



All in a day's work

Saving our heathland for tomorrow

Murlough National Nature Reserve is one of the best examples of lowland heathland in Northern Ireland, and thanks to the support of a UK-wide project called 'Tomorrow's Heathland Heritage', the condition and future of Murlough's heathland is secure.

The South Down Heathland Project, covering Murlough and Bloody Bridge, is the only THH project in Northern Ireland, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, EHS and the Trust. For the past five years, a three person team has been restoring the condition of dune heath and eliminating the bracken and gorse whose vigorous growth threatens to overtake the heath.

The team had the help of some four-legged friends, in the shape of Exmoor ponies and Black Galloway cattle to graze the heath at various times of the year. Since Norman times, rabbits would have kept the bracken at bay, but the rabbit population is no longer sufficient for this task. Fencing had to be put up in some places to keep the grazing animals in the right areas, and some new paths or variations were provided to ensure that visitors could still enjoy access to the dunes.

If the heathland was lost, there would be a devastating effect on birds such as linnets and skylarks and flowers like the bee orchid or field gentian. Thankfully, this is being prevented with the essential ingredients of our hard working project team, some grant aid and a little help from our four legged friends!

Stephen Longster, South Down



Heathland at Murlough



We are grateful to Environment and Heritage Service of the DoE for supporting the production of the Strategy and this Summary.

Photo Credits:
NT/Roger Kinkead, NT/Chris Hill, NT/John Lennon, NT/Phil Richardson, NT/Pacemaker Press
NT/Ron Thompson, NT/Ian Herbert, Phil Davidson, Stephen Longster, Anja Rosler, David Thompson

Next stop - Slieve Donard!

Slieve Donard's summit slopes are home to a rare montane heath habitat, containing a mixture of heather, bilberry, crowberry and some mosses and lichens. A little lower down is upland heathland habitat, which contains rare mosses and liverworts and heathers. These habitats are so important that Slieve Donard has been designated a Special Area of Conservation (SAC). But they're under pressure, struggling to survive, partly because of the trampling of human feet, but mainly because of too much grazing by sheep.

We have worked closely with EHS to develop a restoration programme through the MOSS scheme which includes management planning and grant aid. Our main objective is to ensure that grazing on the mountain is reduced, to enable plant communities to recover in the long term.

We will be monitoring the heathland very closely for signs of recovery, to guide us in future decisions about grazing levels and management. We will share what we learn with others involved in the management of the Mourne's.



Walkers in the Mourne's

Action for Wildlife

The National Trust Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy 2004-2009

Summary Report



What is Biodiversity?

Biodiversity is the total variety of all living things: people, plants and animals and the places or habitats in which they live. As a leading conservation and environmental charity, the National Trust is committed to conserving and improving biodiversity in the special places in our care forever, for everyone. We are also committed to working with other organisations to promote the importance of protecting all of Northern Ireland's biodiversity

We have produced the National Trust Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy to describe how we will manage the biodiversity on our properties. It sets out our ambitious plans to provide better opportunities for everyone to enjoy this richness of wildlife.

This Summary highlights the main themes of the Strategy, and gives examples of our work. The full strategy is available on our website: www.ntni.org.uk or by contacting the Conservation Department at the Trust's regional office, tel. 028 9751 0721.





Biodiversity around the Trust

Celebrating our biodiversity

Did you know that National Trust properties in Northern Ireland are home to a whole range of animals and plants? For example, you will find:

- the elusive pine marten at Crom and Florence Court
- Red squirrels breeding at Florence Court, Collin Glen and Mount Stewart
- Irish hares at Ballyquintin, Ballyconagan (Rathlin Island) and Crom
- Otters at Strangford Lough
- all eight species of bat present in NI roost at Crom, and six species at Address.

This is just a tiny sample of the wildlife to be found on Trust properties. For some people, it is these attractive mammals which give Trust properties their appeal. Others enjoy the birdlife, the flowers, the woodland or simply the beautiful views and the tranquillity.

The Trust owns and looks after over 12,000 hectares of land (about the size of Belfast City Council area) and 200 kilometres (one third) of Northern Ireland's coastline. Two-thirds of this land is exceptionally important for its biodiversity. Many sites - from the Giant's Causeway to the top of Slieve Donard - are in the most scenic parts of Northern Ireland and are important for access and environmental education.

