



The  
**Heather  
Trust**

# Annual Review

2024

[www.heathertrust.co.uk](http://www.heathertrust.co.uk)



## UK WILDFIRE CONFERENCE

Landscape management and  
community preparation is key.  
p. 7-8

## SAVING THE BLACK GROUSE

Problems and  
emerging opportunities.  
p. 15-16

## TICK TALKS

The growing challenge of tick  
management and diseases.  
p. 21-22



# Peatland ACTION

## Restoring Scotland's peatlands for the many benefits to people and to nature.

Climate change is the most serious threat to Scotland's environment.  
Early action is central to overcoming these impacts.  
Peatland restoration offers a solution.



Helping us to reduce the effects of climate change by storing carbon.



Regulating water flow and quality, improving flood management, fisheries and source water supplies.



Benefiting farming and sporting practices e.g. the abundance of invertebrates on which grouse feed.



Internationally important habitats, home to rare and often unique plants, invertebrates and birds.



Restoring  
Scotland's Peatlands  
Ath-stèidheachadh  
Talamh Mònach  
na h-Alba

We provide bespoke advice on restoration management and funding.

Contact us: [peatlandaction@nature.scot](mailto:peatlandaction@nature.scot)  
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# President's foreword

## DAVY MCCRACKEN, PRESIDENT

It is great to see this Annual Review highlighting that the Trust is back to being very proactive now that Katrina Candy is in place as our UK Director.

All of the Trust's work is excellent, but there are a number of articles in the Review that particularly resonate with me.

I was Co-Chair of the Working for Waders Initiative from its inception in 2016 - by Scotland's Moorland Forum and NatureScot - until I stepped down at the end of 2023.

So it is great to see that the Nest Camera project has gone from strength-to-strength and I am looking forward to adding the report from the initial years of the project to my Christmas reading-list.

As you may also know, my day-job is being head of SRUC's 2,200 ha upland research and demonstration farm near Crianlarich.

Twenty five years ago, we planted about 250 ha

of mountain woodland in one of our hill glens, with 40 ha planted in a steep gorge having established very well over the intervening years.

As a result, we now have black grouse back on the farm, making use of the gorge to breed and feed in and re-utilising the historic leks on the neighbouring moorland.

Admittedly they are only back in small numbers, but nevertheless our moorland edge management has played a part in helping restore black grouse distribution in west Perthshire.

And, as David Baines points out, if more hill farmers did something similar then perhaps black grouse could at least be saved.

Finally, I am really pleased that the Trust has established the Heather Futures project. It is likely to make sombre reading as the scale of loss of heather moorland over the decades becomes clearer.

Nevertheless, it will also provide a firm platform for the Trust to build upon when advocating for appropriate policies and practices to enhance the remaining open moorland habitats across the UK.

*D. D. McCracken*

## Office Bearers



**CHAIR**  
Viv Gill



**VICE-CHAIR**  
Colin Shedden

**PRESIDENT**  
Professor Davy McCracken

# Chair's review of the year

## VIV GILL, CHAIR OF TRUSTEES



Welcome to this year's Annual Review from the Heather Trust.

It is a pleasure to look back on 2024, a year where we have re-set and clarified our vision under the directorship of our new UK Director, Katrina Candy.

Katrina's appointment in January this year coincided with a shift in our work with Scotland's Moorland Forum,

following changes to funding from NatureScot. With less pressure on the Trust to provide this service, we have been able to look more broadly at what we do across the UK and to ensure that we are prioritising all aspects of our work.

From running member events on bracken control, to commencing vital research on the change in extent of moorland habitat in the UK

and staging a highly successful UK Wildfire Conference, our activities have been extensive and various. More on our accomplishments within this Review. Alongside this our team have had a presence at several key events including the Royal Highland Show and both the Scottish and English Game Fairs.

Our Annual General Meeting was this year held online on 11 September, to which all members were invited. Notably, Andreas Heinemeyer was appointed a new Member of the Board of Trustees and Malcolm Hay stepped down at Vice-President - more on both within this publication. For your information, the minutes from the AGM are now available to view on the events page of our website.

Our heather moorland has such a deep meaning to so many people, and yet it is increasingly let down by competing interests and a lack of any coherent policy. It is more important than ever that we promote the importance of these beloved landscapes. Your support for The Heather Trust helps our work to ensure our much-loved moorlands and uplands continue to thrive. Thank you for your continued support.

*Viv Gill*

## BOARD OF TRUSTEES



Robert Benson



Hamish Waugh



Roger S Burton



George Dodds



Richard Cooke



Dr. Emily Taylor



Andreas Heinemeyer



# The Heather Trust updates

## Our brand and website refresh

Earlier this year we undertook a brand refresh to better reflect the Trust’s forward-thinking and holistic view of modern resilient moorlands.

The new logo has been applied to print and digital assets and has been a successful refresh of our corporate identity, which sits well alongside our contemporaries.

The next stage of our brand update will be our website which is currently under construction and due to go live in the new year. The new site will be easy to navigate, aesthetically pleasing and host a wealth of information that our site visitors have come to expect. It will also incorporate an e-commerce functionality and a reading room which will provide access to reports, research, news items and social media posts.

## Farewell to Clara

Clara Jackson (*pictured right*) has been an integral and valued member of The Heather Trust team for more than 14 years but has decided to conclude her time with us at the end of 2024.

Clara was initially employed as the membership secretary and went on to adopt various other roles, including auction administrator and bookkeeper. She has worked with three of the charity’s Directors and during that time has ably supported each in the delivery of our charitable objectives.

While continuing her part-time role with a land agency in Dumfries, Clara hopes to now have more time to deal with the administrative tasks associated with her family farm business ‘during daylight hours rather than sat at a computer at 10pm at night!’

We wish Clara the very best and pass on our sincere thanks for all her hard work over the years. Simultaneously, we are delighted to welcome Jennifer Graham as our new finance and administration officer.

## A warm welcome to Chloe



We are looking forward in the new year to welcome on board our new Marketing, Digital & Events Manager, Chloe Thornton.

With over a decade of combined professional and personal experience in the rural sector, Chloe brings a deep understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing upland landscapes and the communities they support.

Professionally, Chloe has held roles at GWCT Scotland and Country Sport Scotland, where she successfully delivered strategic initiatives to enhance engagement, drive income growth, and increase organisational impact. Projects have included leading the rebranding of Country Sport Scotland, launching the Scottish Country Sports Tourism Awards, and transforming GWCT Scotland’s communications strategy, which resulted in a 200% increase in digital engagement.

Chloe lives on a Highland Perthshire estate and has always been immersed in the landscapes she works to support. In her spare time, she enjoys being on the hill, hiking, running, or working her dogs, which gives her first-hand appreciation of upland ecosystems and the role they play in our rural way of life. This personal connection complements her professional expertise, equipping Chloe with the skills to contribute meaningfully to The Heather Trust’s mission.

“I am thrilled to join The Heather Trust as Marketing, Digital & Events Manager. With a shared passion for sustainable upland management, I look forward to building on the Trust’s successes, strengthening connections with members and stakeholders, and growing its reach and impact. Together, we can continue to champion the vital role of our uplands and ensure their future resilience for generations to come.”



# Retiring Vice President

Our Vice-President, Malcolm Hay stepped down from the position at this year’s AGM. Here, our Vice-Chair Colin Shedden reflects on Malcolm’s continuous and valued support of the Trust:

“Malcolm’s father had been a long-term supporter of The Heather Trust and Malcolm himself joined the Board in 2003, soon becoming Vice Chair. He took over as Chairman when Rob Dick stood down in 2007. Seven years later when he himself stood down as Chair, he said it had been an honour to represent the Trust in that capacity.

“The Trust has been lucky to have someone with Malcolm’s insight into moorland issues and banking background. He ensured that the Trust remained in a stable financial position and also saw the start of an ongoing period of moorland restoration as the link between heather, peat and carbon sequestration had been established.

“He saw the Trust take on the secretariat of Scotland’s Moorland Forum and the new drive to see moorland play its role in improved ecosystem services. He welcomed new interest

and investment in driven grouse shooting, the establishment of the Scottish Wildfire Forum and Wildlife Estates Scotland Award. He repeatedly highlighted that the Trust was the only organisation that had a true sense of balance and perspective.

