

COMMON LAND AND WILDLIFE



The wildlife of common land has developed following centuries of traditional grazing on stable, unploughed soils, free from chemical input.

Commons support over 80 types of habitat, ranging from coastal grazing marsh, ancient wood-pasture and chalk downland to upland moors. They support a wider diversity of wildlife than any other category of British farmland.





Because common land is found in nearly all areas and habitats, from the remotest hills to the edges of cities, it hosts a remarkable variety of plants and animals. A high proportion has national or international designations because of its importance for wildlife.



Common land supports significant areas of wet and dry heath, acid grassland and bog, much of which is associated with moors and higher ground. A high proportion of all surviving lowland heathland and chalk downland is common, which has protected it from ploughing.

Heathland commons support internationally important populations of birds like nightjar, Dartford warbler and woodlark. Many Welsh and upland English commons, together with the Scottish grazings, are important for waders, such as snipe, lapwing, curlew and golden plover, and birds-of-prey like merlin and hen harrier, all of which are species of conservation concern.





- More than one third of all British common land is nationally important for its wildlife.
- Much of the world's machair – flower-rich coastal grassland on shell sand – is found on Scottish common grazings. These have the second highest densities of breeding wading birds in Europe.
- Cumbrian commons have over 700 flowering plants recorded, including nine orchids.
- Devon commons support 30 species of butterflies, including high brown, marsh and pearl-bordered fritillaries.
- Some 45% of common land in Wales is designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest for its wildlife.
- Over 20 species of bogmoss (Sphagnum) on common land play important roles in water supply and flood control.
- Internationally important wood-pastures with massive veteran trees like the New Forest, derive from centuries of common grazing.
- Welsh commons support the nationally rare chough, a bird once on the verge of extinction in Britain.
- In England half of all common land is important for wildlife on a European scale.



The biological interest of common land is dependent on people continuing to exercise their common rights to graze domestic stock at appropriate levels.

Biodiversity on many important sites in the lowlands, and parts of Scotland suffers from undergrazing, often leading to major changes in vegetation structure and soil. Re-establishment of grazing after commoning has ceased provides one of the greatest of all modern conservation headaches. Hence the long-term survival of thriving commoning communities capable of maintaining grazing at levels appropriate for the benefit of plants and animals, is critical to the conservation of wildlife.



Keeping commons alive by active grazing

www.foundationforcommonland.org.uk

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Our vision is of thriving commoning communities across Great Britain and beyond making real contributions to economic, cultural and environmental wellbeing