The National Trust has examples of many of the priority habitats which have been identified as in decline or under threat. For instance, the woodland pasture and parkland at Crom, Florence Court and Castle Ward are among the best examples of this habitat in Northern Ireland.

The Giant's Causeway, Fair Head, Ballyconagan and Murlough National Nature Reserve have extensive areas of lowland heath, while the summits of Slieve Donard and Slieve Commedagh are among the very few surviving sites for montane heath.

Many of the Trust's most popular places are along the coast, and they contain important habitats. These include maritime cliffs and slopes, such as White Park Bay, Larrybane and Fair Head. Extensive sand dunes are found at Murlough NNR, and Portstewart Strand. Vegetated shingle, very scarce in Northern Ireland, is found at the Giant's Causeway, Strangford Lough and Kearney. Strangford Lough, with its mudflats, sheltered muddy gravels and seagrass beds provides wonderful habitats for thousands of breeding and overwintering birds, an important seal breeding ground and a vast array of marine life.

The North Coast is the only place where cough - a red-legged crow - can be seen. Murlough NNR has one of the largest populations of marsh fritillary butterfly in NI - as well as rare plants such as spring vetch and shepherd's cress. Portstewart Strand is the only NI site for seaside century.



Pine marten

Many of our properties have international and national designations which show just how special and important they are. The designations include a World Heritage Site (the Giant's Causeway), Special Areas of Conservation, Ramsar Sites, and Areas of Special Scientific Interest, and we have a particular responsibility to ensure that their special features are protected.

From tiny plants to skies full of Brent geese over Strangford Lough, the National Trust has a huge responsibility to manage all its special places to benefit the plants and animals which live there. And in doing so, we will ensure a healthy environment for us all to enjoy.

The Trust and NIBS

The Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy (NIBS) was launched in September 2002 by the then Minister for the Environment, Dermot Nesbitt MLA. The NIBS recognises that biodiversity in Northern Ireland is under threat - as it is across the world - and sets out actions to protect our landscape, wildlife habitats and species. The Trust looks after many important habitats, from coastal to woodland, and we have an important role to play in supporting the NIBS.



Wildflower walk at Rowallane Garden



Biodiversity Strategy Summary

The overall aims and objectives of our Biodiversity Strategy are:

- To protect** important habitats, species and earth science sites;
- To establish and understand** the extent, distribution and condition of the natural heritage resource in the National Trust's care;
- To monitor, record** and share information on long term trends in relation to habitats and species;
- To restore and enhance** habitats, species or earth science sites which have been damaged by unsustainable land-use practices;
- To promote** the importance to our social, physical and economic well-being of a healthy countryside that is rich in wildlife; and
- To influence** decision makers whose policies or actions have an impact on the natural heritage.

A summary of the Strategy themes and actions is given below:



Common blue damselfly

Woodlands

Northern Ireland is the least wooded country in Europe, so all our native broad-leaved woodlands are important. The Trust manages 700ha of woodland, and leases 200ha to Forest Service. Crom is the most important woodland site in NI. Other important Trust woodlands include The Argory and Castle Coole. Native woods contain trees and shrubs such as oak, ash and rowan. They have a fantastic array of flowers like bluebells and primroses, and are very attractive for insects.

We will:

- establish the amount and condition of our woodland habitats
- identify where there are priority species, e.g. red squirrel
- increase broad-leaved cover, as far as possible by natural regeneration

Woodland Pasture and Parkland

The Trust manages a significant proportion of the small amount of woodland pasture and parkland in NI. This habitat is closely associated with country estates and was created largely by the land management systems of the past, e.g. the fashion for 'designed landscapes' in the 18th century. It consists of a mixture of woodland and grazed grassland. Prime examples are Crom, Florence Court, Castle Coole and Castle Ward.

We will:

- carry out surveys and promote the need for more research into parkland biodiversity
- continue phased planting of trees mainly using seedlings from the sites

Coastal Habitats

Managing coastal and marine habitats is a major role for the Trust, with over 200km of NI's coastline in our care. The different rock, soil and vegetation types provide many different habitats, including maritime cliffs and slopes (the Giant's Causeway, Fair Head, Larrybane); coastal sand dunes (Murlough Nature Reserve, Portstewart Strand, Grangemore dunes); and mudflats (Strangford Lough, the Bann mouth). These habitats allow many plants, animals and birds to thrive. The coastline is ever-changing, with natural processes such as erosion, storms and sea level changes affecting how the coast looks.

