

CWM TAF FECHAN WOODLANDS SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST



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YOUR SPECIAL SITE AND ITS FUTURE

‘Your Special Site and its Future’ is part of our commitment to improve the way we work with SSSI owners and occupiers. In it, we try to explain what is special about the wildlife on your site, and what care is needed to look after it into the future.

All SSSI are considered to be of national importance and we recognise the crucial role that owners and occupiers play in their management and protection. We need you to share your views and knowledge of this site with us, to help safeguard it.

We hope that you will find ‘Your Special Site and its Future’ interesting and helpful. Please contact us if there is anything about the site and its management that you would like to discuss.

What is ‘special’ about the wildlife at Cwm Taf Fechan Woodlands SSSI?

The Afon Taf Fechan has its origins as a stream on the southern face of the Brecon Beacons, and flows through several reservoirs before joining the Taf Fawr near Merthyr Tydfil. Here, it cuts through the Carboniferous Limestone that marks the edge of the South Wales coalfield and forms the wooded ravine of the Cwm Taf Fechan Woodlands SSSI. This SSSI has one special feature:

The **Semi-natural Broadleaved Woodland** at Cwm Taf Fechan is special for its wide variety of plants, including several rare species. The dominant tree species are oak, ash and downy birch, with an understorey of shrubs such as hazel and hawthorn. In places, springs occur, and where the water has previously seeped through limestone they can create porous or spongy deposits of calcium carbonate known as tufa. The humid conditions in the wooded ravine allow a particularly rich moss and liverwort flora to grow, with over a hundred species recorded.

Although parts of the woodland at Cwm Taf Fechan may have been periodically felled to provide fuel or pit props, the rich flora shows that the woodland has been in existence for a long period, and probably links back to the original ‘wildwood’ that covered Wales after the last Ice Age.

There are a number of scarce plant species, such as limestone fern, a species found on limestone in South Wales, North-East Wales, Avon, Somerset and parts of northern England. At Cwm Taf Fechan it can be found growing on old walls. Green spleenwort (another fern) and mountain melick (a grass) are also found here.

Other habitats at Cwm Taf Fechan include areas of acid grassland, limestone grassland and dry heath. These add diversity to Cwm Taf Fechan and help to maintain the large number of species to be found there. Part of Cwm Taf Fechan Woodlands SSSI has been declared as the Taf Fechan Local Nature Reserve.

What do we want Cwm Taf Fechan Woodlands to look like?

The following is a description of how we would like to see Cwm Taf Woodlands look in the future:

The ravine that forms the Cwm Taf Fechan Woodlands is mostly covered in ash woodland, apart from some of the flatter parts of the SSSI kept open by stock grazing. The woodland itself is not continuous, and has occasional gaps in the canopy caused by dead or fallen trees. Trees vary in age, and where there are gaps in the tree canopy it is possible to see saplings growing to fill the space. Old trees are relatively rare, as trees often die early because of the difficult growing conditions on free draining limestone, but any dead wood is left to provide habitat for fungi and invertebrates.

Most of the trees and shrubs are of locally native broadleaved species. Ash is the dominant tree, but pedunculate oak, downy birch, beech, small-leaved lime and wych elm can all occasionally be found, with alder growing in damp areas near the river. Beneath the trees are scattered shrubs such as hazel, hawthorn and field

maple. Dead and dying trees, as well as live trees with holes, hollows and rotten branches, provide habitat for numerous mosses, fungi and specialist insects, as well as nesting sites for pied flycatchers, redstarts and other characteristic birds of Welsh oakwoods.



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On the woodland floor, in rocky areas near the river, luxuriant growths of mosses, liverworts and ferns can be found. Elsewhere the woodland floor is covered with a variety of plants depending on soil depth and acidity. In spring there can be an attractive display of wild flowers. In steeper areas, plants such as dog's mercury, wild garlic, primroses and violets predominate, together with some grasses such as false

brome. Higher on the slope, the ground flora can be more grassy, with species such as wavy hair grass, sweet vernal grass and creeping soft grass together, in spring, with attractive displays of bluebells.

What management is needed at Cwm Taf Fechan Woodlands SSSI and why?

Although Cwm Taf Fechan is an excellent place for wildlife, it is not 'natural'. If fact, it is the product of decades or even centuries of management. This has involved direct management of the woodland itself and industry in the surrounding area. Grazing animals have been particularly important in shaping the habitats we see at Cwm Taf Fechan, but the site also has problems because of its proximity to a large urban centre. This site will only remain in good condition if the right management can be continued, and it is CCW's priority is to work with you to ensure that this management is carried out.

What does this mean in practice?

There are a number of management actions that are essential to maintain the scientific interest at Cwm Taf Fechan. These are the ones we think are most important.

Grazing has had a significant effect on the woodland in recent years. Although very light grazing can help to prevent flowers being smothered by bracken, it is very easy for this grazing to also damage young trees. If these saplings are unable to fill gaps as existing trees die and fall, then in the long term the area of woodland will shrink. Over-grazing can enrich the soil with dung, leading to an increase in species such as docks and nettles. However, some grazing will be needed if the grassland and heath are to be maintained.

Our aim is that any grazing of the site should not prevent the woodland renewing itself into the future. This may require a reduction of animals on the site, and the use of more stock-proof fencing.

Bracken is increasing in areas where the soil is deep enough to allow this invasive plant to spread. Once it forms a dense canopy, it can shade out any plants below it and prevent woodland regeneration. Our aim is to reduce the amount of bracken on site to prevent this happening. Bracken can be controlled in a number of ways including spraying, cutting and bruising. In the longer term, the aim would be to encourage saplings to 'get away' from the bracken canopy. These young trees will then eventually grow to shade out the bracken.

In common with other sites near urban areas, Cwm Taf Fechan suffers from a number of **vandalism** issues. These can vary from litter, damage to signs to arson (which can encourage bracken). There is little that can be done in the short term to prevent this, although increasing awareness through education, and closer liaison with the local police may help.

Finally

Our knowledge and understanding of wildlife is continually improving. It is possible that new issues may arise in the future, whilst other issues may disappear. This statement is written with the best information we have now, but may have to change in the future as our understanding improves. Any information you can provide on the wildlife of your site, its management and its conservation would be much appreciated.

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If you would like to discuss any aspect of your SSSI, or have any concerns about your SSSI, please contact your local CCW office.

**Your local office is;
CCW (Vale and Valleys Team)
Unit 4
Castleton Court
Fortran Road
St Mellons
Cardiff
CF3 0LT
Tel: 029 20772400
Fax: 02920772412**