

Grazing Regime Evaluation Case Study:

Site 3 - North Pennines

- 276 ha of degraded blanket bog
- Restoration by decreased stocking rate of year-round sheep grazing



Background

This site is part of an RSPB reserve, which comprises 5,000 ha of moorland, upland farmland and woodland. The area supports nationally important breeding populations of merlin as well as breeding golden plover, dunlin, curlew, black grouse and hen harriers. The site is also in the North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, part of an SSSI, North Pennines Special Protection Area, and candidate SAC.

The site comprises 276 ha mainly of blanket bog, much of which has been degraded due to past heavy grazing by sheep. Before 2001, it was heavily stocked at 2 - 3 ewes ha⁻¹ (<0.45 lu ha⁻¹). In the following two years it was not grazed due to stocking restrictions imposed by the Foot and Mouth disease epidemic.

The current grazing regime of year-round sheep at 0.06 lu ha⁻¹ was introduced in 2004. Since then there has been some recovery of blanket bog vegetation, including dwarf shrubs.

Habitat condition assessment

The blanket bog (276 ha) is in favourable condition with respect to invasive and non-native species, browsing levels, and damage from drainage or burning. However, the site fails at 25% of sample points to meet the criterion of presence of five blanket bog indicator species. In addition, cover of these indicator species is less than the required 50% at half of the sample points. Disturbed, bare ground due to stock was noted at one sample point. There were signs of previous peat erosion at 40% of sample points but this appeared to be recovering through redeposition or revegetation. Browsing levels were above the threshold of 33% of dwarf shrub shoots browsed at only one sample point.

Where present, *Sphagnum* spp. were intact, with no evidence of damage by stock noted.

Farm business and livestock

Current grazing regime:

Sheep @ 0.06 lu ha⁻¹ (Scottish Blackface).

Sheep are grazed year round except when removed for lambing and tupping. The current regime has only been adopted recently and details of lambing percentages and sales are not yet available.

Current area based payment is Countryside Stewardship Scheme.

Other Management

Cessation of burning, which was previously carried out.

Considerable restoration work has been carried out in the RSPB reserve, including grip blocking on steep slopes, cutting of *Calluna*, and use of Geojute mats seed introduction to assist re-vegetation of eroded areas.

Shooting, recreation and landscape

There is no shooting or associated management carried out on the site, although this is to be reviewed. Public access is used only very moderately.

Landscape is heterogeneous in appearance with no sharp habitat boundaries. Walls and site boundaries are intact. The flowering *Eriophorum* spp. is visually striking. There has been little flowering of *Calluna* in the past although this is gradually recovering.