

Moorland

Introduction

Heather moorland is a semi-natural habitat as it has evolved under the influence of human activities, evolving since the start of clearance and grazing thousands of years ago. Dwarf heathers are the dominant plants of heather moorland. The actual mix of species is dependent on the soil, climate, altitude, grazing and competition between the species. Other plants associated with this habitat are grasses, ferns, lichens and liverworts. Typically moorland is found at altitudes between 200 and 700m and the plants grow to heights between 10 and 30cms. Heather moorland is very valuable for wildlife, its unique landscape qualities and its economic value in terms of sheep grazing and grouse shooting.

Range

Heather is found throughout Europe however heather dominated moorland is much more restricted with most of it found in the British Isles, in fact 75% of the world's remaining heather woodland is found in Britain. Heather moorland is recognised by the European Community as a habitat of international importance.

History

Heather grows well on both peat and acid soils. At the end of the last ice age woodland covered most of England and Wales. During the Stone Age people began to occupy the uplands but depended on a hunter-gatherer lifestyle. By 5000 BC Britain was much more densely populated and depended on farming that resulted in wholesale woodland clearance to provide grazing areas and space for growing crops. The soil on the hills was thin and soon became incapable of sustaining crops so the heather began to take over. Sheep would still have grazed there and the introduction of rabbits by the Romans ensured that larger plants did not overrun the heather.

Conservation

The long-term survival of heather moorland is dependent on land use and management. If left alone this habitat would be naturally succeeded by woodland so it is vital that it is grazed and there is a certain level of burning. However if an area of heather moorland is overstocked with sheep, the heather can be overgrazed. On lower areas the use of fertilisers have allowed farmers to convert heather moorland to arable uses. Burning can stop the invasion of grasses and ferns but burning has to be controlled in terms of the number of fires, their size, location and frequency.

Sheep prune the heather and keep it clear of snow in the winter. However the sheep have to be stopped from grazing for too long at any one place, which could destroy the heather.

Heather has to be kept young and prevented from growing into hard, woody stems by regular burning. This burning is carried out on a cycle between October and mid-April. Areas where the heather grows well may be burned every 7 years or so but where growth is less vigorous the burnings may only take place every 25 years. The burning has to be controlled so that the heather plant is burned, roots survive, the underlying peat remains cool and the seed, lying dormant in the ground, is 'shocked' into germinating quickly. Burning creates areas with different aged heathers, with the older plants providing cover and the newer shoots providing a good food source.

Bracken also has to be controlled as it can quickly overtake a moor growing at 5% every year. It kills other vegetation, is poisonous to sheep, the spores are

carcinogenic to both animals and humans, sheep ticks prefer bracken as a habitat which affects sheep, lambs, chicks, deer and hare. Bracken used to be mowed, dried and used as animal bedding but now the preferred method of control is spraying with a safe herbicide.