

Habitat Action Plan: Upland Oak Woodland



1. Introduction

Upland oak woodland is characterised by a predominance of oak (most commonly sessile, but locally pendunculate) and birch in the canopy, with varying amounts of holly, rowan and hazel as the main understorey species.

The field layer varies according to soil type and the degree of grazing, these may be bluebell-bramble-fern communities through to grass and bracken dominated ones to healthy moss-dominated areas.

Most of these woodlands contain areas of alkaline or basic soils, often along streams or towards the base of slopes where much richer communities have developed. These areas may be represented by ash and elm in the canopy, more hazel in the understorey and a field layer comprising of dog's mercury, false brome, ramsons, enchanter's nightshade and tufted hair grass.

Upland oak woodland may also support a diverse variety of lichens and bryophytes and hold a distinctive breeding bird assemblage such as redstarts, wood warblers and spotted flycatchers. In general these woodlands are found in an upland landscape at relatively high altitude, but altitude is not the defining feature. Therefore there is no lower altitudinal limit at which this woodland can occur.

2. Current status

2.1 National

The extent of Upland Oak Woodland in the UK is believed to be between about 70,000 and 100,000 ha. It is found throughout the north and west of the UK; related woodland does occur on the continent, particularly in the more oceanic areas but the British and Irish examples are recognised internationally as important because of their extent and distinctive plant and animal communities. For some of these species Britain and Ireland hold a substantial part of the world/European population.

2.2 Local

Devon and Cornwall have approximately 2.2% and 6% ancient woodland cover respectively compared to East Sussex (10.6%) and Kent (8.5%). Devon is one of the least wooded counties in Britain. Upland semi-natural woodland has declined by 30-40% in area over the last 50 – 60 years through conversion to conifer woodland, clearance for development, creating rough grazing areas, agricultural grazing, lack of management and mismanagement.

2.3 SWLT

Sites that host upland oak woodland habitat	Designations
Burrator Reservoir, Yelverton, Devon	Dartmoor National Park
Wimbleball Lake, Dulverton, Somerset	Exmoor National Park
Wistlandpound Reservoir, Kentisbury, Devon	- Just outside of managed area

3. Legal status

National forestry policies include a presumption against the clearance of any broadleaved woodland for conversion to other land uses and seek to maintain the ecological interest of ancient semi-natural woodland. Felling licences will normally be required, if the woods are not managed under plans approved by the Forest Authority. Management of semi-natural woodlands, including upland oakwoods, has to be in accordance with guidelines published by the Forestry Authority to receive felling licences or grant-aid (UK BAP). Some older trees may have Tree Preservation Orders (TPO) imposed upon them and licences to fell may be required.

The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CRoW) has complimented the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 for the protection of species such as bats which are associated with ancient trees within this habitat.

Some sites that host Upland Oak Woodland have legal protection such as LNR, NNR, SSSI and/or SAC status.

4. Current factors affecting the habitat

- Loss of woodland to coniferous plantation woodland
- Over-grazing particularly cattle and sheep and wild herbivores such as deer and rabbits
- Lack of positive methods for grey squirrel control
- Invasion of non-native species resulting in total loss of associated plant communities. Most damaging are cherry laurel and rhododendron ponticum
- Woodland clearance for agriculture and development
- Lack of management leading to colonisation of sycamore and beech where not locally native
- Under management due to very low financial benefits (low timber quality)
- Air pollution and its effects on lower plant communities

5. SWLT Action plan objectives and targets

Objectives

- Record and maintain the extent of upland oak woodland of all known sites
- Sustainably manage upland oak woodland in a sensitive way in favour of oak-dominated character
- Restore historic upland oak woodlands that have been converted to other types of woodland i.e coniferous non-native plantations or, where appropriate other semi-natural habitats
- Create new upland oak woodland buffer zones and link fragmented woodland habitats by planting oak sapling and associated trees
- Gradually reduce coniferous woodland plantation and replace with broadleaved oak dominated woodland

Targets

- Initiate rehabilitation management of upland oak woodlands within SSSIs and SACs.
- Achieve favourable condition, or recovering condition, in all significant stands by 2012.
- Encourage appropriate management regimes intended to achieve favourable condition on all sites outside of SSSI and SAC designations by 2010.
- Wherever possible extend or link existing isolated woodland by creating wildlife corridors and increasing the flow of genetic diversity associated with isolated or fragmented habitats.
- Create new areas of upland oak woodland using planted natively sourced stock from existing sites and natural regeneration where appropriate by 2012.
- Reduce the extent of coniferous plantation woodland on all sites by 2012.

Current action

- Appropriate management of oak woodland at Wimbleball Lake, including selective thinning and felling of conifer plantation
- Appropriate management at Burrator Reservoir in favour of oak woodland

6. SWLT action plan

Action	Potential Partners	Target Date
Policy & Legislation		
1. Recognise areas of upland oak woodland of ancient origin and declare woodlands as CWS/LNR	Local Authorities / Wildlife Trusts	2011
Site Safeguard & Management		
2. Designate suitable areas of upland oak woodland as internal nature reserves, highlighting their importance through education, media and public awareness	SWW	2012
3. Implement management programme to control invasive species that are detrimental to upland oak woodland		2010 (on-going)
4. Use planting mixes of predominantly local provenance oak, where woodlands would benefit from restoration		2010 (on-going)
5. Expand the area of upland oak woodland linking together with wildlife corridors and extending woodland where possible	FCE, SWW	2012
6. Restore all appropriate coniferous plantations on ancient oak woodland sites back to predominantly oak woodland, and restore oak woodland where it has been degraded by invasive rhododendron		2010 (on-going)
Advisory		
1. Offer advice where appropriate on best practise on the restoration of upland oak woodland		On-going
Future Research & Monitoring		
1. Obtain quantitative data on the extent of upland oak woodland condition and assessment of all known sites to assist with the above targets		2010
Communications & Publicity		
1. Produce educational material		2009

7. Links with other action plans

- Spotted Flycatcher
- Common Dormouse
- Pipistrelle bat
- Lesser Horseshoe bat

8. Useful links

UK Biodiversity Action Plan for Upland Oak Woodland

<http://www.ukbap.org.uk/UKPlans.aspx?ID=1>

Regional, District, National Park & Local BAP's <http://www.biodiversitysouthwest.org.uk/>

South West Regional Biodiversity Partnership:

<http://www.swbiodiversity.org.uk/index.htm>

Status of Species and Habitat Report for Wet Woodland:

http://www.ukbap.org.uk/library/Reporting_pdfs/UKListID4_2002.pdf