

The Muirburn Code 2017 - Supplementary Information 9

Muirburn for Grouse Moor Management

Grouse moor managers carry out muirburn to provide a patchwork of heather with different ages and heights along with the flush of plants, such as blaeberry, that comes after burning. This mosaic contains heather that provides food, nesting areas and shelter for grouse, and a range of other moorland bird species. The burnt or cut strips provide fresh grazing and structural diversity.

Burning is usually carried out in strips or patches of up to 50m wide that can run for several hundred metres, with the aim of maximising the edge area, so birds can move quickly from short to long heather patches. Increasingly, cutting is being used in support of burning, to create firebreaks, and some practitioners are using cutting alone, which opens up opportunities to create different patchworks.

The concept of a "cool burn", while recognised as a contradiction, is widely applied for grouse management. It involves burning with the wind to produce a low severity fire that has lower impact on vegetation close to the soil and only aims to burn off the upper layer of the vegetation. This leaves some un-burnt "stick" or woody stems behind, which can give protection from grazing, when the regenerating heather is small.

The period between each burning or cutting operation, should be determined by the rate of growth of the heather, which in turn will be influenced by its location and elevation. Burning should not take place until the heather is at least 20cm tall. In the most productive situations, this will take at least 8 years to reach this height and in the least productive areas it will take much longer. Wind-clipped heather on the higher hills should not be burnt. After burning, heather can regenerate within 2-3 years, providing young shoots ideal for feeding grouse. Most burning occurs in the spring, when the plant material has dried out, allowing it to burn, while cold, damp conditions underfoot mean the fire is most easily controlled.

Work is being carried out to assess whether it would be feasible to extend the muirburn season into September, which might ease the pressure on the spring period, when there is a risk that muirburn will have an impact on breeding birds.

Grouse moors, especially those that are part of Wildlife Estates Scotland¹, are increasingly developing formal muirburn plans, which identify sensitive areas.

Gamekeepers are employed on grouse moors, and they have long experience of muirburn. They are skilful and equipped with specialist equipment to help them manage the heather. This includes fire-foggers, flail cutters to make firebreaks and most recently powerful leaf blowers, which are effective at putting out fires quickly.

¹ <http://www.wildlife-estates.co.uk>