

JOINT NATURE CONSERVATION COMMITTEE

A PURPLE PERSPECTIVE
Newsletter of the Lowland Heathland
Lead Co-ordination Network
Issue 5: February 2010

What is the Lowland Heathland Lead Co-ordination network?

The Lowland Heathland Lead Co-ordination Network (LCN) is responsible for undertaking the 'special functions' of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) in relation to lowland heathlands. It also provides secretariat support for the UK Lowland Heathland Habitat Action Plan steering group. It involves specialist staff from all three country agencies (Countryside Council for Wales, Natural England and Scottish Natural Heritage), the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and the JNCC support unit.

Contents	Page
1. Editorial	2
2. News items	
International Year of Biodiversity	2
Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill in Scotland	3
Update of FC Open Habitat creation policy development	3
New publications	3
3. Country updates on BAP delivery	4
4. Update of the impact of Phytophthora	7
5. Phytophthora on Cannock Chase	8
6. European Heathland Network Workshop September 2009	9
7. Workshop on biodiversity and extensive grazing in Spain	10
8. Forthcoming meetings	13
9. LCN contact details	13



1. Editorial

Welcome to the latest edition of the Lowland Heathland LCN newsletter. Devolution is having an impact on biodiversity delivery as the UK and country delivery mechanisms become increasingly diverse. This edition of Purple Perspective reviews the progress each country is making on the introduction of new frameworks for biodiversity delivery.

The presence of non-native plant diseases such as Phytophthora may have a significant impact on biodiversity in the UK. A report on the presence of the disease at Cannock Chase is given by Sue Sheppard from Staffordshire County Council. Defra is committed to spending £25 million in England and Wales over the next 5 years to undertake research, education and management of the disease.

Elsewhere in the newsletter, we look at changes in the way nature conservation will be delivered in Scotland; the LCN Chair reports on the most recent European Heathland Network meeting and a Spanish event attended by English Grazing Action Partnership (GAP) staff to discuss extensive grazing. We also report on progress made by Forestry Commission on the development of a policy to create open habitat from woods and forests.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to this newsletter. We are interested in your views about it. If you would like to be included on a circulation list to receive it directly let Suzanne have your contact details.

Suzanne Perry
Lowland Heathland LCN support

2. News items

International Year of Biodiversity



2010 International Year of Biodiversity

The United Nations has declared 2010 the International Year of Biodiversity (IYB). This will be a celebration of life on earth and of the value of biodiversity for our lives. Find out more at: <http://www.cbd.int/2010/welcome/#1>

The main objective of the IYB is to raise awareness of the importance of biodiversity to everybody's lives. It is being coordinated at an international level by the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and within the UK by the [Natural History Museum](#). The Museum is co-ordinating a partnership of over 200 organisations who are committed to conserving and celebrating the diversity of life, and aims to bring biodiversity to the public eye.

Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill in Scotland

It is expected that the Scottish Government will introduce a Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill to the Scottish Parliament during 2010. The Bill will cover a range of topics, including deer management, game laws, invasive non-native species, species licensing, and muirburn.

The environment, public safety and the welfare of wild deer are expected to be taken into greater account. Issues to be covered in the Bill will include how collaborative deer management is to be delivered locally, competence of practitioners, close seasons, and data collection.

Proposals relating to Muirburn (the prescribed burning of heather, grass, and other vegetation) include giving the Minister an enabling power to vary the dates of the muirburn season for reasons other than to adapt to climate change (the existing Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 contains a provision for such variation), and licensing out-of-season muirburn for defined purposes such as research or habitat restoration, which is not currently permitted in Scotland. If significant changes are made to the legislation, there will also be a need for a new version of the current Muirburn Code.

Update on FC Open Habitat policy development

The public consultation period for the Bill is now closed, but the consultation document, responses to the consultation, and other relevant material can be seen at

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Environment/Wildlife-Habitats/WildNatEnvBill>

In the latest document, the Forestry Commission will set out Government policy on how to decide when to permanently change woods and forests to open habitat. Find out more at: www.forestry.gov.uk/england-openhabitats

New Publications

Nigel Webb's New Naturalist book on Heathlands (Volume no. 72), which has been out of print for a long time, is now available through the Harper-Collins Print-on-Demand service, which is available for the first 98 volumes of the

Library. The volumes can be ordered through the Harper-Collins website www.newnaturalists.com.

