

GLASCWM & GLADESTRY HILLS SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST



Gwaunceste Hill © R G Woods, CCW

YOUR SPECIAL SITE AND ITS FUTURE

‘Your Special Site and its Future’ is part of our commitment to improve the way we work with Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) owners and occupiers. In it, we explain what is special about the wildlife on your site, and what care is needed to look after its wildlife into the future.

All SSSIs are considered to be of national importance and we recognise the crucial role that owners and occupiers play in their management and protection. We need you to share your views and knowledge of this site with us, to help safeguard it.

We hope that you will find ‘Your Special Site and its Future’ interesting and helpful. Please contact us if there is anything about the site and its management that you would like to discuss.

What is ‘special’ about the wildlife at Glascwm & Gladestry Hills SSSI?

The site has several special features:

- **Upland Habitats**

Those that are considered to be of particular interest include dry and wet heath. The site contains one of the largest remaining areas of heather moorland on the Welsh borders. There is also a strong breeding population of red grouse.

As well as the features listed above, the Glascwm & Gladestry Hills have other habitats that contribute to the special wildlife interest. These include blanket bog, upland acid and marshy grassland, springs and flushes, streams, rock outcrops bracken and scrub. This mixture of habitats is important for much of the wildlife and except where it is specified below, management of this site should aim to look after these habitats and species as well as those listed above.

What do we want the Glascwm & Gladestry Hills SSSI to look like?

The following is a description of how we would like to see the features at this site:

A large expanse of heather moorland occupies the drier ground on the hilltops and slopes. Bilberry, crowberry, cowberry and wavy hair-grass are prominent in places amongst the heather and lichens are common in areas where there has been no recent burning. Patches of damper ground on the eastern hill flanks support wet heath with frequent heather, cross-leaved heath, deer-grass and purple moor-grass, which are joined by bilberry and mat grass in and bog moss places.

The heathland has a varied age structure created by a system of small patch burning or cutting and grazing, such that there is a mosaic of recently burnt/cut heath, young heath, mature heath and degenerate heath. This provides ideal habitat for a large population of breeding red grouse. Dense patches of bracken are generally absent from these areas.

There are also a few areas of deeper peat supporting bog vegetation with heather, cottongrasses, cross-leaved heath, deer-grass and bog mosses. These areas contain some peaty “mawn pools”, whose rushy margins are frequented by birds like teal and snipe. Elsewhere in damp hollows there are seasonal pools that support plants such as lesser marshwort, shoreweed, water-purslane and the uncommon aquatic fern pillwort.

The lower hill slopes have a fringe of “ffridd” vegetation, which is a mixture of tall heather and bilberry, grassland, bracken, gorse and hawthorn scrub and, in places, rocky outcrops. These areas are good habitat for a variety of different birds including whinchat, stonechat, wheatear and birds of prey.

For each habitat of particular interest, the area is stable, or increasing, its quality is maintained, typical plants and animal are thriving and the factors that may affect the habitat are under control.

What management is needed on Glaswcm & Gladestry Hills SSSI and why?

Although Glaswcm & Gladestry Hills are an excellent place for wildlife, many areas of the important habitat have been reduced in quality and extent by heavy grazing and uncontrolled fires. In order to restore and maintain these sensitive upland habitats appropriate grazing and burning/cutting management is important. CCW's priority is to work with you to ensure that this management is carried out. Management of recreational access is important, so as to minimise any habitat damage and disturbance to sensitive species.

What does this mean in practice?

There are a number of different factors that could damage the special features at this site if they are not properly managed. These are the ones we regard as most important:

- **Grazing**

A certain amount of grazing is needed to prevent heath and bog areas from becoming colonised by trees, shrubs and bracken. Grazing stock can also help maintain a varied age structure in stands of heather and gorse, although this can also be achieved through rotational burning and can even develop naturally over time.

Heavy grazing can damage heather, suppress bilberry growth and prevent regeneration of heathy plants, eventually leading to the establishment of a grass dominated sward. Grazing in autumn and winter, particularly by sheep, is damaging to the heathy vegetation and should be avoided.

A suitable mixed grazing regime should be established/maintained across the site. Cattle are good at controlling bracken and both ponies and cattle do less damage to older heather, although heavy cattle grazing can damage regenerating heather. Sheep tend to avoid the wettest areas and will graze the grassland and drier heath preferentially. However, they are better able to graze on the steeper slopes.

Shepherding could reduce any apparent localised heavy grazing pressure by spreading stock out more evenly across the hill.

- **Burning and Cutting**

Burning and cutting can provide useful management helping to create a structurally diverse mosaic of dwarf shrub vegetation. These are also of benefit to birds such as red grouse, provided that they form part of an approved management plan. Burning has traditionally taken place on the site and CCW are keen to see a

programme of burning continue. Cutting or mowing of vegetation is also acceptable and may be used to create fire-breaks prior to burning. It is also more appropriate for areas where there is a lot of western gorse, because the spread of this plant at the expense of heather is stimulated by burning. If cutting is carried out, the resultant litter should be removed, or seedling germination will be inhibited. Machinery must not damage fragile peat soils.

