

Views About Management

A statement of English Nature's views about the management of Gong Hill Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

This statement represents English Nature's views about the management of the SSSI for nature conservation. This statement sets out, in principle, our views on how the site's special conservation interest can be conserved and enhanced. English Nature has a duty to notify the owners and occupiers of the SSSI of its views about the management of the land.

Not all of the management principles will be equally appropriate to all parts of the SSSI. Also, there may be other management activities, additional to our current views, which can be beneficial to the conservation and enhancement of the features of interest.

The management views set out below do not constitute consent for any operation. English Nature's written consent is still required before carrying out any operation likely to damage the features of special interest (see your SSSI notification papers for a list of these operations). English Nature welcomes consultation with owners, occupiers and users of the SSSI to ensure that the management of this site conserves and enhances the features of interest, and to ensure that all necessary prior consents are obtained.

Management Principles

Dry lowland heath

Heathlands have been maintained for centuries on nutrient-poor acidic soils by a long history of traditional management using extensive livestock grazing and cutting. These uses depleted the thin acid soils of nutrients and kept the land mostly free of scrub and trees, which, together with natural variations in soil conditions and drainage have created conditions favouring a diversity of heathland habitats, including acid grassland and mire communities as well as dwarf shrub heath. Heathland supports the greatest diversity of plants and animals (including a diverse invertebrate fauna and a number of characteristic bird species) where management maintains the open nature of the heath and by promoting a varied structure of uneven-aged stands of native heathers and other characteristic plants. It is generally beneficial if all stages of the heather life cycle are present. Without such management heathland becomes progressively dominated by bracken, gorse and, on wet ground, purple moor grass tussocks. Eventually scrub and trees will invade. The precise management requirements and their intensity and timing will vary both between and within sites according to the needs of the different heathland interests present and differences in on-site conditions.

Low intensity grazing is a suitable means of managing dry heath. By feeding selectively in different areas and on different plants, free-roaming livestock help to maintain variation in the vegetation composition and structure. They can also suppress scrub encroachment and provide some light poaching to create small pockets of bare peat and sandy ground that are of benefit to a variety of specialised plants, invertebrates and reptiles. Sheep grazing is an acceptable method of management but cattle or hardy ponies may also be used, although care must be taken to avoid damage to the heather by trampling. An appropriate stocking rate should take into account local conditions and the timing and length of grazing, but an off-take of between 30-40% of the current growth increment is desirable.

Alternatively, cutting or mowing may be useful options where a mosaic of patches of heather of different ages is desired. The cut material should be removed to avoid nutrient accumulation on site and to allow the cut plants to re-sprout successfully. However, mowing may not be suitable on mire vegetation and on mature stands of dry heath of importance for rare reptiles. Prescribed burning can also be a useful tool for maintaining the structural diversity of some dry heathlands and for re-establishing areas of pioneer heath required by certain species, but special care is required when sensitive species are present. Burning must be used with caution, as inappropriate burning can be very damaging to both plant and animal communities and careful consideration should be given to the timing of the burn.

Management should ensure the predominantly open nature of the heath is maintained, but there is some benefit in retaining a few scattered individual trees, small clumps of Scots pine and birch and some small patches of scrub. For example, the maintenance of scattered mature Scots pine in undisturbed locations will provide suitable nest sites for hobbies. An element of native deciduous woodland fringing the heath may add to the conservation interest by providing habitat edge environments favoured by some heathland birds and invertebrates and mature oak is particularly valuable for these interests. A diverse woodland structure with some open space, some areas of dense understory, and an overstory of more mature trees is important. This may be achieved by grazing the woodland in conjunction with the heath, creating local mosaics of woodland and heath, with some scrub and young trees.

To benefit breeding and roosting nightjar, open ground adjacent to a woodland edge or within woodland clearings should be maintained. The open areas should consist of predominantly low vegetation (grass, heather) 20-60 cm tall with frequent bare areas (greater than 2 m²) for nesting and roosting. The presence of scattered trees and open scrub not exceeding 50% cover overall will provide suitable nesting habitat and song posts for nightjar.

Gorse requires active management to retain its heathland conservation value. Scattered stands with a bushy structure rather than large continuous blocks are of greater benefit to the characteristic bird and invertebrate species associated with gorse scrub. For example, Dartford warbler require areas of open heath (with less than 25 trees per hectare) with over 50% cover of mature heather (preferably over 30 cm tall) and patches of dense, compact, mature gorse bushes (0.5-3 m tall) to be maintained. Winter cutting of 'leggy' stands of gorse and the removal of cut material will maintain gorse at different stages of re-growth and avoid nutrient accumulation in the soil.

However, some additional management may be required to remove any dense bracken or scrub invasions or to control tree encroachment where this begins to impact on the open nature of the heath. This may be achieved either by mechanical control or manual cutting (depending on ground conditions) followed by the careful application of a suitable herbicide where necessary.

Streams and ponds may add considerably to the heathland interest by providing habitat for a range of specialised plants, amphibians and invertebrates. Careful maintenance of existing ponds to retain a mosaic of open water and marginal/submerged vegetation is usually acceptable practice. Where pond management is required, silt and plant material should only be removed from a portion of the pond at any one time, allowing sufficient time for recovery before other areas are dredged. Particular care should be taken to avoid habitat of conservation value when disposing of pond dredgings.

Although careful maintenance of existing ditches and drains is acceptable, the abandonment or deepening of ditches or drains should be avoided. In some instances it may be appropriate to restore natural drainage where this is possible.

Management should ensure that necessary measures are taken to control recreational and other activities that can be damaging to heathland habitats and species, such as fire-setting and vehicle scrambling. Suitable measures may include a system to allow for the effective control of fires, such as firebreaks, access for fire-fighting vehicles and emergency water, and the careful management of public access.

Cultivation and the application of pesticides (including the use of persistent veterinary products on livestock), fertilisers (including manures) and lime are usually damaging and should be avoided. Herbicides should also generally be avoided, although some types can be useful for the targeted control of certain invasive species.

Sand Lizard

Unshaded stands of mature, dry heather on south-facing slopes and banks provide ideal habitat for sand lizards. The provision and maintenance of similarly unshaded areas of bare, well-drained sand or sandy gravels on which sand lizards can bask and lay their eggs is also essential for maintaining suitable breeding habitat for the lizards. On some sites, it may be necessary to actively maintain sufficient areas of bare sand either by blading or turfing to clear patches of vegetation. Where populations of sand lizards are known to be present, any grazing should be of very low density (to minimise the impact of trampling on the animals and their eggs and causing changes to habitat structure) or excluded entirely where high population densities are known to occur. Encroaching bracken, scrub and trees should be controlled to avoid shading-out suitable habitat for sand lizards, though some scattered scrub can be of benefit. Most management operations should be restricted to early spring, late autumn and winter to minimise the risk of disturbance to sand lizards.