

UPLAND HEATH - Habitat Action Plan

1. Introduction

This is an important habitat in international terms; northern Atlantic wet heath and European dry heaths are listed on Annex 1 of the EU Habitats Directive. Shrub dominant wet and dry heath covers approximately 7% of the NNP as defined by 1992 Phase 1 Habitat Survey. Much of this habitat is degraded due to overgrazing, inappropriate burning and the decline of grouse moor management (although interest in the latter has seen a resurgence in the last 10 years). In contrast over 70% of the Park is designated as “moorland important to conserve” according to the S3 Conservation map. Whilst the definition is far wider than upland heath it underpins the importance of this landscape and wildlife resource within the Park. Two moors covering over 2900ha have been designated SSSI, primarily for their upland heath - both wet heath and dry heath. This plan will support proposed and existing SAPs and statements for **juniper, black grouse, raven, hen harrier, ring ouzel and curlew**, and is also complementary to the **blanket bog HAP**.

2. Current Status

2.1 National

Of the UK resource approximately 2.1 m ha, about 270,000 ha is in England, much of which is designated SSSI and SPA. The density of upland birds is a key factor in the importance of the habitat. Much of the resource has been degraded and lost over the past 50 years due to overgrazing, land reclamation and improvement, and afforestation.

2.2 Local

There is little doubt that upland heath was depleted and degraded on a wide scale in the Park between the 1950s and the 1980s, principally due to afforestation and increased grazing pressure. The Phase 1 Survey records shrub-dominated wet and dry heath covering 7477ha in 1992, representing 2.75% of the national resource. Map 1 records all heathland categories including heath/grassland mosaics, 20500ha in total. Map 2 shows the extent of shrub dominant heath in 1992. This figure will have been increased due to the changes in farm and grouse moor management that occurred in the early 1990s in the Cheviots as well as the more recent agri-environment scheme measures, which have been taken up over a wide area (figures are not currently available from DEFRA). Very little monitoring has been undertaken and much of the evidence is subjective, but where changes have been monitored there has been a rise in the recorded heather (*Calluna vulgaris*) cover from 30% to more than 70% which will be sufficient for the change from grassland mosaic to shrub dominated heath under the Phase 1 methodology.

Only where grouse moor management is long established is grazing likely to have changed little. In the late 1980s there were very few grouse moors but now the influence of grouse moor management is widespread throughout the greater part of the Cheviots, perhaps over 10,000ha. The Simonside Hills have been managed for grouse continuously for many decades and covers over 2000ha. More recently several farms in the North Tyne / Rede moorlands have been subject to new management, allied to agri-environment schemes (see below), and possibly extend to over 3000ha. Thus the total area that is subject to grouse moor management is about 15,000ha, or 15% of the Park.

Burning has been practised over many years according to the requirements of the moor for grazing and grouse management. Grouse moors have smaller size, strip burns, which require intensive management. Burning to boost new heather growth for stock requires bigger areas.

New heather burning regimes should mean that burns are smaller, sensitive areas are avoided, burning is controlled and the frequency is sustainable.

The status of the bird population is not well documented in relation to individual moors. The OTA has been surveyed in 1994 and 1998 and long term monitoring of a Cheviot Moor by the GCT has also been undertaken since 1992. Extrapolating from the GCT work it would appear that bird populations, of red grouse, waders, and passerines have been boosted considerably through grouse moor management. Long term monitoring of merlin seems to confirm a stable population. Certain areas in CSS agreements are also subject to sample monitoring of moorland birds. The survey information in County Breeding Bird Atlas, although published in 1995, pre-dates most grouse moor establishment in the Cheviots.

3. Factors Causing Loss or Decline

- 3.1 Most farms have seen an increase in grazing pressure, with subsequent degradation of moorland vegetation, over the past 25 years. The 1999-2000 NNP Farm Survey revealed that since 1972/3 there had been a 35-40% increase in sheep numbers in the Park and a 22% increase in stocking density.
- 3.2 Burning, especially large and frequent burns, and the burning of steep ground, have also played a part in the degradation of upland heath, especially when in combination with high grazing levels.
- 3.3 Whilst the picture is still emerging, the general conclusion can be made that the current status of upland heath is improving over a wide area, even if the results of management may not be clear for some years yet. Monitoring of heather-dominated moorland needs to be undertaken as this habitat covers more land than the other priority habitats in the Park and is arguably the most significant due to changes in habitat quality.

