

Shifting Sands Keystone Species

Securing a Future for the Brecks

**BACK
FROM THE
BRINK**

Why encourage rabbits?

In certain UK grassland and heathland habitats European rabbits are a **keystone species**, having a positive impact on ecosystem structure and biodiversity. Rabbits cause unique and beneficial ground disturbance through grazing, paw scraping, burrowing, and nutrient cycling.

Their highly selective grazing produces mosaics of differing vegetation, increasing floral and faunal richness. Many rare Breckland plants, such as Spring speedwell, depend on rabbits.



The Shifting Sands project

Our advice is produced from a three-year Back from the Brink project, which trialled techniques to encourage rabbits at five Brecks study sites.

- The findings showed that both management interventions, brush piles and banks, increased rabbit activity.
- Brush piles encouraged burrowing, which should promote breeding and restoration of rabbit populations
- Importantly, there was no 'one size fits all' management approach, because sites vary considerably (e.g. species of brush available, soil type, and baseline rabbit population size).

UK rabbit decline

In line with national trends, rabbit numbers in the East Anglian region of Breckland have shown a drastic decline due to a combination of **disease, persecution, predation, and habitat degradation**.

The virus myxomatosis reduced rabbit numbers by 99%, and more recent outbreaks of Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease have further impacted rabbit populations.

Spring speedwell (*V. verna*)



Management techniques

The 'Techniques to encourage European rabbit recovery' report details how to carry out habitat management to promote the restoration of rabbit populations.

Brush piles, made of felled branches or uprooted trees/bushes, encourage burrowing and provide important cover for rabbits which helps protect against predation. They are a simple, low-cost option in grass-heath habitats, utilising scrub material which is otherwise routinely removed.

Banks of soil can also encourage activity. These were used by UK warreners several hundred years ago to encourage rabbits to proliferate, by providing a suitable substrate to burrow into.

Read the full Shifting Sands report at www.NatureBftB.co.uk



Bell, D., Endean, J. & Mountjoy, P. (2021) Techniques to encourage European rabbit recovery. Back from the Brink, Natural England and University of East Anglia, Norwich.