



North York Moors National Park Authority

Moorland

Habitat action plan

North York Moors National Park

Moorland Habitat Action Plan

2008 - 2012

Moorland

Our objectives for moorland are:

1. To retain or restore the full diversity and extent of habitats within the moorland, particularly blanket bog, wet and dry heath and the transitions between them, through the maintenance or introduction of sustainable management.
2. Where appropriate, to look to develop limited areas representative of the transition between open moorland and native woodland.
3. To maintain and enhance populations of characteristic moorland species, in conjunction with Species Action Plans such as the Moorland Birds SAP.
4. To encourage public understanding and appreciation of the importance of the moorland resource to wildlife and local businesses.

Introduction

This Habitat Action Plan covers all non-woodland vegetation above the limits of enclosed farmland. The UK Biodiversity Action Plan priority habitats included in this plan are Upland Heath, Blanket Bog and Lowland Heath.

Moorland generally consists of a mix of wet and dry heath, blanket bog, flushes, bracken and acid grassland. These can be categorised according to their plant communities but, as they usually occur in an intimate mosaic and are closely linked in terms of hydrology, species composition and management, they will be considered as one habitat type for the purposes of this Action Plan.

National status

Moorland vegetation is found on all of the major upland blocks in the UK, from Dartmoor in the south, to Shetland in the north. Almost 90% of the world's heather moorland is believed to be in the UK. Dwarf shrub communities are recognised by the European Union as being of international importance because they are largely confined to the British Isles and the western edge of mainland Europe. Peat bogs have a similar status and a more diverse vegetation mix.

As well as valuable vegetation communities, moorland supports important vertebrate and invertebrate assemblages. Birds such as red grouse, golden plover and merlin are dependent on this type of habitat in the UK. Traditional management of the moors to encourage grouse and to support the extensive grazing of hefted hill sheep has resulted in the wildlife resource we see today.

North York Moors National Park

Moorland Habitat Action Plan

2008 - 2012

There has been a considerable decline in moorland cover over the last century. It is estimated that, between 1946 and 1984, 27% of heather-dominated vegetation in England and Wales has been lost. Much of this has been due to agricultural intensification, heavy grazing and afforestation. Although this situation has improved in some areas, much of the remaining resource is in a poor state with overgrazing still driving a shift away from dwarf shrub communities. (This contrasts markedly with the current loss of sheep from parts of the North York Moors National Park).

Local status

The North York Moors National Park contains the largest patch of continuous heather moorland in England, representing over 10% of the country's resource. The moorland is vitally important from a socio-economic point of view. Most of the moors are privately owned with management being carried out for sheep grazing and grouse shooting. The moorland resource is also important for recreation and the income from visitors supports many local businesses.

Dry heath vegetation covers 26,500 ha and forms the main land cover on the western, southern and central moors. Heather or ling is the dominant species over this entire area with patches of bell heather, bilberry, crowberry and cowberry. Heather is also abundant on the wet heath (8,700 ha), which occurs on moister soils, and favours species such as cross-leaved heath, bilberry, deer grass and purple moor grass. Some limited areas of acid grasslands (usually species poor) merge into the heathlands and are often associated with past or present heavy grazing. Extensive stands of bracken, usually on valley sides are also often species poor and without control they invade the upland heath habitat. However, bracken patches can support locally uncommon plant species such as dwarf cornel and chickweed wintergreen. Where it occurs in a mosaic with other vegetation types, bracken can be a very valuable biodiversity resource, providing a favoured nesting habitat for birds such as whinchat.

Many of our moors are much lower and drier than typical upland heathland. This, in combination with management to encourage heather, may explain why some moors are less diverse, with lower bryophyte populations for example, than elsewhere in the country.

Mire communities occur along seepage lines and streams where rushes dominate over a moss field layer. Blanket bog or mire occurs along the watersheds of some of the high moors on relatively deep peat. The largest contiguous bog in the Park is at the northern end of Bransdale Moor. Most of the North York Moors' peat bogs are dominated by heather with hare's-tail cotton-grass and common cotton-grass also frequent. The area of blanket bog vegetation on the North York Moors has probably been much greater in the past than it is now. The current extent and condition of blanket bog here may

North York Moors National Park

Moorland Habitat Action Plan

2008 - 2012

reflect climate, air pollution, management by burning, grazing, and drainage, or a combination of these.

Legal status

Within the National Park 88% (44,088 ha) of moorland habitat is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Special Protection Area (SPA) and Special Area for Conservation (SAC). The moorland supports internationally important numbers of breeding golden plover and merlin and a nationally important population of breeding curlew.

The main moorland block is designated as access land and contains many scheduled ancient monuments.

