



A PURPLE PERSPECTIVE

Newsletter of the Lowland Heathland Lead
Co-ordination Network
Issue 1: June 2006

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, the Environment and Heritage Service (Northern Ireland) and the JNCC support unit.

Contents	Page
1. Editorial	2
2. News in brief	2
3. Projects and reports.....	4
4. News from UK Lowland Heathland HAP Group.....	5
5. European Heathland conference report.....	7
6. Forthcoming meetings	9



1. Editorial

Welcome to the first newsletter of the Lowland Heathland Lead Co-ordination Network (LCN). The LCN meets twice a year usually with one meeting held back-to-back with the UK Lowland Heathland Habitat Action Plan (HAP) Group meeting. The network has an annual work programme which encompasses a wide range of work, including; providing advice on guidelines for Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), analysing feedback from Common Standards Monitoring, providing the national perspective for the UK HAP and, this year, working on Favourable Conservation Status (FCS) for Annex 1 heathland habitats.

The aim of this newsletter is to keep you up-to-date with the work of the agencies and to communicate news, views and information about lowland heathland research, conservation, management and monitoring across the UK (and beyond). We would welcome contributions from other individuals and organisations and ask that you send any feedback on this edition to myself at the address given at the end. At present we aim to produce the newsletter twice a year but this will depend on the level of interest.

In the year ahead we will have new UK BAP targets which will have implications for the work of the country agencies and the LBAPs, we will hopefully begin to see the benefits of Cross Compliance on habitat management and condition, and we will, of course, see huge changes in England as English Nature is subsumed into Natural England. We will endeavour to cover all these issues in the next edition of the newsletter.

Jan Sherry: Heathland Ecologist, Countryside Council for Wales

2. News in brief

Consultation on the Heather and Grass Burning Regulations and Code

The consultation exercises by Defra in England and the Welsh Assembly Government in Wales on proposed changes to the Heather and Grass Burning Regulations and Code are now completed and the outcomes are awaited. The agencies and other conservation bodies felt that the Defra Science Panel Report focused too much attention on upland moorland habitats rather than the full range of lowland and upland grassland and heathland habitats which are subject to burning. The main issues of concern addressed by CCW and EN in their response documents were; the need to review the burning dates; better training for burning operators; the needs for burning plans on all sites to promote better burning practice; a review of "no-burn" areas; and better definition of the habitats which are covered by the Regulations and Code. Both NE and CCW urged that there should be tighter control of burning management through cross-compliance and in particular that burning plans should be linked to Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition (GAEC). Please contact the agencies for copies of their responses.

Jan Sherry: Countryside Council for Wales

Non-statutory heathlands sample survey in England

One of the duties of the Statutory Agencies is to monitor the condition of SSSIs. However, the condition of non-designated sites is rarely known. In 2005, English Nature, the Rural Development Service (RDS), the JNCC and the RSPB commissioned a contract to determine the condition of non-SSSI heathlands in England. Last year 26 sites were surveyed, but none were considered to be in favourable condition, applying the Common Standards for Monitoring Lowland Heathlands strictly. However, a handful were borderline and could have been passed if more was known about current management and history. An interim report is available if anybody wants to know more.

Dossiers have been prepared for the 2006 field season. The field visits will take place from May to July. The aim is to survey 100 sites (half in agri-environment schemes) by the end of the project. The final report should be produced by September.

Isabel Alonso: Heathland Ecologist, English Nature

Review of grazing impacts on heathland

What are the real impacts of grazing compared to other forms of heathland management? When trying to decide on options for a particular site, it can be difficult for heathland advisors and managers to find reliable studies in the scientific literature and elsewhere to guide their choice. Previous reviews of heathland management approaches have also been unable to give the necessary clarification.

Using an approach called systematic review, originally developed for medical research, researchers at the Centre for Evidence-based Conservation at the University of Birmingham and Bournemouth University are trying an alternative approach to help with such management decisions. The systematic review approach uses a clear protocol (which in this case has been developed in close collaboration with heathland experts at the country conservation agencies) to carry out extensive searches of both the published and 'grey' (including unpublished work, internet fora and questionnaire-based approaches to heathland managers and specialists) literature. The work will use the guidance given in Common Standards Monitoring to consider the impacts of different management approaches against heathland habitat related outcomes, as identified through the Common Standards Methodology developed between the country conservation agencies and JNCC.

