
**NORTH DEVON AREA OF
OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY
(TORRIDGE SIDE) COUNTY
WILDLIFE SITES SURVEY 2004**

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Devon
Biodiversity
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North Devon AONB (Torrige) survey 2004

Summary

The aim of this survey was to provide up to date information on potential new County Wildlife Sites (CWS) within the Torrige side of the North Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

There has been a limited amount of survey work on the Torrige side of the North Devon AONB and at present there are only 9 CWS (Culm grassland sites) on the Torrige side compared to 19 on the North Devon side. The sites to be surveyed included grasslands, woodlands and coastal grassland sites all identified by aerial photograph interpretation.

Desk study

Aerial photographs from 1999 covering the Torrige side of the North Devon AONB were screened for potential areas of good habitat. Certain habitats are easily identifiable from aerial photos such as woodland, bracken and scrub, rush-pasture and heathland. Areas of grassland that have not been agriculturally improved are less easy to identify, but clues were looked for such as the presence of scrub, whether the field was on a steep slope or if the fields were small. Any areas of grassland along the coast were also selected as they may contain species-rich coastal habitats. Approximately 4.5 days were spent identifying new sites from looking at aerial photos, and 106 sites were found, representing approximately 952 ha.

A considerable amount of time (approximately four days) was spent finding and contacting landowners, which were then approached for permission to survey. Out of 30 landowners (for 80 sites) contacted, 14 (42 sites) granted permission to survey. Out of these, 33 were owned by private individuals and nine by organisations such as the National Trust and Woodland Trust.

Field study

The sites were visited and surveyed for assessment as to whether they fulfil CWS designation requirements. Between July and September 2004, four field survey staff visited 22 potential County Wildlife Sites and one County Wildlife Site, and carried out a phase 2 botanical survey of each site. The visits were to be prioritised as follows:

- Sites containing priority UK BAP habitats eg. Lowland heathland
- Sites which were owned by private landowners rather than large organisations.

However, due to time constraints and a lack of ownership information, sites were unable to be prioritised exactly as suggested.

If a site was found to be of interest, a standard four page DBRC site survey form was completed. This included a detailed site description noting the main habitats present, key features, the site's situation, aspect, slope, geology, and the dominant/typical species and notables that occur through each compartment/community. A full species list for the site was included, as well as a map showing the site's boundary and any key features.

North Devon AONB (Torrige) survey 2004

If a site was considered not to be of sufficient interest to merit a full survey, a 'write off' form was filled in. This lists brief reasons why the site was not considered of sufficient interest eg. improved grassland, conifer plantation etc. A brief description of the site was also included, a species list where possible, any recommendations for management and a site map.

Full National Vegetation Classification was not carried out, but in some cases affinities to NVC communities were suggested.

Major habitats

Out of 23 sites surveyed (one of these was an existing County Wildlife Site) 3 were found not to be of sufficient ecological interest to meet CWS criteria and 'written off'. The majority of these were areas of improved grassland. 20 sites were surveyed fully. Approximately 189 hectares of land within the AONB was surveyed during the project.

Woodland:

Out of the 106 potential County Wildlife Sites identified within the North Devon AONB (Torrige side) nine woodland sites were visited this year.

A wide range of woodland communities were recorded during the survey including ancient semi-natural woodland (sometimes replanted), semi-natural broadleaved woodland, secondary woodland, and mixed woodland.

Out of nine woodland sites surveyed, there were six areas of broadleaved woodland and three of mixed woodland.

Many of the secondary woodlands visited were found to be quite species-rich and to contain a number of ancient woodland indicator species. Four woodlands were recorded as ancient in the Nature Conservancy Council's Ancient Woodland Inventory of 1984. Two of these were probably plantations on an ancient site as they contained mixed woodland and two appeared semi-natural although could have been replanted with a broadleaved crop.

Grassland:

Out of the 106 potential County Wildlife Sites within the North Devon AONB (Torrige side) 10 grassland sites were visited this year. Grassland also forms a component of several sites.

