

Wales Grassland and Heathland Ecosystem Group Priority Action

Gower Commons Priority Action

Away from the coast the landscape of the Gower Peninsula is dominated by large open areas of common land. These range from the relatively flat expanse of Fairwood and Pengwern commons to the distinctive high sandstone ridges of Cefn Bryn, Rhossili down and Lanmadoc Hill.

These commons support extensive areas of lowland heath and associated marshy grasslands and mire communities. All the sites lie in close proximity to each other and some are well connected with Fairwood, Pengwern and Welsh Moor Commons essentially forming a continuous heathland/wetland complex. The commons are of particular interest for their heathland and wet grassland communities with intermediate and transitional forms of importance in the European context occurring together with nationally and regionally important plants. The international botanical significance of these commons is illustrated through their identification as an Important Plant Area (the Gower IPA). As such they represent the top 5% of the remaining heathland resource in the UK. Nationally and regionally important invertebrate species also occur, most notably the marsh fritillary butterfly *Euphydryas aurinia*. Welsh Moor supports the largest breeding population of the marsh fritillary in the former county of West Glamorgan.

Gower, is one of the few areas within lowland Wales where local farmers continue to maintain the traditional practices of commoning; grazing cattle, sheep and ponies. Nevertheless these grazing practices have changed with some of the commons now being very lightly stocked whilst others are heavily stocked particularly with sheep. Mixed grazing is still found on Gower although the combination of too few heavy animals (ponies and cattle) and too many sheep is having a negative impact on the vegetation and associated species. Plants of seasonally inundated pools and ditches, kept open by heavy grazing livestock, are especially threatened by this change to sheep grazing. Burning is also an issue on some commons with frequent repeated burning changing species composition and reducing structural heterogeneity. As a result vegetation in some areas is rank with tall leggy heather, dense tussocky purple moor-grass and impenetrable gorse whilst elsewhere grass is very closely cropped or the sward is dominated by a mat of close-sward *Agrostis curtisii*, probably as a result of frequent burning.

The Gower Tomorrow's Heathland Heritage Project and Gower Commons Initiative have had an enormous impact on the areas by improving infrastructure, carrying out practical land management such as scrub clearance and by facilitating better communications with local graziers. This work needs to be built on to encouraging graziers to continue to manage the commons as part of their agricultural system and to improve grazing and burning management to benefit the full range of BAP habitats and the species these support.

Action required:

1. Working with graziers to increase numbers of heavy stock where appropriate
2. Controlling burning through preparation and implementation of Burning Management Plans
3. Restoration of degraded *Molinia* dominated mires and grasslands
4. Scrub control and gorse management
5. Bracken control particularly where it is encroaching into areas of burnt heath
6. Restoration of ponds and ditches with historical records of S42 species

Priority Sites for Action

Rhossilli Down
Welsh Moor and Forest Common
Fairwood and Pengwern Commons

Other Key Sites

Cefn Bryn
Llanmadoc hill
Ryers and Hardings Down

Species Interest

Key Section 42 Species

Marsh fritillary	<i>Euphydryas aurinia</i>
Southern damselfly	<i>Coenagrion mercuriale</i>
Three-lobed water crowfoot	<i>Ranunculus tripartitus</i>
Chamomile	<i>Chamaemelum nobile</i>
Pale Dog-violet	<i>Viola lactea</i>

Other Section 42 Species

Narrow-bordered bee hawk-moth	<i>Hemaris tityus</i>
Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>
Adder	<i>Vipera berus</i>
Slow worm	<i>Anguis fragilis</i>
Grass snake	<i>Natrix natrix</i>
Brown hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>