PRIORITY HABITAT SURVEY 2018 Summary
South and Western YDNP extension

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Priority Habitat Survey 2018 in the South and Western the YDNP extension area

Introduction

The Yorkshire Dales National Park has been divided into ten distinct survey areas with the intent of surveying one area each year between 2010 and 2019. The aim of the survey is to assess the condition of Priority Habitats[1] outside of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs)[2] across the entirety of the National Park.

The results of these surveys is combined with the results of Natural England's surveys of Priority Habitats within SSSIs to give a much wider picture of the state of wildlife across the Yorkshire Dales National Park. Up to date knowledge of habitat condition is vital in order for the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority (YDNPA) and other agencies and bodies to deliver local Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) targets, advise on agri-environment schemes and for development control functions.

In 2018 YDNPA commissioned an assessment of Priority Habitats in the following parishes: Tebay, Firbank, Killington, Middleton, Barbon, Mansergh, Kirkby Lonsdale, Casterton, Leck, Barrow-with-Burrow and Ireby parish. It was estimated that there is a total of 3,929 hectares of priority habitat outside of SSSIs in these parishes. These potential areas of priority habitat were identified in a desk based study using historic Phase 1 data[3], the Natural England Priority Habitat inventory[4], aerial photography and some preliminary site visits. The assessment was completed by the consultants Haycock and Jay Associates Limited.

The condition assessment methodology was based upon that developed for the Environmental Stewardship scheme. Assessment forms are reproduced in Appendix 1. Any Priority Habitat found was mapped where necessary, condition assessed and placed in categories A, B or C depending on how many criteria it met. Any habitat in category A is considered to be in good condition. The consultants were provided by YDNPA with a map of the area of land to be surveyed. Assessment of Priority Habitat required walking a 'W' transect and stopping 10-20 times to record a set of attributes.

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1. Priority Habitats are habitats identified at a UK level as being of crucial importance for the conservation of biodiversity. More information is available at: http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-5718
2. SSSIs are sites afforded some legal protection because they support features of significance biologically and/or geologically in a national context. In England they are notified by Natural England. For more information see: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/protected-areas-sites-of-special-scientific-interest
3. Phase 1 mapping 1983-1987 - The Phase 1 Habitat Classification and associated field survey technique provide a standardised system to record semi-natural vegetation and other wildlife habitats.
4. Natural England Priority Habitat inventory v2.1 - This is a spatial dataset that describes the geographic extent and location of Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (2006) Section 41 habitats of principal importance. http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/

Results

Of the 81 landowners contacted, 26 (32%) allowed access on to their land to survey. In total, 1,397 hectares (ha) of land were surveyed. Habitat patches investigated ranged in size from very small areas (0.25ha) to much larger blocks of land (up to 118ha). 648.3ha was found to be identifiable areas of Priority Habitat, while a further 321.1ha of land surveyed included priority habitat where the priority habitat formed part of a mosaic within a larger area non priority habitat.
Of the Priority Habitat on land surveyed 67ha (10%) was found to be in condition A, meaning that it passed all the criteria relating to the quality of the vegetation as wildlife habitat.

334.6ha (50.5%) was found to be in condition 'B', meaning it failed one of the criteria and 260.4ha was found to be in condition 'C' (39.5%), meaning it failed two or more of the criteria. The remainder of the land surveyed was found to be habitat other than Priority Habitat. this could be because the data sets used to identify habitats initially were inaccurate or the habitat has degraded considerably.

The results of the assessment showing habitats in condition 'A' are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Habitats recorded during 2018 survey in the south and western part of the YDNP extension area (Grey indicates Priority Habitat)