Burning and cutting plans should be agreed with CCW and reviewed regularly. Sites suitable for burning and/or cutting should be chosen carefully and management reviewed regularly. They should include prescriptions relating to the most appropriate methodology, based on current conditions and objectives for the areas being managed. Heathland that is rich in lichens should not generally be burnt or cut and such management should not encourage the spread of bracken or the growth of rank grasses like purple moor-grass.

Blanket bog and wet heath should not normally be burnt, as this is likely to damage important plant and animal species. Burning on the steeper slopes and fringed areas should also be avoided.

- **Stock feeding**

The important wildlife habitats are low nutrient systems that could be damaged by supplementary stock feeding. This could also cause the gradual nutrient enrichment of the whole grazing unit and encourage the undesirable spread of grassland at the expense of dwarf shrubs, especially if dunging is concentrated here. It can also lead to localised damage to dwarf-shrubs themselves. This activity would normally be discouraged within any bog or heathland habitat, but if supplementary feeding is necessary during bad weather, the location of feeding stations should be chosen so as to prevent damage to sensitive vegetation.

- **Drainage**

The bogs, wet heathland, pools, springs, flushes and marshy grassland are all vulnerable to drying out as a result of drainage. The natural drainage pattern must not be altered and any old drainage ditches should not be maintained.

- **Bracken and Scrub Encroachment**

Bracken can threaten the wildlife value of the heathland and also reduce the available grazing, causing pressure elsewhere. It should be controlled by mechanical cutting or spraying with asulam where it is invading the open moorland and could also be managed on the lower slopes in order to provide better grazing away from the more sensitive habitats. Spraying may be done aerially or from the ground, but aerial spraying should not be used in areas adjacent to scrub, pools, springs, flushes, streams, or rocky ground as the herbicide will also kill other ferns.

Trees, hawthorn and other scrub are a valued feature of the site and should be seen as a benefit to wildlife rather than a problem. Ideally, scrub and woodland will

spread into poor habitats such as dense bracken. However, any spread should be monitored and action may be taken in future to prevent heathland, or more valuable grazing areas turning into scrub woodland.

- **Predation**

Ground nesting birds such as grouse are very vulnerable to predation by foxes, crows and magpies. These are present in large numbers around the edges of the site but their impact can be greatly reduced by carefully targeted keeping.

It is desirable to maintain a suitable control programme for these troublesome species.

- **Heather Beetle**

These beetles feed on heather plants in the summer and overwinter in the moss and litter layer beneath. They are favoured by warm summers and mild winters, so are generally on the increase as a result of global warming. In such circumstances large areas of old or grazing damaged heather plants may be killed by beetle attack. Regeneration from seed is poor and these areas can easily revert to acid grassland. Younger, well-managed heather plants recover much better from beetle damage.

Where stands of old heather have been completely killed by beetle attack, a thick layer of moss is often present which inhibits the regeneration of heather plants from seed. These areas can then become dominated by grasses. In such circumstances, burning will remove the moss and litter, killing the beetle larvae and stimulating heather seed to germinate. Elsewhere, heather beetle damage must be accepted as a natural part of the heathland cycle.

- **Recreational Disturbance**

Ground nesting birds are vulnerable to human disturbance. Red grouse and many smaller birds nest in dense heather and other tall vegetation where fewer people venture but they are still at risk from disturbance by dogs, which should be kept on leads, especially during the breeding season.

Unauthorised use of vehicles is very disturbing to birdlife and causes damage to the heathland vegetation. The owners, graziers, police and statutory bodies should work together to minimise such abuse.

- **Acidification/Pollution**

Several widespread ongoing human-induced processes are changing the environmental and ecological conditions and are causing concern at Glascwm & Gladestry Hills and in other upland areas in Britain. These include acidification of rain and soils, due to atmospheric pollution, and nutrient enrichment (especially increased nitrogen and phosphorus), through a combination of atmospheric pollution, excessive sheep-dunging/urination and other inputs from diffuse

sources. Mosses, liverworts and lichens are particularly vulnerable to pollution from atmospheric sources.

Although it is very important for wider measures to be taken, at Government and international levels, to reduce air pollution, some actions can be taken locally to alleviate these problems. High levels of fertiliser applications and other polluting developments should be avoided on land close to the site.

Finally

Our knowledge and understanding of wildlife is continually improving. It is possible that new issues may arise in the future, whilst other issues may disappear. This statement is written with the best information we have now, but may have to change in the future as our understanding improves. Any information you can provide on the wildlife of your site, its management and its conservation would be much appreciated.

If you would like to discuss any aspect of your SSSI, or have any concerns about your SSSI, please contact your local CCW office.

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