

**Survey of potential Woodland Planting Site - Dechomet Co. Down.
Survey completed by Judy Meharg MSc. Fieldfare Ecology.
Date of Survey Tuesday 29th December 2020**

Introduction

Fieldfare Ecology were commissioned by Scottish Woodland to carry out a survey of a potential woodland planting site to establish the presence of Lowland Acid Heath as requested by Forest Service.

The survey involved the following:

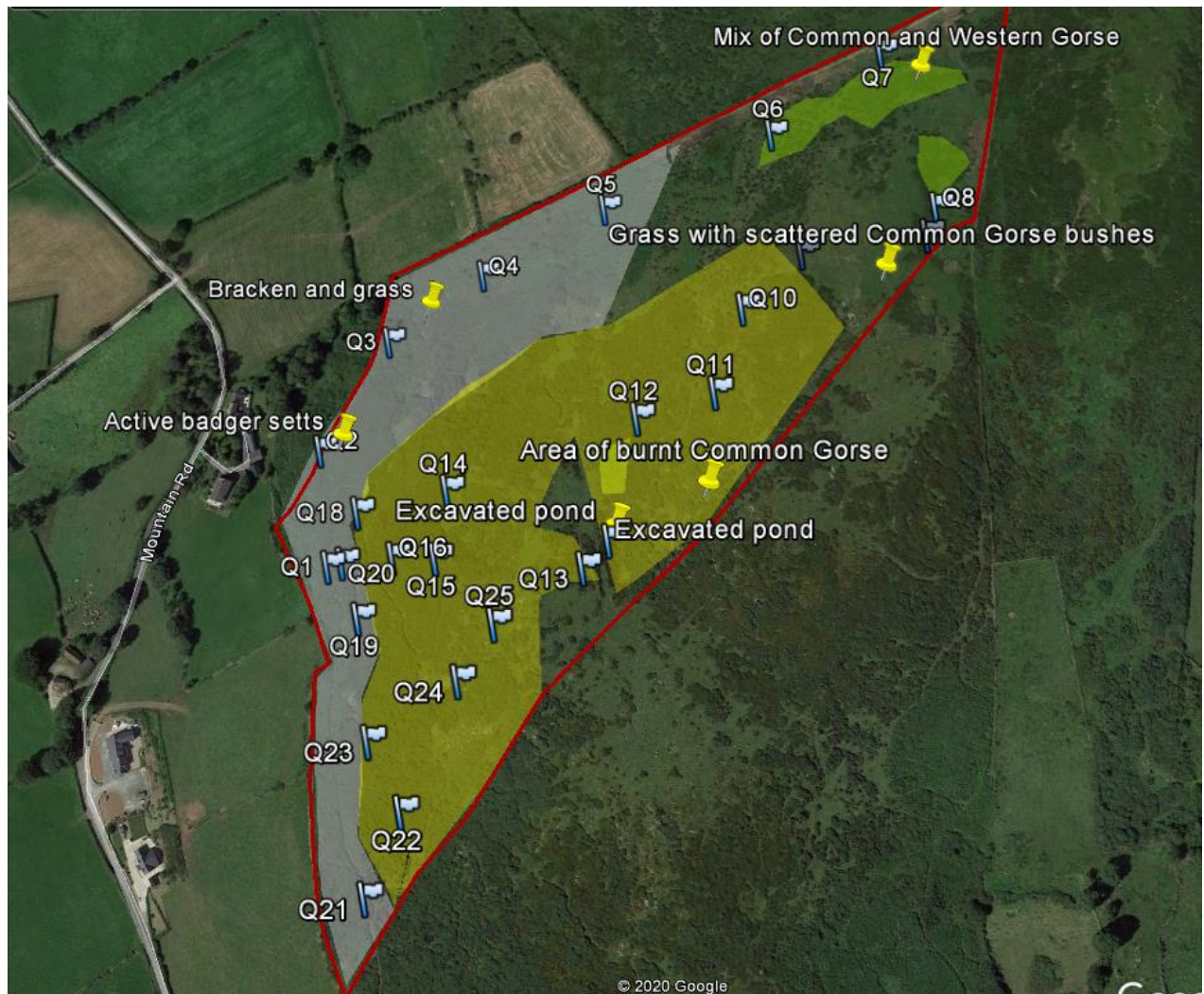
- Field assessment using the RCA template, and record photos as evidence at each plot.
- Preparation of a map showing the locations of the plots
- Provision of an email summary of the site and how much of the site can be planted and how much should remain as lowland heath. This should also be backed up with an annotated map showing the division.

Survey

The site at Dechomet comprises 11 ha of hilly land in the Slieve Croob / Castlewellan area. It is bounded by poor quality agricultural fences and broken drystone walls to the east. It has been used for rough grazing by sheep and there is the likelihood of wild deer. It sits between 190m and 270m above sea level.