Two new publications are now available through the Natural England publications pages. The first, 'The proceedings of the UK Tenth National Heathland Conference 'Managing Heathlands in the face of climate change'(NECR054), can be found at:

<http://naturalengland.etraderstores.com/NaturalEnglandShop/NECR014>

The second is a report entitled 'The Impact of heathland restoration and re-creation techniques on soil characteristics and the historic environment' (NERR 010) which can be found at:

<http://naturalengland.etraderstores.com/NaturalEnglandShop/NERR010>.

Lowland heathlands are often found on soils that have been undisturbed for centuries and can provide information about past climates, vegetation and physical and biological activities. The report contains information about options for heathland restoration and recreation; assistance with the assessment of the historic environment when restoring or re-creation lowland heathland; and information on the effects of different restoration or re-creation techniques on soil conservation.

A Technical Information Note (TIN054) on this subject has also been published to help land managers and advisors plan future heathland restoration projects. This TIN provides step-by-step advice on the desk and on-site investigations required to help with the success of the restoration project and the protection of other features of interest.

<http://naturalengland.etraderstores.com/NaturalEnglandShop/TIN054>

3. Country updates on BAP delivery

Previous newsletters have reported changes to BAP delivery in the UK. Below is a summary of the situation as it currently stands in England, Scotland and Wales. A summary of the situation in Northern Ireland is also included, although this country has not been subject to the same major changes in the last couple of years.

England Biodiversity Strategy (EBS) Update - The BIG Idea

The new England Biodiversity framework calls for a more integrated approach to the delivery of species and habitat conservation, with a greater emphasis on restoring and creating new habitats at a landscape scale. The Lowland Farmland Biodiversity Integration Group (BIG), along with the Regional Biodiversity Partnerships and the 8 other BIGs, has been contributing towards identifying top-level priority areas for where habitat enhancements across landscapes will

make the greatest contribution towards BAP species conservation. These are known as Integrated Biodiversity Delivery Areas (IBDAs).

The BIGs will work closely with existing projects in these areas, which are likely to include many of the well-known lowland heathland hotspots. The aspiration is to ensure that the needs of the full range of BAP species associated with lowland heathland, or habitat mosaics that include lowland heathland, are built into habitat restoration, expansion and enhancement work.

Alongside the major lowland heathland restoration and expansion works being identified at present by the regions, IBDAs will make a big contribution towards our collective work towards our 2015 BAP targets.

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Progress in Scotland

The delivery of biodiversity actions in Scotland is still evolving following restructuring in 2008. The current set of implementation plans run to an end in 2010, so prioritisation of post 2010 work is already underway.

Priority habitats and species have been allocated to one of five ecosystems groups, with an additional two cross-cutting groups providing scientific and communications advice. These seven groups report to the Action Coordination Group, which in turn provides input to the Scottish Biodiversity Committee, Chaired by Roseanna Cunningham, Minister for Environment at the Scottish Parliament.

Lowland heathland and associated species are the responsibility of the Farmland and Lowland Ecosystems Group. To date this Group has produced a draft Ecosystem Plan which identifies the main Ecosystem Health issues and generic management issues. The Group is currently identifying actions which will address these issues for delivery post 2010. Two separate exercises are currently in progress, one to prioritise UK BAP species requiring action in Scotland, and another which will identify generic management issues in Scotland common to a number of UK BAP species and habitats. The ecosystem group will consider the output from these exercises later this year.

Wales Biodiversity Process Update

The Wales biodiversity process is overseen by the Wales Biodiversity Partnership (WBP), with the Welsh Assembly Government chairing the WBP

Steering Group. The devolved Wales BAP process became fully operational during 2009 with the establishment of nine Ecosystem Groups, a Policy Group and a Species Expert Group. Lowland heathland is dealt with by the Grassland and Heathland Ecosystem Group.

