

INTRODUCTION

Habitats are the places where plants and animals live. They are characterised by distinctive combinations of plant and animal communities and their physical environment. This makes it possible to identify individual types of habitat, which is useful in understanding where different species are likely to be found and what their needs are – crucial information for protecting wildlife. Habitats are also valued in their own right as the diverse products of interactions between plants and animals and their environment. For this reason, nature conservation legislation affords protection to habitat types as well as to species.

It is fairly easy to separate habitats into broad categories such as woodland, heathland, grassland, wetland and freshwater and many people are familiar with these terms. Yet within each of these categories there is a wide variety of different habitat types. These habitat types have been classified under a range of different systems (see *page 20*)

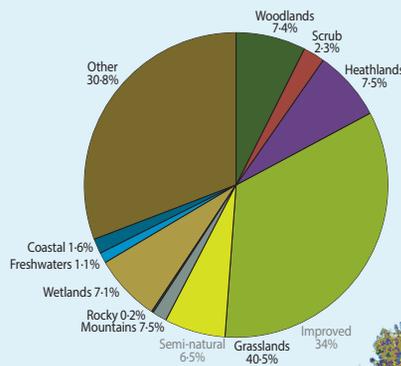
Some habitats will not fit easily into any one of the accounts given in this book – they might be transitional between different habitats, or a particular local expression of a habitat. For example, this site in Connemara supports a curious patchwork of Machair and Lowland Dry Heath.

that have been designed for a variety of purposes, and are in some cases very technical. This book provides a clear description of each of the wildlife habitats that are likely to be encountered in Britain and Ireland, enabling them to be recognised with confidence. For each habitat type, information is provided on its distribution and extent in Britain and Ireland, its ecology, origins and the way it has developed, and the conservation issues. These ‘habitat accounts’ also indicate the key features and species to look out for and the best times of year to visit.

Although most habitats can be recognised quite readily, it is important to remember that they are variable, and that transitions between the different types are common. These transitions (sometimes called ‘ecotones’) may support species typical of both habitats as well as other species that are particularly adapted to the transitional conditions. Sometimes habitats occur in easily distinguishable and often extensive patches with clear boundaries, but in other instances the transition is much more gradual and there is no distinct boundary. In some environments, or under particular management regimes, a variety of different habitat types and transitions between them can be found together in a distinctive combination which can, itself, be considered as a unique habitat. For example, Soft Cliff often contains a mosaic of grassland, wetland and scrub habitats, and Wood Pasture is a combination of woodland and grassland.



The Habitats of Britain and Ireland



KEY

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