

# Coastal Heathland



The North Devon Coast AONB contains a wide variety of habitats, including sand dunes and estuaries, rocky shores, species-rich hedgerows, coastal oak woodlands and culm grasslands.



North Devon exhibits some excellent examples of this valuable habitat. Coastal heathlands tend to occur in a mosaic or semi-natural habitat which includes scrub and bracken. The most exceptional areas of coastal heath can be found on the Morte Point Headland, with prominent areas in Exmoor on the east of Combe Martin at Foreland Point near Lynmouth.

Sea cliffs and slopes are a challenging environment for plants and animals; exposure to gale-force winds and salt spray, steep slopes with thin soils, frequent erosion and landslides - all contribute to forming unique and characteristic wildlife assemblages. Encrusting lichens are often abundant; the pollutant-free, moist maritime air proving the ideal milieu for scores of species. Lichens cling to rock where few other life forms can exist. Plants like cross leaved heath, purple moor grass, red fescue, thrift and sea campion carpet the cliffs in spring and summer, their springy tussocks are to be found even in small rock crevices with the scantest amounts of soil. In some places, spectacular swathes of bluebells are found.

The fleshy leaves of plants such as rock samphire and stonecrop are an adaptation to life in a desiccating environment.

Insects abound, pollinating the profusion of flowering plants; bees burrow into light soils, many species of crickets and grasshopper bask in sunny hollows. In summer, birds are much in evidence. Seabirds such as gulls and fulmars breed on inaccessible ledges, kestrels and buzzards ride the breeze, songbirds such as stonechat and wheatear feed on the abundance of insects on the more vegetated slopes, whilst nightjar have been heard on heathland at Baggy Point.