

HEATHLAND

This priority habitat supports a distinctive array of breeding birds. It has suffered from over-grazing but has recovered in recent years through less-intensive management to become a distinctive landscape feature in late summer.

UK Priority Habitats covered by this statement:

[Upland heathland](#)
[Lowland heathland](#)

Cumbria Biodiversity Action Plan habitats covered by this statement:

[Upland heathland](#)

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Lowland heath, Wan Fell © Stephen Hewitt

Description

Heathland is characterised by the presence of dwarf shrubby plants such as Heather and Bilberry, with Western Gorse often frequent along the west coast of Cumbria and Cross-leaved Heath common in wet heaths. Grasses such as Sheep's Fescue, Common Bent, Wavy Hair-grass and Mat Grass can also be common in heath vegetation. Heathland is found both on mineral soils and on shallow peat, however any heath vegetation on peat deeper than 0.5m should be regarded as bog, not heathland.

Heathland is subdivided into upland and lowland heath, with 250 – 300m being the dividing line. In upland areas such as Cumbria however the distinction is not always clear, and all heathland in the Lake District and Pennines should be regarded as being upland heath, with lowland heath being restricted to the Eden Valley, the coastal plain and Morecambe Bay limestone.

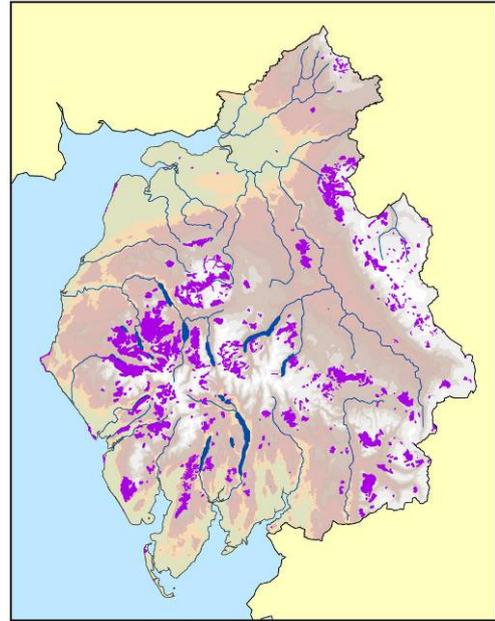
Heathland is important for the populations of breeding birds which it supports, including Golden Plover, Dunlin, Curlew, Red Grouse, Black Grouse, Twite, Short-eared Owl, Hen Harrier and Merlin. Upland and lowland heath also support a variety of reptiles and invertebrates.

Distribution and Extent

Upland heathland covers extensive areas of the Pennines and Lake District fells, including Geltsdale, Skiddaw, Buttermere Fells, Barbon Fell and Kirkby Moor.

Lowland heath is very uncommon in Cumbria, but examples can be found on the sandstone hills north of Penrith such as Wan and Lazonby Fells and on the limestone hills around Morecambe Bay such as Whitbarrow, Scout Scar and Helsington Barrows.

There are also areas of heathland along the coast on cliffs and sand dunes. There are at least 25,000ha of heathland in Cumbria.



Distribution of heathland in Cumbria (provided for illustrative purposes only)

Conservation Issues

Overgrazing by livestock is incompatible with the maintenance of dwarf-shrub cover, with heather being particularly sensitive, and there have been major losses of dwarf-shrubs from heathlands in Cumbria as a result of such inappropriate management. Agricultural improvement such as conversion to more intensive forms of agriculture, particularly pasture improvement and the drainage of wet heath can also result in the loss of this habitat. In the past some large areas of heathland have also been lost as a result of afforestation.

Developments such as wind farms and quarries can also lead to loss of heathland habitat through direct landtake for roads and the wind turbines themselves.

Planning Considerations

- PPS9 states that local authorities should conserve important natural habitat types (priority habitats and habitats of principal importance in England), and identify opportunities to enhance and add to them.
- Any development that may impact upon heathland habitat, or its species interests, would require an assessment of the likely effects on the habitat/species and, as necessary, appropriate protection and mitigation measures.
- Developments on heathland, including quarrying, will lead to direct habitat loss.
- Restoration schemes for time-limited developments should aim to restore to heathland and other appropriate habitats, and instigate wildlife management plans during the working life of the development.
- Wind farm developments on heathland will lead to direct habitat loss, impact upon habitat availability for breeding and wintering birds, and may increase bird mortality as birds can be killed by turbine blades. This is potentially a major issue for rare species, such as Hen Harrier, as a small number of deaths can have a major effect on the population.
- Caravan sites and golf courses may impact upon coastal heathland, but there may also opportunities for habitat protection, management and enhancement through these schemes.
- Landscaping and tree planting schemes on heathland are inappropriate.

- Most lowland heathland in Cumbria is within SSSIs, and the largest upland sites are SAC/SSSIs, but large areas of upland heathland lie outside the SSSI system.
- Any development that may have a significant effect, directly or indirectly, on a Special Area of Conservation would need to be assessed under the Habitats Regulations.

Enhancement Opportunities

- The planning system may offer opportunities to improve the management of heathland through appropriate grazing or burning management or clearance of invasive woodland or scrub via Section 106 agreements.
- If soil nutrient levels are low and there is an available seed source new areas of heathland can be established via natural seeding as part of developments to complement existing areas of this habitat.
- Biodiversity Management and Enhancement Plans can be used for longer term developments, for the lifetime of the development.

Habitat Targets

- Habitat targets for Cumbria can be found in a separate document “Habitat Targets, Planning Considerations and Enhancement Opportunities” available from www.lakelandwildlife.co.uk or by clicking [here](#)

Key Species

The following Key Species could benefit from enhancement of this habitat, or be negatively impacted upon by inappropriate developments on or near this habitat:

Juniper	Great Crested Newt	Merlin
Northern Wood Ant	Adder	Red Grouse
Argent and Sable moth	Short-eared Owl	Curlew
Northern Dart moth	Nightjar	Golden Plover
Viviparous (Common) Lizard	Hen Harrier	Black Grouse

Further information

[UK BAP upland heathland](#)

[UK BAP lowland heathland](#)

[Habitats of principal importance in England](#) Section 41 NERC Act list

[Cumbria BAP upland heathland](#)

[Buglife: habitat management advice: lowland heathland](#)

[Buglife: habitat management advice: upland heathland](#)

[RSPB: heather management](#)

[RSPB: heather restoration on heathland](#)

[RSPB: restoring heather-dominated habitats](#)

[RSPB: Spatial Planning Guide for on-shore wind farm developments in Cumbria](#) (Wind Turbines and Sensitive Bird Populations, and the alert map showing deep peat soils)

[Environmental Stewardship](#) and [HLS handbook](#)

Contacts

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- **Cumbria Wildlife Trust**, Tel: 01539 816300, mail@cumbriawildlifetrust.org.uk
- **RSPB**, Geltsdale Reserve, dave.ohara@rspb.org.uk

Current Action in Cumbria

- The Environmental Stewardship Scheme run by Natural England provides financial incentives to manage land in a way that is sympathetic to its nature conservation interest with specific heathland options.