

Buchanan, G. et al. 2014.

BOU Proceedings – Ecology and conservation of birds in upland and alpine habitats

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Proceedings of the BOU's 2014 Annual Conference

Ecology and conservation of birds in upland and alpine habitats

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Grazing and moorland birds

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Grazing, especially by sheep, has long been a major land use in the UK uplands and has had a major impact on the vegetation in these areas. Recent changes in government policy and Common Agricultural Policy reforms mean that sheep numbers have changed in the uplands. Linking sheep numbers directly to bird number is inappropriate due to local variation in the way vegetation responds to grazing pressure. Instead, linking bird abundance to major vegetation gradients, which are themselves related to grazing, can be used to assess how changes in livestock numbers might impact upon bird populations. These data can be useful in guiding both upland management at a site level, and forming policy for agri-environment schemes at a national level. Here we identify which of a suite of vegetation characteristics have the strongest correlation with the abundance of 11 moorland bird species. These are divided into those related to composition (dwarf shrub to grass gradient), height and heterogeneity. Heavily grazed areas would be expected to be dominated by short grass, while lightly grazed areas will be dominated by tall dwarf shrubs. From the form of the relationships between birds and these gradients we identify which species are likely to be affected, and how, by changes in grazing pressures in the uplands.