4. Current Action

- 4.1 Even without the investment associated with grouse moor enterprises many farms have joined the CSS and entered large tracts of moorland into heather management prescriptions (U1, UM2, UM3 and UM4) both for existing heather and for heather regeneration, notably on the OTA. The stocking rates prescribed by these categories should deliver long term benefits. Figures are not currently available from DEFRA.
- 4.2 The trends of recent years seem set to continue, although the available land for new grouse enterprises is now relatively limited. Some European funded schemes: the Hadrian's Wall and Northern Upland Regeneration Project have assisted with capital works (mainly livestock housing) linked to conservation of upland heath. Improvements to grouse moors have continued with relatively little external assistance.
- 4.3 Approximately 75% of the OTA is in CS schemes and these areas will be subjected to reduced grazing pressure. Important new research on the effect of predator control is being undertaken here by the GCT, which will be very valuable in showing how the habitat can be improved for ground nesting birds. The conservation of black grouse, on the OTA and through the North Cheviots Black Grouse Group, is also helping to conserve heather moorland and create complementary habitats.
- 4.4 Monitoring of heather-dominated habitat is presently very limited but offers considerable scope, some CSS have had simple baseline photographic recording put in place and some bird survey. Work at ADAS Redesdale is examining the effects of reducing grazing on a long term, farm-scale experiment.
- 4.5 Removal of forest at Commonburn and College Valley has been undertaken with the intention of restoring the land to heather moorland.

5. Broad Objectives and Targets

- 5.1 Maintain extent and condition of existing shrub dominant upland heath.

- 5.2 Increase the extent of shrub-dominated upland heath to 20000 ha by 2011.
- 5.3 Recreate shrub dominant heathland on other low quality habitats.
- 5.4 Investigate the effects of predator control on ground nesting birds on upland heathland.
- 5.5 Increase awareness of the importance of upland heathland and its associated species in national and international terms.

6. Proposed Action

6.1 Policy and Legislation

Action	Target	Partners	Achieving Objective
6.1.1 Lobby for funding to monitor effectiveness of CSS prescriptions on heather moorland.	2002 and annually	DEFRA, EN,	1-3

6.2 Site Safeguard and Management

Action	Target	Partners	Achieving Objective
6.2.1 Maintain current extent of shrub dominant heathland in good condition through controlled grazing levels and burning regimes.	7500 ha in good m/ment by 2005	DEFRA, MOD, EN ADAS,	1
6.2.2 Increase the extent of shrub dominant heathland by managing degraded heathland – aim for >50% dwarf shrub cover in good flowering condition. Use CSS and other suitable management regimes.	Increase by 12500 ha by 2011	DEFRA, EN, MOD, NWT, landowners	2
6.2.3 Ensure that there are no burn areas, even on grouse moors, where there are sensitive habitats or topographical features that would be damage.	All burn plans by 2006	DEFRA, EN, MOD, landowners, GCT, RSPB	1,2
6.2.4 Recreate shrub-dominated moorland on areas of grass moorland by re-seeding and controlled grazing regimes.	1000 ha into m/ment by 2011	DEFRA, EN, MOD	3
6.2.5 Recreate moorland through forest removal	200 ha by 2011	MOD, FE, FC	3
6.2.5 Examine the potential for diversifying and complementing the habitat by creation of wetlands, scrub and woodland for black grouse and other species.	150 ha 2010 (or 20 ha/yr)	FE, EN, DEFRA, NWT, RSPB, MoD, GCT	1

6.3 Species Management and Protection

Action	Target	Partners	Achieving Objective
6.3.1 Discuss and resolve bird conservation issues including persecution relating to upland habitats	Meet 2 x per yr	conservation agencies,	1,4,5

including heathland.	2001 onwards.	landowners, keepers.	
6.3.2 Instigate bracken control where it is dominating heathland vegetation over large areas, taking into account susceptible species such as ring ouzel, whinchat and other ferns.	Check records when spraying	EN, FE, MOD, DEFRA, EA	1,2

6.4 Advisory

Action	Target	Partners	Achieving Objective
6.4.1 Make available research findings and best practice concerning the sustainable management of upland heath to landowners and farmers together with the funding available to support this. The Upland Bird Forum will assist with this process.	Within 1 year of report.	EN, ADAS DEFRA, MoD, GCT,	1-5

6.5 Future Research and Monitoring

Action	Target	Partners	Achieving Objective
6.5.1 Monitor upland heath where new management has been put in place to measure effectiveness in terms of changes in shrub component. Aim for yrs 0, 3, 7 of management.	25% of CSS schemes in NNP	DEFRA, EN, MoD, landowners	1-3
6.5.2 Investigate the effect on vegetation composition of grazing with different stock types at different times of year.	2 expts. by 2010	GCT, DEFRA, ADAS, EN	1-3
6.5.3 On sample sites (CSS, S39, NUMRP) monitor the numbers of ground nesting birds at least 3 times per site in 10 years. Include sites to investigate predator control.	4 sites.	GCT, EN, MoD, DEFRA, Birdclub	1,4
6.5.4 Repeat Phase I survey or equivalent (remote sensing etc.) to determine total upland heath cover and relationship with other vegetation.	2010	Universities, CA, MoD DEFRA,	1-3, 5
6.5.5 Monitor development of vegetation on forest clearance and reseeded sites.	4 sites by 2011.	DEFRA, FE MoD, EN	2,3

