

Upland Heathland

Our objectives for this habitat are to:

conserve, restore and enhance all upland heathland in the Harrogate district; and

to encourage diversification of the habitat, where appropriate, with areas of scrub, woodland (especially in the gills) and wetland.



Dallowgill Moor (E Moss)

Introduction

In the Harrogate district upland heath, more commonly called heather moorland, is underlain by acidic soils over millstone grit. It occurs on a rolling plateau of generally un-enclosed land, lying above the 'moor wall' at altitudes of between 300 and 600m.

Upland heath has a limited but distinctive and important diversity of species of plants, invertebrates and reptiles and it is internationally important for breeding waders and raptors (birds of prey).

Drier upland heath is characterised by the dwarf shrub heather, with bilberry and acid-loving grasses. In wet heath the dwarf shrub is typically cross-leaved heath with heath rush, deer grass and sedges.

Wetter upland heath may grade into Blanket bog (see separate action plan), from which it is primarily distinguished by occurring on mineral soils with less than 0.3m of peat.

Extensive heather moorlands are not a natural habitat but are probably derived from the clearance of oak-birch-rowan woodland, from the Neolithic period onwards. Prior to clearance, such woodlands would have clothed most of the uplands, except for the very highest or wettest areas. The dwarf shrub species that make up modern heathland communities would have once been mostly confined to woodland fringes and glades.

The maintenance of heather moorland is closely linked with management for grouse shooting. This includes rotational burning (to maintain a patchwork of heather of different ages especially the younger re-growth), low-level sheep grazing and predator control.

On the more intensively managed grouse moors, commercial pressure may promote almost a monoculture of heather dominated moorland.

By contrast, in those areas where sheep production provides the economic mainstay, overgrazing may lead to the displacement of heather by rough grassland, producing 'white' moor, of lower biodiversity value.

Some moors have been gripped with drainage channels, and consequently drained, although many moorland managers now recognise that the abundance of invertebrates associated with wetland features provide a rich source of food for young grouse.

In the absence of such management for grouse or sheep, most heathland would revert to scrub and ultimately woodland.

The most wildlife-rich upland heath has a diverse structure and species composition, comprising a mosaic of micro-habitats including dry and wet heath with bryophytes, wet flushes and pools. Bracken, scrub and oak woodland may also occur in the gills. It is this rich mosaic which underpins the diversity of upland heath. Under more natural conditions bracken areas would probably gradually develop birch-rowan (possibly oak) open woodland and bracken vigour would be reduced by shading.

Those parts of upland heathland that largely escape the use of fire and livestock grazing are often the most biologically rich and interesting parts of moorland. Such areas include wet flushes (important for many plants and as feeding locations for wading birds) and some of the deeper gills. The latter often escape burning and receive rather little grazing because of their steep and often broken slopes. Such gills frequently support the most natural patterns of vegetation distribution and these are important because vegetation patterns almost everywhere else are largely determined by management. They also often sustain incipient woodland on crags that are inaccessible to sheep and may have some relict woodland ground flora. Ring ouzels often prefer such areas.



Adder (High Batts)

National status

Dwarf shrub heath has international significance and is largely confined to the British Isles and the western seaboard of Europe. The national resource covers around approximately 80 per cent of dwarf shrub heath in Europe (UK BAP). Upland heathland is a UK BAP priority habitat and an EU priority habitat. There is an estimated 2,919,500 ha in the UK, of which 270,000 ha is in England.

Regional status

The regional resource is 76,000 ha (28 per cent of the resource in England)(Selman). Large tracts of moorland form part of the Northern Pennines, the North York Moors National Park and Nidderdale AONB.

Local status

The Upland survey (commissioned by EN) indicates that about 10,055 ha of upland heath occur in Harrogate district. Of this, some 8,800 ha is dry and 200 ha is wet heathland, with additional areas a mosaic of the two (EN).

This survey identified three main upland blocks in the Harrogate district:

1. **East of Nidderdale** - including Dallowgill Moor and Colsterdale [EN Block 15] two thirds being heath (H9 vegetation community covering two thirds; H12 vegetation community one third)
2. **West of Nidderdale to Great Whernside** [EN Block 14i] mostly blanket mire with some heath mostly on the western fringes.
3. **Blubberhouses and Barden Moor and on either side of the Washburn Valley** [EN Block 16i] 50 per cent of whole block is heath.

