

2.6 Acid Grassland

2.6.1 Habitat Description

Acid grassland is a Local Biodiversity Action Plan habitat and is found across the Biosphere. Acid grassland supports the High Focus Species golden eagle and black grouse along with other species of conservation concern such as adder, slow worm, northern brown argus, hen harrier, red kite and brown and mountain hare.

Acid grassland occurs on soils with low pH (4 to 5.5) overlying acid rocks such as sandstones and igneous rocks. Upland acid grassland is generally found above 300m and is much more common than lowland acid grassland. Plants present may include bent, fescue, mat grass and purple moor grasses and herbs such as tormentil, heath bedstraw, harebell, hawkweeds, devil's bit scabious and eyebright species. Examples of acid grassland within the Biosphere include Merrick Kells Hills (SAC/SSSI) and Cairnsmore of Fleet (SSSI/NNR), Laughenghie and Airie Hills SSSI, Camregan Hill and Penwhapple Burn, Auchenyroy and Glenmount Uplands, Dunaskin Glen and Benquhat Hill.

Acid grassland is common across the UK, but its distribution is not well documented and studied. The extent of acid grassland (Broad UK BAP habitat category) within the Core and Buffer zones was calculated to be 16,510ha, with an estimated 748,000ha across Scotland. The estimated extent of acid grassland across the whole of the Biosphere is shown in Map 6.

The condition of acid grassland in the Core area and Buffer zone is not known as it is not listed as a designated feature in any of the open ground designated sites. The management prescriptions below will therefore include general measures considered to be appropriate to bringing the habitat into good condition.

2.6.2 Conservation Objectives

The main conservation objectives for acid grassland in the Biosphere are to:

- Establish more accurately its extent and condition.
- Prevent loss to undesirable scrub or agricultural improvement (using appropriate grazing levels).
- Maintain existing areas of acid grassland, particularly where associated with purple moor-grass and rush pasture (see Section s.5) and wet flushes.
- Increasing the area of species rich acid grassland, with careful consideration for the loss of other important habitat types. In many cases the existing areas of acid grassland were created as a result of overgrazing of heathland sward, so the objective might be to restore the original heathland (where feasible) by reducing/removing grazing.
- Protect existing, and increase the extent of, areas used by golden eagle.

2.6.3 Management

The main management prescription for species rich acid grassland is:

- Grazing

2.6.3.1 Grazing management

Grazing management of acid grasslands is dependent on the dominant grass species in the sward. The management prescriptions differ for grasslands dominated by bent (*Agrostis spp.*) or fescue (*Festuca spp.*) and grasslands dominated by purple moor grass (*Molinia caerulea*), mat grass (*Nardus stricta*) or heath rush (*Juncus squarrosus*).

Suggested Actions:

- Grassland should be grazed at an appropriate stocking rate and with the appropriate stock and account should be taken of the effect of the grazing stock on the flora. Grazing should also be used to prevent more vigorous plants becoming dominant.
- A typical regime for grassland dominated by *Agrostis/Festuca* would be 0.5-0.75LU/ha all year round (3-5 sheep or 0.5-0.75 cattle/ha) or at higher grazing levels if grazing is only suitable during the growing season (for example when acid grassland is in a mosaic with more sensitive habitats such as wet heath which are more sensitive to trampling in the winter).
- Grassland dominated by *Molinia*, mat grass or rushes requires a lower annual stocking rate of around 0.37LU/ha (2.5 sheep or 0.37 cattle/ha or equivalent). Cattle, especially native breeds, are better able to graze these coarser species than sheep. Grazing in the spring is particularly effective early in the growing season when new growth is most palatable.

2.6.4 Example Projects

- No specific projects have been identified, however, acid grassland is often managed under agri-environment schemes, particularly under upland management options.
- Projects which have focused on improving black grouse habitat and populations have improved the condition of acid grassland in some areas through stock reduction.

2.6.5 Considerations

- It is important to assess the most appropriate grazing regime for the site, particularly when acid grassland occurs as part of mosaic with other habitat such as wet heath, heath and bog.
- Adjustment of grazing regime has to be feasible for land owner.
- Agricultural activities such as liming, ploughing or fertilising will have significant impacts on acid grassland. These activities may be limited in areas of high conservation value under cross compliance Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions (GAEC) Regulations.

2.6.6 Opportunities

- Funding may be available through agri-environment schemes as part of moorland management for upland acid grassland or species rich grassland for the lowland areas.

2.6.7 Further Information

Detailed information on Cross Compliance:

<https://www.ruralpayments.org/publicsite/futures/topics/inspections/all-inspections/cross-compliance/detailed-guidance/good-agricultural-and-environmental-conditions/>

Technical Note TN586 Conservation Grazing Of Semi-Natural Habitats (SRUC):

http://www.sruc.ac.uk/downloads/download/473/tn586_conservation_grazing_of_semi-natural_habitats

Grassland for plants and animals guidance leaflet (SNH):

<http://www.snh.org.uk/pdfs/publications/heritagemanagement/Grasslandanimplant.pdf>

Grassland Booklet (SNH): <http://www.snh.org.uk/pdfs/publications/livinglandscapes/grasslands.pdf>

Grazing Animals Project: <http://www.grazinganimalsproject.org.uk/>