We will:

- raise awareness of coastal processes like erosion, and show how these can be accepted
- undertake a climate change study on the Strangford Lough foreshore at Mount Stewart
- influence coastal and marine policy, e.g. through contributing to the development of the government's NI Coastal Strategy



Parkland meadow



Summary and Action Plan

Biodiversity Strategy Summary

Heathland and Bog

Heathland and bog come in a variety of types, like lowland raised bogs, blanket bog, lowland and upland heathland and montane heath. These important habitats are under threat right across the UK. Trust examples include Cushleake, Ballyconagan, Murlough NNR, Slieve Donard, Divis Mountain and The Argory, where the 'Mosses' are managed by the Ulster Wildlife Trust. Bogs also preserve archaeological evidence and artefacts which help trace man's influence on the landscape.

We will:

- bring all our heathland and bog habitats on Special Areas of Conservation into 'favourable condition'
- restore the heathland on Slieve Donard and Commedagh through the EHS Management of Special Sites scheme (MOSS)

Wetlands

NI has many wetlands, e.g. the Fermanagh Lakes, the shoreline of Strangford Lough, and the coastal grazing land around the River Bann estuary. They are rich in plant and wildlife and attract birds such as snipe, lapwing and curlew. This wildlife is vulnerable to changes in water level or quality, caused for example through drainage schemes or farm fertilisers.

We will:

- work with tenant farmers to ensure that agricultural activities avoid damaging wetlands
- establish more information about species which indicate healthy wetlands, through surveys, e.g. at Castle Ward
- promote the importance of managing wetlands at 'catchment level' - taking account of the impacts of development or agriculture anywhere on a water system

Grassland and Arable Land

The Trust looks after a lot of 'species-rich' grassland, much of which is farmed by our tenant farmers on whose co-operation we rely heavily. Good examples include Ballyquintin on the Ards Peninsula and Innisfree Farm at the Giant's Causeway. Cereal field margins provide nesting and feeding areas for birds like skylark and yellowhammer. Species-rich hedgerows are often linked to small farm woodlands and provide corridors for wildlife to move around. Rowallane and The Argory have good examples.

We will:

- manage and where necessary restore our species-rich grassland habitats
- monitor the presence of wild flowers such as birds foot trefoil and knapweed
- complete farm plans for all our farmed land, and enter it into environmental management schemes

Gardens, Landscape Parks and Buildings

Some Trust gardens are the result of intensive horticulture, but these formal areas are often surrounded by areas which contain semi-natural habitats. Gardens are good for wildlife, supporting mammals, insects and birds, and aquatic life on lakes or ponds. Garden buildings and houses provide shelter for birds and bats. Mount Stewart and The Argory are fine examples, while Rowallane champions sympathetic management for wildlife.

We will:

- encourage longer meadow areas to create more wildlife habitats
- promote Rowallane as the premier wildlife friendly garden in Northern Ireland
- champion peat-free gardening methods - we can do it, can you?



Species rich grassland



Biodiversity Strategy Summary

Special Plants and Animals

Innumerable plants and animals live on Trust properties. Many are rare and have been listed in the NIBS as 'Species of Conservation Concern' or 'Priority Species'. We are working with EHS to build up our knowledge of these special species. Examples include the marsh fritillary butterfly at Murlough NNR and chough at North Antrim. Rare plants include water parsnip at Crom and seaside centuary at Portstewart Strand (the only NI site). There are otters at Castle Ward and Crom, and Irish hares on Ballyconagan and Ballyquintin. Species Action Plans and Habitat Action Plans are being developed by EHS and others, including the Trust, to set out how best to look after these special species and habitats.

We will:

- co-operate with EHS and others on SAPs, e.g. for Irish hare and red squirrel
- work to help species recover e.g. supporting the chough SAP
- manage habitats so that they benefit species under pressure

Bats

There are eight species of bat in Northern Ireland; all eight are found at Crom, and six species occur at Ardress. The rare Nathusius' pipistrelle has moved in from Europe relatively recently and only five sites are known in the UK, two of them being Crom and Ardress. Castle Ward and Springhill are also excellent bat sites. The combination of waterside and woodland habitats for feeding and buildings to roost in makes Trust properties particularly bat-friendly.

