

Heathland Features

Heathland is characterised by the presence of dwarf shrubs such as Heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), Cross-leaved Heath (*Erica tetralix*) and Bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*). It may also support dense or scattered patches of gorse (*Ulex spp.*) scrub along with Birch (*Betula spp.*) and Scots Pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) trees. The majority of road verges that support heathland are associated with larger blocks of this habitat outside the highway boundary.

The UKBAP Priority Habitats which are of relevance to this HAP are lowland heathland and upland heathland. Lowland heathland is classified as that below 300m in altitude, while upland heath is generally associated with moorland and is defined as lying between the montane zone (at about 600-750m) and the upper edge of enclosed agricultural land (at around 250-400m). Heathlands are sometimes also classified as 'wet' or 'dry' on the basis of the soil moisture conditions and the plant communities present.

Current status

General

Heathland habitats occur on the network generally where the road verge is adjacent to existing areas of heath. In these locations, colonisation of the road verge by heather, gorse and other heathland plants gradually leads to the development of valuable habitat.

UKBAP habitats

Lowland heathland is found in many parts of England but with the most extensive areas in southern England (Suffolk, Surrey, Hampshire, Dorset, Devon and Cornwall), and network areas 1, 2, 3, 6 and 11. Only one sixth of the lowland heathland present in England in 1800 now remains, and England supports over 10% of the international total of this habitat. A large proportion of lowland heathland has been notified as SSSI, some of which have been designated as Special Protection Areas or Candidate Special Areas of Conservation. Dry heaths are listed on Annex I of the EC Habitats Directive.

Upland heathland is found at higher altitudes in Northern England, mainly in Cumbria, Yorkshire and Northumberland, and network areas 17, 18, 19 and 20. Two upland heath types are listed under Annex I of the EC Habitats Directive, and large tracts of moorland are notified as SSSI/ASSI, some of which area also designated as SPAs under the EC Birds Directive.

Current factors affecting the habitat

Habitat loss and degradation

Large areas of heathland have been lost to development (including road building), and road widening schemes or improvements to road junctions may damage road verge heathland. The Birmingham Northern Relief Road, for example, will affect two lowland heathland sites in Staffordshire. Road maintenance works may cause degradation of heathland on road verges through repairs to services beneath and storage of materials on road verges. Illegal dumping, accidental pollution through spillage from vehicles, and damage by vehicles driving onto or parking on verges may also cause degradation of the habitat. Heathlands are particularly sensitive to spray drift, and salt spray from the road surface, as well as pollutants from vehicle emissions, may damage the habitat and the species it supports.

Inappropriate or unfavourable management

Dwarf shrubs will not persist if the verge is cut too frequently. Conversely if the heathland is not periodically managed by burning, cutting or grazing, trees and shrubs may shade out the heathland plants. Heathland road verges are particularly susceptible to fire; fast, controlled burns used to manage heathland are very different to the slowhot fires started accidentally or deliberately by members of the public.



Uncontrolled burns often result in long-term damage to plant communities of the heathland. Planting trees and shrubs can also have a detrimental effect on heathland diversity, either through the direct effect of herbicide use to encourage tree growth or through shading. Seeding road verges with non-native or inappropriate seed mixes, or the spread of invasive alien species such as Rhododendron, will also have a detrimental effect on the nature conservation value of heathland.

Current action

Most large blocks and many of the smaller blocks of heathland in England have been designated as sites of international, national or county importance for nature conservation. The adjacent road verges are likely to be included in the designated site if they have not been significantly modified.

A number of wildlife trusts and local authorities have schemes in place to develop systems as part of the Local Biodiversity Action Plan that identify road verges which support valuable floras and/or faunas. Some schemes have developed management regimes for particular verges that have been designed to take account of road safety and nature conservation.

The TRMM indicates that verges that have developed botanical interest or nature conservation value should be managed to conserve and enhance this value. It also states that 'where designated sites lie within or adjacent to the highway boundary, the soft estate should be maintained on the advice of English Nature or local wildlife trusts'.

Advice on the creation, translocation and management of heathland on road verges is provided in the DMRB.

Survey and management has been undertaken by HA to enhance the quality of the existing road verge locations of the narrow-headed ant and to improve the chances of further colonisation.

Objectives

The plan aims to protect areas of heathland within the existing road network, and to ensure that future road building and improvement schemes take account of potential impacts on areas of heathland and their associated species.

	Objective	Proposed actions
A	To ensure that new road developments avoid areas of heathland, wherever possible.	5
B	To ensure that any unavoidable impacts of new roads or road improvement schemes on heathland are adequately mitigated.	6
C	To record the distribution of existing heathland habitat (and associated species) on the soft estate, and ensure its protection.	2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9
D	To raise awareness with HA staff, Managing Agents and consultants regarding the importance of heathland on the network, and to provide detailed advice to contractors on beneficial management.	1, 8, 10
E	To recreate heathland as part of new roads and road improvement schemes, wherever appropriate, in particular where the verge is adjacent to existing heathland habitat.	6

Proposed action

The following table lists the actions required to achieve the objectives set out in this Plan. For some of the actions, potential partners have

been assigned as likely sources of cooperation. Targets are provided to give an indication of the timescale for the proposed action.

	Action	Potential partners	Target
	<i>Policy, guidance and advice</i>		
1	Provide detailed information in TRMM/DMRB on the management of the soft estate for the benefit of heathland.	-	2005
	<i>Surveying</i>		
2	Carry out further surveys to ensure that all heathland within the soft estate is classified and mapped. Include all records on the Environmental Database. Identify areas where heathland could be reinstated adjacent to existing sites.	-	2005
3	Carry out botanical surveys of all areas of heathland on the network in order to establish their condition and to act as a basis for future monitoring	-	2010
	<i>Research and monitoring</i>		
4	All enhancement sites, plus 10 existing sites, should be monitored for 10 years.	-	2002-12
	<i>Mitigation and Management</i>		
5	Identify the presence of important heathland areas at the route selection stage of road construction to avoid impact on the habitat.	-	Ongoing
6	Where impacts of new roads and road improvement schemes on heathland are unavoidable, consider the options for habitat recreation and enhancement at 10 new sites.	-	2012
7	Carry out surveys for protected species associated with heathland to ensure they are not affected by maintenance works.	-	Ongoing
8	Ensure that road verge management is carried out to protect and enhance heathland where it occurs within the soft estate, and to ensure road safety.	EN, local WT	Ongoing
9	Identify 10 sites for the reintroduction of the narrow-headed ant to new sites near to its existing road verge locations and elsewhere, as appropriate.	EN	2007

	Action (continued)	Potential partners	Target
	<i>Communications and publicity (continued)</i>		
10	Information on heathland should be included in environmental training for HA staff and Managing Agents.	-	2003

Links with other plans

This plan should be read in conjunction with the Grassland HAP and with the SAPs for reptiles and narrow-headed ant.

Numerous LBAPs contain Habitat Action Plans for heathland. Heathland is also a Regional Biodiversity Indicator in English Nature's South East, West Midlands, East Midlands, Yorkshire and Humber, North West and North East Regions.

Lead partner

The lead partner for upland and lowland heathland in the UKBAP is English Nature.