



Habitat Action Plan

‘Ungrazed areas’



Author – Jonathan Swale

**Living Shetland Biodiversity Action Plan
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Ungrazed corners

Habitat Definition

Because of the agility of the native Shetland sheep and their importance in Shetland's agricultural economy (particularly under the subsidy regimes of the past fifty years), there are few areas of Shetland that are not regularly grazed. Those that are not fall into three categories:

- Areas that have never been grazed as they are inaccessible to sheep under normal circumstances, e.g. ravines, cliff ledges, smaller offshore stacks and skerries and holms in lochs (larger skerries and holms were often used for grazing sheep taken out by boat)
- Areas of in-bye wetland (and occasionally other habitats) from which crofters and farmers deliberately exclude livestock because of the risk of losing them.
- Unused "neuks" around croft buildings and yards.

Areas inaccessible to sheep support Shetland's only truly natural vegetation, unaffected by grazing or agricultural use. They are important refuges for plants that were once more widespread in the Isles, including most of Shetland's hawkweeds and trees (of which both groups have separate action plans), but also species such as goldenrod and royal fern. The vegetation in these areas is very variable, reflecting soil conditions, exposure, nutrient enrichment etc. It includes sea cliffs with roseroot, Scot's lovage, red campion and sea campion; moorland holms with abundant juniper and occasional trees; holms with more fertile soils supporting tall herb vegetation with angelica and ferns; and ravine sides with honeysuckle, woodrush and goldenrod. The abundance of flowers in the absence of grazing makes these areas important for insect life, whilst the dense vegetation of holms on lochs provides cover for nesting tufted ducks and mergansers.

In the past, when Shetland supported almost twice today's population and was largely dependent on home-produced food, many in-bye wetlands would have been managed for bog hay and perhaps also grazed at least seasonally by cattle or ponies. Consequently the vegetation has been more or less modified by agriculture. However, this management often encouraged a diverse array of grasses, sedges and wildflowers making former wet meadows some of the most botanically rich areas of Shetland, with colourful displays of marsh marigold, ragged robin and iris. The tall vegetation that they now support almost year round makes them important areas for nesting and migrant birds and for invertebrates. Their abandonment has sometimes led to loss of plant diversity as the more delicate species are choked out by dense growth of grasses that would once have been cut for hay. Their unsuitability for agricultural improvement has, however, resulted in them converting to species-poor pasture grassland as has so much of Shetland's in-bye land.

Ungrazed "neuks" around crofts are, again, very variable but generally consist of small areas of rough ground supporting wildflowers like red campion and vetches, often alongside escaped garden plants such as foxglove and, in disturbed areas, arable "weed" species. As well as giving a splash of colour, these flowers provide food for insects whilst their seeds are eaten by twite.

Culture and Folklore.

Although the burns in ravines were often used in the past to drive watermills or as locations for otter "hooses" (traps) and the wildflowers on burn-sides were appreciated for their beauty, ungrazed vegetation and the plants and animals associated with it are not thought to have been of any special cultural significance and do not occur in folklore.

Current Status

The most floristically diverse ungrazed wetlands, including those at Spiggie, Aith Meadows (Cunningsburgh) and Trona Mires are designated as SSSIs for their botanical importance. Some ungrazed ledges and holms also fall within SSSIs, often fortuitously although some have been designated for their trees or hawkweed populations. Most ungrazed areas (and all ungrazed "neuks") however, are not subject to conservation designation

Sites of Importance

All three categories of ungrazed land are widespread around Shetland and occur in most, if not all parishes. Holms in the west mainland are particularly important for royal fern.

Ecology & nature conservation importance.

Ungrazed areas provide refuges for plants such as hawkweeds, golden rod and royal fern that are vulnerable to grazing. The vegetation provides cover for a wide range of birds and invertebrates and is particularly important for providing nesting sites for ducks on holms in lochs. Dense growths of woodrush on holms may also provide above-ground shelter for otters. The abundant flowers in some ungrazed areas are an important food resource for insects, particularly bumblebees whilst small birds including twite eat their seeds.

UK Biodiversity status

Ungrazed vegetation supports Hawkweeds and may be important for otters, both of which are UKBAP priority species.

Current Threats

Sheep Ledges and holms are at risk of the accidental or deliberate introduction of sheep. Freezing of lochs in winter may allow sheep access to holms across where they can be trapped by a thaw and cause severe damage by eating all available vegetation before they are either rescued or starve to death. Some ledges may be accessible to a desperate and foolhardy (or particularly agile) sheep, attracted by their lush vegetation when all around is grazed short. Although it is becoming less likely as the incentives to maximise stock numbers are withdrawn, crofters may also be tempted to put the occasional ewe onto a holm or skerry to make use of that little extra grazing.