We will:

- ensure that our building projects are bat-friendly
- make woods bat-friendly, e.g. by restoring open glades and rides as bat 'superhighways'
- lead the implementation of the Bat BAP and act as a champion for bat conservation



Young people enjoying a wildlife event

Earth Science and Soils

Earth science refers to the rocks and landforms on which life develops. These have a major influence on biodiversity. NI has a remarkable degree of geological diversity - ranging from the ancient Precambrian rocks at Murlough Bay, North Antrim, to the younger tertiary igneous rocks of the Giant's Causeway. The ongoing coastal processes at White Park Bay are also of international interest. NI also has a huge variety of soil types which helps determine habitat types.

We will:

- ensure that farm plans take into account damaging activities e.g. continuous cultivation, soil erosion and over-stocking
- contribute to the preparation of the World Heritage Site Management Plan for the Giant's Causeway

Wildlife and People

The Trust is committed to making its wild places and wildlife accessible to everyone. The more people understand their surroundings and the need for a healthy environment, the more likely they are to stand up for it.

We will:

- ensure that visitors to our properties receive information about biodiversity in ways which encourage them to take action at home
- develop more nature conservation events and activities
- increase opportunities for volunteers e.g. practical management at Divis

The Wider Environment

All of the sites owned by the National Trust are part of the wider environment. We have to take into account what happens beyond our boundaries - where the water in our rivers or lakes originates, and factors such as erosion, pollution, and climate change all have to be considered. It is important to promote a holistic approach to the management of the eco-system.

We will:

- work with others to develop Local Biodiversity Action Plans
- encourage Planning Service to ensure nature conservation sites are protected through area plans and planning policy statements
- lobby for environmental protection to be given a higher priority across all government departments

Our overall aim is to celebrate the natural heritage and biodiversity of Northern Ireland so that everyone understands that all living things, from the rare to the commonplace, need to be protected and passed on to future generations.



All in a day's work...



Long eared bat

Bats about Bats at Crom

When I began work as Conservation Warden at Crom Estate, Co. Fermanagh, in December 2000, I already knew how important it was for bats. But when my first spring came round, I was totally unprepared for the spectacle of bats emerging after sunset and returning just before dawn. The sheer numbers were stunning: over 800 soprano pipistrelles, and 200 Leisler's.

I soon became hooked, and with the help of Mark Smyth, an active member of the NI Bat Group, we organised bat nights for the public. The highlight of the year for me was the night we found the rare Nathusius' pipistrelles. Mark detected males 'singing' from walls and buildings all over the estate. Our discovery confirmed that Crom is now home to all eight species of bat found in NI. There are also Nathusius' pipistrelles at Ardress. Crom is special for many reasons, not least for its bats!

Anja Rosler, Conservation Warden, Crom

Islands in the Lough

Strangford Lough is the largest sea lough and marine nature reserve in Great Britain and Ireland, covering 150 square kilometres. The lough's marine life is abundant with 2000 marine plants and animals, of which some species are the only representatives known and recorded in Ireland.

Folklore has it that there is an island for every day of the year. I have spent a month of Sundays looking for them, finding 88 true islands - although some with artificial causeways connecting them to the mainland.

The Trust has helped to preserve the tradition of using the islands for summer grazing. A few years ago, we had a new stock barge built to ferry animals across to the islands. The service works well for our farmers, and grazing is the best way to ensure a herb rich grassland for birds. We also use the barge to transport visitors to island walks and tours. The islands lure sailors, historians and picnickers alike. Part of our

work is to draw attention to the other important visitors with whom we humans share the Lough.

Maybe the stars amongst these visitors are the "sea swallows" - sandwich, common and arctic terns. Our bird ringing returns tell a story of epic journeys by the arctic tern, some making round trips to South Africa and the South Atlantic Ocean of 20,000 miles each year. We also share the Lough with up to 4000 pairs of wildfowl, including eider, shelduck, and mallard. Some 20,000 Brent geese arrive each autumn. Islands also provide birthing and nursing sites and resting places for common and grey seals.

