

# **Wales Upland Ecosystem Group Priority Action**

## **Black Mountains Restoration**

### **Site Description**

This upland ridge straddles the England/Wales border between Herefordshire and Powys/Monmouthshire. This upland common with extensive areas of heather and bilberry heath on top of the ridge has steep sides more dominated by bracken with bracken/bilberry and hawthorn/gorse scrub. The area has a small red grouse population which is, along with neighbouring areas of the Brecon the southernmost population of this species in Britain. In 2003, a comprehensive site condition assessment was carried out of the Black Hill, Hatterrall and Bal Bach-Bal Mawr ridges. CCW holds a copy of the condition assessment report. Most of this section of the SSSI was found to be in an unfavourable condition. Owing to the uncertain future of uplands grazing, as well as continuing ongoing problems, the status of the SSSI is similarly unfavourable.

Natural England is funding the experimental restoration of one of two large erosion scars at the northern end of the ridge. This work is being done under contract by the BBNPA.

### **Issues**

- Low red grouse population that may be generally stable but is vulnerable
- Erosion and exposure of bare peat; erosion control via Upland Erosion Strategy (within the Rights of Way Improvement Plan)
- Areas of aged heather and instances of heather beetle damage
- A series of contiguous commons
- Cooperation by Commoners Association
- Expansion of bracken areas
- Continuance of controlled burning cycle
- Land ownership (BBNPA and private estates)
- Status of upland hill farming and commons grazing; declining numbers of stock

### **Likely Effects of Inaction**

- Continued expansion peat erosion areas, leading eventually to the increased exposure of mineral soils and shrinkage of adjacent areas of peat.
- Poor age structure of heather stands
- Reduction and potential loss of red grouse population
- Reducing the value and effectiveness of work undertaken on the contiguous area of common land in England.

- Continued spread of bracken

### **Actions Required**

- Support and improve relations with graziers
- Mapping and re-surveying of habitat areas and condition, targeted to action areas to inform restoration plans
- Expand scope of heather burning management plan to create a grass/heath burning and cutting plan
- Mowing of firebreaks to enable effective burning management
- Undertaking burning management
- Monitoring of red grouse population
- Developing appropriate restoration plans for areas of eroded peat based on baseline condition assessments

### Longer-term aims

- Bracken control
- Establishment of burning teams

### **Current Status**

- NE progressing with implementation of HLS with the formation of 'Restoration Groups' on the English section of the SSSI.
- NE completed physical works to commence the restoration of a 19ha erosion scar on the English section.
- BBNPA continue small-scale heather management on 40ha of BBNPA-owned land.
- CCW supported S15 management agreement for heather management on Bal Bach-Bal Mawr ridges.
- On-going dialogue by CCW with estates on potential additional S15 agreements.

### **Key Section 15 Species**

Red grouse     *Lagopus lagopus*