North Lanarkshire Golf Course Habitat Action Plan

Scottish Biodiversity List habitat: **No**
UK Biodiversity List of Priority Habitats: **No**

Summary

Golf courses for the purposes of this action plan include the whole area of the land used for playing this sport. There are 16 golf courses in North Lanarkshire; every golf course consists of highly managed areas (the greens and tees), less intensively managed areas (the fairways) and non-playing areas (natural habitat or rough). The extent of each area owes much to the architect who designed the course and subsequent management, but the non-playing areas generally represent between 25% and 40% of the total area of the course. The location of the course is the significant factor in the opportunities presented by these sites as habitat. The age of the course is also significant as many of the younger courses were developed as a result of growing popularity of the sport and exhaustion of natural habitats. Many were built on heaths, grasslands, dune slacks and parkland, but this should provide an opportunity to maximise the contribution to habitat enhancement of golf courses.

Habitat Profile

Golf courses can provide an excellent variety of habitats for wildlife. A wildlife friendly course may harbour around 60 species that are recognised as important in local biodiversity plans. Some courses have extensive areas of “rough” ground that are managed for wildlife and include heathland, marsh, woodland, species-rich grassland, ponds, rivers and burns.

Golf course management is much more complicated than just cutting grass and effects all habitats on the site. Maintenance on a landscape basis, particularly on Scottish golf courses encompasses some, if not all, of the following:

Woodland Management

Trees provide definition for fairway edges or low maintenance areas in and around golf courses. In addition, they provide valuable wildlife habitats and corridors. In wet areas, willow species and Alder are often found, whereas in well-drained soils, Scots Pine, Silver Birch, Oak, Ash and Lime trees are often present. A mix of ages and species creates a greater variation in the genetic stock, lessening the risk of the spread of disease and the loss of trees through wind damage. A mix of trees and ages provides a range of canopy heights and provision of habitat areas. Where it’s safe to do so, dead timber can be left standing, with fallen timber and branches stacked to create microhabitats, and smaller branches and leaves swept into brush piles.

Grassland Management

Areas of rough grassland can have high biodiversity value and provide invaluable habitat corridors that help to link other semi-natural/natural habitats together both within the golf course and beyond. Grassland also offers excellent water retention opportunities as well as preventing soil erosion. Management of invasive species, such as bracken, can be an important part of management. Once bracken is under control, areas of rough grassland may be managed to not only provide wildlife habitats, but also buffer strips of “rough” for water features, ditches and other sensitive areas. Areas of rough grassland only require annual maintenance, such as one “cut and rake” in September. This lowers maintenance costs, especially if they can also be kept free of chemical applications/drift spray and the depositing of grass cuttings, and will encourage wildflowers. If these species already exist on site it is generally a sign of good management practice for nature. Grasslands can be made more visually interesting and diverse with the addition of native wildflower seed mixes or native wildflower plugs. Careful planting of appropriate species adds visual stimulus and can be valuable bird, mammal and invertebrate habitats in themselves if they adjoin rough grassland.

Ponds and Wetlands

Ponds and wetlands can be very aesthetically pleasing areas on golf courses in addition to being golfing hazards. However, the long-term management costs of such features are sometimes forgotten at great cost to the wildlife and the golfer. One common mistake is to introduce Common Reedmace into ponds, where it can choke the pond and greatly reduce the wildlife value within a few years and is costly to remove. Management of existing ponds and wetlands, together with the creation of new ponds and wetlands, encourages a wide diversity of wildlife, creates an ecologically sound system, and provides course drainage and primary water treatment. Wetlands are important wildlife habitats. However, they need to be protected from chemical applications and drift spray so that aquatic life and wildlife remain unharmed. The Water Environment (Controlled Activities Regulations) (Scotland) Regulations 2013, the Water Environment (Diffuse Pollution) (Scotland) Regulations 2008, along with SEPA General Binding Rules are set to control the application of pesticides, fertilisers and other turf management products and activities. Under Local Environment Risk Assessments for Pesticides (LERAP), 6m buffer zones have been set for some pesticides. However, this can be reduced when using LERAP-tested and approved jets. The homogenous cover of a plant type is usually an indicator of chemical application or spray drift. In nutrient-rich waters for example, Common Duckweed and Canadian Waterweed are highly invasive species. Where over-nutrification (eutrophication) occurs, algal blooms can be present.

Wetland features are found on many golf courses in Britain, and can be natural or man-made. They include lakes, ponds, rivers, streams, ditches and flushes, and can be found anywhere from the coast to the uplands. They are important both for their ecological value and for the playing challenge they present to the golfer. However, they are sensitive environments, which require careful management if their golfing and ecological character is to be maintained over time.

Open water bodies, varying in size from large lakes to small ponds, are often significant features in the landscape, and provide breeding and over-wintering sites for many easily recognised bird species, such as mallard, coot, moorhen and grey heron. They are also important for a range of other species, such as tufted duck, great crested grebe, water rail and kingfisher.

Areas of running water found on golf courses may include rivers, streams and ditches, and are often fringed by areas of wet grassland. Birds will breed in the vegetation along the edges of these features, which support rich insect assemblages fed on by birds.
Characteristic birds found in such areas include Reed Bunting,
Implementation of the management programme is best done on a rotational basis as part of a long term plan, so that only part of the water body is treated at a time. This applies both to de-silting operations (the frequency of this will depend on rates of siltation), and to vegetation management (again, this will depend on rates of colonisation and vegetation type). Where silt loads are a problem, the best management is to install silt traps in the inlet.