The results show that all of these blocks hold significant amounts of heathland and indicate that the first two of these areas may be regarded as among the best representatives of the Northern English grouse moor landscape.

Local priority species:

- **Hen harrier**
- **Merlin**
- **Curlew**
- **Golden plover**
- **Black grouse**
- **Red grouse**
- **Short-eared owl**
- **Snipe**
- **Ring ouzel**
- **Adder**
- **Golden-ringed dragonfly**

Status of priority species

Red grouse - the district hosts some of the finest grouse moors in Britain. Numbers of this flagship species vary from year to year.

Golden plover - breeds on open moorland above 230m (see also Blanket Bog HAP).

Hen harrier - (UK BAP) see Species Action Plan (SAP).

Merlin - has probably benefited nationally from a reduction in persecution in recent years. Between 15 and 21 pairs probably breed in the district.

Black grouse - see Moorland Edge HAP).

Short-eared owl - numbers fluctuate in keeping with population cycle of the main prey short-tailed field vole but are thought to be lower than the potential due to illegal persecution.



Red grouse (E. Moss)

Snipe - Mather (2001) states that "it is much less numerous than it was two decades ago". Now within Harrogate district confined as a breeding bird to the uplands.

Curlew - (UK BAP 2007) Nationally declining. Widespread breeding bird in the district on moorland, moorland edge and meadows.

Ring ouzel - (UK BAP 2007) Nationally declining. May be at threat from global warming and possibly at threat of extinction from the district.

Adder - widespread but thinly distributed on blanket bog, moorland, and in higher woodlands.

Golden-ringed dragonfly - associated with moorland streams. Scarce in the district.

Requirements

Upland heathland would benefit from the following:

- Intensive use of both fire and grazing clearly reduce the "biodiversity value". From the conservation point of view a generally 'light touch' form of management is best (i.e. just enough burning to retain heathland and light grazing so avoiding the transformation to white moor).
- Appropriate heather management. Heather lives for 30 years and each age stage should be represented to give structural diversity.
- Fire control. Longer burning cycles on parts of the moor would benefit biodiversity. Uncontrolled 'hot' fires are very damaging.
- Light grazing by traditional sheep, cattle and/or horses. This traditional form of management is ideal on heathland as it controls invasive species and produces a range of vegetation heights, adding to structural diversity.

- A range of micro-habitats within the heathland including bare ground, bogs and open water.
- Bracken is an important part of a heath mosaic but in the absence of cattle grazing can quickly become dominant and may require control to retain upland heath.
- Legal predator control helps protect breeding waders in moorland areas and it is likely that, without such control, wader numbers would be significantly lower.

Threats

- Economic factors which threaten the viability of grouse shooting.
- Over-intensive moorland management especially over-burning and over-grazing.
- Illegal persecution of birds of prey, especially hen harriers.
- Accidental fire hazards and arson.
- Inappropriate vehicular access.
- Uncontrolled dogs cause disturbance to nesting birds (most estates have secured exclusions from dogs during the nesting season under open access legislation (CROW Act) which is to be encouraged and should be rigorously enforced.

Opportunities

- Apply the management prescriptions of the various Environmental Stewardship Schemes to maintain and restore upland heath.
- Encourage landowners/occupiers to enter into Management Agreements with Natural England for upland heath on SSSIs.
- Continue close working and partnership between parties with an interest in upland land management.
- Survey sites outside the SSSIs under the SINC survey programme.

LINKS WITH OTHER HDBAP PLANS:

Blanket Bog HAP

Hen Harrier SAP

UK BAP links: Black Grouse SAP

(http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/_speciespages/596.pdf)



AC08

The UK BAP Objectives are:

- Maintain the current resource in favourable condition.
- Achieve favourable condition on all upland heathland SSSIs by 2010.
- Improve the condition of at least 50 per cent of semi-natural upland heath outside SSSIs by 2010.
- Increase dwarf shrubs to at least 25 per cent cover where they have been reduced or eliminated.
- Restoration of between 50,000 and 100,000 ha by 2010.
- Re-creation of 5,000 ha by 2005 of heathland lost to agricultural improvement or afforestation.

UK HAP definition <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-5706>