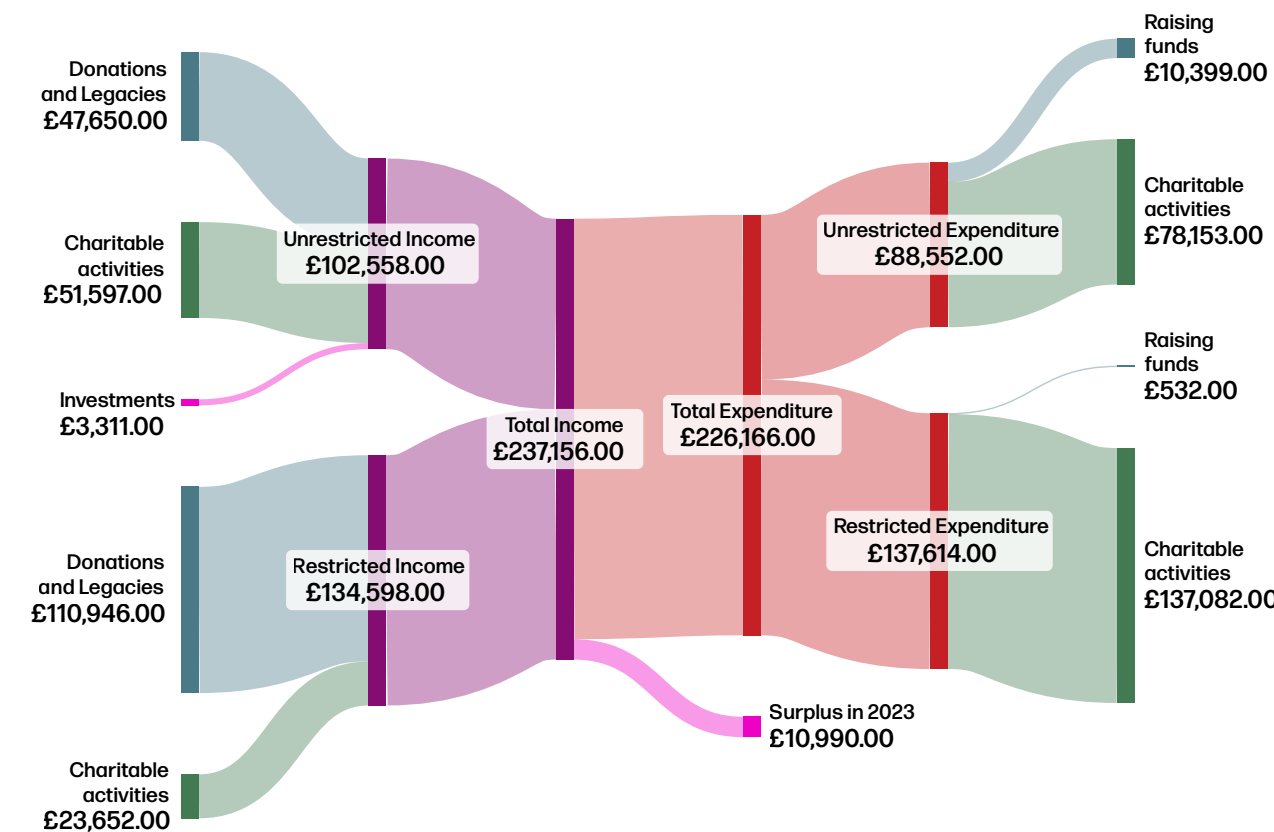
“He oversaw the establishment of the Bracken Control Group after the withdrawal Asulam in 2012. In 2013, he saw the establishment of the Golden Plover Award and in 2014, when handing over the Chair to Anthony Braithwaite, he stated that the Award and Wildlife Estates Scotland sent an important message about modern conservation practises.

“He left the chairmanship with the Trust having made £50,000 in its Country Market & Sporting Sale, and Malcolm not only donated many sporting items for the sale over the years (and continues to do so) but also bid enthusiastically. Malcolm now stands down as Vice President, a role he passionately held for the last 10 years, and the Trust will be expressing our immense gratitude to Malcolm through a small but appropriate gift.”



# Financial headlines for 2023

As presented at our AGM on 11th September 2024





# Separating fact from fiction

In this article, *Andreas Heinemeyer* uncovers the many unfounded claims around heather and its management on UK upland peatlands - and the need for separating fact from fiction.

In a publication back in 2017<sup>1</sup>, several authors questioned 10 common assumptions frequently made about peatlands “in the academic literature, practitioner reports and the popular media which are either ambiguous or in some cases incorrect”.

Since then, I noticed that heather management on peatlands has become an ever more contentious issue, with many misleading, unfounded or even false claims made on either side of an argument (I highlighted a few in my recent talk at the Wildfire2024 conference in Aberdeen organised by The Heather Trust). Therefore, myself and

co-authors recently submitted a paper “Prescribed heather burning on peatlands: A review of ten key claims made about heather management impacts and implications for future UK policy” in which we critically examine 10 claims frequently made by the UK governmental, non-governmental organisations, popular media and scientists in relation to the impacts of prescribed burning of heather on peatlands. For this article I propose to introduce those 10 claims (in no particular order) and provide a short response to each. I hope that this summary will inform any future discussions or debates you might have.

## 1 Prescribed heather burning causes peat carbon loss and contributes to the climate crisis

This remains unsubstantiated, too generic and is site and time dependent. Very few studies, which are often too short (not capturing a full management cycle) and suffer from confounding factors (e.g., drainage) and do not measure the entire carbon budget (e.g. charcoal).

## 2 Fire and heather dominance are a result of recent management changes.

This also remains unsubstantiated, too generic and several peat core studies provide strong evidence (heather fragments or pollen and charcoal layers over thousands of years) to reject this statement.

## 3 Prescribed heather burning reduces Sphagnum moss abundance and peat-formation.

This is too generic as recovery after fire and site condition needs to be considered, several studies show an increase in Sphagnum cover and ‘peat-forming species’ is ill-defined terminology (heather also forms peat but Sphagnum can enhance peat formation).

## 4 Rewetting reduces heather dominance and thus protects peatlands against wildfire.

This remains unsubstantiated for UK blanket bogs with no adequate data or models to support this statement and clearly depends on a site’s potential wetness (depending on topography, temperature, rainfall), with heather potentially growing better in moist conditions (reducing spring/summer water stress), thus increasing fuel loads.

## 5 Cessation of heather burning results in wetter peat, less heather cover and no need to burn.

Again, this is too generic, site and time dependent with no adequate data to support this statement. Very likely high water loss from unmanaged, taller heather will dry out peat and increase fuel loads, which has been shown in several studies.

## 6 A third of global heather moorland is found in the UK.

Almost certainly wrong (i.e. 75%) due to ill-defined habitat and lack of consistent data/maps but likely much smaller but still a considerable proportion.

## 7 Prescribed heather burning causes water colour and quality issues.

This remains unclear, due to a lack of robust data to support/negate this statement, often studies suffer from confounding factors (e.g. drainage being the cause of issues).

## 8 Prescribed heather burning causes flooding.

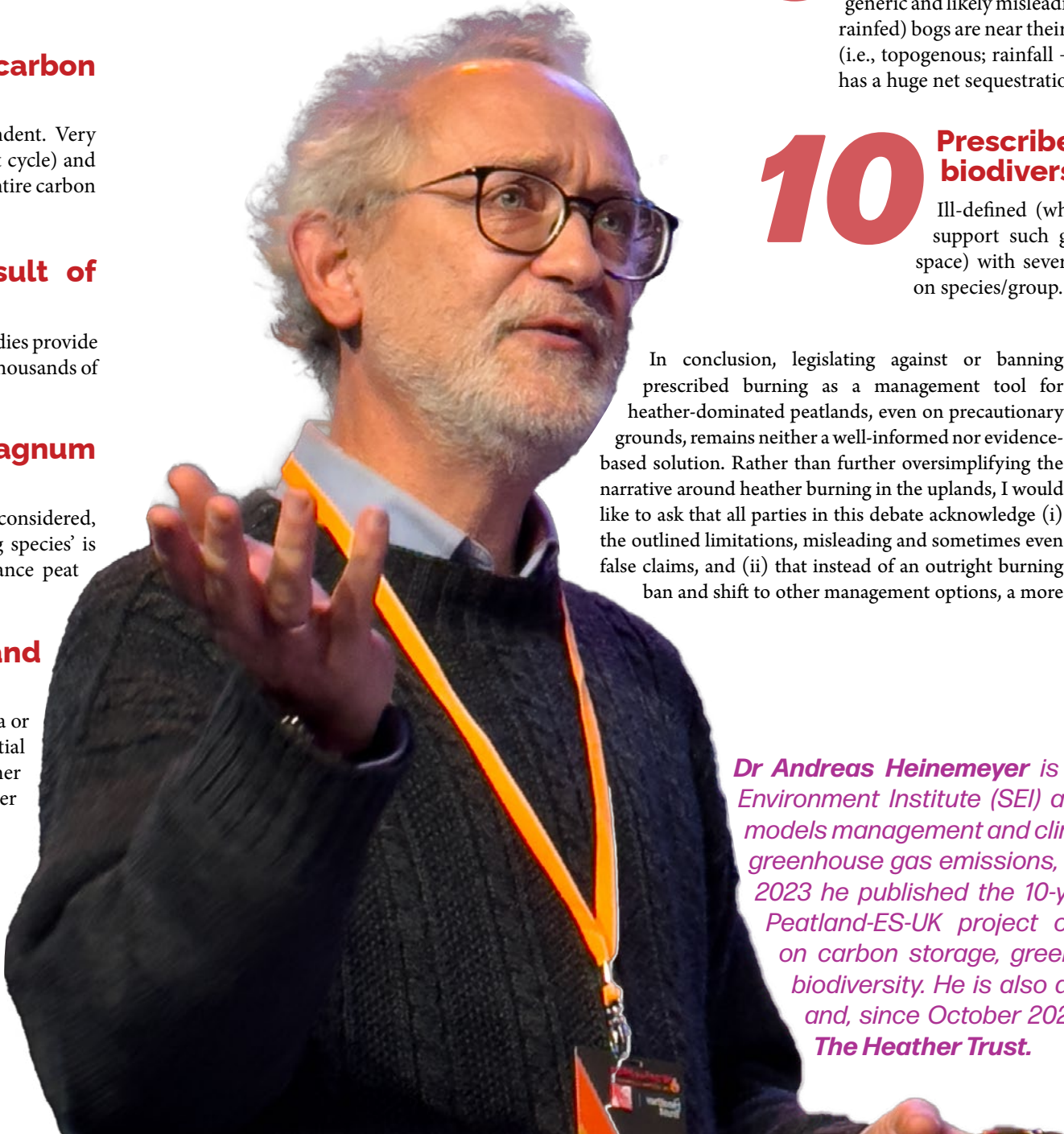
Again, this remains unsubstantiated due to a lack of robust data and/or catchment-scale studies to support/negate this statement and confounding factors. However, burning can affect peatland hydrology.

