

Preface

The purpose of this guide to upland vegetation is simple – to focus attention on the nature, diversity and importance of habitats which cover almost a third of Great Britain's land surface and create landscapes so characteristic of its wilder parts. But this book is much more than that; it is also a tribute to the sustained efforts of a small group of people who have studied the vegetation of the uplands.

Forty years ago two remarkable young ecologists introduced their classic volume on *Plant Communities of the Scottish Highlands* (McVean and Ratcliffe 1962) with the following statement: 'A vegetation monograph can be arranged in three ways – ecologically, or according to the main habitat types and altitudinal zonation; systematically, or according to an hierarchical classification of the units distinguished; and physiognomically, or according to the life-form of the dominant species'. It is a great tribute to the two authors, Donald McVean and Derek Ratcliffe, that their book is still a source of raw data on upland vegetation and an inspiring read. Yet in some ways the issues which these two scholars tackled are still taxing us today. Precisely how does one describe the vegetation seen in the field, and to what extent is it possible to classify this in a systematic way? And to what extent does what we see reflect broader environmental influences on plant growth and development?

With the publication of volumes 2 and 3 of *British Plant Communities* (in 1991 and 1992), edited by John Rodwell, and with substantial contributions from ten leading botanists, an important line was drawn under the classification and description of the bulk of Great Britain's upland vegetation. At long last we had an exhaustive treatment of upland vegetation, with a huge amount of detail on the taxonomy, habitats and ecology of each plant community.

But as is so often the way with science, time has brought new information to light. Over the past fifteen or so years, a huge amount of fieldwork by just a handful of ecologists has given new insights into the vegetation of the British uplands. While the basic classification of vegetation is much the same, our knowledge of the different communities, notably their distribution, ecology and conservation importance, has advanced considerably. This is due largely to the work of three of our co-authors – Ben and Alison Averis, and David Horsfield. They have greatly improved our knowledge of upland vegetation, and in their different ways have made significant contributions to what we know today about the importance of different parts of the uplands.

These days, however, the politics of conservation seem to conspire to eclipse the efforts of those working in the field. We are fortunate, therefore, in having Marcus Yeo as a further co-author. As Head of the Habitats Advice Team in the Joint Nature Conservation Committee he had responsibility for advising on the UK's implementation of the Habitats Directive (Council Directive 92/43/EEC) – the major European statutory instrument for protecting habitats and species.

Working with our colleagues, we have tried to produce a fresh overview of the distribution and ecology of British upland vegetation. This builds substantially on the classification and content of *British Plant Communities*, which has provided a solid foundation for our endeavours. We owe an enormous debt to John Rodwell and his co-workers for what is now widely referred to as the NVC – The National Vegetation

Classification. Our work also echoes many of the ideas in *Plant Communities of the Scottish Highlands*. It is therefore a special pleasure for us to dedicate this guide to our two mentors – Derek Ratcliffe and Donald McVean. We hope that we have done something to solve what they described as the ‘essential problem’ of representing adequately the total range of variation in vegetation.

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February 2004