

# DWARF SHRUB HEATH (UK BAP BROAD HABITAT)

This broad habitat comprises vegetation in which dwarf shrubs are abundant or dominant. The dwarf shrubs here are most commonly ling *Calluna vulgaris*, bell heather *Erica cinerea*, cross-leaved heath *E. tetralix*, blaeberry *Vaccinium myrtillus*, cowberry *V. vitis-idaea* and crowberry *Empetrum nigrum*, but less commonly include bog bilberry *V. uliginosum*, bearberry *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*, alpine bearberry *A. alpinus*, dwarf juniper *Juniperus communis* ssp. *nana* and western gorse *Ulex gallii*.

The main division among these heaths in Scotland is between wet heaths and dry heaths. Wet heaths contain at least one of deergrass *Scirpus cespitosus*, purple moor-grass *Molinia caerulea*, *Erica tetralix* and bog myrtle *Myrica gale* in good quantity, or smaller quantities of these individual species attaining high cover collectively. Wet heath vegetation can resemble that of the Bog broad habitat, but differs in having little or no hare's-tail cottongrass *Eriophorum vaginatum*, and the bog mosses *Sphagnum papillosum* and *S. magellanicum*. Wet heath vegetation on peat >50 cm deep is classed as bog. Dry heaths have little or no *Scirpus*, *Molinia*, *Myrica* or *E. tetralix* and are mostly dominated by *Calluna* or *Vaccinium myrtillus*.

This broad habitat is widespread and common in Scotland, especially in the uplands where it dominates very large areas. Wet heath is most common in the western Highlands and Hebrides: in these areas it is the most extensive type of semi-natural vegetation. Further east dry heaths predominate.

Dwarf shrub heaths can be of high conservation interest, especially for birds, mammals, insects, bryophytes and lichens. Many west Highland and Hebridean heaths are of international importance for their oceanic liverwort floras.

Heaths are mostly managed and maintained by grazing or burning or both. Grazing can lead to reductions in the height and cover of dwarf shrubs, and can convert heath into grassland. Some rather heavily grazed wet heaths are dominated by *Scirpus*, with dwarf shrubs very sparse. In some situations undergrazing can lead to over dominance of heather and losses of small plants of interest. Heather-burning in patches is commonly carried out as part of grouse moor management, but in other places, especially in the west, larger-scale burns are sometimes carried out. Burning generally leads to more uniform swards of heather and a decline in bryophyte diversity and populations of other species such as juniper, although it can also keep conditions open enough for small uncommon species such as intermediate wintergreen *Pyrola media* and pyramidal bugle *Ajuga pyramidalis*.

Montane dwarf shrub heaths, including species such as stiff sedge *Carex bigelowii*, dwarf willow *Salix herbacea* and *Empetrum nigrum* ssp. *hermaphroditum*, belong in the Montane habitats broad habitat. Among coastal heaths, those belonging to the H7 NVC community belong in the Supralittoral rock broad habitat, and those which are NVC H11 belong in the Supralittoral sediment broad habitat. The remainder – that is, the great bulk of our Scottish dwarf shrub heaths – belong in this broad habitat, Dwarf shrub heath, and to either of two UK BAP Priority Habitats: Upland heathland in unenclosed upland areas, and Lowland heathland within enclosed agricultural lowlands. Upland heath is by far the more widespread and common of the two in Scotland.

The priority habitats included within this broad habitat type are:

- [Lowland heathland](#)
- [Upland heathland](#)