneficial in the early years.

The death of one Belted Galloway cow in August 2023 was considered, by the vet to be due to bracken poisoning, although no postmortem was carried out. There was evidence that some cattle had been browsing on the young fronds after the first cut. To reduce the risk of bracken poisoning from grazing on young shoots, it is important that livestock have alternative sources of feed or any individuals seen to be preferentially grazing young fronds removed from the site.

Further Information

Click on the link(s) below for the original source of information and further details.

- [Historic England Sites Case Study Link](#)
 - [Historic Environment Scotland \(HES\) Site Case Study Link](#)
 - [Woodland Ride Clearance, North Yorkshire Case Study Link](#)
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