

BASC Information Sheet

HEATHER MANAGEMENT FOR GROUSE

The following information on grouse and moorland management will assist those with an interest in managing moorland for the conservation of grouse.

Upland moorlands are fragile habitats and as such need to be managed in an appropriate manner to maintain their value. Over recent years there has been much research carried out to establish methods for regeneration in derelict areas and the maintenance of grouse populations.

The diet of grouse is varied and seasonal, so management of moorland is not solely for heather but for other plant species as well. In the spring, the diet consists of shoots from blaeberry, cotton sedge, chick weed and sorrel. In the summer months grouse mainly eat the fresh tips of the heather, preferring the heather stands of 2 - 6 years old.

Grouse chicks, like many other game birds rely, in their first days after hatching, on insects together with heather shoot tips, moss and various flowers. However, after a few days they grow to depend on plant food alone. It is important to maintain areas with wet flushes and pools, as grouse drink every day. In the summer, during breeding, you will find that most grouse will nest within 1 kilometre of water.

Grouse require a broad age range of heather to allow for cover, shelter and feeding. Hens usually nest in mature heather adjacent to freshly burnt or second year burn, where fresh shoots will be available for chicks. A patchwork of old and new heather suits birds best.

HEATHER: PHASES OF DEVELOPMENT

Pioneer

- This starts from seed or from the burnt base of old stems, and lasts until the heather is 6 years old and stands 80 - 150mm high.

Building

- The heather predominates and suppresses other plants. This stage lasts approximately 10 years and ends when the plant is 15 - 20 years old.

Mature

- This is the stage where the plant tends to break from the middle. This allows light through to the ground where mosses and other plants can establish themselves. This mature stage lasts about 10 years and leaves a litter of dead shoots, twigs and flowers.

Degenerate

- These plants are approximately 30 years old, and completely broken down allowing other plants to colonise such as birch and purple moorgrass.

The building phase is important for grouse management as it is a highly productive phase supplying both food and cover for the grouse. With careful grazing and burning management this stage can be maintained.

Overgrazing of moorland by sheep, cattle or deer has a detrimental effect on the moor. The habitat remaining is not favoured by grouse. These areas tend to be overtaken by bracken

and coarse grasses. Careful management of grazing is therefore required. Liaison between grazing tenants and grouse managers is important.

Heather burning is the traditional method of managing heather moors, and government agricultural departments have "The Heather and Grass Burning Code" booklet giving guidelines that should be used to ensure effective burning. When burning special consideration should be given to avoid areas of wet flushes, scree slopes and along the banks of streams where other vegetation flourishes.

LEGISLATION

Shooting

- The grouse shooting season begins on August 12th (The Glorious 12th) and ends on 10th December inclusive.

Burning

Legislation sets out the time and requirements for burning heather/Muriburn.

- England and Wales between 1st November - 31st March in the Lowlands and 1st October - 15th April in the uplands.
- Muirburn in Scotland between 1st October to 15 April.
- Heather in Northern Ireland between 1st September – 14th April.

A special licence to burn out of season can be obtained in special circumstances from Natural England, Welsh Government, Scottish Government or the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (Northern Ireland).

Do's and Don'ts when burning

- You must not give less than 1 day or more than 7 days written notice of intent to burn to:
 - Neighbours owners and occupiers of the land
 - You must not start burning between sunset and sunrise.
- You must ensure that sufficient people and equipment are on hand to control the burn.
- You must take all reasonable precautions to prevent injury or damage to people and animals.
- You must follow special arrangements and plan well in advance if burning on a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).
- You must not cause a nuisance through creation of smoke.
- You must not create dark smoke.
- You must not start a fire which is likely to injure, interrupt or endanger road users.

Further Advice

The BASC Conservation and Land Management Team will be pleased to discuss any of the above information with you. *We are here to help*, contact us at:

BASC, Marford Mill, Rossett, Wrexham, LL12 0HL.

Team direct line: 01244 573024

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