The outcomes of this work, which has been made possible through funding from NERC and the British Ecological Society, should be ready for presentation to the National Heathland Conference in Aberdeen in August,

Mark Crick: Joint Nature Conservation Committee

3. Projects and reports

Rodwell JR (2006) *National Vegetation Classification: users' handbook* Joint Nature Conservation Committee

This handbook, by the co-ordinator of the original National Vegetation Classification (NVC) and editor of the five volumes of *British Plant Communities*, gives a detailed description of the NVC methods for collection of vegetation relevé (quadrat) data, the methodology for sampling vegetation in the field, and the analysis and description of NVC data. It also explains how such information can be used to identify plant communities and discusses important issues involved in carrying out an NVC survey of a site. There is a brief account of some of the applications and limitations of the NVC.

Rose, R.J. (2005). *Urban impacts on Dorset heathlands: analysis of the heathland visitor questionnaire survey and heathland fires incidence data sets*. English Nature Research Report 624

This project analysed and commented on two existing sets of data collected under the Urban Heaths Life Project (UHLP). These data sets comprise a database of all the fire incidents that have been recorded by Dorset Environmental Records Centre (DERC) from within the UHLP heathland sites, and the results of a visitor survey questionnaire carried out on the same sites in 2003. The report documents the methodology used for the processing of the visitor questionnaire survey information and discusses the limitations of both the methodology and the data that has been collected.

Underhill-Day, J. C. (2005). *A literature review of urban effects on lowland heathlands and their wildlife*. English Nature Research Report 623

The report reviews the literature on the impacts of urban public access and recreation on heaths. Chapters include:

- Urban effects on lowland heathlands
- Fragmentation
- Disturbance effects
- Fire
- The effects of cats on heathland wildlife
- Trampling effects on heathland
- Other urban issues (dogs, nutrients from horses, light and noise)

Grazing management of lowland heathlands English Nature 2005

This new leaflet aims to promote good practice in the re-establishment of grazing on heathland.

Short, C., Hayes, E., Selman, P. & Wragg, A. (2005). *A common purpose: a guide to agreeing management on common land*. National Trust/ Open Spaces Society/ English Nature/ Rural Development Service/ Countryside Agency

The aim of this document is to introduce and outline a process that anyone concerned with the long-term management of common land can follow and implement. The approach

is based on the principle of working with stakeholders to create increased levels of awareness of the issues and values related to their common and the range of possible solutions that would tackle the one while respecting the other. By developing an increased understanding of all stakeholders' views, and agreeing the problems before proposing solutions this approach seeks to promote the development of sound, effective management proposals based on co-operation.

Ross, S & Bealey, C. 2005. *Validation Network Project: Lowland heathland monitoring covering: dry and wet heaths*. English Nature Research Report No 669

This is the latest of a series of reports from the Validation Network. The overall objective of the Validation Network project is to ensure that data on the condition of individual features on SSSIs is accurate, consistent and scientifically robust. The means to achieve this outcome is through a sample of sites on which quantitative monitoring is undertaken on a regular basis in parallel with the cycles of condition assessment for SSSIs. The aims of the project are: to validate the condition assessment methodology in England through testing the suitability of attributes and associated targets in assessing quality and trend in condition; to establish a set of control sites to ensure that individual site assessments match regional or national changes in feature condition over time; and to contribute to a wider network of monitoring sites that will allow a better understanding of the drivers of change. This document reports on part of Validation Network monitoring on key lowland wet and dry heaths within the lowland heathland Priority Habitat. The heathland habitats were represented by NVC types H1, H2, H3, H4, H6, H7, H8, M14, M16, M25 and U-type communities.

All English Nature publications are available for download from www.english-nature.org.uk

4. News from UK Lowland Heathland HAP Group

September meeting of the UK Lowland Heathland HAP Group

The September meeting was held at the National Trust's residential centre at Stackpole, Pembrokeshire. In addition to the business meeting, two sites visits were held to look at re-creating heathland from agricultural land. The first site visit looked at three small trial plots which had been topsoil stripped on the limestone headland at Stackpole NNR, an area of species-poor permanent pasture which is known to have been heathland prior to ploughing and reseeded in the 1950's. Whilst the plots have shown that heathland (and semi-fixed dune) vegetation can be restored by simply removing the enriched topsoil, further work has not progressed because of debate about the damaging effects of topsoil stripping on sensitive archaeology. The group felt that there was a need to look carefully at mechanisms for resolving conflicts between habitat restoration, archaeological interest and soil conservation.