## 9 Peatlands offer huge carbon sequestration potential and are climate change ‘saviours’.

Carbon sequestration is very much site and time dependent. Statement is too generic and likely misleading hyperbole statement. Many hill blanket (ombrogenous; rainfed) bogs are near their maximum carbon sequestration potential, whereas valley (i.e., topogenous; rainfall + groundwater) bogs are not. Restoring eroding/lost peat has a huge net sequestration potential.

## 10 Prescribed heather burning causes biodiversity loss.

Ill-defined (what biodiversity; species/group) and not enough data to support such generic statement, overlooking scale aspects (time and space) with several studies showing positive/negative impacts depending on species/group.



In conclusion, legislating against or banning prescribed burning as a management tool for heather-dominated peatlands, even on precautionary grounds, remains neither a well-informed nor evidence-based solution. Rather than further oversimplifying the narrative around heather burning in the uplands, I would like to ask that all parties in this debate acknowledge (i) the outlined limitations, misleading and sometimes even false claims, and (ii) that instead of an outright burning ban and shift to other management options, a more

robust and applicable evidence-base is required for all management options.

I would like to propose collaborations between all major stakeholders to underpin an adaptive management approach based on UK-wide management trials to capture long-term impacts (benefits and risks) on the ecosystems, their functions and services including the people who live there.

*Dr Andreas Heinemeyer is an Associate Professor at the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) at the University of York. He measures and models management and climate impacts on vegetation, carbon storage, greenhouse gas emissions, hydrology and water quality in peatlands. In 2023 he published the 10-year report on the previously Defra-funded Peatland-ES-UK project on upland heather management impacts on carbon storage, greenhouse gas emissions, water storage and biodiversity. He is also a member of the Future Landscapes Forum and, since October 2024, a member of the Board of Trustees to The Heather Trust.*

<sup>1</sup> - Bacon, K.L., Baird, A.J., Blundell, A., Bougauff, M.A., Chapman, P.J., Dargie, G., Dooling, G.P., Gee, C., Holden, J., Kelly, T.J., McKendrick-Smith, K.A. (2017) Questioning ten common assumptions about peatlands. *Mires and Peat*, 19(12), 1–23.



# Wildfire2024

## UK Wildfire Conference



Pictured (l to r): Tiago Olivera, Sarah Cowan, Bruno Guillaume, Andreas Heinemeyer, Anton Beneslavskiy and Michael Bruce

**T**HE COMMON thread of preparing landscapes and communities for the threat of wildfire ran through the UK Wildfire Conference – Resilience in a Changing World in Aberdeen in November.

Almost 250 delegates gathered at Wildfire2024 at P&J Live to hear from global experts who shared their experiences of wildfire across a range of landscapes in South Africa, Chile, Norway, Portugal, Canada and others. The collective message was one of using wildfire prevention techniques that reduce damage and create wildfire resilient communities by adopting traditional and new techniques to manage landscapes, in tandem with responsive policy frameworks.

Organised by The Heather Trust on behalf of the hosts, the Scottish Wildfire Forum, the event was a resounding success and we were delighted to have received such positive and heartwarming feedback from many of the delegates. The conference opened with an address by Jim Fairlie MSP, Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity who recognised that wildfires can have a significant impact on our wildlife and environment as well as the economic and social costs to the

communities affected by outbreaks of such a destructive force in our countryside.

He said we needed to reduce the preventable wildfires that not only occur here in Scotland but throughout the developed world. In recognising the predicted extension of the wildfire season due to climate change, Mr Fairlie said that we could experience more sustained severe fire danger throughout the year.

He noted the valuable work that event hosts, the Scottish Wildfire Forum carries out and its role in enhancing the partnership work with Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and those with an interest in land management throughout Scotland.

Keynote speaker, Val Charlton of Landworks South Africa (pictured left) said:

“Events like the UK Wildfire Conference are so important because it gives the community of practice, exposure to new ideas, progress and other people’s perspectives.

**Keynote speaker,  
Val Charlton of  
Landworks South  
Africa said:**

*Events like the UK Wildfire Conference are so important because it gives the community of practice, exposure to new ideas, progress and other people’s perspectives.*



“Knowledge sharing is key for three reasons; firstly, it is important for the UK community to know that their challenges are not much different from the rest of the world; secondly it is clear that no single nation can win the battle against wildfires on their own - international cooperation is becoming increasingly important; and thirdly, the UK can avoid making the same mistakes – you can learn from others in terms of what works and what doesn’t.

“Globally, we should be placing much more emphasis upon reducing risk at landscape level and involving the people that live in those landscapes and in the natural/urban interface areas. We must make that paradigm shift from suppression focus to prevention focus.

“These challenges are global, but the UK has a fantastic opportunity to avoid repeating the same mistakes as other countries, if it places an emphasis on effective landscape and community planning, backed up with political support and good policies.”

Katrina Candy, Director of The Heather Trust who provided the opening address, said:

“We have been treated to both a global perspective of wildfire by some of the leading lights in the sector and an equally rich programme of speakers who focussed on where we are in terms

of wildfire risk and mitigation in the UK. It was also fascinating to hear about the various attitudes towards controlled burning and its role in building resilience into our landscapes.”

The Wildfire2024 website is still live if anyone wishes to catch up on the presentations which can be viewed on the Programme page: [www.wildfire2024.co.uk/programme](http://www.wildfire2024.co.uk/programme)

### Spectacular site visit

The main conference was preceded by a superb site visit to the James Hutton Institute Glensauigh Farm near Fattercairn.

Hosted by the South Grampian Wildlife Group in Partnership with JHI Glensauigh Farm, the theme for the event was ‘local resilience’ and offered a unique look at the systems and equipment in place to tackle wildfire in the local environment, including demonstrations of ATV-mounted fire fogging units and the use of helicopters in firefighting.

PDG Helicopters and trained muirburn practitioners provided excellent ‘real-time’ demonstrations of current wildfire-fighting techniques - all of which provided an incredibly interesting spectacle for attendees.



PDG Helicopters at Glensauigh Farm



Michael Bruce



Pictured (l to r): Niall MacLennan, Vanessa Walker and Katrina Candy



# Charles Gimingham Award

## A fitting tribute

### PROF ROB MARRS

Wildfire2024 saw the launch of the 'The Heather Trust Charles Gimingham Award' for contributing to wildfire science, which was presented for the best student poster at the conference in Aberdeen.

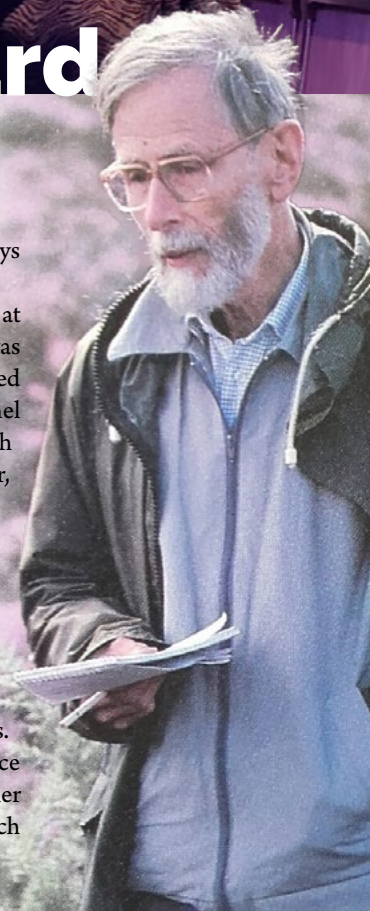
It was fitting that this award was initiated in Aberdeen, the city where Charles worked for his entire career. He arrived in Aberdeen just after World War II, completed a PhD, was thereafter appointed a lecturer, rising through the ranks to be the Regius Professor in Botany.

