

GRAIG FAWR, PONTARDDULAIS SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST



YOUR SPECIAL SITE AND ITS FUTURE

‘Your Special Site and its Future’ is part of our commitment to improve the way we work with SSSI owners and occupiers. In it, we try to 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 will look to your views and knowledge to help safeguard this important site.

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 Graig Fawr SSSI?

Graig Fawr has two special features:

Dry Heath This habitat, a colourful mix of heather, bilberry, western gorse and wavy hair grass is found across the uplands of Britain where more freely draining soils over acid rocks can be found. It is originally the result of clearance of the primeval ‘wildwood’ that covered much of Britain at one time, but now forms the characteristic habitat over much of upland Britain. At Graig Fawr, this habitat can be found on the slopes overlooking the Loughor valley.

Across Wales, much of this habitat has been lost because of excessive grazing by sheep, which transforms dry heathland into impoverished grassland containing only a few hardy grass species. Graig Fawr is the best remaining example of upland dry heath still in the Swansea area.

Wet Heath, as its name implies, is found where ground is more waterlogged and occurs mainly on the flatter plateau at Graig Fawr. Here, heath and bilberry are still present, but are joined by species such as cross-leaved heath and tufts of deer grass. In places, where the peat is deep enough, there is some relict blanket bog on Graig Fawr, where purple moor-grass, cotton grass and sphagnum mosses can be found.

Like the dry heath, much of this type of habitat has been lost or modified through a combination of drainage, burning and excessive grazing. Graig Fawr is one of the best remaining examples in the Swansea area.

What do we want Graig Fawr to look like?

The following is a description of how we would like to see the future of Graig Fawr:

When visiting the site, the slopes overlooking the Loughor valley are a mixture of browns and reds that stand out in contrast against the brighter green of the agricultural land in the valley bottom. A closer look reveals that much of the ground consists of heather tussocks with the occasional bright green shoots of bilberry, beneath which is a carpet of mosses. In autumn, the hillside is transformed into vivid purple as the heather comes into flower. Though the heath grows across much of the site, it is still relatively easy to walk across it, for nowhere does it approach knee height. There may be a little bracken, but this is confined to the very southern edge of Graig Fawr.

On the flatter, wetter land on the top of Graig Fawr, some heather and bilberry is still present, but here it is joined by species such as cross-leaved heath and deer grass. In places where the peat is deep enough, purple moor-grass and the white heads of cotton grass indicate that blanket bog has developed. Like the dry heath, the vegetation may be a little tussocky, but it is still possible to walk through it fairly easily.



Cross leaved heath



Cotton Grass

What management is needed on Graig Fawr SSSI and why?

Although Graig Fawr 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 Graig Fawr if they are not properly managed. In addition some management is essential to conserve the heath and maintain it in good condition. These are the management issues we regard as most important.

- **Grazing**

Graig Fawr can only be maintained by a delicate balance of grazing, which allows the heath to flourish. Too much grazing, particularly by sheep, will result in the heathland plants being 'grazed out' in favour of grass species. Too little grazing and the mountain will start to be colonised by trees such as willow and birch, together with bramble. The aim should be to achieve this balance with a range of grazing animals, including cattle or horses, as well as sheep.

- **Burning**

Burning should be avoided if possible, unless it is a controlled burn and is part of an agreed burning plan. Uncontrolled burning can be damaging to important plants and animals especially bog mosses, invertebrates and nesting birds. Burning of the wet heath should be avoided, because it can literally dry out the habitat. Burning, in combination with intense grazing, is responsible for the loss of much of the habitat similar to Graig Fawr in the surrounding area.

- **Scrambling bikes and 4 x 4 vehicles**

The use of scrambling bikes and four wheel drives has been taking place on parts of the common and has been causing serious damage to the soil and vegetation. It is important that we work with the police and the commoners to help reduce the damage.

- **Invasive species**

Rhododendron is a problem on neighbouring commons, there is a real possibility that it might spread across to Craig Fawr. It is best controlled at the earliest opportunity, when the plants are still young.

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 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.

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