Upland Heathland

This plan is currently being reviewed by Shropshire Wildlife Trust; a new version should be available early in 2009.

Upland heathland commonly occurs on mineral soils and thin peats less than 0.5 m deep. This habitat is found above enclosed agricultural land at an altitude of about 250 to 400 metres, and is characterised by a cover of at least 25% of dwarf shrubs such as heather, bilberry, crowberry and cowberry.

Upland heathland is typically found in association with a number of other habitats such as acid grassland (often with bracken), scrub, rock outcrops and scree, wet flushes, mires, and open water. An important assemblage of birds such as red grouse, merlin and hen harrier, and a diverse range of invertebrates, are associated with upland heath.

The upland heathlands of Shropshire are associated with the Shropshire Hills. They are especially notable for their transitional mix of southern lowland and northern upland types of heathland. This mix is best represented at The Stiperstones: on lower south-facing slopes the vegetation is characteristic of lowland types and includes bell heather and western gorse, and this grades into upland heath with heather, crowberry and cowberry on upper slopes Although much of the upland heathland throughout the Shropshire Hills is dry, there are small but significant areas of wet heath with characteristic species such as cotton grass, cross-leaved heath and sphagnum moss at sites such as Rhos Fiddle and Lower Short Ditch in the Clun Forest.

1 Objectives and Targets

1.1 Objectives

A. Protect all upland heathland and associated moorland habitat by ensuring no further loss or degradation.
B. Increase the extent of upland heathland through restoration or habitat creation.
C. Improve the condition of existing upland heathland through appropriate management. D. Improve knowledge of the extent and status of upland heathland through survey, research and monitoring.
E. Increase awareness of the importance of upland heathland.

1.2 Targets

- Re-create 25 ha of upland heathland in areas where it has been lost due to agricultural improvement or afforestation by 2005, with particular emphasis on linking isolated blocks of heathland.
- Increase dwarf-shrubs to at least 25% cover on 100 ha in areas where they have been reduced or eliminated due to inappropriate management, by 2010.
- Improve the condition of at least 50% of upland heathland outside SSSIs through reintroducing appropriate management (including sustainable levels of grazing), by 2005.
- Achieve favourable condition of all upland heathland by 2010.

2 Current Status

2.1 Importance

Upland heathland is a priority habitat in the UK Biodiversity Programme. Dwarf shrub heaths are of international importance as they are largely confined within Europe to the British Isles and the western seaboard of mainland Europe. The European Union's Habitats and Species Directive identifies dry heaths as of European importance.

The heathlands of south Shropshire are especially notable for their transitional nature between southern lowland types and northern upland heather moorland. The Stiperstones supports an internationally important example of these vegetation types and has been submitted to the European Union as a candidate Special Area of Conservation (cSAC) under the Habitats and Species Directive.

The upland heathlands of Shropshire support a distinctive assemblage of birds including red grouse, merlin, ring ouzel, wheatear, curlew and snipe.

2.2 Trends

There has been a considerable loss of heather moorland in recent times. Between 1947 and 1980, approximately 27% was lost in England and Wales. Much of this loss is due to agricultural improvement, heavy grazing by sheep and afforestation.

Losses of upland heathland in Shropshire have mirrored national trends. The most significant causes of loss in the county have been due to overgrazing and agricultural improvement.

2.3 Area / Extent

Ten sites in south Shropshire support upland heathland, covering approximately 2000 ha in total. In practice the total upland heathland resource in Shropshire is less than this as several sites, such as The Stiperstones, support heathland that is transitional to lowland heathland.

With the exception of the Long Mynd and The Stiperstones, the examples of upland heathland are less than 100 ha in extent. At this comparatively small size they do not support the diversity of upland birds normally associated with large upland moors.

2.4 Distribution

Upland heathlands mostly occur within the Shropshire Hills Natural Area. Small remnants also remain in the Clun and North-West Herefordshire Hills Natural Area. Most of the heathland in these areas are registered as common land.

3 Current Factors Affecting the Habitat

- Fragmentation and isolation of heathlands resulting in deterioration of the quality of wildlife sites.
- Lack of appropriate management including overgrazing on many sites (see below) and lack of grazing on a few sites which results in the replacement of heathland by woodland of lower wildlife value.
- Agricultural improvements including the drainage of mires and flushes.
- Overgrazing and inappropriate supplementary feeding leading to a reduction in heathland and its replacement by bracken and grassland of lower wildlife value.
- Indiscriminate burning, leading to loss of heathland and erosion of peaty soils.
- Dominance of invasive bracken leading to a loss of biodiversity.
- Recreational impacts leading to damage and erosion.
- Over registration of grazing rights on common land which can lead to overgrazing and act as a disincentive to take-up of agri-environment schemes.

