

MONTANE HABITATS

High level habitat on mountain tops in Cumbria. Its extent and species composition are very likely to suffer as a result of climate change.

UK Priority Habitats covered by this statement:

[Mountain heaths and willow scrub](#)

Cumbria Biodiversity Action Plan Habitats covered by this statement:

None

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Montane heath, Skiddaw © Stephen Hewitt

Description

The montane zone lies above the altitudinal limit for tree growth. In Cumbria this tree line is at around 600m, but varies according to local climatic conditions, so there can be considerable variation between individual hills.

Montane heath and grassland covers most of the vegetated summits and slopes in the montane zone. The soils here are generally shallow and stony and usually sharply draining. The vegetation is characterised by moderately short swards with a mix of grasses, dwarf-shrubs, lichens and mosses. Species characteristic of this habitat include Woolly Fringe-moss, lichens, Stiff sedge, Bilberry, Crowberry, Dwarf Willow, Alpine Lady's mantle, Wavy Hair-grass and Viviparous Fescue.

True montane willow scrub is not found in Cumbria, but a few scattered plants of Downy Willow can be found on the cliffs of Helvellyn and may represent the remnants of a previously more extensive habitat.

This habitat supports a unique invertebrate fauna, which includes the moth *Catoptria furcatellus*, the Northern Pill Beetle, the rove beetle *Geodromicus longipes* and the Northern Dart moth. Both Dotterel and Golden Plover breed on montane heath and grassland, though the former are very rare in Cumbria. Several uncommon species are specialists of snow beds, including the mosses *Kiaeria starkei* and *Ditrichum zonatum* var. *zonatum* and the ground beetle *Nebria nivalis*.

Distribution and Extent

Montane heath and grassland is found on the summits of many of the high fells of the Lake District, including Grasmoor, Skiddaw, and the Buttermere and Ennerdale fells; and is also found on Cross Fell and a few other Pennine hill tops.

Conservation Issues

This habitat is severely affected by both historic and current overgrazing, including trampling and dunging, by sheep, such that in many areas most of the characteristic plant species, such as *Racomitrium lanuginosum* (Woolly Fringe-moss) and lichens, are largely absent from the vegetation, leaving swards with species compositions similar to sub-montane grasslands. Examples of montane heath and grassland unmodified by heavy grazing are extremely rare, if not entirely absent, in Cumbria. Overgrazing has resulted in the loss of characteristic montane species.

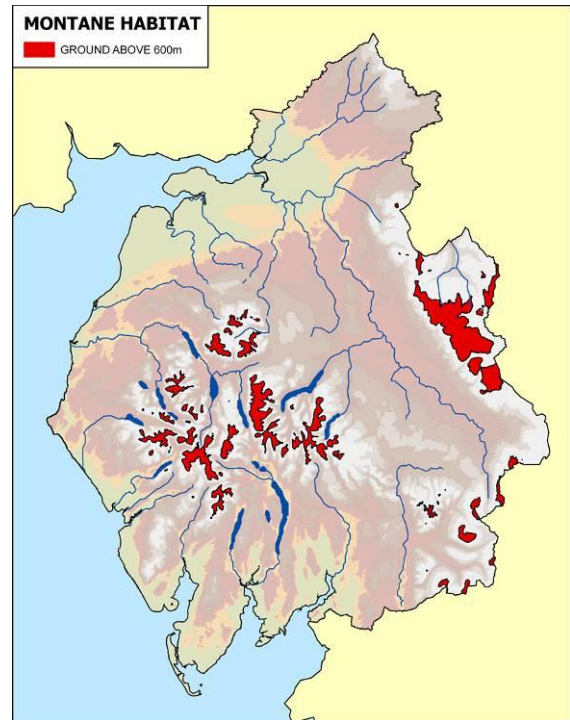
Recreational pressure can cause vegetation change and soil erosion along paths and tracks similar to that resulting from overgrazing. On some of the most popular Lake District fells montane vegetation has been lost over large areas of the summits with little more than bare stony soil remaining, a situation which has resulted from a combination of trampling by walkers and sheep grazing.

Atmospheric pollution is also a significant factor affecting montane vegetation, resulting in nitrogen deposition on fell tops and subsequent changes in vegetation many tens or hundreds of miles from the source of the pollution.

Climate change, including post glacial warming, is affecting the species composition and vertical distribution of this habitat.

Planning Considerations

- This habitat is unlikely to be affected by planning issues; there is a small possibility that it could be affected by wind farm developments but these are most likely on hills below 600m.
- Any development that may impact upon montane habitat would require an assessment of the likely effects on the habitat and, as necessary, appropriate protection and mitigation measures.
- Most good quality montane habitat is found within SAC/SSSIs, however, some Lake District summits with good montane heath and grassland also occur outside the SSSI system.
- Any development that may have a significant effect, directly or indirectly, on a Special Area of Conservation would need to be assessed under the Habitats Regulations.



Distribution of montane habitat in Cumbria (provided for illustrative purposes only)

Enhancement Opportunities

- There are limited opportunities for enhancing this habitat within the planning system, however any opportunity to reduce grazing of this habitat would be beneficial.

Habitat Targets

- As yet no habitat targets have been prepared

Key Species

The following Key Species could benefit from enhancement of this habitat, or be negatively impacted upon by inappropriate developments on or near this habitat:

Downy Willow

Dotterel

Golden Plover

Northern Dart moth

Further Information

[JNCC montane grasslands and heaths information page](#)

[SNH montane scrub information page](#)

[UK Biodiversity Partnership, Species and Habitats Review 2007](#), Mountain heaths and willow scrub, Summary Statement p102, Habitat Proposal p133

[Habitats of principal importance in England](#) Section 41 NERC Act list

[RSPB managing habitats for wildlife](#)

[Environmental Stewardship](#) and [HLS handbook](#)

Contacts

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- **Cumbria Wildlife Trust**, Tel: 01539 816300, mail@cumbriawildlifetrust.org.uk

Current Action in Cumbria

- The Environmental Stewardship Scheme run by Natural England provides financial incentives to manage land in a way that is sympathetic to its nature conservation interest with moorland options applicable to this habitat.