At the second site heathland re-creation is part of a much larger initiative; the Marloes Coast Project, which aims to restore 200 hectares of mixed arable and pasture land on the Marloes Peninsula [in]to a landscape of heathland, wildflower-rich grassland and 'bird-friendly' arable crops. In addition the project will provide new public access, improve the condition of an iron-age fort, provide pools for pillwort and protect a wetland SSSI from fertiliser and pesticide run-off. Heathland re-creation took place in

2004 and involved topsoil stripping, sulphur application (donated by the nearby Texaco refinery) and the addition of heather brash. The 16000m³ of topsoil produced by stripping has been used to create over a mile of traditional Pembrokeshire hedgebanks. The project is in its infancy and it is too early to gauge the success of the heathland re-creation however the wider benefits of the project to a range of wildlife including seed-eating birds, arable weeds and the diminutive pillwort have been clearly demonstrated.

Jan Sherry

UK Lowland Heathland HAP targets review

The Lowland Heathland HAP group has submitted the proposed new HAP targets. The aim is to maintain all existing heathland in the UK (i.e. no net loss); to maintain the condition of the sites currently in favourable condition and to improve that of sites currently in unfavourable condition. The expansion target is very ambitious in England: to double the area of lowland heathland by 2100, which means re-creating more than 600 ha per year mainly from arable and conifer plantations. In the other countries current efforts will be maintained, with targets of 130 ha, 100 ha and 500 ha of heathland to be re-created every five years in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales respectively. There is a further target to increase the number of patches over 30ha from 10% of the total to 50 %. For a detailed breakdown of figures contact Isabel Alonso at English Nature.

Conservation of aculeates on heathlands

Accommodating the needs of threatened species, particularly invertebrates, in heathland management often requires additional autecological research. At the heathlands HAP meeting at Stackpole in October 2005, Stuart Roberts of the Aculeate Conservation Group gave a presentation on the most recent findings from ongoing survey work on three BAP-listed aculeates; the Purbeck mason wasp *Pseudepipona herrichii*, the bloody spider wasp *Homonotus sanguinolentus*, and the jewel wasp *Chrysis fulgida*. The following information is drawn from that presentation.

Pseudepipona herrichii has only ever been found in the Poole Basin heathlands of Dorset, both in the Purbeck area and to the north and west of Wareham making its nests in ball clay pits and exposed clay paths in heathlands. The wasp provisions brood cells in the nest solely with caterpillars of the tortricoid moth *Acleris hyemana*, which are most common on plants of bell heather (*Erica cinerea*) in early to mid successional heathland. Recent survey work has successfully focused on narrowing down the location of finding nesting aggregations of the wasp species by searching for the distinctive nest burrows, signs of nectar raiding scars at the base of bell heather flowers and the larval webs of *Acleris hyemana*. This survey work shows that *Pseudepipona herrichii* is very opportunistic within its very restricted range, and will exploit suitable terrain wherever it can find it.

Homonotus sanguinolentus is similarly restricted to Dorset and the New Forest (but previously known from the Surrey heaths) and presented even more problems for initial investigations than *Pseudepipona herrichii*. There were no known references from the UK or Europe on its nesting biology, only 19 specimens had been recorded in the previous

200 years, and sites with previous records had been greatly altered (many becoming afforested). Furthermore the sole suggestion about its possible spider host (*Cheiracanthium erraticum*) came from a French research paper published in 1928. However the purported host spider constructs distinctive nesting refugia, most commonly joining the tips of grass or ericoid plant branches. Survey work for these refugia on former heathland sites finally bore fruit in 1997, including photographic evidence of a gravid female *Cheiracanthium erraticum* supporting a fully grown larva of *Homonotus sanguinolentus*.

Scattered records for the jewel wasp *Chrysis fulgida* were known from much of England and the Welsh borders until the late 1960s but more recent records suggest a restriction to heathlands on the Surrey/ Sussex/ Hampshire border. When the BAP process began, no specimen of the wasp had been collected in the UK since 1944; little was known about the wasp's nesting biology and there was a lengthy list of suggested hosts for this parasitic species with none proven. Work eventually narrowed likely candidate hosts down to the eumenine wasp species *Symmorphus crassicornis*, and artificial nesting blocks for this host were placed along the edges of blocks of heathland with suckering aspen *Populus tremula* (the preferred host habitat). Pupae of *Chrysis fulgida* have now been found in these nesting blocks alongside pupae of *Symmorphus crassicornis*, and so we can be much more confident that work to secure populations of the latter species in heathland sites will help the former.

