

Upland acid grassland

WHAT IS UPLAND ACID GRASSLAND ?

Upland acid grasslands are areas of permanent grassland above 250m where the underlying rock and soil formation produces conditions of low nutrients and high pH, in such conditions only acid-tolerant species can exist. Upland acid grassland is frequently the result of grazing where the previous habitats, e.g. woodland or dwarf shrub heath, has been grazed out. They are found on the open fell and on enclosed 'inbye' land.

The typical constituents of upland acid grassland are - sweet vernal grass, common wood-rush, heath bedstraw, tormentil, and the mosses *Rhytidiadelphus squarrosus* and *Dicranum scoparium*. The actual grassland type is defined by the dominant species.

The abundant 'white moors' of the uplands are those grasslands dominated by mat-grass. The unpalatability of mat-grass means that sheep preferentially graze almost any other species present. Further reducing the nature conservation interest of the habitat.

On wetter ground heath rush is the dominant species although hard and soft rush are also common; this is the typical habitat of moorland edge and in-bye land. These rough pasture allotments are important feeding and nesting grounds for breeding birds such as black grouse, curlew, snipe, golden plover, redshank, lapwing, skylark and grey partridge. The Durham Dales are of national and international importance for their suite of upland breeding birds.

Occasionally upland acid grassland sites occur where wavy hair-grass is the dominant species. This is normally a result of burning or sudden cessation of grazing on dwarf shrub heath, which favours wavy hair-grass, and is only of short duration.

WHERE IS IT FOUND IN THE UK?

Upland acid grasslands are found throughout the UK, wherever there are areas of uplands. There is estimated to be in excess of 1,200,000 ha of upland acid grassland in the UK.

WHY IS UPLAND ACID GRASSLAND OF CONSERVATION IMPORTANCE?

Upland acid grasslands, with the exception of some of those in Teesdale, are generally species poor in terms of the flora present, and none of these are considered rare or at risk.

Acid grassland requires intensive management to improve it agriculturally and it quickly reverts if the intervention is withdrawn. The overall amount of upland acid grassland is not thought to be decreasing. However, in some areas, there is thought to have been a decrease in the rush-dominated grassland, which is important for breeding birds and an increase in the mat grass dominated grasslands. Black grouse, skylark and grey partridge have suffered more than 50% declines in breeding numbers in the last 25 years. The Pennine fringes are

believed to be the only habitat locally in which grey partridge numbers have not seriously declined.

UPLAND ACID GRASSLAND IN THE DURHAM AREA

WHAT IS THE STATE OF UPLAND ACID GRASSLAND IN THE DURHAM AREA?

There is thought to be about 15,000ha of unimproved acid grassland (both upland and lowland) and 5000ha of semi improved in Durham, but these figures are liable to change in both extent and distribution.

There are limited areas of upland acid grassland designated as SSSI, but upland acid grassland sites form part of some SPAs.

WHERE DOES IT OCCUR IN THE DURHAM AREA ?

Upland acid grassland occurs in the west and south west of the area with strongholds in Teesdale and Weardale.

UPLAND ACID GRASSLANDS ARE AT RISK FROM:

Agricultural improvement by means of drainage, fertiliser/lime application, reseeding.

The success of attempts to increase heather coverage, which would, inevitably, lead to some losses of acid grassland.

Overgrazing, particularly by sheep.

Winter feeding of stock.

The effects of synthetic pyrethroid sheep dip upon soil invertebrates.

Burning.

Rush cutting – although rush cutting is not always a negative action and may be desirable in some circumstances, where cover has become too dense for birds to nest.

UPLAND ACID GRASSLAND BENEFITS FROM:

Grazing management, preferably including both sheep and cattle, using recommended stocking densities.

Grip blocking.

IMPORTANT SPECIES FOR UPLAND ACID GRASSLAND:

Black grouse	**	Curlew	*
Grey partridge	**	Golden plover	*
Skylark	**	Snipe	
Redshank		Lapwing	*
Short-eared owl		Hen harrier	*
Merlin	*		

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OTHER HABITAT ACTION PLANS COVERING ISSUES RELEVANT TO UPLAND ACID GRASSLANDS:

Upland heathland and blanket bog *

Upland hay meadows *

N.B. ** indicates action plan produced in 1998.

* indicates action plan produced in 2000.

TARGETS FOR THE CONSERVATION OF UPLAND ACID GRASSLANDS IN THE DURHAM AREA:

	DATE
Target 1 <i>Assess the resource of important rough pasture for upland breeding birds.</i>	ONGOING
Target 2 <i>Maintain and enhance the current sites by positive management.</i>	2008
Target 3 <i>Seek opportunities to extend the area of important bird sites, preferably by linking with existing sites.</i>	ONGOING

UPLAND ACID GRASSLAND ACTIONS

ACTION	DATE	POSSIBLE PARTNERS	MEETS TARGET NO.
<u>POLICY AND LEGISLATION</u>			
1. Seek SPA/SSSI or CWS status (as appropriate) for all important bird sites.	2004	EN, LAs	2
2. Work at national policy level to reduce overgrazing in the uplands.	ONGOING	MAFF, EN, RSPB	2
3. Seek support for small scale upland farms.	ONGOING	MAFF, EN, RSPB	2
<u>SITE SAFEGUARD AND MANAGEMENT</u>			
4. Assess current Countryside Stewardship regulations in terms of best practice and payments.	2004	MAFF, RSPB, EN, FWAG	2
5. Look at linkages between existing sites and neighbouring habitats and identify sites for enhancement.	ONGOING	DBAP, RSPB, EN	3
<u>RESEARCH AND MONITORING</u>			
6. Assess current resource of important bird sites.	2004	EN, RSPB, DBC	1
7. Instigate monitoring scheme on 6 year cycle.	2004	EN, RSPB	1
<u>ADVISORY</u>			
8. Set up Agricultural and Biodiversity Advisory group for DBAP.	2000	FWAG, DBAP, CA, ABAG	2
9. Produce best practice notes on management to benefit birds.	2004	DBAP, RSPB, DUBSG	2
<u>COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLICITY</u>			
10. Raise awareness of biodiversity value of upland acid grassland sites for birds.	ONGOING	DBAP, RSPB, FWAG, CA, ABAG	2, 3