

35/09 To ask the District Council to cease bracken control on Baildon Moor as it constitutes a waste of money.

36/09 The Parish Council facilitate an audit of the biodiversity of Baildon Moor and other semi-natural areas in the parish area through the parish planning process as a means to raise their importance and understanding of their long-term future.

BRACKEN CONTROL ON BAILDON MOOR

The rolling of bracken on Baildon Moor on the 23 June 2009 was arbitrary, and a waste of money, as was the rolling last year. The area and the timing fly in the face of all the technical advice given for bracken control, and has been done without any context as there is no reason to believe that heather will spread into this area, nor grass. Additional grassland area is, anyway, unnecessary now that the moor is no longer regarded by local farmers as suitable for sheep grazing.

Here are some factors from national guidance that were not considered:

- The best and most cost-effective results will come from treating stands that still possess some ground vegetation under the bracken. Bare or sparsely-vegetated ground can take years to revegetate without additional intervention and is at risk from erosion.
- There is no point in controlling dense bracken without considering the vegetation that is to replace it.
- The need to plan areas of control to minimise adverse effects on landscape quality, by avoiding rectangular blocks and working in irregular patches with boundaries against natural features.
- It is best to tackle bracken fronts which are invading more valuable habitats, in order to prevent further encroachment, before tackling dense, static stands.
- The amount of bracken litter present and whether this will inhibit vegetation recovery. Litter destruction/removal may be needed.
- Evaluation of whether there would be disruption of wildlife using or within the bracken
- Whether it is more acceptable to manage for woodland (by planting or natural succession) on sites with limited agricultural potential or environmental value

The recommendation is not to control where:

- the costs exceed the likely environmental and/or agricultural benefits;
- bracken occurs on steep slopes which may be subject to erosion whilst without vegetation;
- a woodland ground flora is present beneath the canopy

Rolling is not a very effective method of bracken control (it will not eradicate bracken). It has to be carried out repeatedly on young fronds that are brittle and easily snapped. The treatment has to be repeated for at least three consecutive years if two rollings are done and five years if only rolled once annually. Without repeats the bracken will just recover. There is a risk of erosion if this method is used on sloping ground.

Heather will not colonise rolled areas unless heather brash is brought in as a seed source.

Stabilisation of the soil whilst heather establishment takes place is necessary and is accomplished with establishment first of a sward of suitable grasses. However the grasses will not seed into deep bracken litter unless it is disturbed, either by burning, cattle trampling or removal.

Baildon Moor is diverse in having the landscape characteristics of both the coal measures and millstone grit. In this, it is totally different from Ilkley Moor, and should be considered so. It is not a heather moorland, it is an acid grassland moor with some really good mires (wet seepage areas), wet heath plus a few areas of dry heath, and some cover in places of a mix of berried, dwarf shrubs. The exceptional flora are to be found in the mires, as is shown by a SEGI in the northern side. Acid grassland in the open is not generously floristic, with tormentil the most common flower, and some areas of yarrow and rarely its cousin sneezewort.

Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) is a natural part of our landscape, and its abundance has fluctuated over thousands of years. Its invasive nature allows it to spread, and it now occurs widely within a variety of habitats throughout Britain.

Originally a woodland plant, bracken will have been kept in check by shading in the woodland matrix that covered the Mid-Holocene period of Briatin (about 6000 years ago). Large-scale loss of woodland cover over the millenia has facilitated its spread and increased abundance. Changes in land management practices have also tended to favour the spread of bracken, such as fewer cattle and increased numbers of sheep, as has historically happened on Baildon Moor.

Bracken has an extensive underground stem (rhizome) system that can store large amounts of nutrients and carbohydrate. This means that it can recover after initial treatment if control is neglected, and so adequate follow-up treatment and aftercare must be planned and implemented.

There are benefits of bracken:

- Bracken can provide protective cover on steep slopes at risk of erosion.
- As part of a habitat mosaic, bracken is important for many forms of wildlife including invertebrates, small mammals, some plant species and birds such as whinchat, tree pipit, woodlark and yellowhammer
- Patchy bracken stands can support several rare fritillary butterflies which depend on violets and cow-wheat (often growing under bracken) as their sole food source.
- Bracken can support woodland ground flora in areas that were once tree-covered eg wood sorrel and wood violet can be found under bracken on Baildon Moor

Bracken has a specific distribution on Baildon Moor, related to soil composition, moisture content and the orientation of the land. Too wet or dry and it does not grow, but the areas that it does grow on are also areas where trees would naturally grow. Nature is thus finding its own solution by the rowan that has seeded into the bracken areas and which copes with shade, and the trees are getting away now that sheep are no longer grazing the moor. Thus sheep are doubly to blame for the bracken since their browsing has prevented natural woodland regeneration that would have controlled the bracken.

Baildon Moor has many uses that rub along together. The break in agricultural use has catalysed an explosion of natural change in the moor that needs recognising and appreciating as a common good, and which can be safeguarded by virtue of sensitive rather than dogmatic public ownership. The proposal for an audit of biodiversity through the parish planning process has the virtue of encouraging engagement with the moor, exploring what will happen on the moor in the next 25 years so that people will know what to expect - and what they have to look forward to.

Dr Mark Fisher 6 July 2009

Bracken control, vegetation restoration and land management, Rural Development Service Technical Advice Note 23 2005

<http://naturalengland.etraderstores.com/NaturalEnglandShop/Product.aspx?ProductID=30f3211f-bc91-4e19-9d74-77b49cc0ba29>

Bracken Control – a guide to best practice, SEARS 2008

www.sepa.org.uk/land/ldoc.ashx?docid=8cb12368-f9ca-4141-b7b5-ffd2d57e4b33&version=-1