6.6 Communications and Publicity

Action	Target	Partners	Achieving Objective
6.6.1 Use heathland and its associated species as the focus for interpretation and education events for one year in the rolling programme of Celebrating Biodiversity.	2002	schools, NWT, local media.	5
6.6.2 Re-state the importance of sustainable management of heather moorland to the general public in talks, walks and publications.	5 events/ articles by 2011	EN, NWT, RSPB, FE, MOD, GCT	5

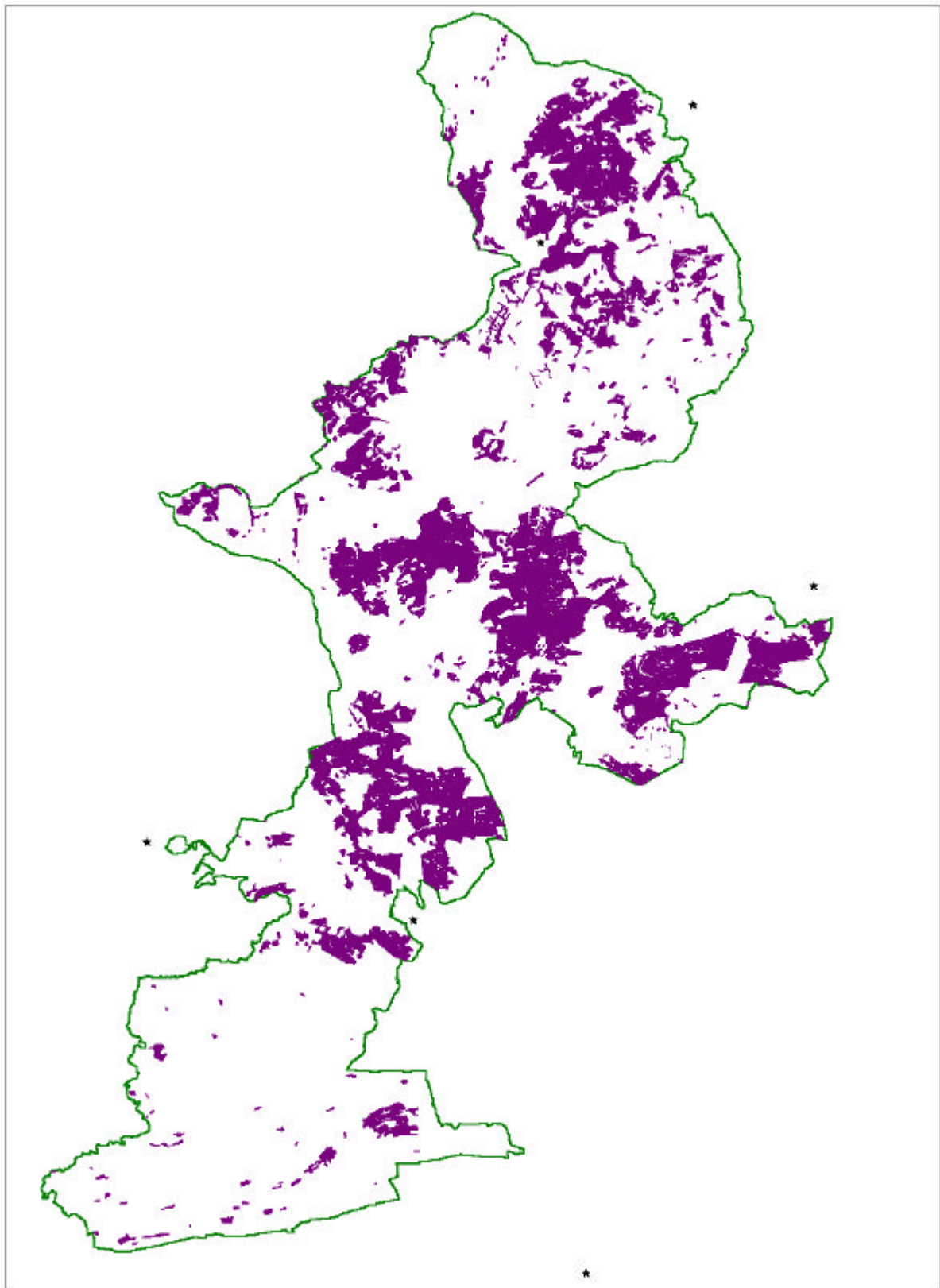
7. References

- RSPB (1994) A Survey of Upland Breeding Birds in the Northumberland National Park - Part 1 the Otterburn training Area. Survey Repeated 1998.
- Section 3 Conservation Map NNPA (1994).
- Phase 1 Habitat Survey (1992). Northumberland National Park Authority.
- Day, Hodgson & Rossiter, ED. (1995) Atlas of Breeding Birds in Northumberland. Northumberland and Tyneside Bird Club.
- NNPA Farm Survey (2001)

