

PURPLE MOOR-GRASS (& RUSH-PASTURE)

Nationally

Purple moor grass and rush pastures occur on poorly drained, usually acidic soils in lowland areas of high rainfall in western Europe. In the UK, they are found in south-west England, particularly in Devon, southern Wales, south-west Scotland, perhaps extending as far north as northern Argyll, and in Northern Ireland, especially Fermanagh. Elsewhere in Europe they are particularly characteristic of the oceanic and sub-oceanic regions of the western seaboard, from Portugal to the Low Countries, extending eastward into central Europe.



Snipe © Paul Hobson

Their vegetation, which has a distinct character, consists of various species-rich types of fen meadow and rush pasture. Purple moor grass (*Molinia caerulea*), and rushes, especially sharp-flowered rush (*Juncus acutiflorus*), are usually abundant. Just as the best examples of lowland heath contain a wide range of plant communities, so the same is true for this habitat: the characteristic plant communities often occur in a mosaic with one another, together with patches of wet heath, dry grassland, swamp and scrub.

Key species associated with purple moor grass and rush pastures include: wavy St. Johns-wort (*Hypericum undulatum*), whorled caraway (*Carum verticillatum*), meadow thistle (*Cirsium dissectum*), marsh hawk's beard (*Crepis paludosa*), greater butterfly orchid (*Platanthera chlorantha*), lesser butterfly orchid (*Platanthera bifolia*), marsh fritillary butterfly (*Eurodryas aurinia*), brown hairstreak *Thecla betulae*, narrow-bordered bee hawkmoth (*Hermaris tityus*), curlew (*Numenius arquata*), snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*), and barn owl (*Tyto alba*).

Extent in UK:
79,392 ha

In the Peak District

In the Peak District Purple moor-grass and rush pasture in the sense above, is an uncommon habitat; however, Rush Pastures are quite common in the upper reaches of rivers and at the moorland edge within the South West Peak and Dark Peak Natural Areas. These areas are commonly dominated by either soft or sharp-flowered rush, in some instances with a rich assemblage of marsh species, but in others in association with relatively species-poor grassland. All are potentially of importance for their invertebrate and bird populations. Waders such as lapwing, curlew and snipe depend on this habitat for feeding and/or breeding, as do several of our farmland birds such as skylark.

This habitat occurs as a complex mosaic of community types along the fringe of the moorland areas. In this context they often exist in close association with spring-heads, flush-lines, field ditches and small streams. They also exist extensively over permanently damp soils in areas of impeded drainage.

Rush pasture exists as part of the intimate mosaic of farmland habitats. The tussocky structure and damp soils contribute to the richness of its invertebrate fauna whilst the structure and rich feeding grounds make it of crucial importance to the survival of many of our best loved farmland birds which have shown dramatic declines in numbers over the last 15 years. For example, curlew, lapwing and snipe numbers declined by 57 – 73 % in the North Staffordshire area between 1985 and 1996. It is also the habitat for increasingly uncommon plants including marsh orchid, ragged robin and marsh cinquefoil.

Rush pasture makes a valuable contribution to the landscape often existing as a transition and buffer between the more intensively used in-bye land and the moorlands above. Several of the species it supports are equally dependent on the moorland habitat e.g. twite, ring ouzel, golden plover and merlin. It is only by conserving both of these elements within the landscape that we can positively contribute to the enhancement of the populations of these key species.



Rush-pasture © Karen Shelley-Jones

Extent in PD:
930 ha

Current Factors Affecting the Habitat & Habitat Condition

- Agricultural improvement through drainage, cultivation and fertiliser applications.
- Inappropriate management, including overgrazing by sheep and too frequent burning.
- Agricultural abandonment, leading to rankness and scrub encroachment through lack of grazing.
- Fragmentation and disturbance for developments such as housing and road constructions.
- Afforestation, especially in Northern Ireland and Scotland.

Traditionally rush pastures have been used for light grazing by cattle. During the 20th century they have come under pressure for drainage and improvement and have suffered from increased stocking rates, which have dramatically altered the quality of the habitat type.

Recent Work

The Peak Birds Project, for many years has been working with farmers and land managers to enhance the habitats on their land for waders, this has often involved management of rush-pastures to achieve an appropriate balance of rushes, shorter-sward grasses and feeding scrapes.

Rush-cutting and scrape creation for waders



Associated BAP Species in the Peak District

Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Reed bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>
Brown hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>
Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>

Locally Significant Species in the Peak District

Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
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NVC Communities

The principal vegetation types (and their associated sub-communities) included in this habitat are:

- M22** - *Juncus-Cirsium* fen meadow
- M23** - *Juncus-Galium* rush-pasture
- M24** - *Molinia-Cirsium* fen meadow
- M25** - *Molinia-Potentilla* mire
- M26** - *Molinia-Crepis* fen-meadow

MG10 *Juncus effusus-Holcus lanatus* rush-pasture, is a local priority habitat for waders.