



10 - Protecting Habitats and Species

“Northern Ireland’s biodiversity plays a significant role within its economy. A healthy, properly-functioning natural environment is the foundation of sustained economic growth, prosperous communities and personal well-being.”

[Valuing Nature A Biodiversity Strategy for Northern Ireland to 2020.](#)

A quarter of the 76,000 ha of land managed by the Forest Service is designated for nature conservation. Designations include [Special Area of Conservation \(SAC\)](#), [Special Protection Area \(SPA\)](#), [Area of Special Scientific Interest \(ASSI\)](#), [Marine Nature Reserve \(MNR\)](#) and [National Nature Reserve \(NNR\)](#).

Designated areas in and adjacent to Down Forestry Planning Area (FPA) forests are listed in [Appendix II](#). As a competent authority Forest Service is required to undertake assessments of the potential impact of forestry on areas designated as either SAC or SPA. In the Down FPA this includes Strangford Lough SPA, Outer Ards SPA, Rostrevor Wood SAC, Hollymount SAC, and Eastern Mourne SAC.

In addition to identifying designated areas forest plans also identify areas in forests that correspond to priority habitats formerly described in the [EU Habitats Directive](#). These include native woodland, lowland wood pasture and parkland, species-rich grassland, bog and heathland.

Forest design plans identify areas for [native woodland](#) expansion and [natural reserves](#) which are areas where intervention is restricted. Forest design plans also identify current and planned open habitats. This includes areas which may currently be [afforested](#) and open ground along internal forest edges.

Forests and woodlands provide habitats for a number of rare and protected plants, invertebrates, birds and mammals, and support populations of wild deer which are managed to prevent damage to susceptible trees. Biodiversity of forests is also enhanced through management of deadwood habitat, and protecting ancient woodland remnant features, veteran trees, and other features of high biodiversity value from damage in the course of forest operations.

Other measures include extending the period of time between planting and [clearfelling](#) (extended rotation), and converting the management of areas to [low impact silvicultural systems](#) to maintain [continuous forest cover](#).

[Ancient semi-natural woodland](#) is particularly important as it provides a range of habitats which support a rich diversity of plants and animals compared to more recent woodland. However, it is very limited in extent and there are relatively few intact examples outside of protected areas. Such woodland can be found in or close to Forest Service forests such as Hollymount, Mourne and Rostrevor forests.

The use of [low impact silvicultural systems](#) in conifer stands is generally understood to be beneficial in terms of increasing biodiversity. Some raptor species, such as hen harrier, benefit from a mosaic of plantation ages resulting from managed clearfelling. Forest glades and unplanted breaks, or rides, are particularly important for nesting and foraging of forest edge dwelling raptor species. These species include buzzard, merlin, red kite, goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*), kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*) and raven (*Corvus corax*).

Forest operations are planned to avoid adverse effects on rare and vulnerable species. It is also important that people wishing to use forests for recreational purposes are aware of the needs of protected species, particularly easily disturbed breeding raptors.



Opportunity: Complete Habitats Regulations Assessments (HRAs) of revised forest plans in respect of SACs as appropriate.

Opportunity: Identify areas of open habitat where intervention is necessary to address potential loss of biodiversity, and maintain ecological connectivity.

Activity: Review potential effects of forest operations specified in forest plans.

Activity: Undertake assessments of the risk to open and parkland habitats from colonising by trees and other threats to biodiversity.

Outcomes	Benefits
- Contribution of forests to Northern Ireland biodiversity is maintained or increased.	- Opportunities for watching birds and wildlife in forests.