All Heath Land from Phase 1

Compiled by Northumberland National Park Authority on 15 January 2002

Scale 1:200000

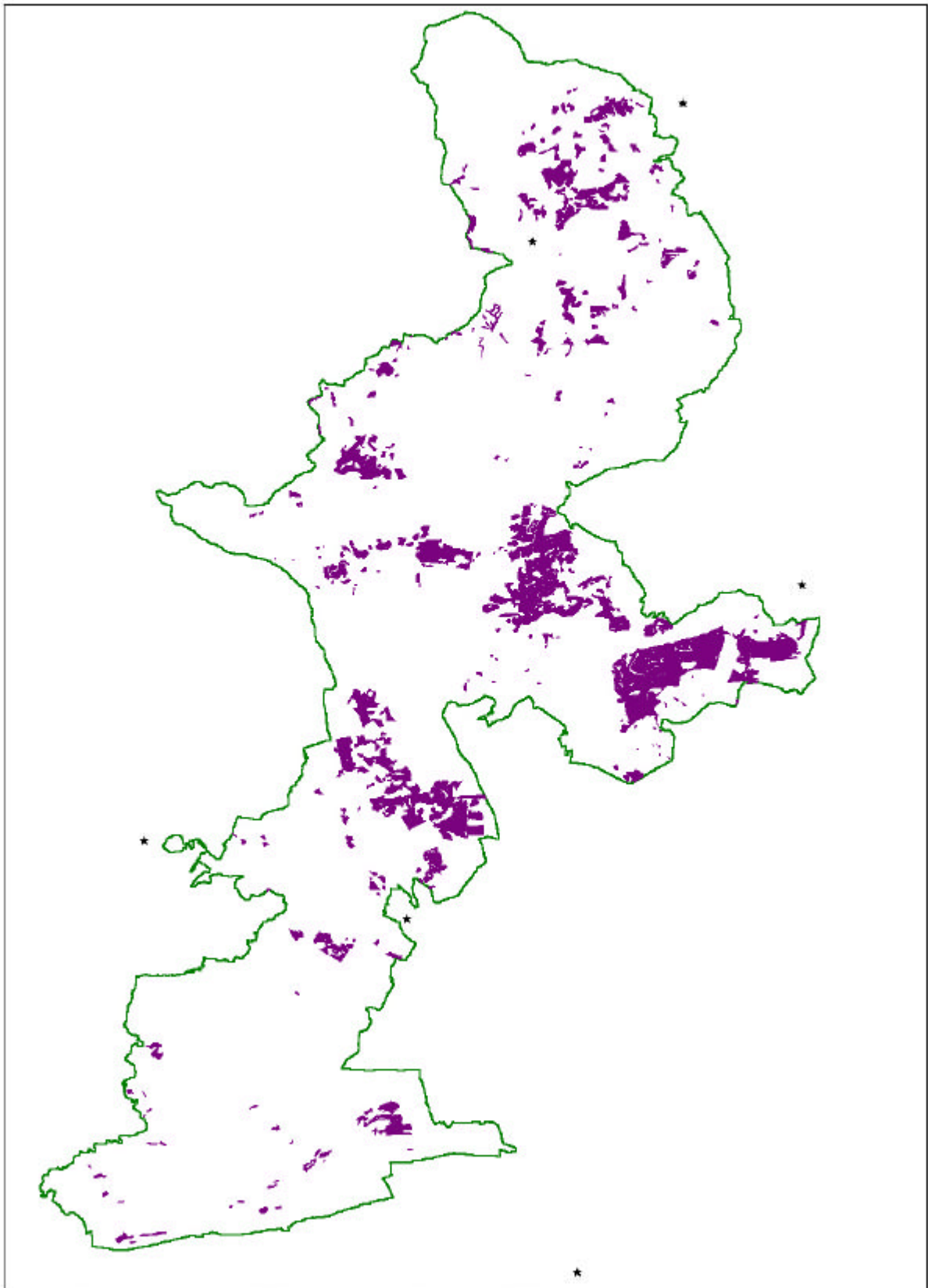


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Shrub dominant heath from Phase 1

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