

Landscapes of Worcestershire

Landscape Type Advice Sheet - *Land Management*

Unenclosed Commons

Landscape Type Description

A category of landscape offering tremendous variety of scale and size, the overriding characteristics being the lack of enclosure and, usually, a land use of rough grazing. The smaller unenclosed commons are ranked as features within other Landscape Types but a few are considered to be of sufficient extent to warrant separate classification. Settlement, where present, is usually restricted to wayside dwellings situated around the perimeter of the common.



Key Characteristics

Primary

- Unenclosed land
- Rough grazing land use

Secondary

- Unsettled, but with wayside dwellings of distinctive scale and style, located on the perimeter of commons
- Unwooded, but small plots associated with dwellings often afford scattered tree cover
- Acid grassland/heath very often associated with these landscapes



Current Concerns

The character of these landscapes has developed historically as a result of the activities of those with commoners' rights. Commons can convey an exhilarating sense of wilderness and are invariably of high nature conservation value. Sadly, there now appears to be a lack of motivation to restore active pursuance of rights of common today (due to economic factors, disturbance and danger to grazing stock from busy roads, dogs and people and increased animal husbandry regulations). This has resulted in reversion to scrub in many places. Elsewhere commons are valued for their recreation potential and managed in a municipal fashion, with regular cutting of the sward and sometimes planting of ornamental trees. There have, however, been successful instances of community approaches to restoring grazing stock on common land, Monkwood Green being an example. Long term sustainable management initiatives are clearly needed for these landscapes.

The settlements associated with commons are often much sought-after, but properties frequently become subject to enlargement and remodelling, and risk developing a suburban character as a result. It is important that the integrity of such small communities is retained and their distinctive detail and spatial patterns conserved.

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Guidelines for Land Management

How to use this sheet

The aim of this information sheet is to provide *general guidelines* about the priorities for land management activities - focusing on relevant landscape features - within this Landscape Type. However, Landscape Types are generic descriptions of landscape character and any advice **must** be interpreted within the context of the site in question. Please also visit the Landscapes of Worcestershire mapping pages <http://gis.worcestershire.gov.uk/home/wcc-lca-maps> to click on your area and read the more specific ecological and landscape descriptions.

In the case of any habitat work, specialist advice should be sought from the County Ecologists and/or the appropriate agency (Natural England, Forestry Commission, Environment Agency, Defra) to ensure that the work is appropriate, is carried out at the right time of year, in the correct manner and in the best possible location. Surveys may need to be carried out to assess the sites for presence of protected species or existing habitat. With this in mind, please read on for opportunities for land/habitat management activities appropriate to this Landscape Type...

The general guidelines for the management of Unenclosed Commons are to:

- **conserve** and **enhance** the unenclosed nature and visual distinctiveness of open common areas
- define management objectives to integrate wildlife benefit, current recreational interests and other uses (bearing in mind the distinct historical profile of the common); management objectives could include:
 - ⇒ **restore** appropriate grazing regimes, to be agreed amongst those with commoners' rights
 - ⇒ **conserve** existing heath/acid grassland areas, encouraging linkage of patches through **re-creation** where appropriate
 - ⇒ **restore** or **enhance** the unwooded character through removal of scrub or secondary woodland where appropriate (*bearing in mind that a very few commons have historically had extensive woodland cover*)
- seek to avoid municipal/tidy approaches to management

Managing Common Land

The following additional information may prove helpful in defining management objectives (but bear in mind the need to research and record the specific historic profile of any common where a management plan is to be drawn up):

Grassland and Vegetation

When commoners' rights are not exercised, the vegetation of areas can change to coarser grass communities, to scrub and eventually secondary woodland. Grazed commons are invariably 'unimproved', having lacked fertilizer input over the years and so are very often of notable biodiversity value. The cessation of grazing can greatly reduce such ecological interest. Heath/acid grassland communities are very often, but not always, associated with these landscapes. These are plant communities typically developed in free-draining nutrient poor soils. Indicator species may include gorse (*Ulex*), bracken (*Pteridium*), ling (*Calluna*) and purple heather (*Erica cinerea*). Localised areas of poor drainage may be present. Indicator species may include cross leaved heath (*Erica tetralix*) and rush (*Juncus*).

Woodland and Trees

Many commons contain an element of tree cover that has developed over time, typically scattered hawthorn or other species, or willows in association with ponds or watercourses. At the other end of the spectrum commons may occasionally have extensive woodland cover (e.g. Pipers Hill Common) but this is the exception rather than the rule. Whilst such tree cover is totally acceptable, there is no expectation of a particular tree cover pattern associated with these landscapes and the overall openness of these areas of land, and absence of a notable tree presence, is the defining feature that should generally be respected. Whilst tree cover that becomes established due to natural succession following changes in management practices is acceptable (as it reflects the natural processes of evolution of these landscapes) the character can be damaged by attempts to introduce formal tree planting.

For more information visit our website www.worcestershire.gov.uk/lca or contact the Worcestershire County Council Environmental Policy Team on 01905 766038