

SITE NOTIFIED TO THE SECRETARY OF STATE ON 14 OCTOBER 1998

COUNTY: DURHAM

SITE NAME: LUNE FOREST

Status: Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) notified under Section 28 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 as amended

Local Planning Authorities: DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL, Teesdale District Council

National Grid Reference: NY 850200

Area: 6333.44 (ha.)

Ordnance Survey Sheet 1:50,000: 91 & 92 (both maps cover the whole site)

1:10,000: NY 81 NW, NE, NY 82 SW, SE, NE, NW,
NY 91 NW, NY 92 SW

First Notified: 1998

Description and Reasons for Notification:

This upland block encompassing Lune Forest, together with moorland surrounding the headwaters of the River Lune, has been identified from comprehensive surveys of the North Pennines as one of the most extensive areas of relatively undamaged blanket mire in the north of England. The presence of dry and wet heath, acid grassland, limestone grassland and flushes increases the habitat diversity of this moorland. The area supports an important assemblage of moorland breeding birds. These include merlin and golden plover, contributing to the internationally important North Pennine populations of these species.

The predominant vegetation on the moorland plateau is blanket mire co-dominated by heather *Calluna vulgaris* and hare's-tail cottongrass *Eriophorum vaginatum*, typically with cross-leaved heath *Erica tetralix* and an abundance of mosses. On the highest ground to the west, other dwarf shrubs, including cloudberry *Rubus chamaemorus* and crowberry *Empetrum nigrum*, become more frequent. Where past grazing pressure has been severe, the blanket mire communities have been degraded and heather is suppressed or absent, with hare's-tail cottongrass predominating. In places on the lower, more accessible fringes, blanket mire and heath communities have been replaced by acid grassland dominated by mat-grass *Nardus stricta* or heath rush *Juncus squarrosus* and sheep's-fescue *Festuca ovina*.

Where steeper slopes have restricted peat formation, dry heath dominated by heather, wavy hair-grass *Deschampsia flexuosa* and bilberry *Vaccinium myrtillus* is found.

Wet flushes are frequent throughout the area and most of these support relatively few plant species, with soft-rush *Juncus effusus* predominating alongside mosses including the bog-moss *Sphagnum recurvum* and star-moss *Polytrichum commune*. There are also very localised patches of more herb-rich mire where sharp-flowered rush *Juncus acutiflorus* and herbs including common marsh-bedstraw *Galium palustre* grow in association with soft-rush.

Throughout the northern part of the site the presence of underlying limestone is obvious, with the blanket mire communities being dissected by bands of grassland, typically along the lines of outcrops or of the incised gills. Again, grassland dominated by mat-grass with herbs including heath bedstraw *Galium saxatile* and tormentil *Potentilla erecta* is common, but richer grasslands dominated by sheep's-fescue and common bent *Agrostis capillaris* also occur. At a few localities in the vicinity of Lune Head and Close House, thin soils overlying limestone support more species-rich limestone grassland with herbs such as wild thyme *Thymus praecox* and selfheal *Prunella vulgaris*. There are large populations of the nationally rare spring gentian *Gentiana verna* on some of these areas.

There is a rich assemblage of upland breeding birds, nesting both on the moorland and on the surrounding in-bye pastures. The merlin and golden plover populations of the open moorland contribute to the internationally important numbers of these species which nest within the North Pennine Moorlands. Merlin and short-eared owl nest in taller heather, whilst species such as red grouse and golden plover take advantage of the varied structure provided by burning and grazing management of the moorland. Dunlin are generally found on the higher blanket bog, where there are bog pools. Snipe, redshank and curlew breed along the grassy and rushy edges of the moor and, together with lapwing, also on the in-bye pastures. In addition to raptors and wading birds, the site has an important concentration of black grouse. A variety of other breeding species are recorded, including ring ouzel, yellow wagtail, twite and teal.

Other Information:

The site is located within the North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

The site fulfils criteria for consideration as part of the North Pennine Moorlands Special Protection Area.

The international importance of the bird assemblage of Lune Forest is supported by the presence of the following species listed on Annex 1 of the EC Birds Directive; merlin, golden plover.

The site includes the following species which are listed in the Red Data Book for Britain; Birds – merlin, red grouse, golden plover, curlew, redshank and Plants – spring gentian.

Part of this site overlaps Grains O' Th' Beck Meadows SSSI, a separate notification under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, as amended. The site also abuts four other SSSIs; Upper Teesdale SSSI to the north, Cotherstone Moor SSSI to the south and Appleby Fells SSSI to the west. The site surrounds but does not include Close House Mine SSSI, notified for its geological interest.