The survey of the site at Dechomet was undertaken on the 29th December 2020 using the Rapid Condition Assessment by ecologist Judy Meharg and an assistant from Fieldfare Ecology Ltd. The aim of the survey was to determine if Lowland Acid Heathland habitat is present on the site. It should be noted that a full botanical survey was not possible due to annual plants being absent at this time of year. However as many of the typical of Lowland Acid Heathland indicator plants are herbaceous perennials, these are identifiable if present all year round. Indicator plants include heather species, bilberry, bog cotton, thyme, heath bedstraw and western gorse.

24 2x2m quadrats were taken throughout the site to record the flora and the soil depth. The survey data are attached in Annex B (please note there is no Q17)



Map 1 Site map showing quadrat locations and vegetation types

Soil depths were recorded at every other quadrat. Soil was generally between 5-35cm in depth and of a dark sandy nature containing high levels of schist. The underlying boulders were often at surface level. No peat was found on site nor any presence of heather or lowland acid heathland species apart from patches of Western Gorse *Ulex Gallii* amongst larger areas of Common Gorse *Ulex europaeus*. Please refer to map for extent of vegetation types.

The dominant vegetation on the lower and western flank of the site was bracken and patches of grass, the middle section was dominated by dense *Ulex europaeus* scrub (which had been burnt by a wildfire in 2020) and the upper area, although still dominated by *Ulex europaeus*, also contained patches of *Ulex gallii* associated with rock outcrops. Along the top boundary there were areas of open grass. It should be noted that the full extent of *Ulex Gallii* could not be determined due to the extent of the 2020 wildfire however assessing orthophotography from pre-fire images suggest that it is more frequent to the north of the site.



Photo 1 Photo looking south showing extent of burn



Photo 2 Western gorse with taller common gorse behind it in top corner of site

In a couple of areas across the site self-seeded trees of birch, hawthorn and ash were growing which would indicate that if sheep, and other grazing animals, were excluded the area would naturally progress through scrub to woodland.



Photo 3 Self-seeded Hawthorn and Ash trees

On the lower slope an active, well established badger sett was noted which had 4-5 entrances. The whole site was criss-crossed with badger pads.



Photo 4 Active badger sett on site

Current use of the site.

The site had been lightly grazed by sheep but encroachment by gorse is extensive, probably due to under grazing. The area is important for Red Kites and the landowner wishes to plant native woodland on this site as a suitable habitat. 6 Red Kites and 2 buzzards were observed in the area during the survey. The owner is licenced to provide a feeding station for Red Kites in an adjacent field.

Much of the site was affected by the 2020 burn and a few signs of regrowth at the base of common gorse stems are now visible.

Site overview

Most of the site is vegetated by a mix of rough habitats comprising common gorse, bracken and species poor grassland.

There were no signs of lowland acid heathland habitat on the site and no characteristic species such as heathers, bilberry or tormentil were recorded.

On shallow soils and around rock outcrops, in the upper, northern area of the site, there are patches of western gorse. The CEDaR website 'Habitats' describes the Northern Ireland distribution of *Ulex gallii* as

"This is similar at first sight to the common gorse *Ulex europaeus*, but a closer look shows that it is generally a smaller, more compact shrub, with smaller spines. The most obvious difference is in time of main flowering - spring for *U. europaeus* and late summer to autumn for *U. gallii*. **Although called western gorse, in N. Ireland its principal areas of occurrence include Co Down in the south-east of the Province, especially in the Mourne and Slieve Croob areas. It is very common within these areas.**"

An active badger sett is present on the site, badgers are a woodland species and would benefit from planting of a native woodland.

Rabbits are present at the lower areas of the site.