Each of the Ecosystem Group and Species Expert Group (SEG) has been asked to identify issues that impact on habitats and species and to suggest possible solutions. These will be presented to the Policy Group, where the mechanisms for dealing with them will be identified. Many of the issues arising, such as the lack of incentives in agri-environment schemes for cattle grazing, are common across Ecosystem Groups. WAG have a major role in finding solutions to these policy blockages.

WBP is asking groups to develop succinct SMART Action. All habitat and species actions are assigned a Lead who will communicate the action to those 'Delivery Agents' that can deliver on the ground. These Action Plans will develop continuously and actions will be removed or added as required. The Action Plans will be available through BARS when it has been redeveloped. Each Ecosystem Group will be expected to report progress on actions to WBP annually.

A species sign-posting exercise has been led by the Species Expert Group (SEG), which has expanded the list of sign-posted species, developed more detailed actions and made these actions more relevant to Wales. Welsh Species Leads will work with the Ecosystem Groups to implement the sign-posted actions through the Action Plans.

During 2009, new Wales BAP groups have been identified as formal consultees by the Welsh Assembly Government. Since the summer of 2009, many of the Ecosystem Groups and SEG have been heavily involved in the development of the new agri-environment scheme in Wales (Glastir). Undoubtedly, the new BAP process has improved communication between species and habitat specialists, and this has allowed a much more coordinated approach to the consultation.

Much of this work has fallen to a few individuals within certain statutory agencies and NGOs. Other issues that have been identified include: the need to spread the work load, lack of funding; and of course the need to push biodiversity higher up the political agenda. With substantial spending cuts around the corner it will be important to ensure that the biodiversity process keeps on track during 2010.

The Biodiversity Delivery Process in Northern Ireland.

Over the last few years, a number of Biodiversity Delivery Groups (BDGs) have been established in Northern Ireland to help co-ordinate the delivery of a range of habitat and species action plans. The delivery of the lowland heath

Habitat Action Plan (HAP) falls within the remit of the Peatlands and Uplands BDG.

This habitat is mainly included in two Northern Ireland Countryside Survey (NICS) 2007 land cover types - gorse heath (which may include some scrub habitat) and dry and mixed heath in lowland land-classes. The extent of gorse heath was estimated at 5,692 ha (a non-significant increase of 10.5 % from 5,148 ha in 1998). Heath in lowland-classes was estimated 86 ha (compared to 261 ha in 1998). Combining both land cover types, the current estimate of lowland heath in Northern Ireland is therefore in the region of 5,880 ha with approximately 25% within our ASSI series.

In December 2007, Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) agri-environment schemes covered 3,931 ha of 'dry' heath which will have included both upland and lowland heath habitat. In addition agri-environment schemes covered 29,213 ha of 'wet' heath with an additional 5,882 ha of degraded heath which is likely to be mostly blanket bog but may include some upland heathland and lowland heath.

4. Update on the impact of Phytophthora

Phytophthora is a group of fungus like pathogens that kill trees and shrubby species including *Vaccinium* spp. Three species of the disease which affect heathland plants are of concern to conservation bodies in the UK: *P. ramorum*, *kernoviae* and *pseudosyringae*. The first two of these species are believed to be non-native and may have been introduced through the international horticulture trade.

Rhododendron ponticum is the most commonly Phytophthora infected plant encountered in the wild, but the disease has also been found in native bilberry. Laboratory tests indicate that other native species such as heather, cowberry and bearberry may also be highly susceptible.

JNCC have created models to predict where the disease might be found in future see: <http://www.jncc.gov.uk/page-3717>

Towards the end of 2009, an outbreak of *P. ramorum* was identified on Japanese Larch trees in Devon, Cornwall and Somerset, which was the first time stem lesions caused by *P. ramorum* have been found on conifer species. Many of the infected trees are not growing in proximity to rhododendron, which raises the question of how the trees have become infected. Symptoms have also been found on Western Hemlock, and a selection of broadleaf species growing in the same area, including beech, birch and some oaks. FERA and Forestry Commission staff are working hard to better understand these changes.