4 Current Action

4.1 Policy and Protection

- Policies for the protection and enhancement of heathland and other moorland habitats have been included within statutory local plans and other policy documents such as Wildlife and Countryside Plans, Forest Design Plans, and Countryside Character and Natural Area Plans.
- 4 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) include upland heathland and are therefore protected by the provisions of the Wildlife and Countryside Act.
- The Stiperstones is owned and managed as a National Nature Reserve (NNR) by Natural England
- The Long Mynd is owned by the National Trust whose objectives include landscape and nature conservation.
- The Stiperstones and The Hollies SSSI is one of the best heathland sites in the European Union and has been submitted as a candidate Special Area of Conservation (cSAC).
- Several heathland areas have been identified as county Wildlife Sites by the Shropshire Wildlife Trust
- The Environmental Conditions of the Livestock Subsidy Schemes.

4.2 Management, Research and Survey

- A number of upland heathlands are under Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) agreements secured for the sustainable management of heathland and other moorland habitats.

- Vegetation surveys have been carried out on most upland heathland sites. The Long Mynd and The Stiperstones have been surveyed for their plant, invertebrate and bird interest.
- English Nature and the National Trust have prepared detailed management plans for The Stiperstones and the Long Mynd.
- A detailed report into the opportunities, techniques and cost of heathland restoration at The Stiperstones has been undertaken and is relevant to other sites in the county.
- The Stiperstones area is included in a programme of restoration to extend heathland and reduce fragmentation – the 'Back to the Purple' project.

5 Benefits

- Conservation of rare and characteristic species and habitats.
- Enhancement of the landscape, often with both cultural and historical benefits.
- Provision of a resource for both recreation and local tourism which, in turn, has a significant impact on the local economy.
- Demonstration of best practice techniques in the maintenance, restoration and recreation of upland heathland.

6 Key Species

Birds merlin, red grouse, ring ouzel, curlew, snipe, linnet, skylark
Reptiles common lizard
Dragonflies golden-ringed dragonfly, black darter
Butterflies dark green fritillary, small pearl-bordered fritillary, grayling
Moths emperor, fox moth, oak eggar, yellow underwing, wood tiger, grey mountain carpet
Plants bog pimpernel, marsh St. John's-wort, bog asphodel, sundew and common butterwort, bilberry, heathers, cowberry, crowberry, crossleaved heath.

7 Complementary Plans

UK Upland Heathland HAP
Shropshire Lowland Heathland HAP
Shropshire Acid Grassland HAP

Habitat / Species	Action Code	Action text	Location of action	Start Date	End Date	Lead	Assisting
Heath	SHR HEA HC 05	Liaise with forestry landholders to restore heathland from coniferous woodland.	Shropshire	2002	-	FC	SC
Upland Heath	SHR UHE HC 01	Seek to achieve heathland restoration and recreation by full implementation of the 'Back to Purple' project	Shropshire	2002	2010	FC	SWT
Upland Heath	SHR UHE HS 04	Ensure application of best practice techniques in the management of upland heath to maintain or restore species and structural diversity (e.g. burning and cutting of heather, control of bracken).	Shropshire	2002	-	NT	NE RSPB SC
Upland Heath	SHR UHE HS 05	Monitor grazing levels and where appropriate inform DEFRA of overgrazing to enable investigation under The Environmental Conditions of the Livestock Subsidy Schemes.	Shropshire	2002	-	NE	NT RSPB
Upland Heath	SHR UHE SU 01	Implement a program to monitor the management of upland heaths to ensure best practice and species safeguard.	Shropshire	2002	-	SWT	NT SC
Upland Heath	SHR UHE SU 02	Monitor population levels of important upland heathland birds such as merlin, red grouse, ring ouzel, curlew, snipe.	Shropshire	2002	-	NE	NT RSPB SOS

Key to Organisations

FC	Forestry Commission
SC	Shropshire Council
SWT	Shropshire Wildlife Trust
NT	National Trust
NE	Natural England
RSPB	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
SWT	Shropshire Wildlife Trust
SOS	Shropshire Ornithological Society

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