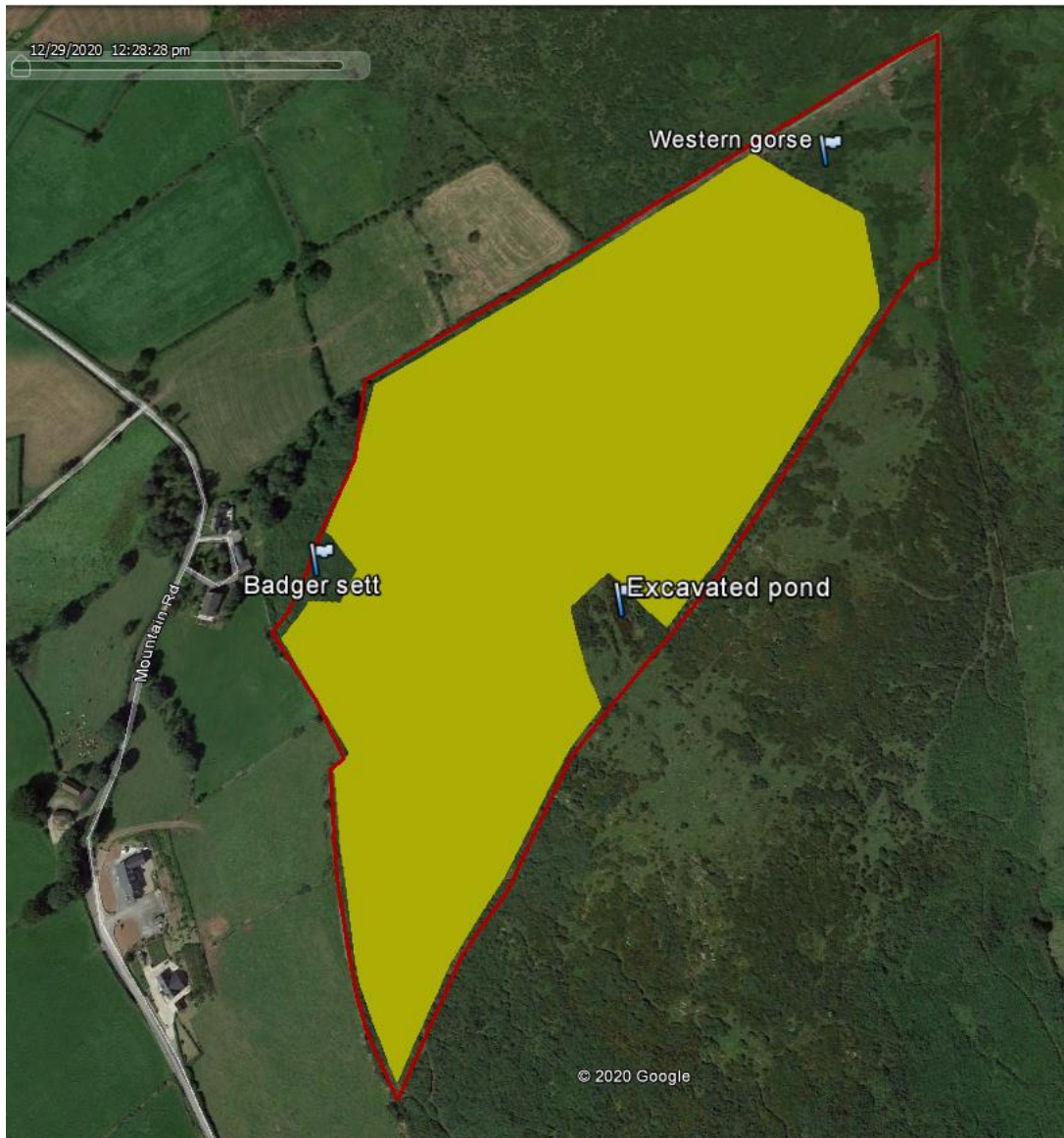
Recommendation

It is the opinion of the surveyor that the site would be suitable for planting with native woodland species and rather than impacting on the habitats present that careful planting would enhance the opportunities for carbon sequestration, biodiversity and landscape.

Existing features, including areas to the north of the site where *Ulex gallii* is present, should be left unplanted and the natural growth of this shrub around rock outcrops and shallow soils integrated into the planting plan.

It would be advisable to leave an area around the excavated pond and the badger sett unplanted and to leave space wherever outcrops of rock occur to accommodate open areas and diversity within the planting.

Refer to map 2 below.



Map 2 Suitable area for native tree planting 9.25 ha

Judy Meharg

Michael Meharg

Fieldfare Ecology Ltd

1 January 2021

Appendix A

Species List

Latin Name	Common Name	Comment
<i>Agrostis stolonifera</i>	Grass	dominant grass throughout
<i>Betula pubescens</i>	Birch	lone tree
<i>Crataegus monogyna</i>	Hawthorn	lone tree
<i>Digitalis purpurea</i>	Foxglove	sporadic under burnt gorse
<i>Fraxinus excelsior</i>	Ash	lone tree
<i>Gallium saxatile</i>	Heath Bedstraw	scarce
<i>Juncus articulatus</i>	Jointed rush	one small patch
<i>Juncus effusus</i>	Soft Rush	one small patch around excavated pond
<i>Primula vulgaris</i>	Primrose	sporadic
<i>Pteridium aquilinum</i>	Bracken	the lower slope and western flank
<i>Rubus fruticosus</i>	Bramble	scarce
<i>Spagnum</i> sp	spagnum	one small patch
<i>Ulex europaeus</i>	Common gorse	throughout
<i>Ulex gallii</i>	Western gorse	in small patches to upper section of site
<i>Umbilicus rupestris</i>	Navelwort	on boundary wall