



UK Biodiversity Action Plan Priority Habitat Descriptions

Purple Moor Grass and Rush Pastures

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The definition of this habitat remains unchanged from the pre-existing Habitat Action Plan (<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20110303150026/http://www.ukbap.org.uk/UKPIans.aspx?ID=17>), a summary of which appears below. Following the 2007 review, occurrences of this habitat on roadside verges are also covered by the definition.

Purple moor grass and rush pastures occur on poorly drained, usually acidic soils in lowland areas of high rainfall in western Europe. In the UK, they are found in south-west England, particularly in Devon, southern Wales, south-west Scotland, perhaps extending as far north as northern Argyll, and in Northern Ireland, especially Fermanagh. Elsewhere in Europe they are particularly characteristic of the oceanic and sub-oceanic regions of the western seaboard, from Portugal to the Low Countries, extending eastward into central Europe.

Their vegetation, which has a distinct character, consists of various species-rich types of fen meadow and rush pasture. Purple moor grass *Molinia caerulea*, and rushes, especially sharp-flowered rush *Juncus acutiflorus*, are usually abundant. Just as the best examples of lowland heath contain a wide range of plant communities, so the same is true for this habitat: the characteristic plant communities often occur in a mosaic with one another, together with patches of wet heath, dry grassland, swamp and scrub.

Key species associated with purple moor grass and rush pastures include: wavy St. Johnswort *Hypericum undulatum*, whorled caraway *Carum verticillatum*, meadow thistle *Cirsium dissectum*, marsh hawk's beard *Crepis paludosa*, greater butterfly orchid *Platanthera chlorantha*, lesser butterfly orchid *Platanthera bifolia*, marsh fritillary butterfly *Eurodryas aurinia*, brown hairstreak *Thecla betulae*, narrow-bordered bee hawkmoth *Hemaris tityus*, curlew *Numenius arquata*, snipe *Gallinago gallinago*, and barn owl *Tyto alba*.

Purple moor grass and rush pastures are a priority for nature conservation because they are highly susceptible to agricultural modification and reclamation throughout their range. In Devon and Cornwall, where the habitat is known as Culm Grassland, only 8% of that present in 1900 remains, with a staggering 62% of sites and 48% of the total area being lost between 1984 and 1991. In Northern Ireland, between 1990 and 1993, the rate of loss of fen meadow was reckoned to be 3.3% per annum. Fragmentation and isolation of stands have been common.

In Wales it is estimated that there is now about 24,000ha of lowland purple moor grass and rush pasture. In south-west England 530 purple moor grass and rush pastures sites are known to survive on the Culm Measures, covering 3,981ha, 400 sites on Dartmoor covering 1,000ha, with a further 90 sites covering about 300ha on the Blackdowns. In Northern Ireland it was estimated that there was about 24,600ha in 1993. No area estimates are available for Scotland, but the total extent is thought likely to be in the region of 2,000ha. Thus it is probable that the total extent of the habitat in the UK is now about 56,000ha. This is thought to be considerably more than survives in the rest of Europe, with the possible exception of the Republic of Ireland.