Along the way he also became the world leader in heathland research and this included much research on fire. Many of his former students have gone on to have distinguished careers in heathland dynamics and fire ecology. Apart from his academic success he played a major role in what would now be called 'knowledge exchange', from the 1950s onwards he played a major advisory role in both local, regional, national and international initiatives. In addition to this, he was

genuinely nice person, modest, humble and always seeing the best in others.

Although I was not one of his students, he had, at times, given freely of his time to mentor me, and I was grateful for it. As such, I was honoured to be invited to introduce the award and organise the judging panel (Michael Bruce and Katrina Candy). It was a tough call as all posters were really very good. However, we unanimously selected Katy Ivison from the University of Birmingham as the first winner of this inaugural award for her poster "Extreme weather breaks landscape & phenological controls on temperate fuel moisture".

The award was presented to Katy by Alison Avery and Clare Davidson, two of Charles' daughters. Alison thanked The Heather Trust and the conference for starting this award on behalf of their mother Caroline Gimingham (now 991/2). It was much appreciated by the Gimingham family.



# Waterfalls to waders

## A successful update day

### KATRINA CANDY

Landowners, keepers, managers, NGOs and many others joined us for an excellent day at the High Force Hotel and Moor House site in Upper Teesdale in June.

We were delighted to welcome almost 50 people to the event which kicked-off with dinner and 'stargazing' at the High Force waterfall the evening prior (not many stars but fascinating nonetheless!). The day itself began with presentations from Katrina Candy on the Trust's priorities and strategy and Prof Rob Marrs who verbally painted the picture of the history of Moor House.

Heading out on to the moor, the group heard about the wealth of research which has, and

continues to be, carried out on this unique site. Rob Marrs, Natural England's Martin Furness and researcher Dr Dave Baines led the group through myriad of research projects with interesting findings – not least the breeding success of red grouse and waders on the moor, compared to other moors in the locality.

Following lunch back at the hotel, we enjoyed a lively heather burning presentation from our new Board member Andreas Heinemeyer and an interactive presentation by David Jarrett on the Trust's own research project, Heather Futures. The event closed with Q&A led by Rob Marrs and thanks from our Chair, Viv Gill.

### DAVID JARRETT

As we approach the culmination of the first phase of the Heather Futures research project, I am providing an insight to the work undertaken to date.

We know that the extent of heather moorland in the UK has likely been declining since at least the nineteenth century, with afforestation, over-grazing and agricultural reclamation likely to be key drivers of habitat loss.

In recent years, traditional moorland management has also come under greater scrutiny with increased legislation, growing public support for rewilding, and generous government subsidies for the conversion of moorland habitat to commercial forestry or native woodland. These processes may be accelerating the loss of heather moorland, but there is little national data to support this, or for policy-makers to consider when making decisions.

My research, so far, has produced evidence on the pace and extent of moorland loss and the threats to these vital habitats. I have also assessed which habitats and land uses are most prominent in replacing moorland. The project is using maps derived from satellite imagery from the last three decades to identify land use change across the UK.

The final report will examine the broader consequences and policy implications in the hope we can engage with policy-makers and alert stakeholders to the pace at which moorland habitats are being lost and encourage more coherent land use policy in the uplands.

We look forward to sharing these findings in early 2025 and advancing the discussion points that have arisen from the project.





# Implementing the Wildlife Management and Muirburn (Scotland) Act 2024

## MARGARET DAVIDSON, BOARD MEMBER OF NATURESCOT

I have the privilege of chairing the Working Groups that have the task of helping to develop the Muirburn Code and Code of Practice for Grouse Moor Management. Together these Codes will support two of the key licensing approaches introduced by the Wildlife Management and Muirburn Act.

It is an odd business. As a citizen I have always believed that legislation comes as a piece and implementation is to follow swiftly. Well not so. It necessarily takes time to develop the detail in codes of good practice and to develop simple to use licensing applications. So, that is what we have been doing.

### Building consensus among experts

So, who are we, and what are we working together for? Good practices and process, and most importantly, as much as a consensus as we can achieve. A stellar caste you will agree. One thing was sure, they all knew far more than me about grouse moors and muirburn. Hence each meeting has been a very real learning curve for me.

We have made good progress. The first piece of work we completed was a new Code of Practice for Grouse Moor Management. The Working Group, was in broad agreement from the outset on the overall structure of the Code and whilst there were areas of disagreement there was a reassuring level of consensus. The license was launched in summer 2024 with over 200 applications. As with all NatureScot's licences we will review the guidance and application process and seek feedback on how applicants have found them.

### Challenges with muirburn code

On the Muirburn part of the Act it has been more difficult to reach consensus. We have outstanding issues particularly around the measurement of peat depth, topography of



Margaret Davidson

areas that can be burnt and rolling out training to all who need it. While we don't yet have a commencement date, we are working to the expectation of licences in place by autumn 2025. We still have a fair bit of work to do to get to that elusive consensus point. But this is where having a Working Group of key stakeholders helps. It is better to discuss disagreements around the table than in isolation.

Meanwhile, any views you may still have, get in touch with your representative at the table.

### Addressing wildfire risks and future debates

The Act apart, I am convinced there is still work to be done about the regrowth of the range and health of plants after burning. One of the licensable purposes for muirburn will be as a control mechanism to reduce wildfire risks. Wildfire is of course an unregulated and more damaging and frequent fire event and we need a clear eyed look at control and mitigation. I expect that to lead to vigorous debate in 2025 as it is not part of the Act.

Finally to thank The Heather Trust for its attendance and input. Both are valued.

### At the table we have representatives from:



# Scotland's Moorland Forum – a new chapter

## Forum still has a key role to play

## DAVID JOHNSTONE - CHAIR OF SCOTLAND'S MOORLAND FORUM

It is a great honour to have been asked to chair the Moorland Forum and I would like to pay tribute and thank you to Hugh Raven, the outgoing Chairman for his skill in chairing the Forum.

It always seems a little bit trite to say it, but there probably has never been a more important time for the uplands in Scotland as we seek to address the twin challenges that are coming upon us in climate change and the loss of biodiversity in our environment. The uplands offer us a unique opportunity to build upon the strengths and the work that has already been undertaken and to seek to take it to the next level in what really are quite outstanding areas of beauty and diversity.

There are so many different drivers and motivations that support the diverse uses of the uplands, but I feel that there is very much a common theme that runs throughout everybody in that there is a passion for the best way forward, and I think that the Forum provides the opportunity of everybody to come together and share best practice, air concerns, and seek to develop and further enhance the common goals

We have been through a period where new legislation has come in which will have an impact upon our uplands in the grouse moor licensing, and also following on from that the licensing of Muirburn. The practical guidance of which is being developed and the Forum will have an input to that.

We have also the implementation of the Natural Environment Bill that is going to be coming up in the future, which will be

very much looking at supporting and advocating improved management to support nature recovery, and which the Forum will have a large role to play within that.

The Forum also has a role to play in helping to implement the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy and the aim to be nature positive by 2030, and then to move on and have restored and regenerated biodiversity by 2045. To achieve this the uplands are going to be key.

When it comes to climate change, and carbon emissions, the health of our peatlands is absolutely key to firstly stopping the emissions of carbon from degraded peatlands, and then moving onto sequestration when they are in good order and the water levels restored. The simple truth is that with something like 1.8 million ha of peatlands still to be restored, without that Scotland cannot meet its targets.

For all of this to happen it fundamentally requires the collaborative working of the people on the ground that own and manage, whether individuals or communities, these uplands on a day-to-day basis. Not only this investment of skill and time, but it is also going to require an enormous investment of resources, some of which will come from government, but with the pressure the public finances are under, an increasing amount is also going to have to come from the private sector, and I feel that the Forum has a key role to play in being able to help shape and deliver this.





# Scottish Policy Update:

## Grouse Moor Licensing in Scotland

*Ross Ewing, Director of Moorland at Scottish Land & Estates, explores Scotland's new licensing scheme for grouse moors which came into force for the first time in 2024.*

More than four years on from when the Scottish Government confirmed its intention to licence grouse moors, Scotland has now concluded its first grouse shooting season to have taken place under licence from NatureScot.

Is the licensing scheme perfect? No. Has it all been plain sailing? Definitely not. But what we do have is a scheme with important legal safeguards which is, on the whole, workable.

Influencing the legislation and its subsequent implementation has required a seismic effort from a diversity of organisations interested in moorland management and how our uplands are used. For Scottish Land & Estates (SLE), we have resolutely focussed our efforts on ensuring the principles of reasonableness, workability and proportionality are at the heart of the various provisions – something we are continuing to do in conjunction with brilliant charities like The Heather Trust.

At the outset of this process, we determined that a good licensing scheme would have three core principles at its heart - namely:

- licences should be easy to obtain;
- licences should be difficult to lose;
- licences should be connected to the policy objective.



These principles (figure above) have guided (and continue to guide) our representations. All too often we have seen licensing schemes fall foul of these important principles, so it has been a priority for us and others to ensure these principles remain at the forefront of our minds when making representations.

