DAREN FACH SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST

Ley's Whitebeam *Sorbus leyana* (centre of photograph) © GS Motley

YOUR SPECIAL SITE AND ITS FUTURE

‘Your Special Site and its Future’ is part of our commitment to improve the way we work with Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) owners and occupiers. In it, we explain what is special about the wildlife on your site, and what care is needed to look after its wildlife into the future.

All SSSIs are considered to be of national importance and we recognise the crucial role that owners and occupiers play in their management and protection. We need you to share your views and knowledge of this site with us, to help safeguard it.

We hope that you will find ‘Your Special Site and its Future’ interesting and helpful. Please contact us if there is anything about the site and its management that you would like to discuss.

What is 'special' about the wildlife at Daren Fach SSSI?

Daren Fach has several special features:

- **Ash woodland**, with associated limestone grassland, cliffs and scree

  An important example of upland ash woodland that has developed over limestone. The site also supports good examples of limestone grassland, which extend onto the adjacent slopes of Daren Fawr. The cliffs and scree at Daren Fach and Fawr also support a variety of uncommon plants.

- **Assemblage of rare and scarce plants**

  Including important populations of:

  - **Ley's Whitebeam (*Sorbus leyana*)**

    One of the rarest trees in the world. Daren Fach is one of only two sites for Ley's whitebeam. It is the type locality for the species (i.e. the place from which the species was first described new to science) and it also supports the largest wild population.

  - **Chalice Hawkweed (*Hieracium cyathis*)**

    A rare species with a world population confined to a handful of sites in the Brecon Beacons National Park and a single site in England.

As well as the features listed above, this site has other habitats that contribute to the special wildlife interest. These include scrub, bracken, dry heath and unimproved acid grassland. This diversity of habitats similarly supports a wide range of species and these too are a key component of the special interest of the site. Unless it is specified below, management of this site should aim to look after these habitats as well as the listed features of interest.

Limestone fern © GS Motley

What do we want Daren Fach SSSI to look like?

The following is a description of how we would like to see the features at Daren Fach:

Around a third of the site is wooded. The woodland is mainly dominated by ash trees of different ages, with a variety of other tree species such as rowan, small-leaved lime, yew and whitebeams, including Ley's whitebeam and Sorbus porrigentiformis. There is a scattering of standing and fallen deadwood. Regeneration of trees is sufficient to maintain the canopy cover in the long term. Canopy gaps form often enough to allow regeneration of whitebeam and other tree species. Trees alien to the area or invasive species, such as beech and sycamore, are absent or present only in small numbers.

The understorey is diverse, with hazel, hawthorn, field maple and blackthorn amongst the most common shrubs. The ground is boulder-strewn in places and the flora is rich and diverse with a range of grasses, including false brome, mosses, ferns, including hart's-tongue, and a variety of typical ash woodland flowers such as wood anemone, dog's-mercury, sanicle, ramson's and herb-Robert. Although bramble is present it does not form impenetrable thickets.

At least 10% of the site supports open limestone grassland, dominated by mixtures of sheep's-fescue and common bent, with other distinctive grasses, such meadow oat-grass and crested hair-grass, in places and a wide variety of wild flowers, including carline thistle, wild thyme, northern bedstraw, common rock-rose and the scarce soft-leaved sedge. Coarse grasses, invasive scrub and plants indicating disturbance and nutrient enrichment, such as thistles and nettles are rare in these grassland areas

The limestone cliffs and screes provide a home other rare and scarce plants, including chalice hawkweed and limestone fern.

The cliffs, limestone grassland and other habitats are free of introduced and invasive plants such as cotoneaster.

There are stable or increasing populations of Ley's whitebeam, other native whitebeam trees, chalice hawkweed, limestone fern, soft-leaved sedge and other rare and scarce plants. For each of these, the population is sustainable in the long term, the range is not contracting, sufficient habitat exists to support the plant and the factors that may affect the plant or its habitat are under control.

Common rock-rose © GS Motley

What management is needed on Daren Fach SSSI and why?

Although Daren Fach is an excellent place for wildlife it will only remain so if the necessary management continues. CCW's priority is to work with you to ensure that this management is carried out.

What does this mean in practice?

There are a number of different factors that could damage the special features at Daren Fach if they are not properly managed. In addition some management is essential to conserve the special features and maintain them in their current condition.

