



UK Biodiversity Action Plan Priority Habitat Descriptions

Upland Mixed Ashwoods

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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=3>), a summary of which appears below.

The term 'upland mixed ashwoods' is used for woods on base-rich soils in the north and west, in most of which ash is a major species, although locally oak, birch, elm, small-leaved lime and even hazel may be the most abundant species. Yew may form small groves in intimate mosaics with the other major tree species and alder may occur where there are transitions to wet woodland. Despite variations in canopy composition the ground flora remains broadly similar. Upland in the name reflects the abundance of this type of woodland on base-rich soils in upland Britain rather than to the altitude at which individual sites occur – some, such as Rassal Ashwood, are only just above sea level.

In terms of National Vegetation Classification (NVC) plant communities this habitat is characterised by W8 *Fraxinus excelsior* - *Acer campestre* - *Mercurialis perennis* woodland, sub communities d. *Hedera helix*, e. *Geranium robertianum*, f. *Allium ursinum* and g. *Teucrium scorodonia*, and W9 *Fraxinus excelsior* - *Sorbus aucuparia* - *Mercurialis perennis* woodland, together with W13 *Taxus baccata* woodland for the yew groves on the Carboniferous and Magnesian limestones. Less frequent sub-communities that may occur in mosaic with the above are the relatively dry alder-ash stands W7c and the more southerly and eastern sub-communities of W8 (a-c).

The largest examples occur on limestone (i.e. well-drained, base-rich soils), but the type is also found on more acid poorly-drained soils where there is flushing of nutrients. Often these latter are just small fragments of woodland with irregular margins or narrow strips along flushes, riparian tracts, outcrops and steep banks. Most upland mixed ashwoods are probably ancient, but ash is a vigorous colonist of open ground, and some important areas such as Derbyshire Dales are mosaics of ancient and recent ash woodland. Many woods have been treated as coppice in the past, others have been wood-pastures, but most now have a high forest structure.

They are found throughout upland Britain and in Northern Ireland, though they are limited in the north-west Highlands. In the north-east they include the Angus glens and a high level ashwood near Glen Shee, while south-west examples include the Mendips. The boundaries between this type and lowland mixed deciduous woodland may be unclear in places, for example in Somerset and South Wales, because the two types form an ecological continuum determined by climate. In South Wales and the Wye Valley, upland ashwoods may also merge with beechwoods on base-rich soils (see the Lowland beech and yew woodland habitat action plan). In the north-west of Scotland ash is often scarce, but the type is represented by some of the most westerly European examples of hazel scrubs that are rich in lichens and higher plants.

There are no precise data on the total extent of upland ashwoods in the UK, but in the late 1980s the Nature Conservancy Council estimated the total extent of ancient semi-natural woodland of this type to be 40,000–50,000ha. It has declined in area by clearance, overgrazing and replanting with non-native species, by about 30–40% over the last 50 years. A crude estimate places the total area of upland ashwood at 67,500ha.

Mixed ashwoods are amongst the richest habitats for wildlife in the uplands, notable for bright displays of flowers such as bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, primrose *Primula vulgaris*, wood cranesbill *Geranium sylvaticum*, and wild garlic *Allium ursinum*. Many rare woodland flowers occur mainly in upland ashwoods, such as dark red helleborine *Epipactis*

atrorubens, Jacob's ladder *Polemonium caeruleum*, autumn crocus *Colchicum autumnale*, and whorled Solomon's seal *Polygonatum verticillatum*. Some rare native trees are found in these woods, notably large-leaved lime *Tilia platyphyllos* and various whitebeams (*Sorbus* spp.). Upland mixed ashwoods also harbour a rich invertebrate fauna, which may include uncommon or declining species. The dense and varied shrub layer found in many examples can in the southern part of the types range provide suitable habitat conditions for dormice *Muscardinus avellanarius*. The alkaline bark of old ash (and elm where it still survives) supports an important lichen flora, particularly the Lobarion community. The remains of dead trees such as old elm trees provide habitat for rare beetles, flies and other invertebrates.