

Summer Grazing | For Native Warm Season Grass

This is a set of notes to take to the field when grazing native warm season grasses (NWSG) in Summer. For a more in-depth discussion of these concepts, watch the video by the same name at <https://youtu.be/je682ZQYqsw>. Other videos in this series discuss spring grazing of NWSG as well as haying, burning, and more.

1. **Timing of Grazing Initiation Is Crucial:** Successful management of NWSG in summer begins in spring. Delaying grazing into summer leads to loss of production and lower forage quality (reduced protein and increased fiber). Delaying grazing can also cause an increase in “knockdown” of the grasses, which causes them to regrow entirely from root reserves meaning that regrowth is slower and it may reduce forage yield. For more information on starting to graze in the spring, check out the video and Take-to-the-Field Guide for the First Graze of Spring at <https://hamiltonnativeoutpost.com/first-graze-of-spring-on-nwsg/>.
2. **It Takes Grass to Grow Grass / Tall Grasses Must Be Managed Tall:** NWSG have growing points located well above ground level, and if this is grazed off, regrowth happens much slower and the grass is more stressed. Realize that “grazing all of the grass” today is a short-term gain but a long-term loss in forage production.

Recommended canopy height for grazing NWSG pastures. Information from <i>Native Grass Forages for the Eastern U.S.</i> by Patrick Keyser.		
Grass Species	Grazing Approach	
	Rotational	Continuous
Switchgrass – Lowland Types	15-30"	18-24"
Switchgrass – Upland Types	12-26"	14-18"
Big Bluestem/Indiangrass	13-26"	14-18"
Eastern Gamagrass	16-32"	18-22"

3. **Canopy Height:** Grazing to a proper canopy height will increase forage production, maintain quality and discourage weeds. The general rule of thumb is to keep the grass between the top of your cowboy boot and hip high. More details are in the table above.
4. **Proper Grazing Discourages Weeds:** An old rule of thumb allowed grazing down to an 8-inch canopy, but this reduced canopy can give weeds a leg-up. Annual weeds respond to open canopies and exposed soil as do invading, shorter perennials such as Bermudagrass and Horse Nettle, so manage NWSG higher than these weeds.

5. **The 3-bites Concept:** A NWSG plant can be viewed as having 3 sequential bites. The animal removes roughly the top third first, and if not allowed to graze more, the regrowth period will be quite short as opposed to allowing the animal to remove both the top and middle thirds. If the animal also removes the bottom third of the plant where the growth point is, this is very stressful for the plant and results in the need for a very long rest period. Ideal grazing removes only one or two bites, never all three when the plant is actively growing.
6. **Managing by Feel:** Experience with grazing NWSG will allow you to manage more by feel. You will gain a sense of balancing forage height, plant condition, weather, and seasonal variations rather than rigid dates alone.
7. **What If I Grazed Too Hard or Not Enough?** *If the grass gets too tall*, the quality decreases (protein decreases, fiber increases), but if you find yourself in this situation and the grass is still of decent quality, go ahead and graze it – maybe even graze it intensely (e.g. mob graze or total graze or ultra high stock density graze it), or you can hay it. Another option, especially if you’re not in need of the forage or if the stand is young, is to let it rest for the remainder of the season and burn or graze it in the winter (keep in mind that dormant season grazed NWSG will lack protein). *If the grass is grazed too hard*, give it extra rest (maybe 45-55+ days) and be careful to monitor canopy height on the subsequent grazes.

As you graze your mature pastures of NWSG through the summer, don’t get too nervous. If you “mess up”, know that these grasses aren’t fragile, they just don’t stand for repeated mismanagement, so keep learning and improving! Also keep in mind that weed encroachment into a mature stand can be a sign of overgrazing.