A Defra-funded disease management research programme began in April 2009. New research will be commissioned to support the main activities of the programme. Topics being covered in the research programme include: investigating new methods of clearance and disposal, development of disease management approaches for the quarantine pathogens *P. ramorum* and *P. kernoviae* on *Vaccinium* and other heathland species in important habitats in England and Wales. The Scottish Government Rural Directorate is responsible for policy and legislative matters relating to this species in Scotland, and research on this disease is also underway in Scotland.



The impact of *Phytophthora* spp. on *Vaccinium myrtillus*
Photo credit: Iain Johnstone, FERA

All suspected occurrences of *P. ramorum* and *P. kernoviae*, which are both notifiable pathogens, should be notified to [FERA](#) in England and Wales, [SEERAD](#) Horticulture and Marketing Unit in Scotland, or [DARDNI](#) in Northern Ireland.

Further detail of the symptoms of the disease and its identification can be found at the [FERA website](#).

5. Phytophthora on Cannock Chase

Phytophthora ramorum was discovered on parkland adjacent to the Cannock Chase Special Area for Conservation (SAC) in January 2009, and *P. pseudosyringae* has been found on the SAC itself.

As a notifiable disease, the *P. ramorum* outbreak was quickly treated and contained, although ongoing monitoring of the affected areas will be necessary. Though an indigenous species, *P. pseudosyringae* had not been found on bilberry prior to the infection discovered on Cannock Chase SAC. The effects of the disease were first observed as extensive patches of bilberry dieback in Brocton Coppice, an area of ancient semi-natural oak woodland within the SAC. A rapid initial survey of the Country Park, which contains much of the SAC and is owned and managed by Staffordshire County Council, revealed further patches of

infected plants, both within the woodland and occurring more sporadically in bracken and open heathland areas.

The County Council's Environment and Countryside Team were quick to develop a disease control strategy, engaging help and advice from Natural England and the Food and Environment Research Agency (FERA). Studies undertaken by FERA indicated that *P. pseudosyringae* was most likely to enter bilberry above ground, but then spread throughout the plant, including the rhizomes. Once infected, the bilberry dies, sometimes within a few weeks.

The disease control strategy considered a number of factors, including vulnerability of SAC features, mechanisms for disease spread and containment methods. Evidence on site suggests the role of animal vectors in disease spread, including finding infected plants along narrow deer tracks and on footpath edges. Research on *P. ramorum* and *P. kernoviae* has indicated that if spores are allowed to accumulate they can 'jump' species - heather and cowberry have been shown to be susceptible to these diseases in laboratory conditions. To date, *P. pseudosyringae* has acted in a broadly similar fashion to *P. ramorum*.

P. pseudosyringae spores can be spread in water, on animal coats and in rain splash; thick-walled resting spores can lie dormant in litter for years until suitable conditions for re-infection arise. The pathogen appears to prefer a moist microclimate, thriving in woodland shade and bracken areas on the bilberry understorey, although isolated infection has also occurred in open heath.

Disease containment has involved significant resources, both in terms of in-house staff time and funding from Natural England, through the Cannock Chase Environmental Stewardship Scheme. Containment methods have included cutting and burning infected bilberry in situ, burning infected regrowth and localised herbicide treatment of infected plants under consent from Natural England, where it was clear that regrowth from cutting and burning treatments rapidly became re-infected.

A year on, in February 2010, the disease spread has slowed through the ongoing efforts of the Environment and Countryside Team and funding from Natural England, but it is clear this disease will continue to pose a threat to Cannock Chase SAC for many years to come.

6. European Heathland Workshop, 14-18 September 2009, Cornwall

Last year saw the return of the European Heathland Network to the UK, when the focus was on linking site visits to the presentations and discussions.



Attendees at the European Heathland workshop meeting 2009

The Lizard, Bodmin Moor, Goss Moor and the China Clay Country and the moors of Penwith were all visited during the week long event. Issues discussed included: similarities and differences between British heaths and their continental counterparts; grazing management, including grazing of areas with dangerous mine-shafts; public access and public opposition to grazing; the link with the historic environment and the need to consider this when managing heaths and when undertaking heathland restoration and re-creation.

