

Moorland of Nidderdale AONB

all T Bunney



a Curlew's nest



Grouse shooting provides the main revenue.

Nidderdale AONB covers an area of 603km² and a third of this is moorland. Moorland is defined as uncultivated upland areas often clad in heather. The AONB has some of the finest heather moorland in the country.

Throughout the world this type of habitat is rare - 75% of the world's heather moorland is found in Britain. Although they appear natural and wild, they are the result of man's activities. If left unmanaged, heather grows into a dense mass of long woody stems that supports very little wildlife and which has no grazing or economic value.

When the ice retreated after the most recent Ice Age the land in Nidderdale AONB was recolonised by plants and trees. Much of it reverted to woodland. But, as man became less of a hunter gatherer and more of a farmer he began to clear trees from areas of land so he could plant crops and keep livestock. However, in the highest areas the growing season was too short to grow crops. Here, succession of plant growth culminated in heather and other relatively low-growing hardy plants with a few trees (the high altitude restricts the tree types which are able to grow here).

Moorland habitat is managed to maintain the heather growth. This is done primarily to sustain the population of red grouse and to provide grazing for sheep. A programme of rotational burning, between October and April, inhibits any reversion to woodland and scrub vegetation and creates a patchwork of bare ground, young and mature stands of heather together with other dwarf shrubs like bilberry and crowberry. Burning is done to maintain the supply of young, new heather shoots which are the staple food of adult grouse.

The grouse population is maintained and encouraged for the sport of grouse shooting. Although, at first, this may seem odd (as the grouse is an internationally-protected species) the process is closely monitored and grouse shooting has become vital to pay for the management of heather moors both for grouse and other birds and for other wildlife while providing local employment. Grouse shooting provides the means and incentive to manage the moors sustainably for the long-term for the benefit of a wide range of other wildlife.

Most of the actively-managed heather moorlands in the British Isles are privately owned providing the necessary focus to continually manage and

preserve them. Grousemoor owners and tenants take financial responsibility by employing keepers, beaters and other staff to manage the land.

Heather moorland is an almost unique habitat of international importance and one which is still under threat. It will only survive with the continued management funded primarily by grouse shooting. It is of huge value for landscape, historical and wildlife conservation and associated recreation.

At least 46 bird species occur regularly on heather moorland to feed and/or breed. Red grouse is a small stocky bird with distinctive red/brown plumage, white-feathered legs and bright red flashes over the eyes. It only lives on heather moorland and in areas where the temperature drops significantly in winter.

The merlin is one of the smallest birds of prey. Found on moorland it feeds on small birds and mammals.

Wading birds are regular summer visitors to the moors where they breed. Species such as golden plover, curlew and lapwing can be sighted. They feed on insects, which are attracted to the heather in large numbers, and on grubs and worms found in the soft, peaty soil.

Heather produces a lot of nectar and is a favourite with bumble, honey and solitary bees. Attracted too are butterflies such as the green hairstreak and small copper, but the most visually impressive insect found here in April is the emperor moth.

The main plant species on the moor is heather. There are three main types of heather: ling, bell and crossed-leaved. Heather-covered moorlands look stunning, especially in August and September when in full, purple bloom.

Other plants found on Nidderdale AONB's moorlands include sphagnum moss, cotton grass, bilberry and the insect-eating sundew.



Cotton grass

Variations in the heather suit different species. The red grouse, merlin and short-eared owl nest amongst the taller heather, where the stems provide them with cover, whereas the golden plover is often found nesting on the newly burnt more open areas. Lapwing and curlew will only nest where the vegetation is short so this is often at the fringe of the moorland as it opens out into farmland. Other wading birds such as snipe and redshank nest in the wet and boggy areas.

The moorland landscape varies to some extent from the slightly lower areas which are dotted with farms, drystone walls and the odd tree to the high, wilderness areas of clear open moorland. The moorland stretches along the high plateaux of the land and stops as the valleys extend into fields and woodlands.

The moors hold a link to our history as the nature of the untamed land means early monastic tracks and even prehistoric burial grounds have remained unchanged.

The open landscape away from the hustle and bustle of life attracts visitors to the moorland areas. The CROW Act 2000 (Countryside Rights of Way) has given people the opportunity to explore these areas. The Moorland Visitors Code has been drawn up in recognition of the fact that we have responsibilities that go with enjoyment of these magnificent and wild places. The code says:



- Be safe: plan ahead and follow any signs
- Keep dogs under close control
- Prevent uncontrolled moorland fires
- Protect plants and animals, and take your litter home
- Leave gates and property as you find them
- Consider other people