Vegetation Build-up Conversely, some wetlands may be at risk from lack of management allowing thick mats of lodged grass to build up, choking out wildflowers and too dense to provide cover for birds.

Agricultural Activities Ungrazed neuks are vulnerable to many activities that routinely occur around crofts, such as vehicles being driven through or parked on them, use for storing materials, spillages or run-off from silage bales or fertiliser bags etc.

Current Action.

Stock exclusion During the 1980s and 90s, a few ledges and holms thought most vulnerable to accidental invasion by sheep were fenced off, mainly to protect trees. One ravine (the Burn of Lunklet) has been fenced and sheep excluded under a management agreement with SNH in order to protect its hawkweeds but with benefits for other plant species.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest SSSI's are the main nature conservation designation in Great Britain. The purpose of the SSSI system is to safeguard for present and future generations a series of sites that are individually of high natural heritage importance and, in total, represent the diversity and geographical range of habitats, species, geological, and geomorphological features throughout Britain. Following notification of a site as a SSSI, owners and occupiers are required to consult SNH before management changes are made that may be damaging to the natural heritage. In Shetland there are three SSSI's that support relict tree and scrub vegetation.

Crofters A few areas are also protected from grazing by individual crofters who value the plant life that they support.

Action Plan Objectives, Targets and Actions

Publicise the importance of ungrazed areas for native plants, insects and birds and encourage the agricultural community to protect existing areas, e.g. by regularly checking holms for sheep during the winter. (LBAP partnership, agricultural community)

Encourage, by means of publicity and grants, the creation of more "wild neuks" on crofts by allowing natural vegetation to develop or sowing appropriate wild flowers from seed of Shetland provenance. (SCFWAG, SAC, SNH)

Identify all ledges and holms supporting locally important species or rich botanical communities that are likely to be irreversibly damaged by grazing, including hawkweeds, royal fern and all native trees and shrubs.

Assess the risk of accidental invasion by sheep and, where practicable, block any obvious possible access route to these areas. (SBRC, SCFWAG, SAT, SNH)

Identify and survey ungrazed wetlands to assess their botanical, ornithological and invertebrate value and their conservation needs. Where it appears that this would benefit from some form of active management, try to secure this using agri-environment measures or (on designated sites) SNH management agreements. If necessary, seek amendments to agri-environment prescriptions or payment rates to enable this.

Associated plans

Hawkweeds, Freshwater, Woodlands, Community Biodiversity Action Plans (Bigton, Bressay, Fetlar, Sandwick, Yell),

Key contacts

For further information or advice on management for these habitats and species please contact;

Lead Partner

- Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH)
Ground Floor, Stewart Building, Esplanade, Lerwick. ZE1 0LL
Tel – 01595 693345
Fax – 01595 692565
Email:
Website: www.snh.gov.uk

Associated Partners

- Shetland Island's Council (SIC)
Austin Taylor (Conservation Manager) Shetland Islands Council
Infrastructure Services, Grantfield, Lerwick
Tel: 01595 744833
Fax: 01595 695887
Email: austin.taylor@sic.shetland.gov.uk
- Shetland Crofting and Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (SCFWAG)
Agricultural Marts, Stoney Hill, Lerwick. ZE1 0QW
Tel: 01595 692633
Fax: 01595 692633
Email: shetland@fwag.org.uk
- Scottish Water
Shetland Office, PO Box 11660, Lerwick. ZE1 0ZF
Tel: 01595 741550
Fax: 01595 694222
Website: <http://www.scottishwater.co.uk>
- Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA)
The Esplanade, Lerwick. ZE1 0LL
Tel: 01595 696926
Fax: 01595 696946
Email: david.okill@sepa.org.uk
Website: <http://www.sepa.org.uk>
- Living Shetland Officer
c/o SIC Infrastructure Services, Grantfield, Lerwick. ZE1 0NT
Tel: 01595 690832
Fax: 01595 692633
Email: Livingshetland@fwag.org.uk
- Shetland Biological Records Centre (SBRC)
Shetland Amenity Trust, Garthspool, Lerwick
Tel: 01595 694688
Fax: 01595 693956
Email: sbrc@zetnet.co.uk
Website: <http://www.nature.shetland.co.uk/brc/>

