

APPENDIX 14 - WOOLER COMMON HABITAT RESTORATION PROJECT 1999-2001

Introduction

In spring 1999 Lilburn Estates bought the Wooler Common and Commonburn Forestry Plantations from the Forestry Commission. These conifer blocks were situated in the middle of the estates grouse moor and it was the estates objective to fell the majority of the conifers and convert them to moorland that could be added to the area of moor already managed for red grouse shooting and sheep grazing.

The total area bought amounted to 226 ha and the area felled totalled 158 ha. The areas felled were predominantly Scots pine planted in the late 1960's and younger Sitka spruce planted in 1982. The remainder was retained as a woodland for conservation, although some restructuring was undertaken to diversify the species composition and native broadleaves were planted.

Methodology

The conifers were felled and all merchantable timber recovered. In addition the brash was recovered and chipped before despatch to fuel-wood markets. This left the site clean of timber arisings, but the stumps were still visible. Once the harvesting was completed the site was mulched to reduce the height of the stumps and partly scarify the upper soil layer.



Above; Panoramic View of Fredden Hill taken from the Commonburn Road looking east towards Wooler. In 2000 this area was P1982 Sitka spruce.

Heather Re-colonisation

In the area of older conifers the heather had been suppressed by the trees and was restricted to the rides and edges of the plantation. In the younger area of Sitka spruce there was more heather as it had suppressed the trees. The tree felling was completed in early 2001 and almost immediately the heather started to regenerate over much of the site. After areas had been mulched there was significant grass growth (Wavy Hair and Purple Moor grasses), but the heather eventually began to dominate.

Now 6 years after the completion of the deforestation and conversion to moor-land the area of the previous conifer plantation is fully vegetated by a mosaic of heather and hill grass and populated by red grouse, waders and typical moorland birds, including a small number of black grouse.



Above; Vegetation re-colonisation showing vigorous growth of Cross-leaves heath and Ling heather amongst remains of old pine stumps. This was the first area felled in 1999 and consisted of Scots pine planted in 1967, where heather was restricted to the rides and edges.



Above; Heather and grass growth of western edge of Fredden Hill. As well as being a productive grouse moor this area is also grazed by black face sheep as part of a controlled grazing regime.

Summary

The conversion of 158 ha from conifer to moor-land described above and shown on the attached maps in the period 1999-2001 was a great success story, with the moor-land vegetation regenerating much more quickly than expected.

This bodes well for the proposed deforestation at Threestoneburn where the conditions over much of the site are similar and it is hoped that the process can achieve the same success in terms of ecological and landscape improvements.