



# UK Biodiversity Action Plan Priority Habitat Descriptions

## Mountain Heaths and Willow Scrub

**From:**

UK Biodiversity Action Plan; Priority Habitat Descriptions. BRIG (ed. Ant Maddock) 2008.

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# Mountain Heaths and Willow Scrub

## Correspondence with existing habitats

- UK BAP broad habitat: Montane habitats
- Phase 1: D3 lichen/bryophyte heath; D4 montane heath/dwarf herb; D1 dry dwarf-shrub heath (part); A2 scrub (part)
- NVC: H13–H15, H17–H20, H22; U7–U15, U18, W20.
- Annex I: Alpine and boreal heaths; Sub-Arctic *Salix* scrub; Siliceous alpine and boreal grassland

## Description

This habitat encompasses a range of natural or near-natural vegetation occurring in the montane zone, lying above or beyond the natural tree-line. It includes dwarf-shrub heaths, grass-heaths, dwarf-herb communities, willow scrub, and snowbed communities. The most abundant vegetation types are heaths dominated by *Calluna vulgaris* and *Vaccinium myrtillus* typically with abundant bryophytes (e.g. *Racomitrium lanuginosum*) and/or lichens (e.g. *Cladonia* species), and siliceous alpine and boreal grasslands with *Carex bigelowii* moss and sedge heaths. Rarer vegetation types include snow-bed communities with *Salix herbacea* and various bryophytes and lichens, and sub-arctic willow scrub (as described in McLeod *et al*, 2005).

As in the Annex I habitat H4080 Sub-Arctic *Salix* sp. Scrub, montane willow scrub, corresponding largely to NVC type W20 (though not all types fit W20), is included. Heaths with prostrate juniper of NVC type H15 are included, but upland stands of upright juniper (W19) fall within the upland heathland or native pinewood priority habitats, apart from more isolated stands that would usually be included in the upland heathland priority habitat. Stands of *Betula nana* would mostly be included within blanket bog or upland heathland priority habitats. Scrub forms of W17 and W18 should be included within the appropriate woodland priority habitat.

The lower altitudinal limit of montane communities varies in different parts of the UK, occurring at lower altitudes in the north and west of Britain. Most communities occur on thin soils, which may be acidic or calcareous. Some communities are characteristic of very exposed ridges and summits, whereas others are restricted to sheltered situations where there is late snow-lie. A range of important rock outcrop and scree types, including tall herb ledge vegetation, often occur in close association with this habitat, along with high-altitude springs, flushes and other mire types, and Alpine calcareous grasslands.

The invertebrate fauna is diverse, with species such as the mountain burnet, the beetles *Stenus glacialis* and *Phyllodecta polaris*, the flies *Alliopsis atronitens* and *Rhamphomyia hirtula*, and the spider *Micaria alpina*. UK BAP priority species include three vascular plant spp, *Salix lanata*, *Artemisia norvegica* and *Juniperus communis*; six bryophyte species including *Herbertus borealis* and *Andraea frigida*; eight lichen species; and two moths, the northern dart and the netted mountain moth. Many other rare and local arctic-alpine plants and invertebrates occur. Notable birds include dotterel and ptarmigan. See also Thompson *et al* (2003).

Mountain heaths and willow scrubs are extensive in the Scottish Highlands, but highly localised in southern Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Some montane communities (e.g. sub-arctic willow scrub and snowbeds) are extremely rare in the UK, and are only found in very small amounts south of the higher Scottish mountains, where they represent the southernmost extent of this vegetation type. Although most of this habitat occurs above 600m, in the exposed areas of the northwest Highlands and Islands of Scotland the characteristic montane plant communities can occur almost at sea level. The

full extent of mountain heaths and willow scrub has not been fully surveyed. There is an estimated in Wales, between 400–600ha in England, 60,000ha in Scotland, and 150ha in Northern Ireland.

### **References:**

McLeod, C.R., Yeo, M., Brown, A.E., Burn, A.J., Hopkins, J.J. & Way, S.F. (eds) (2005) *The Habitats Directive: selection of Special Areas of Conservation in the UK*. 2nd edn. Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Peterborough ([www.jncc.gov.uk/page-1457](http://www.jncc.gov.uk/page-1457)).

Thompson, D.B.A., Whitfield, D.P., Galbraith, H., Duncan, K., Smith, R.D., Murray, S. & Holt, S. (2003) *Breeding bird assemblages and habitat use in alpine areas in Scotland*. In: L. Nagy, G. Grabherr, C. Körner & D.B.A. Thompson (eds). *Alpine Biodiversity in Europe*. Ecological Studies Series, Springer Verlag, Berlin.