So how successful have we been? Well, everyone who has legitimately applied for a licence to kill or take grouse has received one – with c. 250 licences issued overall. Overall feedback on the application process is that it has been straightforward and simple.

It hasn't all been perfect though. In their rush to implement the licensing scheme ahead of 12 August, NatureScot did make a significant error when interpreting the legislation by licensing the landholding boundary instead of the grouse moor – all of which happened just before licensing applications went live.

After extensive engagement with us and others, NatureScot accepted that their position was not realistically defensible and, to their credit, modified licences accordingly. As of now, land on which red grouse may be taken or killed (i.e., the grouse moor) – as specified by the licence holder – is the licenced entity.



The evidential threshold for having a licence suspended or revoked is rightfully high given the importance of grouse shooting for people, jobs and nature. For NatureScot to suspend or revoke a licence, the following tests would need to be satisfied to the civil burden of proof (defined as 'on the balance of probabilities'):

- first, an offence would need to be committed on the land to which the licence relates;
- second, the relevant offence would need to be committed by the licence holder or another relevant person (i.e., a gamekeeper);
- and third, the offence would have to be a relevant offence (which encompass most wildlife crimes).

NatureScot has also introduced a new licence condition to tackle the persecution of raptors and ravens beyond the licenced area following the recent modification. If NatureScot are satisfied on the balance of probabilities that the following things had taken place, they could conceivably argue that the condition has been breached (which would potentially give grounds to suspend or revoke the licence):

- first, a licence holder would have to have failed to take “reasonable steps” to prevent a relevant offence (under sections 1, 5 or 6 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act);
- second, a person within the licence holder’s “employment or control” would have had to committed the relevant offence;
- and third, the relevant offence would have had to be committed for the purposes of or in relation to “the management of land to which this licence relates” (i.e., management of the grouse moor).



Ross Ewing

This sets a high bar, but it does mean that NatureScot will be able to act where criminality occurs – in line with the Scottish Government’s policy objective to tackle raptor persecution related to grouse moor management.

So what can a licence holder do if they disagree with a decision by NatureScot? Well, they can appeal – specifically to an independent Sheriff who will consider an appeal based on fact and law (i.e., the Sheriff will essentially consider all the facts leading up to a NatureScot decision, plus any additional evidence an appellant wishes to provide). This is perhaps the foremost legal safeguard and provides an independent means of challenging decision-making by NatureScot – something which hitherto has been lacking across their licensing functions.

In summary, the licensing of grouse moors is undoubtedly a step change for the sector. It isn't a perfect licensing scheme, but it could have been significantly worse had it not been for the representations made by stakeholder organisations.

SLE was proud to play our part in making the scheme more proportionate and workable than it otherwise would have been, and we look forward to continuing our work in representing the interests of grouse moor owners and managers for years to come.



# Black grouse and moorland edge management

## Saving the Black Grouse

### DR DAVE BAINES, FREELANCE ECOLOGIST

**B**lack grouse are renowned for their elaborate dawn displays in spring, when males gather on traditional sites called 'leks' to display to, attract, and mate with visiting females. In the UK, birds were widespread, being native to 25 English counties in the late 19th century.

Now, they are confined to just four counties in northern England and to chiefly one moor only in Wales, whilst their range in southern Scotland has contracted so markedly that soon they may no longer occur south of the Edinburgh-Glasgow belt. They have become an IUCN Red-listed threatened species and form a conservation priority in the UK and wider Europe. What has happened to make this dramatic change?

### Problems facing Black Grouse

I see three main problems facing Black Grouse: they need a habitat mosaic, they taste good, and they are largely sedentary. Taking each problem in turn, habitat first because most consider this the principal cause of the demise. Unlike Red Grouse, which need heather moorland alone, Black Grouse require a mix of farmland, moorland and woodland and a lot of it; 300 ha supports one lek of 5-10 males and associated females.

Furthermore, the farmland should be traditionally managed herb-rich meadows for year-round feeding, and insect-rich, damp, rush-infested pastures for nesting and brood-rearing, preferably cattle grazed in summer to create a structurally varied sward for chicks. This farmland, which could include some patches of uncropped arable, should adjoin sensitively managed grouse moor. Why grouse moor? I'll explain later. Moorland should have mature heather and bilberry as winter foods and intact peatland where cotton-grass flowers provide a key pre-breeding bite. Next, woodland but not wall-to-wall commercially grown blanket conifers. Instead, broad-leaved Birch, Alder, Rowan and scrub willows within gill, or cleugh, landscapes providing emergency food in snow-cover.



Photo taken by: Spjutkastare



Unlike Red Grouse, which need heather moorland alone, Black Grouse require a mix of farmland, moorland and woodland and a lot of it.

Often these habitat mixes have been lost from our uplands. Sadly, the metrics of many farmers, gamekeepers and foresters have been productivity-driven, involving livestock units, brace shot per ha, and cubic metres of timber, whilst sometimes competing for the same ground. Meadows have received much inorganic fertiliser, allowing earlier and multiple cutting for silage, rush fields have been drained, and often reseeded, with the subsequent loss of vital cover. Some moors have also been drained, some would say over-burned and now over-cut, whilst some guns cannot separate their Red quarry from their Black quarry, especially if they are unintended Grey (hen) quarry. Hill farms and moors have been planted with impenetrable spruce forests that block out understory vegetation. Bare bright-green fields abut tailored chequerboard-like black moors and the "white" margins loved by Black Grouse have been (or should patches persist they are now small) fragmented by conifer intrusions, and incapable of supporting birds.

### Predation pressures

Black grouse are good to eat and now there are more predators wishing to eat them. The game of hide and seek has shifted, fewer places to hide and more seekers. Alarming, RSPB research found the UK supported the highest and second highest densities of Carrion / Hooded Crows and Fox respectively across European countries. Forests host these and other predators, which can limit breeding success and numbers of ground-nesting waders and gamebirds including Black Grouse. How many farmers now carry guns or run traps? Which brings me back to grouse moors, because gamekeepers still do. Fringes of moors managed for driven grouse shooting remain as one of few places where Black Grouse persist in good numbers. In parts of northern England, where gamekeepers

successfully control Fox, crow, Weasel and Stoat, Black Grouse have remained stable for at least 60 years. This needs to continue. Of recent concern is the impact of protected predators such as Badger and Buzzard, and reintroduced predators such as Red Kite and Pine Marten (tree stoat), the latter being scourge of the extinction-bound big Scottish cousin, the Capercaillie.

### Emerging conservation opportunities

Have things however recently started to change? To survive, hill farmers increasingly must "farm flowers" within agri-environment schemes, whilst gamekeepers count waders, host harriers, and think carbon. One local keeper receives financial incentives linked to per capita of lekking blackcock counted. It works, his numbers have increased! Foresters plan open-space, conservation planting, bogs and broad-leaves. New opportunities for Black Grouse appear and formerly occupied areas have once again become suitable. Bring in the third problem - being sedentary, birds sometimes cannot take up these restored opportunities. Young males stay at home and most young females move less than 10 km. Catching them and providing a helpful lift in a car to their newly refurbished homes does, if planned carefully, work, creating novel range expansion. If doing this, then think the following: habitat mosaic, big areas, predator control, cattle grazing, insect-rich, heather and rushes, scrubby woods, boys first-girls follow, and neighbourly co-operative working.

My 35 years working with game and wildlife have taught me that Black Grouse cannot be restored but perhaps can be saved. Now, working as an Ecologist for Gunnerside Sporting in Swaledale, may allow some ideas to be put into practice.



# Working for Waders

## Helping you, help waders

**DR DAVE PARISH,  
ORNITHOLOGY ADVISOR, NATURESCOT AND  
WORKING FOR WADERS CHAIR**

**W**orking for Waders was born of the Scottish government's collaborative Understanding Predation project in 2017. Its aim is to help practitioners understand the issues faced by breeding waders in Scotland and how to overcome them, and to support them in their efforts on the ground, following the same partnership working successfully deployed by Understanding Predation. It has brought together a wide range of stakeholders, including The Heather Trust, each with its own important contribution to make.

Since the project's inception, we have held many boots-on-the-ground events, covering practical topics from creating wader scrapes to how to monitor breeding waders, as we strongly believe in the benefits of demonstrating how things can be done using real examples. We are always open to suggestions for new topics to cover and venues to visit, should you have any good ideas. These events are an excellent way of supplying key skills and knowledge to busy practitioners so that they might go on to help waders on their own ground.

Another key aim of the project is encouraging some basic wader monitoring. We all know that waders are in trouble, with changes to land use like afforestation, and high rates of predation on eggs and chicks, taking a significant toll. It is only by understanding the pressures that waders face in different parts of the country and in different circumstances that we can be better prepared to help them. Along with BTO, we run the Nest Camera project, which helps practitioners to safely use trail cameras to monitor wader nests on their ground, providing useful evidence of outcomes.