Habitat code	Habitat name	Total area (hectares)	Area in (ha) Condition A	% in Condition A
G02	Semi-improved grassland	0.1	N/A	-
G05	Lowland dry acid grassland	2.9	0.3	10.3
G06	Lowland meadows & pastures	4.2	0.3	7.1
G07	Purple moor-grass and rush pastures	12.7	12.4	97.6
G08	Upland calcareous grassland	0.7	0.7	100
G09	Upland hay meadows	3.5	3.5	100
L01	Limestone pavement	0.1	0	0
M01	Grass moorland and rough grazing	151.6	N/A	-
M02	Fragmented heath	1.2	0.6	50
M04	Upland heathland	27.2	0.5	1.8
M06	Blanket bog	496.4	5.2	1.0
M07	Inland rock outcrops, cliffs & scree	36.8	33.6	91
M08	Upland flushes, fens & swamps	32.4	0.2	0.6
T05	Conifer plantation	11.0	N/A	-
T06	Mixed woodland	70.1	N/A	-
T07	Landmark woodland	0.5	N/A	-
T08	Native semi-natural woodland	13.3	1.3	9.8
T11	Upland mixed ash woods	1.0	0.0	0
T13	Wet woodland	14.9	6.0	40.3
W04	Fens	0.6	0.5	83
W07	Ponds	0.4	0.3	75
	Totals (Priority Habitat only)	**648.3**	**65.4**	**10.1**

Discussion

The survey results have substantially updated the level of knowledge of the extent and condition of habitats within the south and west part of the Yorkshire Dales National Park National Park extension area. This will provide a strong platform for the future monitoring and planning of biodiversity conservation work within this area of the National Park The results will be used in-house and will also be made available eventually to others as part of the YDNPA Habitat Map available on https://data.gov.uk/.

As this is the first survey and condition assessment that the YDNPA has carried out in the extension area it is not possible to comment on any progressive change in habitat condition as the survey data used to identify potential areas of priority habitat was sometimes inaccurate, did not always include habitat condition and frequently used a different survey methodology.
Once the baseline condition assessment of National Park habitats has been completed (anticipated in 2020), it will begin to be possible to make informed statements relating to habitat degradation with the backing of evidence.

Mosaics of habitats are frequent and in these cases where possible each habitat was assessed independently and an estimation of percent cover of each component was made.

Taking a look at broad habitat types:

Grassland - Almost three quarters of the priority grasslands surveyed in south and western part of the YDNP extension area (71.6%) were in 'good condition' (condition A). However only 10.3% of lowland dry acid grasslands and less than 10% of lowland meadows surveyed were in 'good condition' (condition A). The landscape character in the lowlands of this area of the YDNP is predominantly semi-improved grassland. Getting these habitats into better condition and exploring opportunities for restoration of other grasslands where appropriate should therefore be seen as an important goal.

Upland Habitats – In this category are fragmented heath, upland heathland, blanket bog, inland rock outcrops, cliffs & scree and upland flushes, fens & swamps. 6.8% of these Priority Habitats were assessed as being in 'good condition' (condition A). The largest upland habitat type surveyed was blanket bog, a total of 496.4ha. However only 1% of this was in found to be in 'good condition' (condition A) while the remainder failed to meet the standard required due to there being more that 10% of sphagnum damaged, infrequent cover of dwarf shrub species and a lack of flowering heather plants recorded during surveys. Blanket Bog was seen to be failing it's target of 21% in

the 2016 Trends and Status Review, it is also a priority habitat in an international context as well as in the Yorkshire dales and as such restoration of this habitat should be seen as an important goal. Less than 2% of Upland Heathland and Upland flushes, fens and swamps reached condition A and the reasons for this should be further investigated.

Woodland – The total amount of woodland of all types was found to be 110.8 ha or 7.9% of the land surveyed. Woodland with enhanced nature conservation value (i.e. Priority Habitats) accounted for 29.2 ha (or 26.4%) of the woodland surveyed in 2018. Of these priority woodland habitats 25% (7.3ha) were found to be in 'good condition (condition A) The main reasons for priority woodlands failing to meet the criteria were due to grazing by stock, lack of natural regeneration and more than 20% of non native canopy species. It should be noted that of the remaining woodland 70.1ha (or 63.3%) was found to be T06,non priority mixed woodland which is a fairly high proportion, however much of this is PAWS (Plantation on Ancient Semi Natural Woodland) and therefore this data could be used to identify and target future woodland improvement schemes. However, from a nature conservation perspective, only 5.7% of Priority Habitat was judged to be in 'good condition'. (condition A)

Acknowledgements

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References

YDNPA (2017) Nature in the Dales 2020: The second Biodiversity Action Plan for the Yorkshire Dales National Park - 2016 Trends and Status Review Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority on behalf of the Yorkshire Dales Biodiversity Forum July 2017.