

## Information Sheet 2C: Characteristic habitats of the Meldon area

### Upland Oak woodland

Upland Oak woodland above 250m, dominated by oak, is a habitat of conservation concern in Devon as well as being listed in the *UK Biodiversity Action Plan*. Upland semi-natural woods have declined by about 30-40% in area over the last 50-60 years as a result of replanting, mainly with introduced conifers, clearance for quarries or other developments in some areas and from conversion to rough grazing. Woodlands are also under threat from the spread of invasive species such as rhododendron, cherry laurel and Japanese knotweed which shade out the native ground flora.

Dartmoor has one of the main concentration of upland oak woods in the UK. One of the finest examples is Black-a-Tor Copse National Nature Reserve upstream of Meldon Reservoir in the West Okement River valley. The international value of Dartmoor's oak woodlands has been recognized in the designation of South Dartmoor Woods Special Area of Conservation under the European Habitats Directive.

Upland oakwoods may be rich in ferns, mosses, lichens and liverworts as well as holding rare breeding birds such as the wood warbler, redstart and pied flycatcher. Black a Tor Copse is the only true upland oak woodland in the area.



Black a Tor Copse NNR © Petra Tilley

#### **More information on Upland oak woodland:**

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

Devon BAP - <http://www.devon.gov.uk/dbap-land-oak.pdf>

Dartmoor BAP - <http://www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk/au-bap8.pdf>

Woodland Trust – <http://www.woodland-trust.org.uk/>

## Moorland

Moorland is heathland above 300m and usually comprises a mosaic of wet and dry heaths, scrub, grass moor, bracken, valley mires and blanket bogs. Typical moorland vegetation consists of a range of dwarf shrubs such as heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*), cross-leaved heath (*Erica tetralix*), bell heather (*Erica cinerea*) and, in the south and west of Britain, western gorse (*Ulex gallii*). All these species grow on thin mineral soils or peat. Moorland is home to a variety of species of birds, insects and reptiles (see Dartmoor BAP) such as red grouse, skylark, curlew, golden plover, dunlin, ring ouzel, buzzard, Dartford warbler, wheatear, whinchat, stonechat, lapwing, snipe, high brown fritillary, pearl-bordered fritillary and keeled skimmer.



Moorland © DNPA

### **More information on Moorland:**

UKBAP - <http://www.ukbap.org.uk/UKPlans.aspx?ID=16>

Dartmoor BAP - <http://www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk/au-bap7.pdf>

## Rivers and streams

Rivers and streams are vital parts of our natural environment both for the characteristic wildlife that they support and the water they carry. Water, which is the basis for all life, human and non-human alike, is vital and a healthy aquatic environment is key to healthy ecosystems.

Rivers and their valleys also provide important wildlife corridors along which animals and plants move to new areas of habitat. Further down river floodplains provide a vital function of holding floodwaters to reduce the severity of floods and to delay the onset of flooding further downstream. Floodplains are often associated with areas of high wildlife value, including wetlands, reedbeds, wet meadows and estuaries.

Dartmoor rivers are typically fairly short and steep with rocky or gravelly beds which provide high-oxygen environments for salmon, trout and a diversity of invertebrates. Birds like dippers and kingfishers are relatively common. Otters are also frequent around the periphery of the high moor.



West Oakment River © DNPA

### ***More information on Rivers and Streams:***

Devon BAP - <http://www.devon.gov.uk/dbap-freshwater-rivers.pdf>

Dartmoor BAP - <http://www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk/au-bap9.pdf>

Environment Agency - [http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/subjects/waterres/?lang=\\_e](http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/subjects/waterres/?lang=_e)



## Blanket bogs

Blanket bog is a globally restricted peatland habitat confined to cool, wet, typically oceanic climates but is one of the most extensive semi-natural habitats in the UK and ranges from Devon in the south to the Flow Country in north of Scotland, although it is mainly confined to the west and north of the British Isles. Blanket bog peat accumulates because of the very slow decomposition of *Sphagnum* mosses and other vegetation under cool, waterlogged conditions. It can develop on slopes of up to 30°. Studies indicate that most blanket peat development began 5000-6000 years ago, but some could have started as much as 15000 years ago. Some areas of blanket bog started to form following clearance of the original forest cover by early humans.

Typical blanket mire species, such as heather, cross-leaved heath, deer grass, cotton grass species and several species of the bog moss *Sphagnum* occur throughout much of the range of the habitat, with other species often being more localised. On Dartmoor blanket bogs are extensive.



Blanket Bog © DNPA

### **More information on Blanket Bogs:**

UKBAP - <http://www.ukbap.org.uk/UKPlans.aspx?ID=21>

## Pits and quarries

Pits, quarries and cuttings are listed in the *Devon Biodiversity Action Plan* as habitats of conservation concern in Devon. *Action for Wildlife: Dartmoor Biodiversity Action Plan* also has a specific action plan for rocks (including tors, clutter slopes, quarries, caves, mines and buildings). The numerous working pits and quarries in Devon are used for the extraction of a variety of minerals and are of great importance to the local and national economy. The pits and quarries are also of importance for the geological features that they expose and the varied wildlife that they support. Uncommon bird species of such as peregrine falcon and raven may use quarry edges to nest, greater and lesser horseshoe bats roost in cave-like quarries and reptiles such as common lizard and adder may be found basking in sunny areas in many quarries. Most quarries in the County are disused, however, and as well as providing nationally and regionally important geological exposures, many have become havens for wildlife that has often been all but excluded from intensively farmed or manicured landscapes and townscapes.



Meldon Aplite Quarry © DNPA

### **More information on pits and quarries:**

Devon BAP - <http://www.devon.gov.uk/dbap-land-pits.pdf>

Dartmoor BAP - <http://www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk/au-bap13.pdf>

## Rhôs pasture

Species rich purple moor grass and rush pasture grassland – also known as Rhôs pasture - is one of Devon's most important habitats and as a consequence it is listed in the *Action for Wildlife: Dartmoor Biodiversity Action Plan* as well as *Devon Biodiversity Action Plan* as a key habitat of conservation concern. It is also listed in the *UK Biodiversity Action Plan* (where it is listed as purple moor grass and rush pasture). Devon contains approximately 80% of the extent of the habitat in England, and approximately 8% of that in the UK as a whole. Rhôs pastures are a priority for nature conservation because they are highly susceptible to agricultural modification and reclamation throughout their range.

Perhaps the species for which Dartmoor's Rhôs pastures are most important is the marsh fritillary butterfly, which is declining across Europe and has a national stronghold on Dartmoor. The butterfly is listed within the EC Habitats Directive requiring special site protection. Another European protected species discovered on Rhôs Pasture on Dartmoor in 1995 is the southern damselfly. Further nationally scarce and rapidly declining invertebrates of Dartmoor's Rhôs pastures are narrow-bordered bee hawkmoth and double line. Dormice are frequently found within scrub and woodland that border Rhôs pasture on Dartmoor.

In the Meldon area, Rhôs pasture habitat occurs in the nearby Okehampton Park Flush SSSI as well as other land in private ownership to the west.



Rhôs Pasture © DNPA

### **More information on Rhos pasture:**

UKBAP - <http://www.ukbap.org.uk/UKPlans.aspx?ID=17>

Devon BAP - <http://www.devon.gov.uk/dbap-land-rhos.pdf>

Dartmoor BAP - <http://www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk/au-bap10.pdf>

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