We have just published our first report on the initial years of this project, which were a huge success, with practical data received from 87 nests across Scotland. This has given us the confidence to push on and expand, hopefully covering more ground, with more participants, and resulting in more information on the issues breeding waders face. If you'd like to take part, please get in touch – we may be able to loan you a camera or two.

Similarly, another key project for us, again run with BTO, is the Wader Calendar. This provides a simple means of recording waders on the ground at points through the breeding season, which anyone can do, and again provides valuable information on numbers in different regions.

Over the years Working for Waders has paid many individuals to adjust their management to help breeding waders, but we are hoping to expand our work considerably in future years with a change of emphasis. As well as encouraging more people to monitor their birds via our projects, we are planning a major fundraising effort so that we can put more advisors on the ground. The importance of one-to-one advice, and the impact that regular encouragement can have on conservation outcomes, has been demonstrated repeatedly, and we believe will greatly improve our ability to help our threatened waders.

[www.workingforwaders.com](http://www.workingforwaders.com).





# Common Land

## Securing the future of England's upland commons: insights from a landmark project

The Heather Trust recently attended the Foundation for Common Land conference at Rheged, Penrith, following which we were encouraged to share some of the findings from the 'Our Upland Commons' project. **Julia Aglionby, executive director of Foundation for Common Land, tells us more.**

A transformative four-year, £3 million initiative, Our Common Cause: Our Upland Commons, is in its last year of delivery, leaving a lasting legacy for England's upland commons. Supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, the project underscores the critical role commons play in biodiversity, heritage, climate resilience, and community livelihoods.

Focusing on 12 iconic commons in the Yorkshire Dales, Lake District, Shropshire Hills, and Dartmoor, the project brought together 25 national and local partners. It delivered surprising outcomes that affirm the importance of common land for nature conservation, archaeology, carbon sequestration, wetland restoration, public access, and sustainable farming.

### Six key lessons for stakeholders

The initiative distilled six essential lessons that are now being shared to guide future land management and conservation efforts:

#### 1. Recognising diverse values

Commons are rich, multifaceted landscapes that provide ecological, cultural, and economic benefits. Planning approaches must embrace this complexity, contrasting sharply with single-outcome initiatives often favoured by other natural environment projects.

#### 2. Redefining expertise

Local knowledge, rooted in lived experience, is as critical as academic expertise. Commoners possess unparalleled insights into the land, shaped by generations of stewardship.



Julia Aglionby

#### 3. The role of the commons facilitator

A skilled facilitator can bridge gaps between commoners, stakeholders, and funders. Success hinges on recruiting natural conveners whose role is to be an open and unbiased conduit of information, support and interaction.

#### 4. Harnessing the arts for dialogue

Artistic interventions, such as Commons Stories—a series of interviews, videos, and photographs by Somewhere Nowhere—offered a neutral and reflective space for all to tell their stories.

#### 5. Ground-up collaboration

Listening to local voices and co-creating solutions led to more effective outcomes. Future projects should prioritise flexibility, allowing goals to emerge organically rather than imposing predetermined frameworks.

#### 6. Action drives progress

Getting stuck into 'doing' rather than just talking has increased understanding, momentum and goodwill. For example, Commoners and owners are using insights from Farmer-led habitat assessment and animal health projects to refine their farm businesses.



### Spotlight on regional achievements

#### Yorkshire dales: natural flood management and farmer-led habitat assessments

A £120,000 natural flood management scheme at Brant Fell Common near Sedbergh was designed in consultation with local commoners and The Farmer Network. Measures include 22 leaky barriers to slow water flow, enhance habitats, including Bryophytes, and boost carbon sequestration. Additionally, commoners on Ingleborough learned to monitor rare habitats, using key environmental indicators to guide sustainable management through a farmer-led habitat assessment program. Crucially the ecological data informed Defra's SFI Moorland Survey.

#### Lake district: carbon foot-printing innovation

On Kinniside Common, 10 farms collaborated to create a bespoke Farm Carbon Calculator tailored to upland systems. Developed with the Farm Carbon Toolkit, the tool assesses the carbon sequestration potential of common grazing and in-bye land while identifying ways to cut greenhouse gas emissions. The free tool, now available via the Foundation for Common Land website, is supported by comprehensive resources and can be used on all commons

#### Dartmoor: Integrated commons management plans

On Dartmoor Our Upland Commons commissioned the European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism to create a management plan for two commons. This involved co-creating a comprehensive picture of the land, establishing a narrative of its importance and changes. The objective is to provide a meaningful analysis based on the state and trends of the common's natural and cultural heritage and

management. The approach recognises the role of those with lived experience. The management plan process comprises four stages: preparation, writing the plan, developing a work programme, and creating a monitoring schedule. We hope to encourage others to adopt this process elsewhere.

#### Shropshire Hills: bracken management for biodiversity

Working with Butterfly Conservation, an ornithologist, botanist and local volunteers we undertook bird, butterfly and plant surveys to inform bracken management on Clee Liberty common. The aim being to promote biodiversity while enhancing the landscape for grazing and public enjoyment. Clee Liberty Commoners Association has recently entered a 10-year Countryside Stewardship Scheme. This is the first time the common has been in a scheme to enhance the biodiversity, whilst still supporting local graziers. The scheme includes reduced sheep numbers, bracken control, work to slow the water coming off the common and replacement of dilapidated fencing and gates.

#### A vision for the future

Our Upland Commons has demonstrated that commons are vital for addressing modern challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and sustainable food production. By combining traditional knowledge with innovative tools and inclusive collaboration, this project sets a compelling example for delivering improved stewardship of shared landscapes.

Our independent evaluators, Heritage Insider, have produced a detailed report. Their conclusions are that we need to address the social and economic issues to enable the delivery of improved environmental outcomes. Commons are profoundly social places, the balance of power between different interests significantly affects the success of delivery and effective partnership delivers significant benefits.

[www.foundationforcommonland.org.uk](http://www.foundationforcommonland.org.uk)







The warming climate, changes in land use, and the movement of wildlife are creating ideal conditions for tick populations to thrive.

Photo by: Moredun Photo Library



# TICKS

## risks to animal and human health

## Collaborate to innovate

### A workshop on ticks and tick-borne diseases

**T**HE Heather Trust was interested to join a diverse group of stakeholders recently who had gathered to address the growing challenge of tick management and tick-borne diseases (TBDs) control in Scotland and the UK.

The workshop, held at the Moredun Research Institute near Edinburgh brought together around 80 farmers, environmentalists, veterinarians, ecologists, representatives from the pharmaceutical industry, land managers, gamekeepers, and government officials. Organised with the support of the Scottish Environment, Food and Agriculture Research Institutions (SEFARI) the event highlighted the urgent need for a coordinated approach to mitigate the impact of ticks on animal health, human health, and ecosystems.

**Dr Mara Rocchi, Head of Virus Surveillance Unit and Dr Beth Wells, Principal Research Scientist at Moredun, tell us more about the aims of the event.**

#### Context and findings

Ticks and the diseases they transmit, such as Lyme disease, babesiosis, Tick-borne fever, louping ill and tick-borne encephalitis, are a growing concern. The warming climate, changes in land use, and the movement of wildlife are creating ideal conditions for tick populations to thrive. Farmers, veterinarians and land managers have observed increased TBDs, leading to economic losses in livestock industries. Biodiversity and climate change mitigation strategies implemented by local and national governments have also affected tick presence and activity. Tick-transmitted human diseases (eg. Lyme disease) have also shown an increase in number and a wider geographical spread. This workshop aimed to foster collaboration among stakeholders to develop sustainable and effective solutions.

#### Key highlights of the workshop

Chaired by Simon Cousins (former Landward producer), the day-long workshop featured presentations, audience testimonials, breakout sessions, and interactive discussions. Professor Lucy Gilbert, an ecologist from the University of Glasgow specialising in tick ecology and human-wildlife interactions, provided a detailed overview of the complex tick lifecycle and its interplay with environmental factors. She underscored targeted habitat management to reduce tick densities in high-risk areas as well as wildlife management.

Several participants shared their experience of ticks and TBDs, including farmers that had suffered significant livestock or game losses, veterinarians concerned with lack of training in this specific area, stakeholders concerned with acaricide effectiveness, public health professionals supporting Lyme patients, and highlighted the lack of information available to the general public and the farming industry in particular. The need for robust tick monitoring and data sharing and the



*Prof Lucy Gilbert*

importance of public reporting platforms to improve disease surveillance were recurring topics.

During the breakout sessions, organised around five main topics (landscape and moor management, TBDs diagnosis and surveillance, acaricides and their correct use, communication strategies and zoonoses and public health) participants provided achievable solutions to the different challenges. The role of wildlife as tick hosts, particularly deer, and the challenges of balancing tick control with conservation goals, particularly in areas with high biodiversity was a key topic of discussion. The importance of understanding the interconnectedness of ecosystems, land management practices (including bracken control) and human activity was stressed when planning tick control strategies. It was acknowledged that effective control would require a balance between public health priorities, conservation goals, and economic interests.