Mark Crick Joint: Nature Conservation Committee
Stuart Roberts: Aculeate Conservation Group

5. European Heathland conference report

9th European Heathland Workshop, Bredene and Genk, Belgium 13-17 Sep 2005.

These European workshops are becoming more popular over the years. Rather than having a declining attendance, we have been successful in attracting a range of workers from all over Europe, and importantly, younger participants. Many students from both Belgium and the Netherlands attended, some of them presenting their first talks or posters. This time it was held in Belgium, at the north coast holiday resort of Bredene for the first three days, and then relocating for the next two days inland to Genk near Maastricht (no, not Gent- that is a different place). The overall theme was 'Heathlands in a changing society', and it was well organised by Geert de Blust from the Institute of Nature Conservation, based in Brussels.

The topic sessions were titled: history of heathlands; heathland communities in relation to composition, structure, environment and area; heathland in an ever-changing society; ecosystem research; heathland management and restoration. I presented a joint paper with Martin Auld of the RSPB on the Viking Heath project in Orkney. This is Scotland's only project funded by HLF under the Tomorrow's Heathland Heritage (THH) scheme. I have a hard copy of all the abstracts but unfortunately they are not available electronically.

An evening discussion on the use of fire as a management tool was organised by the Department of Knowledge, Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality. The

reserve managers in this Staatsbosbeheer area of Holland have lost the knowledge of how to burn heathland safely. Reluctance to use fire was expressed by the local Fire Brigade chief, and he was rather incredulous when two of our Norwegian colleagues offered to visit and demonstrate that a positive fire could be controlled by just one or two people who knew the practical techniques.

The field excursions showed that we in GB have larger areas of good, intact heathland remaining in comparison with some of the Belgium relicts! We were surprised that one of their best remaining areas of wet heath, Gulke Putten, which is only 1.5 ha in extent, was discovered in 1969, and only saved from destruction by the intervention of a local action group. They now have a rota of volunteers to help manage and interpret the site. There are also some substantial areas which are managed, one of these being the Strabrechtse Heide nature reserve, an area of 1500ha, just over the border in the Netherlands. All the participants mounted bicycles to explore the different areas of the heath, including Charles Gimingham, who although retired, proved more in control of his bike than some other members!



Left: Cycling across the heath.

Right: Gulke Putten 1.5 ha of wet heath

In contrast, we walked through the valley of the Zwarte beek along a meandering river. This area is unusual as most of the rivers in Belgium have been dug out, broadened and modified, so to find a natural river and valley is rare. The fringing woodland and heathland were one of the most popular areas for Belgians to visit with walking tracks criss-crossing the area. There was an excellent interpretation centre, which ran activity courses for adults and children, and there is a continuing programme to acquire adjacent land in order to restore traditional land management (hay meadows irrigated by a system of wooden sluices) and re-create heath, scrub, grassland and woodland. As well as the mixed habitats, we saw black woodpecker, goshawk, Alcon blue butterflies and snake root (*Calla palustris*), which is a native plant here but can be a pest elsewhere.

The value of these meetings is, of course, in the exchange of information and knowledge, but also in encouraging new, younger heathland workers.

Lynne Farrell: Senior Species Advisor and Scottish Natural Heritage Lowland heathland Representative

6. Forthcoming meetings

Heathland manager's workshop

CCW will be hosting a Heathland Managers Workshop on June 30th. This one-day event intends to bring together people working on heathland projects throughout Wales to exchange experiences on successes and problems and to identify issues which require action at an all-Wales level. Please contact Jan Sherry for details.

9th National Heathland Conference

The conference is to be held at Aberdeen University, August 8-10 2006. The theme of this year's conference is *Changing Landscapes*. The programme is being arranged by representatives from Scottish Natural Heritage, English Nature, RSPB, Centre for Ecology and Hydrology and the National Trust. It will cover the impacts of climate change, pollutants, access on upland and lowland heathlands, and the increasing interest in landscape scale approaches to sustainable management and expansion of the heaths. Prospective delegates need to register their interest by **Thursday 25 May 2006**. Further details of this meeting are available from helen.forster@snh.gov.uk.

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