Timing is important. Management is best done in autumn and early winter (September to late November), avoiding the bird breeding season (April to August), and before normal high winter flow rates. Depending on scale, some excavated material should be left on the bank of the lake or pond for a few days, so that invertebrates can get back into the water, but should be removed after this so that leachate from decomposing plant material does not enter the water, where it would reduce oxygen levels and damage the ecosystem. For the same reason, grass clippings should not be dumped or composted near water bodies or watercourses.

Heathland

Heaths are characterised by nutrient poor, acid soils principally consisting of plants of the Heath family. Heather or Ling is usually one of the most prominent species, although Blaeberry is often found on upland heaths. On lowland heaths, Heather, Bell Heather and Cross-Leaved Heath combine with gorse and grasses to provide a varied habitat, which like the upland heath is sensitive to a number of factors. This habitat may be home to game birds including Grey Partridge, as well as numerous other species such as moths, grasshoppers, crickets, dragonflies, and many other invertebrates, mammals, and reptiles such as the Common Lizard. Changes in golf course management can rapidly benefit heathland in terms of quality, health and species diversity, with benefits arising beyond its high biodiversity value. The slow growth of heathland species enables general maintenance costs to be kept low in comparison to woodland and grasslands. Many different management options can be used in order to regenerate heather. The options for golf courses are dependent on a number of localised factors including climate, land use, viable seed bank and budgets, to name but a few. Some of the options available include restricted burning, seeding, turfing and scarification.

Current Status

There are currently 16 golf courses and 1 footgolf course in North Lanarkshire. The exact sizes are unknown, but they can range from 30ha to 115ha. Courses in North Lanarkshire cover approximately just under 100 hectares, with at least half falling into the non-managed areas this presents a significant potential area for conservation. Eleven of these golf courses have a SINC designation that partially covers the course and 4 lie adjacent to at least one SINC.

Legal Status

The golf courses in North Lanarkshire have varying degrees of protection through designation as a SINC (Site of Importance for Nature Conservation). Some courses have trees that are protected through Tree Protection Order.

Current Factors Affecting This Habitat

- Poor spraying practices and lack of buffer zones causes loss of aquatic animals and plant life.
- Poor management of rough grassland can result in loss of native grasses and wildflower populations, leading to dominance by invasive species.
- Poor selection and mixing of trees on golf courses can mean a high loss of existing and newly planted trees, leading to loss of habitats and wildlife corridors.
- Loss of habitats such as heath due to inappropriate management such as use of fertiliser, pesticides, over-watering, excessive traffic on foot and by golf trolley, tree invasion, burning and lack of control of invasive species.
- Habitat fragmentation or destruction through creation of new fairways in sensitive areas.
- Poor tree management leading to damage by strimmers, stakes, etc.
- Damage to trees by golfers due to poor choice of location for tree planting.
- Planting of trees in areas with an existing importance for wildlife, which then leads to loss of the main wildlife value as the habitat changes to one dominated by woodland. Too many conifers can produce too much shade and reduce wildlife value of ground vegetation.
- Nutrient and pesticide run-off into ponds can reduce their wildlife value.
- Canalisation or culverting of burns will make them less wildlife friendly, as will cutting the burn margins short right to the water's edge.
- Sandpits provide potential nest sites for Sand Martins, so sand excavation from open faces during the summer needs to be avoided to prevent nest loss.
- Neglect: in some cases habitats that are not under active conservation management such as wetlands may pass through succession, scrub over, and turn to woodland, so drying out.

Current Action

- Free site visits to golf facilities followed by a detailed biodiversity action plan recommendations by the Scottish Golf and Environment Group (SGEG).

- Advice from North Lanarkshire Council Greenspace Development in managing golf courses for biodiversity species and habitats, and advice on funding applications to take forward actions for biodiversity.

Proposed Objectives, Targets and Actions.

Objectives

1. Promote appropriate environmental management for habitats on golf courses.

2. Promote awareness of the habitat, its public value and conservation issues

Action	Meets objective number	Action by	Target
1.Policy and legislation			
1.1 Survey potential golf course SINCs and designate where appropriate	1,2	NLC	Potential golf course SINC sites identified and surveyed by 2027.
2.Site safe guard and management			
2.1 Promote Golf Environment Organisation certified programme	1	NLC	2 new sites by 2028
2.2 Develop biodiversity projects on council owned golf courses to enhance the habitat on site.	1,2	NLC	2 projects completed by 2028
3.Communications and publicity			
3.1 Ensure greenkeepers are aware of the benefit of managing for biodiversity.	1	NLC	Meet information to greenkeepers to discuss at 5 sites by 2027
3.2 Promote biodiversity training for greenkeepers.	1	NLC	Invite greenkeepers on species ID and habitat management training. Record attendance on these.
3.3 Encourage clubs to raise the awareness of the value of biodiversity on golf courses to its members, visitors, staff and residents.	1, 2	NLC	Assist in the development of interpretation, potentially utilising score cards at 5 sites by 2028.

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