Gamekeepers and farmers/land managers shared successful practices, like vegetation modification and buffer zones to disrupt tick habitats. Targeted treatment of livestock with acaricides and acaricide efficacy was also discussed. Finally, participants emphasised the need for a unified policy approach integrating public health, animal welfare, and environmental sustainability. Collaborative models involving local communities and cross-sector partnerships were deemed essential for achieving lasting solutions.

The workshop concluded with a lively panel discussion. Participants emphasised that control of TBDs require a coordinated effort across all sectors. They called for continued collaboration, funding for research, and public awareness campaigns to educate stakeholders and communities on preventive measures. They unanimously called for the creation of a single point of reference organisation (similar to Sustainable Control of Parasites in Sheep) to find the latest information, best practices and emerging research data.

#### Moving forward

The workshop demonstrated the power of bringing together diverse stakeholders to tackle a shared challenge. As tick populations continue to rise, initiatives like this will be crucial in protecting public health, livestock, and wildlife while maintaining Scotland and the UK's rich ecological balance.



# Managing Bracken with livestock

## Field lab explores animal impact on bracken control



**T**HE Heather Trust was interested to learn of a new field lab where farmers, in conjunction with Innovative Farmers and Pasture for Life, are using animals to control bracken.

We have reported in this publication before on how beneficial cattle can be in crushing bracken and thus limiting its spread, so we wanted to know more about how this project was utilising livestock to help knock back this invasive species which spreads across grazing land, restricts public access and suffocates other habitats. It is hoped the process will also save costs while restoring habitats.

**Rob Bunn, project manager for Pasture for Life, explains what the project entails.**

As we are well aware, many farmers and land managers used to manage bracken with the herbicide Asulox, but this is no longer available, so some are now exploring this, and other methods, as chemical-free options.

### “Obvious nature-friendly solution”

Cattle, pigs and ponies across eight farms who are part of “Pasture & Profit in Protected Landscapes”, a project delivered by Pasture for Life and funded by Defra through its Farming in Protected Landscapes programme are being encouraged to trial managing areas of bracken with animal impact by using methods such as strategically placed hay or salt licks.

The animals trample the bracken using their natural body weight, opening up space for other plant species while also damaging the bracken fronds and restricting regrowth. The pigs also root out the starch-rich rhizomes of the bracken from below ground.

Triallist Katharine Pinfold, a cattle farmer at Hudson Place Farm, Cumbria, said: “We have a substantial area of bracken on our fellsides which limits the grazing available for livestock as well as general biodiversity. Our farming system is very low input and therefore using our Belted Galloway cattle as a means of controlling the bracken seems to us an obvious nature-friendly solution.

“It is great to be working in a group with other farmers to measure and monitor the impact of livestock on

bracken density and growth. We are also excited to see what other plants will emerge over time as the bracken cover recedes.”

### Protecting endangered species

In some parts of the country, particularly in the west, bracken stands maintain a woodland ground flora, allowing plants like dog violets to grow which are a key food source for caterpillars of fritillary butterflies.

The trial therefore doesn’t seek to eradicate bracken entirely, but to maintain a balance and “mosaic” of habitats, providing opportunities for a range of biodiversity.

The group of farmers are working alongside conservation experts at James Hutton Institute to monitor changes to habitat. They hope to find a long-term solution that uncovers grazing land while also boosting nature.

Soil health will be monitored, with samples lab-assessed for their carbon and nitrogen contents as well as carrying out visual soil structure assessments.

Field lab researcher Robin Pakeman of the James Hutton Institute said: “This is a great opportunity – we haven’t had a trial like this for decades. Asulox herbicide could be sprayed over large areas and, if followed up properly with repeat spot spraying, could be very effective. However, it is no longer available, so we have to think differently. Using livestock means we can hopefully manage with more precision to achieve different impacts across a stand of bracken. We’re monitoring the trial closely and hoping for a long-term boost for biodiversity.”

Innovative Farmers Manager Rebecca Swinn said: “We’re excited to see farmers take the lead on this research. Farmers urgently need more ways of managing bracken – this could be a huge opportunity. We hope others follow this trial and are inspired to try these nature-friendly methods.”

[www.innovativefarmers.org](http://www.innovativefarmers.org)



Farmers urgently need more ways of managing bracken – this could be a huge opportunity.







# Bracken – a ticking time bomb?

*Simon Thorp, a former Director of the Heather Trust, and Coordinator of the Bracken Control Group, calls for a cross-sector approach to bracken and its management.*

## SIMON THORP

**T**here is a danger that we are under-estimating the seriousness of the threats associated with bracken. Bracken has had a good year and the belief amongst landowners and land managers is that its area is increasing and therefore the impact of the associated threats is increasing.

Asulox, the principal herbicide, had the twin benefits of selectivity and approval for aerial application. The withdrawal of this product in October 2023 has significantly reduced our ability to control bracken in large areas, or in remote places where access by machinery is difficult, dangerous or impossible. We are now less able to intervene where it is decided that this is necessary or beneficial.

This year, I supported the development of the interim best practice bracken management guidance, commissioned from Fera Science Ltd, by the UK Nature Conservation Bodies. This sets out the current management options for bracken. Spraying with herbicide is no longer an option and the use of a weed wiper is not encouraged. The shift away from the use of herbicide is understandable, but it leaves those wishing to control bracken, in less-than-ideal conditions, with a problem.

Following its introduction in the late 1960s, Asulox had become the go-to solution for all bracken problems. As a result, little research has been carried out on the effectiveness of physical management methods. There are many questions that need answers. How effective is cutting, bruising or cultivating? What is the best time of year to carry this work out? How can livestock be best used? Could there be a role for herbicide use in the future in places where the risk of using it is assessed to be less than the risks associated with unmanaged bracken?

In this first year following the withdrawal of Asulox, there has been considerable confusion around the support that is now available through agri-environment schemes with conflicting advice being issued. No doubt this will settle down, but it must be accepted that, for the moment at least, only physical control options will be approved for bracken management.

The BCG's future is uncertain, as it is currently unfunded, but **I have recommended that the priority issues that need to be addressed are:**

**Prioritise issues relating to the health of people, livestock and wildlife.**

**Coordinate cross-sector stakeholder input to discussion about bracken and its management.**

**Support the Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies in the further development of the Interim Best Practice Guidance and the drafting of the proposed UK Bracken Strategic Framework.**

**Assist with the development of effective bracken control options in UK agri-environment schemes.**

**Give consideration to hosting a national conference to review the approach to bracken.**

**Connect practitioners to researchers and policy makers.**

**Coordinate research activity to facilitate the filling of knowledge gaps.**

Consider how monitoring of case studies and/or trial plots, possibly on demonstration sites, could improve the understanding of the effectiveness of different management techniques.

For those interested, there is much more information about bracken on the BCG website. Bitesized Bracken Briefings are available on the Briefings page of the website; these aim to provide an easily digested summary of key issues.

Arguably, with the loss of Asulox, it is even easier to justify a cross-sector role for the BCG – we need to work together to find the best ways to respond to the opportunities and threats associated with bracken. I believe that the BCG should continue in some form, but if it is to do so, it requires support from those who can appreciate the value of a cross-sector stakeholder group. If this is you, please get in touch.

**[info@brackencontrol.co.uk](mailto:info@brackencontrol.co.uk)**  
**[www.brackencontrol.co.uk](http://www.brackencontrol.co.uk)**



**We need to work together to find the best ways to respond to the opportunities and threats associated with bracken**



# Heather Beetle

**ROBERT BENSON**

There is no doubt that heather beetle infestations and serious long-term damage to heather have markedly increased over the last 20 years. In many cases, moors are experiencing repeat outbreaks on young recovering heather. It is causing much concern to moorland managers and 2024 is no exception with severe damage over thousands of acres in upland areas. Photographs of active beetle taken this year on the 13th November on heather in the North Pennines have just come in. Keepers have never seen them this late in the year.

Heather Beetle research is sparse, and as a result there are still huge knowledge gaps. It has always been around, and the old and experienced hill men have always maintained that frost well into the ground is the essential ingredient to control. Climate change, warmer and wetter winters and possibly some correlation with grip blocking / rewetting of moorland over the last 20 years are probably all contributing to the spread and repeat outbreaks, along with restrictions imposed on burning.

The other unknown is the disappearance or seemingly no longer effective predation of Heather Beetle larvae by the parasitic wasp ( *Assecodes Mento*) which lays its eggs in the beetle larvae and in due course this provides food for the wasp larvae.

Growing concern prompted The Heather Trust to conduct a survey over 2006 – 2018 on acreage affected each year but it is difficult to draw any firm conclusion other than it is an increasing problem and over the period almost 100,000 acres was affected but it was known that the 207 outbreak reports received was well under the actual number of affected moors.



**There have been 2 strands of research work since.**

**How to tackle/ speed up recovery of beetled heather**

A Penny Anderson Associates report over the period 2013 -2017 in the Peak District comparing different methods of the restoration of heather in a heather dominated community after severe HB infestation – looking at burning and cutting compared with doing nothing. The conclusion of this work was that Moor owners could do a lot of work and feel that they had improved things by getting rid of beetled heather but that this did not necessarily speed up heather recovery.

