

GROWING CORN ON THE MACHAIR



Crofters here on the Uists work the land in a wildlife-friendly way and it is thanks to their traditional management practices that there is such amazing rich and varied wildlife on the Hebrides.

You will see many different types of sheep and cattle on the machair and there is a separate worksheet to tell you all about them.

The farming and crofting practices that encourage wildlife as well as enabling people to make a living, include using seaweed as organic fertiliser, shallow ploughing and growing local varieties of corn.

How many of these practices can you see being carried out today?



Seaweed known locally as 'tangle' is washed up on the shore in huge piles by the Atlantic winter storms. Many people used it to manure their feanagan or lazy beds which were long raised strips of cultivated land for growing vegetables (especially potatoes), which you can still see as outlines on the hillsides.

Today it is being widely used again as a natural fertiliser for growing machair corn. The kelp species of seaweed are collected by tractor and trailer and stored in piles for several weeks to go rotten and turn into the best possible mix for spreading on the machair. There is a pretty strong pong when crofters are spreading so you don't want to get down-wind...

Seaweed is great for the machair because it helps to make a good stable soil with high organic matter and enables lots of nutrients to be available to all kinds of invertebrates which provide food to nesting waders, corncrake and corn buntings which then eat the crop pests. Hardly any pesticides are needed.

After spreading seaweed, the machair plots are cultivated in preparation for planting potatoes and sowing corn. You don't want the light soil to blow away so shallow ploughing to a depth of 4 inches or 10 cms and rotavating is practised. This stops erosion of the fragile machair soils.



Most of the machair is cultivated for corn or local varieties of cereals: small/black oat, rye and bere (a kind of barley) These cereals, which are mainly fed to the cattle, are special locally-adapted seed mixtures which are ideally suited to the growing conditions on the Hebrides. Bere (pronounced 'bear') is probably Britain's oldest cereal so it is known as a heritage seed. Looking after old varieties of seed is also vital insurance for the future as they provide a genetic bank for new types of cereals which could feed a growing world population.

Can you identify two species of corn?

Growing local seed crops is part of the traditional cycle of two years cropping and then two or three years of fallows (where no corn is grown and the land rests) this makes a mosaic of habitats for a wide range of wildflowers invertebrates and birds.

Corn seed crops are also harvested later than grass and corn silage which means that birds like the corncrake, which migrates to Africa for the winter, can still have a place to hide and wildflowers can set seed. Crofters also cut their corn in corncrake-friendly patterns.



Have you heard a corncrake calling yet?

Something special to the Uists, especially on Benbecula and in South Uist, is the way crofters still make stacks. The crops are harvested by traditional reaper binders, left to dry in the fields in stacked sheaves (stooks) then made into mini stacks (Toiteans) and then into the big stack. The sheaves are fed out to cattle over the winter and/or threshed for seed.

Have you seen any stacks or toiteans today?



This means that seed-eating birds like the very rare corn bunting has food available all winter, but sadly because stack making is declining, this is thought to be one reasons why the corn bunting is disappearing from the machair. Making stacks takes a lot of time and energy for crofters and their families, so it is often easier to make silage in big black bales or cut the corn by combine. Look out for the traditional reaper binders as they are also a rare breed on the mainland.

One species of bird that is not disappearing and is proving a challenge for crofters and conservationists is the increasing population of greylag geese. Eight geese eat as much as one cow so imagine what comes out the other end! When the corn is ripening it is very vulnerable to geese that will go to extraordinary lengths to eat it and are very difficult to scare away. Protecting corn is not just about protecting cattle feed, it's all about protecting crofters and wildlife too.



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