- **Woodland management**

  There is evidence to suggest that seedlings and young saplings of Ley's whitebeam are most successful in areas where the canopy is more open and where there is more natural light. It is hoped that the natural fall of large trees or natural rock falls will from time-to-time open up gaps in which young seedlings and saplings of Ley's whitebeam will grow. The population of the whitebeam is critically small and it is therefore essential that from time to time, young trees are recruited into the population to replace those that die. This situation will be monitored by CCW, but if recruitment of young trees remains poor, then some consideration could be given to actively creating small gaps in suitable areas.

  Some tree species such as beech and sycamore, which historically are not native to the area, can spread and start to dominate the canopy and alter the natural woodland fauna and flora. Any planned thinning could target these species in

order to reduce their frequency in the woodland. Fallen and standing dead timber should be retained as far as is possible as it is of value to a variety of fauna and flora such as fungi, insects and birds and lends structure to the woodland.

- **Grazing**

  Regular grazing of dry ash woodland results in a poor ground flora and can limit natural regeneration of tree species. Stock should be excluded from the woodland but, if levels of bramble increased so much that it displaced more interesting elements of the ground flora, then light grazing in late summer or autumn might be considered. Sensitive woodland plants are less vulnerable to grazing damage at this time of year.

  For grassland and heathland habitats, grazing is necessary to maintain an open sward. Grazing levels need to be sufficiently high to prevent the spread of scrub, but at the same time at a level that allows the characteristic plants of limestone grassland, rock ledges and heathland to thrive.

- **Nutrient enrichment**

  No fertiliser applications should take place on the site (it is accepted that this would be physically difficult and unproductive on most of this site, which is often steep, wooded or commonland). Other activities that could lead to enrichment problems, such as supplementary stock feeding or storage of cut vegetation, should not take place within, or adjacent to, the important woodland, unimproved grassland, heathland and rocky habitats.

- **Cotoneaster and scrub control**

  Introduced, invasive plants, such as cotoneaster, can smother large areas of limestone crags, rock outcrops and limestone grassland and displace native species like Ley's whitebeam. Cotoneaster spreads readily and is difficult to control and would likely require the use of herbicides. As the most useful herbicides are not species specific, they could, if used in the wrong place and in the wrong conditions, pose a threat to the rare native species, therefore the use of herbicides at the site should only be undertaken with guidance from CCW.

  Small patches of scrub and isolated bushes are important for a variety of wildlife, such as insects and birds; however, the spread of scrub can be a problem on steep limestone sites such as this. If grazing is unable to control the spread of scrub, it may be useful from time-to-time to cut it back. This may be best undertaken between October and February. Some herbicide treatment of stumps may be necessary, but again, this would only be carried out with guidance from CCW.

- **Burning**

  Winter burning is sometimes used as a traditional method of keeping rough grassland, scrub and heathland in check. However, due to the rare species present the site should not be burnt.

- **Bracken**

  Some small stands of bracken are present towards the bottom of the slope, below the main woodland block, and also in the northern part of the site. In terms of the habitat and species interests, bracken is not considered to be a problem at Daren Fach. The chemical normally used to control bracken also kills other fern species, therefore its use would not normally be suited to a site such as this, where scarce fern species are found. Should in the future there be a need to control bracken, CCW would consider which method would be most suitable.

- **Public access and rock climbing**

  The SSSI and surrounding area has been mapped as access land under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. As Ley's whitebeam is confined to the cliffs, seedlings and young saplings of the species are most likely to grow on or beneath the cliffs, it will be necessary for CCW to monitor the use of the site to ensure that there is no excess pressure from well-used paths developing in those parts of the site where there is greatest potential for saplings to grow, for example at the base of the cliffs.

  Rock climbing would be inappropriate at this site due to its small size and the potential to damage or destroy rare plants.

- **Quarrying**

  Quarrying within the SSSI would be inappropriate, as it would destroy the rare plants and the habitats in which they grow.

Finally

Our knowledge and understanding of wildlife is continually improving. It is possible that new issues may arise in the future, whilst other issues may disappear. This statement is written with the best information we have now, but may have to change in the future as our understanding improves. Any information you can provide on the wildlife of your site, its management and its conservation would be much appreciated.

If you would like to discuss any aspect of your SSSI, or have any concerns about your SSSI, please contact your local CCW office.

Your local office is:

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