

Supporting guidance for Heath Management (Coastal, Serpentine, Lowland and Special Interest)

This is an old version of the page

Date published: 21 December, 2018

Date superseded: 22 January, 2022

For recent changes to this guidance, please see the [bottom of the page](#) .

[Heath Management](#) supports the management of several different types of heath, to make sure that their special plants and wildlife thrive.

The areas of these habitats can be quite small, and management needs to be tailored to the type of heath and the species present.

Heath types



Coastal heath – land bordering the sea, often on top of cliffs, with heath or species-rich grassland which is affected by salt spray and exposure.

Heath plants are stunted by the wind, and the sward can include salt-tolerant species such as sea plantain, thrift, and spring squill.

On the north coast and in Orkney, this vegetation is where the rare Scottish primrose can be found.



Serpentine heath –found in a few locations where there are ultrabasic rocks. The vegetation includes species that can tolerate the chemical composition of the unusual soils derived from these rocks.

This habitat ranges from bare, stony soils with scattered plants to closed swards dominated by heath, grasses or flush species.

Species found include arctic sandwort, northern rock-cress and spring sandwort, along with special forms of other species which are tolerant of the soil conditions.



Special interest heath – restricted to some examples on designated sites or other heaths identified by Scottish Natural Heritage as being of particular local importance.

They include some of the upland dry heaths that occur at low altitudes in Orkney, and unusual areas of species-rich upland heath.

They often occur in small, isolated fragments and require careful management. For example, here the needs of small uncommon plant species in the grassy patch on the right must be met along with those of the heath and juniper which are the dominant vegetation types.



Lowland heath – found at lower altitudes where the climate is mild, and relatively rare in Scotland. Usually these heaths are isolated remnants of a formerly more extensive habitat, now within a wider landscape of more intensively used land.

Heather and other dwarf shrubs usually form between 25 per cent and 90 per cent of the vegetation.

Grasses and herbs are often more prominent than in upland heath, lichens and mosses can be important, and some gorse, bracken or scattered tree cover is often present.

Wader management on heath mosaics

Land which was previously managed under an agri-environment scheme as habitat mosaic, to benefit waders, but which no longer meets the eligibility requirements, due to having more than c25% heath/bog habitat, can be entered into this management option instead. To be eligible, the land must be a mosaic, containing a minimum of two of the following habitat types:

1. improved and unimproved grassland
2. heath communities
3. blanket bog
4. wetland

In addition, the land site must be within the target area for the Wader Grazed Grassland option and you must stipulate which waders your plan will benefit, and tailor grazing to suit the species requirements. Further information can be found in the:

[Wader grazed grassland supporting guidance](#)

Areas previously managed under the Moorland management option in an agri-environment scheme should continue to be claimed as moorland.

For any new sites, which have never been in an agri-environment scheme, please note that this option is designed for heath mosaics typically found in the transition area between in-bye and hill ground. Larger expanses of ground dominated by bog and heath and upland sites should be entered under the moorland management option. If you are unsure of your land eligibility, please speak to RPID or SNH prior to submitting your application.

What needs to be done?

Coastal heath and serpentine heath

The aim of the standard prescription given in the option is to create a balance between the cover of the dwarf shrubs and fine grasses with broad-leaved herbs.

To achieve this:

- grazing should not take place in summer in order to allow plants to flower and set seed
- autumn grazing is needed to reduce rank growth

On grass-dominated sites, if ground and vegetation conditions allow, there may be some grazing over winter, but take care to ensure that dwarf shrubs such as heather are not too heavily grazed at this time.

If there is a grazing regime more suited to biodiversity objectives on the site or to the current condition of the vegetation than the standard prescription, a grazing plan may be agreed.

For special interest heath, the aim of the standard prescription is the same as for coastal heath and serpentine heath. Here, however, the interest can be very varied, and in most cases a grazing plan tailored to the biodiversity requirements of the site will be needed.

For example:

- there may be small herb species present which require some light summer grazing to ensure that they are not shaded out by vigorous grasses
- autumn / winter grazing might need to be avoided in order to promote growth or recovery of dwarf-shrubs
- a variable grazing regime responsive to change in vegetation condition may be required

Lowland heath

The aim of the standard prescription is to create good vegetation structure to maintain diversity across the habitat, ensuring that the condition of the dwarf-shrub heath is maintained.

This is achieved by:

- grazing in summer to ensure that grasses, which are more palatable and available then, are grazed more than the dwarf shrubs
- allowing some flexibility over spring grazing, to allow early growth to be grazed on suitable sites, and autumn grazing, which may be required to reduce rank growth

If you want to graze in spring and autumn, seasonal growth and ground conditions need to be taken into account.



Lowland heath – © Graham Sullivan, Scottish Natural Heritage

If a different management regime is more suited to biodiversity objectives for the site or to the current condition of the vegetation, a plan that reflects these objectives may be agreed.

Management can include rotational cutting and burning to maintain or enhance heath condition. You may cut or burn heath in addition or as an alternative to grazing (for example, where suitable stock is not available).

If lowland heath is not properly managed, heather becomes old and rank, and scrub and trees colonise the heath.

Dwarf shrubs can start to die out, the condition of the heath declines, and eventually the heath can be lost. However, this process can be stopped by a programme of tree and scrub removal, heather management, and appropriate grazing.

You may be able to use [capital items](#) to support such a programme.

Wader management on heath mosaics

The grazing regime listed under the option requirements **MUST** be followed. This restricts grazing levels between 15 March and 15 June to protect ground nesting birds. In addition, no grazing is permitted between 1 November and the end of February to prevent poaching and damage to the habitats. For the remainder of the year, grazing levels should be appropriate to address the condition and structure of the sward, the combination of habitats on the site and waders which are being targeted.

For all heath types

- it is common for these heath types, especially coastal and serpentine heath, to occupy only part of a field. For example, serpentine heath may only be found on rocky outcrops within a field of unimproved grassland. Here, the management which is beneficial to the heath will have to be applied to the whole field, and therefore the whole field can be entered into the option
- 'rough grazings' may include areas which are not grazed by livestock or used agriculturally, for example special interest heath may be grazed by deer
- bracken, scrub or trees should not be allowed to expand on the site unless there is a specific justification for it, and it may be necessary to take steps to control them
- you should not apply fertiliser, slurry or farmyard manure
- you should not apply pesticides or herbicides except with prior agreement for activities such as spot treatment of scheduled weeds or non-native invasive species

Capital items that you may need to consider along with this option include:

- [Control of Scrub or Woody Vegetation – Primary Treatment – Light Vegetation](#)
- [Control of Scrub or Woody Vegetation – Primary Treatment – Intermediate and Heavy Vegetation](#)
- [Muirburn and Heather Cutting](#)
- [Primary Treatment of Bracken – Manual](#)
- [Primary Treatment of Bracken – Mechanised or Chemical](#)
- [Stock Fence](#)
- [Deer Fence](#)

[Previous versions](#)

[Previous versions of this page](#)