



UK Biodiversity Action Plan Priority Habitat Descriptions

Upland Heathland

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The definition of this habitat remains unchanged from the pre-existing Habitat Action Plan (<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20110303145955/http://www.ukbap.org.uk/UKPlans.aspx?ID=16>), a summary of which appears below.

Heathland vegetation occurs widely on mineral soils and thin peats (<0.5m deep) throughout the uplands and moorlands of the UK. It is characterised by the presence of dwarf shrubs at a cover of at least 25%. Blanket bog vegetation may also contain substantial amounts of dwarf shrubs, but is distinguished from heathland by its occurrence on deep peat (>0.5m).

For the purposes of this plan upland heathland is defined as lying below the alpine or montane zone (at about 600–750m) and usually above the upper edge of enclosed agricultural land (generally at around 250–400m, but descending to near sea-level in northern Scotland).

Lowland heathland occurs below the upper limit of agricultural enclosure and supports a range of birds, reptiles and invertebrates not found on upland heath; this habitat is covered by a separate habitat action plan. Montane heaths, restricted to high-altitude mountain summits and ridges, are also excluded from the upland heathland plan. Blanket bog and other mires, grassland, bracken, scrub, trees and woodland, freshwater and rock habitats frequently form intimate mosaics with heathland vegetation in upland situations. This plan recognises the importance of this habitat mosaic. Habitat action plans have been produced for some elements of this complex, for example, blanket bog and upland calcareous grassland.

Upland heath in 'favourable condition' is typically dominated by a range of dwarf shrubs such as heather *Calluna vulgaris*, bilberry *Vaccinium myrtillus*, crowberry *Empetrum nigrum*, bell heather *Erica cinerea* and, in the south and west, western gorse *Ulex gallii*. In northern areas juniper *Juniperus communis* is occasionally seen above a heath understorey. Wet heath is most commonly found in the wetter north and west and, in 'favourable condition', should be dominated by mixtures of cross-leaved heath *Erica tetralix*, deer grass *Scirpus cespitosus*, heather, and purple moor-grass *Molinia caerulea*, over an understorey of mosses often including carpets of *Sphagnum* species. This habitat is distinct from blanket mire which occurs on deeper peat and which usually contains frequent occurrence of hare's-tail cotton-grass *Eriophorum vaginatum* and characteristic mosses. High quality heaths are generally structurally diverse, containing stands of vegetation with heather at different stages of growth. Upland heath in 'favourable condition' also usually includes areas of mature heather.

Upland heathland encompasses a range of National Vegetation Classification (NVC) plant communities. *Ulex gallii* - *Agrostis curtisii* (H4) and *Calluna vulgaris* - *U. gallii* (H8) are restricted to southern Britain. *Calluna* - *V. myrtillus* (H12) is particularly widespread in the east. *Calluna* - *E. cinerea* (H10), *Calluna* - *V. myrtillus* - *Sphagnum capillifolium* (H21), and *Scirpus cespitosus* - *E. tetralix* (M15) are especially characteristic of western margins. *Vaccinium myrtillus* - *Deschampsia flexuosa* (H18) is generally widespread in the uplands but other communities are more local in distribution, notably *Calluna* - *D. flexuosa* (H9), *Calluna* - *Arctostaphylos uva-urii* (H16) and *E. tetralix* - *Sphagnum compactum* (M16). The distribution of these communities is influenced by climate, altitude, aspect, slope, maritime influences and management practices including grazing and burning.

An important assemblage of birds is associated with upland heath, including red grouse *Lagopus lagopus*, black grouse *Tetrao tetrix*, merlin *Falco columbarius* and hen harrier *Circus cyaneus*. Some forms of heath also have a significant lower plant interest, including

assemblages of rare and local mosses and liverworts that are particularly associated with the wetter western heaths. The invertebrate fauna is especially diverse.

This habitat type is present on an estimated 270,000ha in England, 80,000ha in Wales, up to 69,500ha in Northern Ireland and between 1,700,000 and 2,500,000ha in Scotland. The total upland heath resource in the UK thus amounts to between 2 and 3 million hectares. Dwarf shrub heaths are recognised as being of international importance because they are largely confined within Europe to the British Isles and the western seaboard of mainland Europe.

There have been considerable losses of heather moorland in recent times. For example, 27% of heather moorland is estimated to have been lost in England and Wales between 1947 and 1980. On the Berwyn mountains in north-east Wales there was a 44% decline in the extent of heather-dominated vegetation between 1946 and 1984, whereas other upland sites in Wales have shown much smaller losses over similar periods. An estimated 18% was lost in Scotland between the 1940s and 1970s and the trend continued throughout the 1980s with a further estimated loss of 5%. Much of this loss is attributed to agricultural land improvements, heavy grazing by sheep (and, in certain areas, red deer and cattle), and afforestation.

It has also been estimated that 440,000ha of land in the uplands in England and Wales have less than 25% cover of heather (i.e. grassland containing suppressed dwarf shrubs). There is likely to be further significant loss of heather moorland to acid grassland if current grazing levels and pressures continue. However, the conversion of heathland to acid grassland is not a purely recent phenomenon. On some sites in Wales (and elsewhere in UK) the major decline in heathland cover probably took place in the 19th century or even earlier.