The Trust's management of the lough's islands spans almost 40 years. We own 33 islands with management arrangements over others. I see each island as a fragmented oasis, a haven for wildlife and symbolic of the fragility of nature. I am reminded every time we ring young tern chicks that they will be carried to far off distant lands and seas. We act locally, but we must never take our eye off the global picture.

David Thompson, Property Manager, Strangford Lough



Strangford Lough, looking towards Scrabo Tower



Common seals



Friendly farming at Ballyquintin

Ballyquintin farm occupies a beautiful site at the tip of the outer Ards peninsula. It was bought by the Trust in June 2000 with grant aid from the Heritage Lottery Fund. Since then, with the co-operation of our farm tenants, we have been using wildlife friendly farming methods to make Ballyquintin more attractive for birds, wildlife and people. In 2001 and 2003 we acquired adjoining land at Bar Hall with grant aid from EHS thus creating a more viable farming unit.

We are aiming to return to the kind of mixed farming and arable pasture which was common some 40 years ago. The farm now is a mixture of barley and grass. We have sown grass seed with lot of native species in order to encourage the re-establishment of wild flowers. We are also leaving uncultivated margins around field boundaries to encourage arable weeds. In time, we hope Ballyquintin will have flowery meadows which would have been typical a generation ago.

Flowery meadows are good for wildlife, for example the Irish hare, which is in decline and has a Biodiversity Action Plan. Farm birds are also increasing, and over one winter, almost 40 different species were recorded, including linnet and yellowhammer. Some of the birds like the fields of stubble we leave behind after the barley harvest, and others may stay and breed as the hedgerows develop. Ballyquintin is in the DARD Countryside Management Scheme and we plan to use it as an 'exemplar farm' to share our experiences with other local farmers.

Ballyquintin Farm is a good example of the Trust's approach to farming. We have employed a Farm and Countryside Advisor to support our farming tenants and help them understand the vital role they play in food production and in reversing the decline of our native biodiversity. We encourage our tenants to reduce the use of fertilisers and chemicals and to consider organic and other models of sustainable farming.

Hugh Thurgate, Strangford

Irish Lady's Tresses

In August 2003, a kind of orchid never previously recorded along the North Coast was discovered at Aird, near the Giant's Causeway. Irish lady's tresses (*Spiranthes romanzoffiana*) is more usually found on lough shores and wet meadows, so it was both exciting and surprising to find it turning up on Aird. This is an area of wet heath the Trust has owned since 1994. An all-Ireland Species Action Plan is being prepared to target conservation action for this special plant.

Vertigo at the Causeway

This has nothing to do with the dizzy heights of the Causeway cliffs. We're talking about *Vertigo angustior* - a snail so tiny it's just over one millimetre long. It had not been recorded in Northern Ireland for about 100 years until 2002, when conchologist Geraldine Holyoak found specimens close to the Giant's Causeway. This was followed by a detailed survey funded by EHS. It gives a whole new meaning to 'vertigo' at the Causeway!

Chuffed about the Chough!

The Causeway Choughs, currently the only pair in Northern Ireland, bred successfully in 2003 for the second year running. Two young birds flew the nest in June, and throughout the summer they were spotted all along the Causeway cliff path. They had the site to themselves, as the previous year's three fledglings had moved on - we believe to become part of a large non-breeding flock in Donegal.

Breeding success is just the start, and if our dreams of re-establishing a viable population of chough in North Antrim are to be realised, we will have to hope that more young pairs get the message and return to breed in this area. The chough is in decline across Europe and in Ireland the population has declined by more than 50% in the past 25 years. Our North Antrim birds are the only pair in Northern Ireland, so we are playing an active part in the Species Action Plan for chough.

The main cause of decline is the disappearance of the kind of habitat chough like. That's why we're working with farmers, DARD, RSPB and EHS, for example to change the way we graze cliff-top fields with cattle and sheep, and leaving arable land in stubble over the winter instead of immediate re-

ploughing and planting. This leaves lots of bare ground for choughs to forage on. As is so often the case, this has benefited other species like wintering finches and buntings.

We remain hopeful that our partnership keep this lovely, characterful red-legged bird a permanent resident on the Causeway Coast.

Jenny Campbell, North Antrim



Bird watching in North Antrim