

Landscapes of Worcestershire

Landscape Type Information Sheet

High Hills and Slopes

Landscape Type Description

An unenclosed "highland" landscape characterised by its steeply sloping topography, shallow mineral soils and extensive tracts of rough grassland and heath. The large scale and open, exposed character is heightened by the dramatic form of the topography creating a wild, invigorating quality. This is a simple, yet visually distinctive landscape, not least for the contrast which it provides with the surrounding, more gentle, enclosed agricultural landscapes.



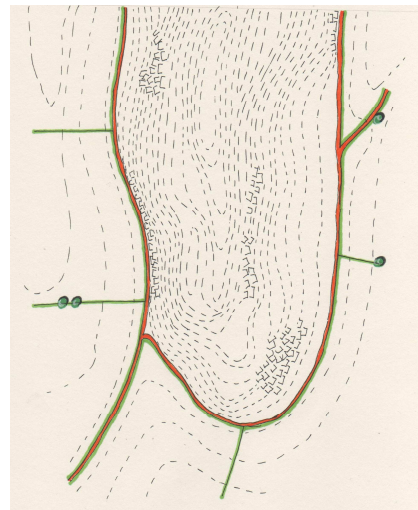
Key Characteristics

Primary

- Prominent, steeply-sloping highland topography
- Unsettled landscape, with few signs of human habitation
- Wide views over surrounding, lower lying farmland
- Hard rock geology with localised prominent rocky outcrops
- Shallow mineral soils supporting extensive areas of acid grassland and heath
- Unenclosed landscape

Secondary

- Rough grazing land use
- Absence of woodland, though occasional patches of secondary woodland and scrub



This is a landscape that owes its character primarily to a combination of its past management and to its physical structure. In Worcestershire, this Landscape Type is restricted to the summits and upper slopes of the Malvern Hills, an area that, in the past, has been largely if not totally, an unenclosed expanse of commons and rough grazing. The stocking levels would have been sufficient to keep scrub encroachment at bay and so maintain its distinctive open character, producing a close, botanically valuable sward in the process. It is an area that today has a much greater diversity of vegetation, with significant areas of bracken cover together with scrub and secondary woodland, particularly on the lower slopes. It is an area that tends to be bordered by roads, rather than crossed by them, the sparse settlement that exists being associated with the few roads.

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It is important for ecological, historical and visual reasons that the existing areas of open grassland are retained. The severe reduction in stocking levels over the years has led to the advance of bracken and scrub, and the character of the landscape is likely to change enormously if this encroachment is allowed to continue. An area in woodland cover would have the effect of wiping out the historical record of the landscape, destroying the essential scale and openness in the process. On the other hand the development of woodland, particularly along the lower flanking slopes, could have advantages in providing visual continuity with the wooded hills and slopes to the north and south of this area.

There are basically three options for the future management of the areas of scrub and woodland. The first is to endeavour to return such areas to their former grassland dominant status, whilst at the other extreme woodland encroachment could be allowed to continue and even actively encouraged, on the lower slopes. The third option is a compromise approach, accepting a degree of woodland and scrub cover and endeavouring to maximise habitat diversity within the matrix of habitats present. The notable ecological status of the area, particularly the habitat requirements of certain rare species must strongly influence the eventual management strategy of the area, but a degree of consultation to appreciate public perceptions of this particular landscape should also be included.

In order to facilitate the maintenance and possible expansion of the open grassland area, the long term sustainable management of the central ridge should be a priority. Whilst the current low stocking rates of livestock continue, manual methods of controlling scrub are being employed, and these are costly and of short term benefit. A means of encouraging higher stocking rates should be sought and this may necessitate paying for the presence of stock for nature conservation/landscape benefit. The diversification of the age structure and ecological value of other habitats should be led by biodiversity priorities.

The overall strategy for the high hills and slopes should, therefore, be primarily one of conservation together with an element of restoration. The open grassland character of the hills should be conserved and scope for restoring areas of current scrub and woodland back to grassland should be explored.

Landscape Guidelines

- conserve all remaining areas of semi-natural grassland
- restore areas of former grassland whilst acknowledging the need to retain other habitats of importance for endangered species
- enhance the nature conservation interest of the whole area through appropriate sustainable management, with particular emphasis placed on restoring grazing at the necessary stocking densities
- conserve the simple unity of the area, avoiding built development and urban influences

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