

Local Wildlife Sites – South East Wales Project

The following information outlines the best practice guidelines for managing the habitat type listed below in a manner that is sympathetic to wildlife. It is part of a series relating to various habitat types and management issues that have been produced by your local Wildlife Trusts.

No.7 Heath

What is Heath?

Heath is characterized by a dominance of dwarf shrubs, usually heather. It can be present in a mosaic with other habitats but needs to have at least 25% heather covering to be defined as heath. It is formed on poor soils and is essentially a man-made habitat resulting from historical deforestation and as such requires ongoing management to prevent it returning to scrub or woodland. Heath habitat can be subdivided according to both altitude and hydrology. Dry Heath is characterised by Ling & Bell Heather as well as gorse & Bilberry, this is commonly found in association with Bracken and acid grassland. Wet Heath is characterised by Cross-leaved Heather & mosses and is commonly in association with bogs, marshy grassland and flushes.



Bell Heather



Heath



Cross-leaved Heather

What wildlife does it support?

Despite being man-made, heath is a fantastic habitat that is home to many important species of flora and fauna. These include birds such as Stonechat, reptiles, scarce flowers and many invertebrates, including countless buzzing bees, butterflies, dragonflies and moths such as the impressive Emperor Moth.



Stonechat



Common Lizard



Emperor Moth

Why preserve/enhance it?

Heathland is a fantastic and much reduced habitat and you can justifiably feel proud to have on your land such a superb resource for wildlife. These heath habitats are so special, vulnerable and rare within a European context that they are afforded special protection. It is therefore of great importance that they are protected/enhanced and we would very much like to assist you in achieving this goal by both highlighting the threats to this habitat and providing management recommendations.

Threats

The following can all lead to the loss and degradation of this habitat:

- Development i.e. pipelines, windfarms and pylons.
- Forestry planting.
- Drainage to improve grazing.
- Overgrazing leading to the replacement of heather by grasses.
- Undergrazing/management leading to areas scrubbing over.
- Burning inappropriately
- Recreational pressure causing erosion and disturbance.

Management Recommendations

The following is recommended to ensure the valuable heath habitat is managed sympathetically for wildlife and is thus preserved/enhanced:

Preservation/Enhancement of Heath

If your heath is already in good condition there may be no need to alter the current regime. If alterations are required then the best-practice guidelines for grazing or cutting are (exact timings will vary from site to site):

Grazing

- The vegetation can be maintained by light grazing with cattle, horses, or sheep not exceeding 0.05LSU*/ha/yr.
- Grazing should ideally be avoided between October and March however.
- Efforts should be made to avoid localised overgrazing or undergrazing by shepherding the sheep to the required areas, particularly on larger sites.

*Livestock Units (LSU)

1 Dairy Cow = 1.0LSU

1 Beef Animal (less than 24 months) = 0.6LSU

1 Suckler Cow = 1.0LSU

1 Breeding Ewe (with or without lamb) = 0.15LSU

1 Horse = 1.0LSU

Mowing

- Grazing is the ideal management technique but in certain circumstances and particularly for smaller areas mowing can be effective, although uneven ground and obstructions can prevent this.
- Cutting/mowing should ideally be on a rotational basis to create a mosaic of different age structure to benefit wildlife.
- Cuttings should ideally be removed to prevent the suppression of new growth.
- The cutting should avoid the bird breeding season (March-August).
- If cutting is undertaken in November/December then the cut heather and its associated seeds can be collected if you want to undertake heather creation in other areas.

Burning

- As outlined previously grazing is the ideal management tool.
- On larger sites burning can be useful however.
- Burning should ideally not be utilised on sites that do not have a history of management by burning.
- The finer details of heath burning are beyond the scope of this document. Reference should be made to the “Heather and Grass Burning Code” (see web address at end of Toolkit). The seasonal constraints are particularly important to ensure the preservation of wildlife.

There may be further issues that are reducing/threatening the ecological value of your Heath such as:

Scrub Control

- In general heathland needs to be kept open for the benefit of wildlife with trees/scrub controlled, this is particularly the case with pine and birch which can be quickly invasive.
- Young seedlings can be hand-pulled, however larger trees will need to be cut and the stumps treated.
- With larger sites (5ha+) it is beneficial to retain some limited trees/scrub to add diversity and song-posts for birds with species such as gorse, oak etc. being of particular value.
- Gorse can be retained but controlled using a coppicing cycle, every site varies but a 15 year cycle with one fifth cut every three years should create a good variety of habitat.
- Hand-pulling can be undertaken all year round but cutting works need to be mindful of avoiding the bird-breeding season (March – August).
- ***Refer to separate Toolkit – No. 11 Scrub Clearance for more detail.***

Bracken Control

- For best results, roll/flail/cut bracken twice a year in May/June and again in July/August.
- Leave bracken on steep slopes or gullies.
- Consideration however needs to be given to potential for breeding birds that may limit/preclude work in May/June, if this is the case then control bracken by cutting or spraying after the bird-breeding season in late July/early August.
- A noticeable reduction will be achieved in 5 years.
- ***Refer to separate Toolkit – No. 12 Bracken Control for more detail.***

Creation of Heath

Additionally there may be some areas within your land that do not have any discernible wildlife value but measures can be taken to create habitat of higher ecological value if desired. The detail of this work is beyond the scope of this document but your Local Wildlife Trust would be delighted to advise you further.

Should you require any further advice regarding the management of your Local Wildlife Site please do not hesitate to contact your local Wildlife Trust:

Gwent Wildlife Trust

Tel: 01600 740600

e-mail: info@gwentwildlife.org

Wildlife Trust of South & West Wales

Tel: 01656 724100

e-mail: info@welshwildlife.org

Other toolkits available are:

No.1 Neutral Grassland (Hay Meadows)

No.2 Neutral Grassland (Pasture)

No.3 Acid Grassland

No.4 Calcareous Grassland

No.5 Marshy Grassland

No.6 Marsh Grassland (with Marsh Fritillary)

No.8 Hedgerows

No.9 Saltmarsh & Coastal Grazing Marsh

No.10 Ponds & Lakes

No.11 Scrub control

No.12 Bracken control

No.13 Invasive weed control (natives – thistle, dock etc.)

No.14 Invasive weed control (aliens – Japanese Knotweed, Himalayan Balsam etc.)

Further useful documents include:

- ❖ Further advice on grazing: www.grazinganimalsproject.org.uk/
- ❖ Heather Burning: www.wales.gov.uk/topics/environmentcountryside/farmingandcountryside/plantsseedsbiotechnology/heathergrassburning/heatherandgrassburningpi/burningcode/?lang=en
- ❖ General information on Heath: www.wildlifetrusts.org/wildlife/habitats/heathland

This Toolkit has been produced as part of the Local Wildlife Sites – South East Wales Project which is funded by the Welsh Government Resilient Ecosystems Fund 2013-2015



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