Several grassland communities were recorded during the survey including unimproved grassland, coastal grassland, Culm grassland, semi-improved grassland and agriculturally improved grassland. The two unimproved grasslands and the coastal grassland site were found to be quite species-rich. The majority of the grasslands found (three sites) were semi-improved species-poor grassland. Three areas of agriculturally improved grassland were found, and were 'written off' as they were of little wildlife interest.

North Devon AONB (Torrige) survey 2004

Although not technically grassland (a mosaic of heath, rush-pasture and bog communities), one area of Culm grassland (an existing CWS) was re-surveyed as it fell within the same ownership of several of the potential sites. This site was found to still be of great interest and is being managed positively under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme.

As part of larger sites, unimproved acid grassland, species-rich coastal grassland, semi-improved neutral grassland and Culm grassland were recorded.

Heathland:

As a result of the survey one site was found to have a small area of heathland. Coastal heathland dominated by Western gorse (*Ulex gallii*) was found at The Warren (N & S). Heathland communities also form a component of Culm grassland.

Fauna and notable species:

Mammals:

During the survey, several different mammal species were recorded from their field signs as well as live sightings. Much evidence was found of badgers (*Meles meles*) on the majority of sites, with a number of setts recorded, as well as other signs of their presence such as latrines, paths, hair and feeding remains.

Deer were recorded at a number of survey sites from sightings, tracks and droppings, and are likely to be roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*), a fairly common species in the Torrige district.

A characteristically nibbled nut was found at one site (Deptford) from a hazel dormouse (*Muscardinus avellanarius*). Further survey is recommended here to confirm the extent of them. The owner of Hollacombe also reported dormice present, but no conclusive evidence was found during the survey. Dormice have been recorded at the nearby Henford, so the record is likely. Dormice have also been recorded close to Hartland and Buck's Mills.

Signs of otters (*Lutra lutra*) were found at Cranham Mill, Hartland, and they have been recorded from a number of sites within the AONB, for example, Gooseham Mill, Welcombe, Hartland Abbey, Hartland, Buck's Mills and Abbotsham.

Other interesting species recorded from the AONB area include pipistrelle bat (*Pipistrellus pipistrellus*), red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) and water shrew (*Neomys fodiens*).

Other fauna:

Notable birds recorded during the survey include yellowhammer (*Emberiza citrinella*), raven (*Corvus corax*), buzzard (*Buteo buteo*), nuthatch (*Sitta europaea*), stonechat (*Saxicola torquata*), tawny owl (*Strix aluco*) and peregrine (*Falco peregrinus*). Other interesting species include silver-washed fritillary (*Argynnis paphia*) and marbled white (*Melanargia galathea*).

North Devon AONB (Torrige) survey 2004

Previous records from the AONB area also include skylark (*Alauda arvensis*), barn owl (*Tyto alba*), curlew (*Numenius arquata*), marsh fritillary (*Eurodryas aurinia*) and pearl-bordered fritillary (*Boloria euphrosyne*).

Plants:

A number of rare plant species were recorded during the survey, including broadleaved helleborine (*Epipactis helleborine*), pale flax (*Linum bienne*), sea spleenwort (*Asplenium marinum*) (Devon Notable 3 plant species), slender club-rush (*Scirpus cernuus*) (Devon Notable 1 plant species) and wavy St. John's-wort (*Hypericum undulatum*) (Devon Notable 2 plant species, Nationally Scarce).

Previous records from the AONB area include lesser butterfly-orchid (*Platanthera bifolia*), Western clover (*Trifolium occidentale*) and ivy broomrape (*Orobanche hederæ*). There are also many records of the invasive plant Japanese knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*) from areas close to Hartland, Clovelly, Welcombe and Buck's Cross.

Conclusions

Whilst it would be left to the County Wildlife Site panel to decide on which sites are selected as County Wildlife Sites, there appear to be at least 20 worthy of consideration. The results of this survey work only represent a snapshot of the potential wildlife interest within the North Devon AONB (and the Torrige District as a whole); there are possibly hundreds of sites that with further survey work could meet the criteria for County Wildlife Sites.