**Pheromone Trapping**

The Heather Trust in 2022 -2023 along with the Moorland Association and the Moorland Communities Trust helped fund a University of Greenwich Natural Resources Department project working with a pest control company to synthesise the HB pheromone and see whether impregnated lures in traps, could be a possible method of control. Worried moor managers desperate to find a solution in the Peak District, North Yorks Moors, Bowland and the North Pennines all helped enthusiastically with this work over two seasons demonstrating the concern over loss of heather and the time it takes to recover. Trapping results were very disappointing, and it was not repeated in 2024.

Discussion on all sorts of other potential solutions are doing the rounds including captive breeding of the parasitic wasp and ideas on nematodes but it is essential that they only target HB. Natural England, when they realised the size of concern showed at best a passing interest in Heather Beetle and offered to set up a discussion group. This has never happened.

# News from The Heather Trust

**We're listening...**

The Heather Trust carried out a survey of our members in July this year to better understand how we can meet their needs from our charity.

One of the main findings was the appetite for more field visits and in-person networking events – so we are working on a varied programme of events for 2025 which we hope will be of interest to a good number of our supporters.

We also took the opportunity to review our current membership structure with a view to better understand our supporter demographic. Our membership fees have remained static for a number of years, and it became apparent that we needed to implement a modest increase from the start of 2025 to better support our charitable activities and promote the importance of sustainable, resilient moorlands across the UK.

Therefore, as of 1st January 2025, membership fees will be: Individual: £60; Estate & Business: £150; Student / Gamekeeper: £25; Junior (under 16): £15; Life: £750; Over-55's Life: £500. There are also options to make regular or one-off donations and legacy giving.

We continuously review our membership benefits which currently include regular e-newsletters, Annual Review, discounted rates for events, invitation to our AGM and annual site visit, competitions and access to our research. Again, in response to our survey, we hope to offer more, exclusive opportunities in the near future.

**Sweet stuff**

We are incredibly proud to have launched our very first batch of Heather Trust honey.

Each attendee at November's UK Wildfire Conference was lucky enough to receive a jar in their delegate bag and the feedback has been incredibly positive. Produced by Luke and the team at the Northumberland Honey Co (and the busy bees), these pots of heather honey are delicious, and we hope to offer a limited number of jars for sale in our Spring Auction.

**Spring auction**

Our annual Spring Auction (formerly Country Market & Sporting Sale) will take a slightly different format in 2025 as we move to a new online auction provider, EMMA. EMMA provides a clean, simple, user-friendly bidding platform which we are excited to utilise to help grow our popular (and vital) fundraising auction. More information will be sent to our supporters but if you are keen to donate an item for auction or want to join the mailing list for updates and details of how to bid, please email [info@heathertrust.co.uk](mailto:info@heathertrust.co.uk)

Our auction is a very popular staple in the rural calendar, offering bidders a wide variety of Lots to choose from – items include sporting opportunities across the UK, fine wine, holidays, artwork and the ever-popular daffodil bulbs and heather seed!

Huge thanks, of course, to our donors and bidders, new and old who support us so generously.



## Grateful thanks to John Apthorp

Everyone at The Heather Trust was very sad to learn of the death in July this year of John Apthorp at the age of 89.

He was the founder of the Bejam frozen food chain and the force behind the emergence of Majestic as one of Britain's leading high street wine merchants.

John adored his grouse shooting and was particularly associated with Bransdale and Snilesworth on the North York Moors and Woodhead in the Peak District. This led to his wonderful financial support for the work of The Heather Trust over many years and bottles of the finest wines and Champagne for auction in our annual sale, for which we are most grateful.





# UK Policy Update:

## The uplands

**HENRIETTA APPLETON,  
POLICY OFFICER (ENGLAND), GAME & WILDLIFE CONSERVATION TRUST**

I think it is vital that the uplands are seen as a policy ‘special case’ given the demands that are now placed on them. The analysis we did at GWCT to assess grouse moor management’s contribution to government policy identified 12 public goods and services from food production to recreation and biodiversity<sup>1</sup>. Just focussing on one outcome such as carbon sequestration or nature recovery can lead to negative consequences for other desired outcomes. It is the trade-offs between these multi-functional demands that we hope the forthcoming Land Use Framework for England will help navigate.

As the UK National Ecosystem Assessment in 2011 explained, the uplands have distinctive cultural identities reflecting decades (even centuries) of management. It is the resulting landscape that attracts many of the visitors to our upland National Parks, about 58% of whom specify enjoying the scenery and landscape as the main reason for visiting a national park<sup>2</sup>.

It is this cultural history that makes a call for a reduction in management through destocking or restrictions on prescribed burning a struggle for some to accept. Much of our uplands

are protected through landscape or other designations such as SPAs and SSSIs reflecting the outcomes of historic management practices. These attributes are easily lost if management changes or is withdrawn. That is not a criticism of this approach just that the ‘new’ attributes will present as a new landscape with different species. The question is therefore – “what does society want from our English upland landscape?”

Arguably it is policymakers that need to decide policy priorities and how to progress, and in doing so need to balance the interests of different stakeholders. To achieve this requires collaboration with all stakeholders to co-design policy from the ground up to avoid a one-size fits all policy, a weakness in upland policy identified in the Independent review of protected site management on Dartmoor (December 2023)<sup>3</sup>.

A difficult task to say the least as many regard the English uplands as a ‘contested landscape’ fuelled by polarised views on prescribed burning, predation management and the illegal killing of birds of prey. The last is the most contentious as it is so emotive. Whilst the GWCT is completely opposed to the illegal killing of any protected species, we are concerned



that by focusing on one effect (the illegal killing of raptors), those opposed to grouse shooting have a tendency to diminish perception of all the other effects of its associated management (the loss of heather moorland, a change in the wildlife assemblage (biodiversity), loss of jobs, privately funded peatland restoration and protection from wildfire etc).

Protection from wildfire is a significant public benefit that is being compromised by a focus on carbon sequestration policies that emphasise peatland restoration through rewetting and a reduction in prescribed burning through limiting its use on deep peat. Whilst raising water tables could, in the long term, protect the peat particularly if sustained during the hotter, drier summers forecast due to climate change, the surface vegetation will still be vulnerable to total loss through wildfire with consequent impacts on dependent biodiversity. And then there is the potential for heightened wildfire risk during the restoration period as the vegetation builds up through reduced management (ironically increasing evapotranspiration and therefore drawing down on the water table). In the UK pretty much all wildfire ignitions are human induced (wild camping, disposable BBQs, discarded glass bottles reflecting the sun etc) and given that our uplands are hotspots of public access the risk is hard to mitigate across these extensive landscapes through managing ignition threat alone. The fuel load (vegetation) must be broken up to allow our Fire & Rescue Services an opportunity to control the wildfire, an event that is so severe it will destroy the habitat totally and the underlying peat.

I fear that current policy direction is diminishing our uplands and the public goods and services it supplies.

This frustrates me enormously. Ultimately all parties have the same priorities – to conserve our wildlife and protect our environment. But where we differ is in our beliefs and values.

This is the elephant in the room.  
So how do we turn a conflict into an opportunity?

The IUCN recently produced guidelines on human-wildlife conflict and co-existence<sup>4</sup> to help formulate strategies where different valid views are held. It is vital therefore that upland stakeholders come together and use these guidelines to seek a resolution. The key word here to me is co-existence. Synonyms for this are harmony and peace. Wouldn’t it be lovely if the future for the uplands was just this – other than of course hearing the evocative sounds of the abundant Curlew!



<sup>1</sup> Sustaining-ecosystems-English-grouse-moors-LR.pdf / Appleton, H. and Smith, A. 2022. Sustaining ecosystems – English grouse moors. Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust, Fordingbridge.  
<sup>2</sup> What are National Parks For? - UK National Parks Education Resource. / Tourism in UK National Parks Information sheet (October 2020)  
<sup>3</sup> Independent review of protected site management on Dartmoor - GOV.UK  
<sup>4</sup> IUCN (2023). IUCN SSC guidelines on human-wildlife conflict and coexistence. First edition. Gland, Switzerland: IUCN





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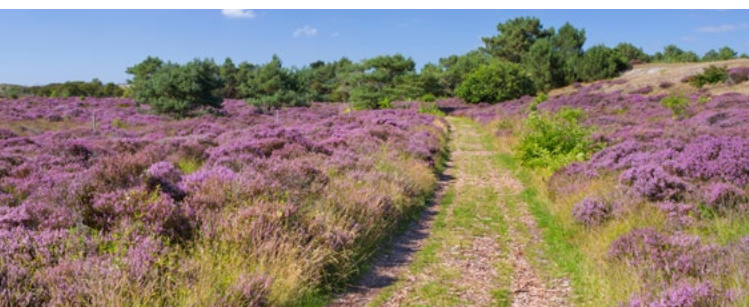


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