Presentation topics included: impacts of atmospheric nutrients on vegetation; mitigation of those impacts through management; evidence of restoration, not only in terms of plants but also invertebrates; England's Policy on Open Habitat Restoration from woodland; potentially profitable uses of heathlands; current threats, such as *Phytophthora* outbreaks; impact of restoration on the historic environment; nutrient enrichment in combination with fire impacts and climatic conditions (drought, frost); dune heathland issues; grazing, N deposition; impact of climate change; and the effectiveness of the Habitats Directive to protect European heathlands.

A more detailed account of the event can be found Volume 2 of the European Heathland Network Newsletter, which can be found at: <http://www.english-nature.org.uk/heathlands/network/pdf/EHNetworkNews2.pdf>

The next European Heathland Workshop will be in northern Spain in 2011.

7. Workshop on biodiversity and extensive grazing in Picos de Europa, Spain, 1-3 October 2009

In October 2009, staff from Natural England and the Grazing Advice Partnership (GAP) attended a workshop organised by the "Fundación para la

Conservación del quebrantahuesos”, or the Trust for the conservation of the bearded vulture *Gypaetus barbatus*.



The landscape of Picos de Europa
Isabel Alonso

The Trust aim is to reintroduce the bearded vulture back to the Cantabrian Mountains in Northern Spain, whose diet is based on animal bones. The survival of this species relies on a thriving livestock farming community which is sympathetic to its needs. In this part of Spain, the bearded vulture was hunted to extinction, although it poses no threat to livestock. It is hoped that the bird will become a flagship species, whose reintroduction will also benefit other species.

One of the objectives of the Trust, which has formed a partnership with local farmers and local authorities, is to develop strategies to combine mountain farming activities with the needs of the birds.

This workshop was one in a series of activities organised by the Trust. Staff from the UK attended to provide examples from UK heathlands, to share experiences and to help identify and open new markets for extensive and/or organic graziers. Tom Cairns from GAP and David Burton and Isabel Alonso from Natural England attended the meeting. From Spain, the workshop was attended by local farmers, local researchers, local and regional authorities, National Park staff and land managers and NGOs.

There are about 1 million ha of heathland in this part of Spain, which is dominated by heather and common gorse. The number of farming animals in the area has decreased since the 1950s, but their grazing is essential to maintain the vegetation structure required to sustain a rich local biodiversity. A local

research centre has been investigating ways to improve productivity of the heathland. Presentations to the group looked at new land management approaches and applied research.

In the Cantabrian Mountains, the farming infrastructure still exists, but local farmers are concerned about the future. The workshop considered proposals to introduce shepherd schools, which will give local young people opportunities to learn skills first-hand from practising shepherds and farmers, with the objective of creating and maintaining new grazing businesses. As a result of the UK group attending the workshop, Spanish shepherding students will visit farms in England during the summer of 2010.

As in the UK, local farming groups are looking into producing and using local products. Many of these initiatives aim to get a "denominación de origen" or 'certificate of local origin and quality' which usually means consumers will pay a premium for these products which are sold mainly in farmers markets, but also in speciality shops.

The UK contingent gave an overview of conservation grazing in England, with examples from heathland areas such as Ashdown Forest and the Isles of Scilly. UK advice and training products which support conservation grazing were demonstrated, including the Grazing Advice Partnership; Habitat Composer, Stock Keep, Lookers training courses, Conservation Grazing Ready Reckoner and the Nibblers discussion forum. UK projects to improve revenue from grazing were also discussed.

Farmers working in this area of Spain are worried about their future; only one has a young son working in the family business. They would like to see some of the more pressing problems dealt with before supporting iconic species, such as the bearded vulture. They do recognise that this species could be a big tourist attraction for the area, which would particularly benefit their cheese production business. However, they thought that local government and NGO staff are not sympathetic to their worries about wolves, which kill some of their pedigree animals every year.

The workshop helped identify some of the primary concerns to the farmers. These issues include: improving access to their small-scale cheese making and storing facilities; planning legislation which currently constrains the quality of accommodation in the mountains. If farmers really are essential to maintain the habitats that support the biodiversity which conservation organisations would like to maintain, these issues need to be resolved.

Isabel Alonso

8. Forthcoming meetings

9th March 2010 Lowland Heathland LCN meeting, Peterborough

10th March 2010 Heathland HAP group meeting, Peterborough

9. LCN contact details:

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