Links to other action plans

Habitat Action Plans:	Species Action Plans:
Rivers and Streams*#	Moorland birds*#
Woodland*#	Reptiles#
	Otter#
	Water vole*#
	Small pearl bordered fritillary*#
	Large heath butterfly*#
* = Local Species Action Plan	Fresh water pearl mussel*#
# = UK Species Action Plan(s)	Juniper*#
	Dwarf Cornel*#

Threats

- Lack of management of some tracts of isolated moorland has led to longer vegetation which represents an increased risk of accidental fires, as well as detrimental levels of scrub and tree encroachment. The fire risk may increase substantially as a result of climate change.
- Lack of grazing on moorland reduces the intimate vegetation mosaic created by trampling, browsing and dunging. This in turn can limit the botanical and invertebrate interest of moorland.
- Short burning rotations, whilst beneficial for some breeding birds such as golden plover can, without careful management, restrict the structural diversity of the habitat for wildlife.
- Burning of wet heath and bog communities may dry the peat surface, causing erosion and encouraging conversion to dry heath vegetation. Burning and drying peat also releases a large amount of carbon into the atmosphere, exacerbating climate change.
- Digging out watercourses and maintaining moorland grips can cause the bog surface to dry out with consequent peat erosion degrading this habitat, having associated impacts on water quality and increasing flood risks downstream.

North York Moors National Park

Moorland Habitat Action Plan

2008 - 2012

- If not carefully regulated, 4x4 vehicles, bikers and cyclists can cause excessive peat erosion and may disturb moorland bird populations.
- Inappropriate track development destroys habitat & can create drainage problems.
- Climate change increases the risks of drought and flooding, exacerbating the damage caused by inappropriate management, moorland grips and access tracks / paths.

Requirements

- Appropriate grazing regimes, with good shepherding / animal husbandry using upland hardy breeds at low densities.
- Sensitive cutting / burning regimes. If using burning as a management tool, careful 'cool' burns must be used with special care taken not to damage peat. When cutting heather, damage and disturbance by vehicles (including during the extraction of heather) must be minimised.
- Minimise the risks of accidental or damaging fires by careful fire risk management, such as the inclusion of fire breaks and emergency action plans
- Adherence to the Heather and Grass Burning Code.
- Grip or drain blocking to restore natural hydrology.
- Bracken control where it is invading important habitats.
- Control of scrub and trees where they are invading important habitats.
- Recreation management, providing structured paths to decrease pressure on fragile substrates and prevent disturbance to breeding birds.

Local action

The Moorland Regeneration Programme (1995-2001) was developed as a partnership between moorland managers and conservation organisations and it covered a wide range of environmental and economic issues. Much of the work has helped deliver biodiversity targets and the Habitat Action Plan will develop projects initiated under the Moorland Regeneration Programme.

Projects included:

- A survey of moorland vegetation carried out between 1995 and 1996, describing the distribution of NVC communities and heather condition.
- Breeding wader surveys carried out in 1996 and 2000 provided information on breeding snipe, lapwing, curlew and golden plover. They also recorded breeding meadow pipits and skylarks.
- Bracken control carried out and the relative success of different methods assessed.
- 40.5ha of former conifer plantation managed to encourage regeneration of moorland vegetation.
- 195ha of vegetation that had suffered from localised overgrazing fenced to exclude livestock.

North York Moors National Park

Moorland Habitat Action Plan

2008 - 2012

Every five years or so since 1977, a Moorland Research Review has been compiled, which brings together the results of surveys and research into moorland management within the National Park.

Since 1985, annual surveys of breeding merlin have been undertaken on many of the moors by the Upland Bird Group. This is a small team of dedicated volunteers assisted by the National Park Authority.

In May 2002 a Moorland Project Officer post was established in the Park. The post is currently joint-funded by natural England and the National Park Authority and is reviewed on an annual basis. The main focus of the post is to help deliver Natural England's environmental schemes to graziers and estates.

Opportunities

- Partnership working with Natural England to achieve good habitat management on protected moorland.
- Agri-environment schemes.
- Restructuring of conifer blocks to remove them where appropriate and to create a natural woodland/moorland fringe.
- Work with all moor managers to achieve beneficial moorland management.
- Climate Change Agenda – drain blocking to reduce erosion of peat and retain water on moorland.
- Re-vegetate bare areas, such as those damaged by fires or access tracks.
- Where appropriate and beneficial to biodiversity, experiment with alternatives to traditional moorland management, such as using Exmoor ponies and cutting heather for biofilters.

What can you do to help

- Avoid walking over open moorland by keeping to established footpaths and tracks.
- On moorland, please keep your dog on a lead or to heel at all times.
- Always drive safely and carefully, respecting livestock and wildlife that may be confused or frightened by traffic.
- Support local grazing regimes by purchasing local meat
- Ensure that at times of high fire risk you and others do not increase the risk by having barbecues, open fires etc.
- Report notable species to the National Park Authority using the on-line recording form on the National Park's website:
www.moors.uk.net/recording
- Assist the North York Moors National Park Volunteers with moorland management. Phone the Volunteers Service on 01439 770657 or see

North York Moors National Park

Moorland Habitat Action Plan

2008 - 2012

the National Park's website: www.moors.uk.net for details. (For volunteering opportunities click on Authority Services at the bottom of the screen. Then choose "Rangers, Volunteer & vocational training".)

- Get involved in traditional moorland management, as a beater or casual labourer to help with heather burning and bracken control. E-mail George Winn-Darley at george@winndarley.net for details.
- Assist the Hawk and Owl Trust Volunteers with their work to record moorland wildlife and enhance the habitat on Fylingdales Moor. Phone 01751 417398 or e-mail john.edwards@wildfylingdales.co.uk for details.