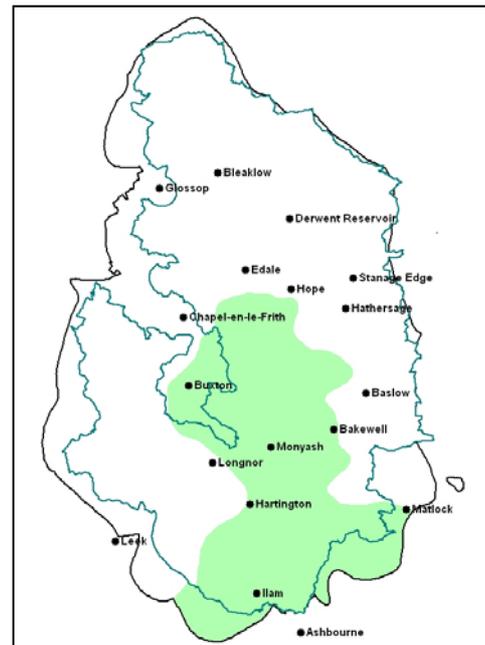


# THE WHITE PEAK



The White Peak consists of a gently rolling limestone plateau, largely overlain by acidic wind-blown soils, and dissected by **limestone dales** cut by glacial meltwater. In many places the dales are steep-sided and contrast sharply with the plateau land above, whilst in other places the plateau grades more gently into shallow dales.

The limestone plateau was completely cleared of its natural woodland by people thousands of years ago and not a single example of this original woodland appears to remain today. Until the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century much of the limestone plateau was a mosaic of open heathland, scrub and unimproved grasslands, with enclosed cultivated land around villages and settlements. Nearly all of the “limestone heathland” has long since disappeared under the plough and only about 100 hectares now remain as relics of the medieval landscape. Limestone heath can be seen at Longstone Moor and along road verges at Hartington Road Junction.



Today most of the plateau comprises highly productive meadows and permanent pastures divided up by the characteristic network of limestone walls and occasional linear shelterbelts of trees. However, despite the predominance of intensively managed species-poor grassland, important areas of interest remain. Extensive areas of rough grazing land occur on the higher unenclosed limestone hills around Castleton and Bradwell in the north, and in the west above Dove Dale and the Manifold Valley and around Earl Sterndale. Flower-rich **hay meadows**, unimproved pastures, road verges and steeper slopes, although only a small and increasingly isolated proportion of the area of farmland on the plateau, provide essential refuges for many species such as skylarks and brown hares. They also make a significant contribution to the landscape with contrasting colours and flower-rich swards, with the wonderful displays of meadow cranesbill being a particular feature of the road verges. The network of **dewponds**, created to provide a source of drinking water for livestock, provides an important habitat for species such as water-crowfoot and the protected great crested newt.

Several features of wildlife importance on the plateau are associated with past mineral extraction. Centuries of lead mining have left hillocks of waste material and accompanying mineshaft hollows which stretch as linear features across the landscape. These lead rakes support specialised plant communities of considerable conservation importance which are adapted to the metalliferous soils, including spring sandwort, known locally as **leadwort**.

The extraction of limestone has also been an important industry with a significant effect on wildlife. Whilst this has undoubtedly led to the loss of important and irreplaceable habitats in the past, such **quarries**

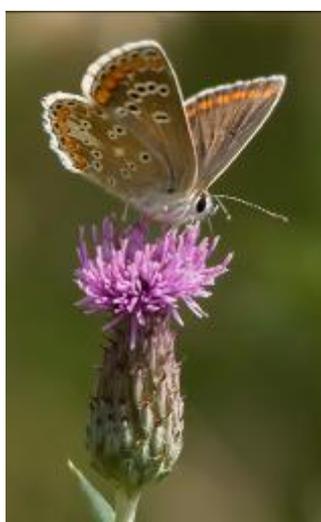


can colonise in time with a rich flora, and the rock faces provide nesting sites for birds such as raven and peregrine. A number of small areas of silica sand and clay were deposited in pockets in the limestone during glacial periods and have provided a source of material for brick making. These now support a characteristic mosaic of ponds, heathland and grassland, and associated wildlife.

The limestone dales are one of the jewels of the Peak District, supporting a varied mosaic of habitats of exceptionally high quality. The upland ash woodlands of the dales are amongst the finest in Europe and include the most extensive examples of this habitat in Britain. They are particularly important for their rich flora and invertebrate life. Despite Dutch Elm Disease, wych elm remains in many of these woodlands, supporting small colonies of [white-letter hairstreak](#) butterflies.

Small and large-leaved lime and lily-of-the-valley occur very locally on relic sites where the ancient woodlands have probably never been cleared. The ground flora shows considerable diversity, with ramsons tending to dominate in damper dale bottoms and dog's mercury or wood false-brome on screes. Invertebrates include a rich moth fauna. In a few places small fragments of wet woodland occur in dale bottoms, and vestiges of oak, birch and holly woodland occur on the upper dales slopes.

Areas of scrub provide an important habitat in the dales, particularly in those areas where it forms part of a transition from woodland to open grassland and where habitat mosaics occur. These areas can be very rich botanically, with species such as globeflower, aspen and stone bramble, and they provide important habitat for birds like the whitethroat.



The grasslands of the dales are very varied, reflecting factors such as different soil types and whether they are north or south-facing. The most species-rich are the calcareous grasslands with their characteristic colourful displays of early purple orchids and cowslips in the spring. These calcareous grasslands are a habitat of European importance and the Peak District is a meeting point between northern and southern types. On south-facing slopes, species characteristic of warmer southern areas such as dwarf thistle are found, whilst more northerly limestone grassland types with species such as mountain everlasting and flea sedge can be found on the north-facing slopes. On the upper slopes where soil has been washed down from the plateau more acid grassland tends to occur, often including mountain pansy; whilst extensive areas of species-rich neutral grassland occur on deeper soils. A specialised type of tall neutral grassland has developed in places, supporting [Jacob's ladder](#) for which the Peak District holds a considerable proportion of the national population. All of these grasslands are again of particular value for their flora and invertebrates, the latter including the [Peak District brown argus](#) and [dark green fritillary](#) butterflies.

Limestone cliffs, rock outcrops and screes often form dramatic landscape features in the dales. Several important plants, including the nationally scarce Hutchinsia and rock whitebeam, are adapted to these habitats and the rock faces are often very rich in mosses, liverworts and lichens, including some very scarce species. Limestone screes support a specialised flora and fauna of importance, notably red hemp-nettle and limestone fern, whilst the extensive network of caves and lead mines provides a habitat for hibernating bats and cave-dwelling invertebrates such as the cave spider.

Rivers and streams run through some of the dales and can hold populations of white-clawed crayfish and water voles, both of which have suffered significant declines throughout Britain over the last two decades, although the latter is experiencing some resurgence. Fish include [bullhead](#) and brook lamprey, both regarded as of European conservation importance, as well as the more widespread brown trout. [Dippers](#) are particularly characteristic of White Peak rivers, and are good indicators of clean water. This is also the habitat of Derbyshire feather-moss for which the single Peak District site, comprising a few square metres of wet rock, is the only confirmed site in the world. In a few dales, small springs and flushes arise on the daleside just above river level and these are rich in scarce plants and invertebrates including specialised species of soldierflies, craneflies and snails.



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