8 Black Hill: wildlife habitats

The contrast between how the Black Hill would have looked in 1946, when it was leased to the Forestry Commission, and how it looks today, 80 years on, could hardly be greater. From being a hill of open heathland it has become one of closed coniferous woodland. Onto what was probably a continuous sward of native heathland plants, a continuous cover of alien conifers has been imposed. Apart, that is, from the 9-acre postage stamp of a holding marooned in the middle – the Parish land. The vegetation that survives here provides pointers as to how the whole hill would have looked, probably for many centuries, before the arrival of blanket coniferous forestry. It is the survival of this tiny vestige that gives it a significance beyond its size. If, however, we go back millennia, the whole area may well have been covered in woodland and scrub (of native species) which was then cleared, providing grazing for domestic animals, whose grazing will thereafter have kept it open.

So, the native plants to be found on Whinberry Hill today tell us what would have been the dominant vegetation right across the unenclosed land of the Black Hill. This would have been a heather-bilberry heathland along with other plants characteristic of this vegetation community such as wavy hair grass, tormentil, heath bedstraw and cow-wheat, with areas of bracken and patches of gorse on deeper soils. There will have been birch and rowan around the fringes, and although in recent times there will have been no deer to nip off tree seedlings, these will have been kept in check by sheep and cattle of hardy native breeds grazing; there will have been rabbits and hares too. However, two riders need stating: we don't know how much wet ground there may have been, nor how much damage was done by the severe fire of 1939.

The Black Hill appears today to be a dry site, but there was a turbary here, so there must have been waterlogged conditions where, over millennia, peat had accumulated. This would suggest significant areas dominated by sphagnum mosses where cotton grass will have flourished, along perhaps with cross-leaved heath, bog asphodel and sundews. Was it here perhaps that the snipe and 'plovers' listed as quarry in the Cwm Estate Game Register (fig. 16) for 1905-1910 were shot? The 'plovers' may have been lapwing or possibly golden plovers, which may have wintered here, while curlews will have arrived each spring to breed.

As to the severe fire of 1939, the newspaper accounts (fig. 26) seem to indicate that no part of the hill was spared. If so, all the vegetation will have been burned off and it is likely that the fire burned into the ground, eating into and fragmenting the surface soils and destroying any accumulations of peat. The fire in Radnor Forest in August 1800 is reported to have burned to a depth of three feet in the turbary; this may have been the case with peat deposits in what is now Whinberry Hill. The vegetation of the hill may have taken some long time to recover. There was severe fire damage to parts of The Stiperstones in 1976, ten years later the worst affected area showed only limited signs of recovery. Upland heathlands like the Black Hill do eventually come good and a mantle of heather and bilberry takes over, but the woodmen who planted the hill from 1947 onwards may have found only a thin covering of heather and whinberry to compete with the conifers they were planting.

But, to return to the time when the Black Hill was referred to and presumably managed as a grouse moor, the Game Register tells us a little bit more about the bird fauna then present. Two species of grouse were shot: red and black. The red grouse will have kept to the open heather habitat of the higher ground, the black grouse ('black game') to the fringe, favouring mosaics of heathland, scattered trees and grassland. The open heather habitat will have been home to meadow pipits and skylarks, and there will have been tree pipits and redstarts in the heathland fringe. Cuckoos would

have been a spring-time fixture, parasitising the pipits, and interestingly too, we learn from a newspaper cutting of 1912 that ring ouzel (the upland blackbird) were said to breed.

The gamekeeper employed by the Cwm Estate would have been expected to manage the hill for the benefit of the grouse. He will, in a controlled way, have burned areas of old heather to promote new young shoots, the staple diet of red grouse. And he will have been expected to control any wildlife thought, rightly or wrongly, to endanger the grouse. Buzzards, ravens and all other members of the crow family would have been rigorously controlled, along with any other predatory birds. And foxes, badgers and stoats will have been shot, snared or trapped.

When the Forestry Commission started planting, the red grouse will have deserted the hill, and the black will have moved away as the trees grew taller. The early stages of plantation growth will have seen the arrival of whinchat and willow warbler, linnet and yellow hammer, but as the trees grew, these species will have moved on, and wrens, chaffinches, coal tits and goldcrests will have taken their place. A bird-watcher of the time would have ticked off a greater number of species but will have regretted the loss of the specialist upland birds which were losing out, not just here, but elsewhere in Shropshire, including a few miles west at the head of the catchment in the so-called Clun Forest (where there were in fact few trees). The heather and bilberry will have persisted but then retreated as the shade of the densely planted evergreens intensified, and, as the trees matured, light levels will have declined to such an extent that the woodland floor became bare of herbaceous plants, although the original vegetation still hangs on in places along ride-sides.

But new birds will have started to arrive as the trees matured. Today the sitka spruce plantations provide ideal conditions for breeding siskins, and crossbills appear in some years when they feed heavily on the spruce cones. Coal tits persist and goldcrests too. And given mature trees and little disturbance, goshawks have started to appear.

The Black Hill plantations are sufficiently extensive to have allowed a rotation of felling coupes to be put in place over recent decades. Following felling, the sudden burst of light to the forest floor, coupled with the ground disturbance caused by felling and timber extraction, stimulate the germination of buried seed, notably that of heather. The plants produce millions of seeds some of which can survive for many decades in the soil. So, there is a flush of heather growth, and for a few years this, coupled with the growth of the next generation of planted conifers, provides habitat for nightjars, a very uncommon bird in the county. All being well, as one young plantation gets too tall for the birds, another provides the low dense cover they like. And Whinberry Hill should provide a continuity of suitable habitat for feeding and possibly breeding too. This is a place to come to in spring and summer in the hope of hearing their night-time churring. But come by day if you wish to hear Tree Pipits which like the mix of open ground and scattered trees afforded by Whinberry Hill.