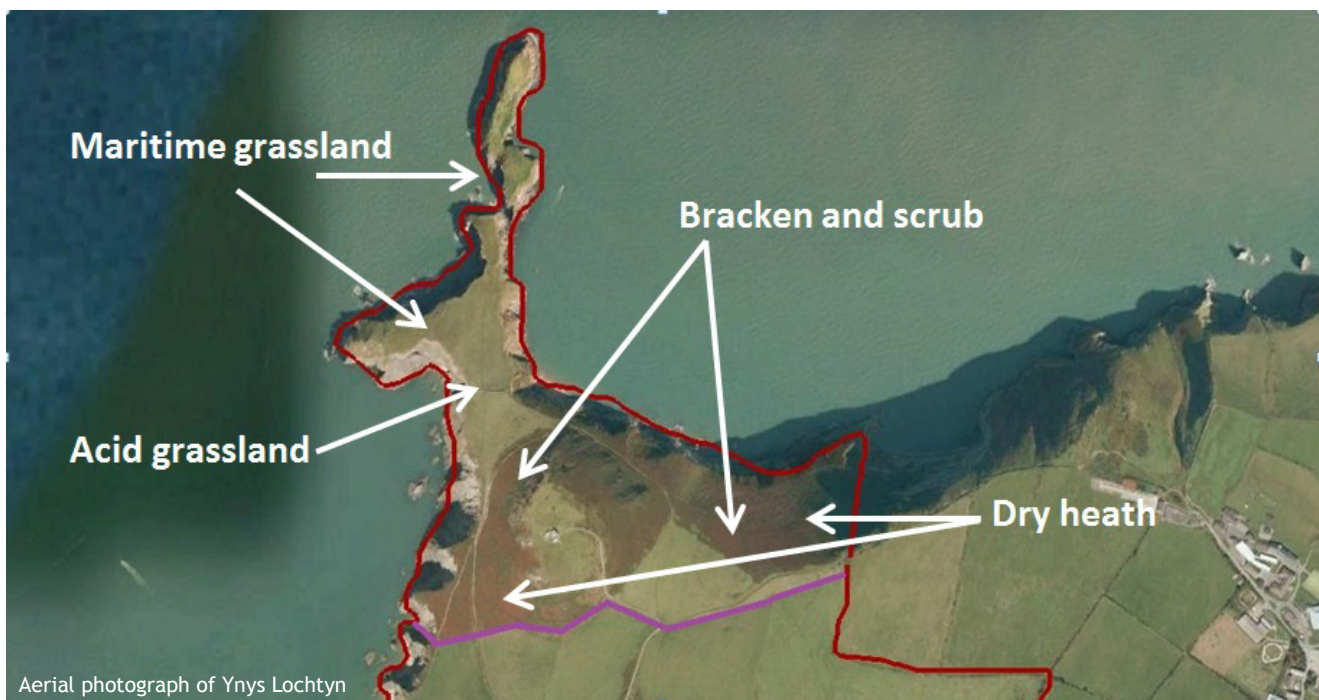


## Maritime grassland and bracken management by grazing at Ynys Lochtyn

Ynys Lochtyn was purchased by the National Trust in 1965 and lies just north of the village Llangrannog on the Ceredigion coast. It comprises of improved neutral grassland, species-rich acid and maritime grassland, coastal heath, scrub and bracken on the coastal slopes that have been farmed for thousands of years. Part of the site lies within the Aberarth-Carreg Wylan Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), and is designated for the maritime grassland, coastal heath, breeding and non-breeding chough, and grey seals. The diversity of habitat supports a very diverse range of plants species. Plants typical of species-rich acid and maritime grassland include spring squill, thrift, fescue grass, heath bedstraw and harebell. The coastal heath is characterised by bell heather, tormentil and betony. Keeping the maritime and acid grassland short is particularly important for feeding chough as it is ideal hunting grounds for their invertebrate food.





Welsh mountain ponies © Victoria Squire

The total area of land at Ynys Lochtyn is 86 hectares. The majority is relatively agriculturally improved grassland and is considered to be species-poor. Most of the land is tenanted by a local sheep farmer and means that it is quite closely grazed as part of the agricultural holding. However, the main coastal enclosure of 20 hectares is managed and grazed by the National Trust using a small herd of Welsh mountain ponies. Small coastal sites present challenges when it comes to effective conservation management with restricted and limited access for grazing animals.

Scrub management can be a real issue at Ynys Lochtyn due to its location and topography. It has steep slopes that are hard to access and keep clear from scrub. Also, there can be problems removing cut scrub from the site because of the restricted access, which could lead to nutrient enrichment.

The species-rich maritime grassland is largely confined to the fringes of the sea cliffs and coastal slopes where salt spray and thin soils are the dominant factors. This grades into the semi-improved acid grassland where years of sheep grazing and nutrient enrichment have had a greater influence. When the National

Trust started managing the land in 2015 they quickly realised that the level of scrub was high and encroaching onto the species-rich maritime heath. Ponies were introduced in spring 2016. This type of livestock was thought to be most beneficial to control scrub and rehabilitate the maritime and acid grassland compared with sheep due to their eating preferences. Ponies are more selective in what they eat and are less likely to eat flowering plants whereas sheep can and will, if allowed, eat flowering plants; in effect 'mowing' an area to a lawn-like short sward.

After having the ponies on the site for only a few months, it was obvious that there was an improvement. The frequency of spring squill and thrift within the patches of maritime grassland increased under the pony grazing compared to when sheep had been grazing. This is encouraging and bodes well for other changes that may occur in time. There has not been much of a visible increase in area of maritime grassland yet, but the ponies have only been present on the site for two years, and it was expected that a change in the extent of maritime grassland would take longer to become apparent. The extent of maritime grassland will be monitored along with frequency of indicator species to







measure how the habitat is changing and whether the pony grazing is continuing to have the desired effect.

An unforeseen benefit of grazing with ponies was that the areas of thistle that were the result of over-grazing by sheep decreased in size as the ponies found them quite tasty! Extensive grazing with cattle has been found to reduce the area and thickness of thistles, but the fact that ponies selectively ate thistles has been a huge benefit. The knock-on benefit is that no additional thistle control using volunteers was considered necessary.

A habitat feature at Ynys Lochtyn was a large bracken patch on the north-eastern slope of the site. Dense bracken covered around four hectares and over the years had encroached into the species-rich acid grassland. Consequently, the grazing pressure on the remainder of the land, 16 hectares, had increased. To rehabilitate the acid grassland, the majority of the dense bracken was

cleared during the summers of 2015 and 2016 by contractors. As part of the 'Save Our Magnificent Meadows' project, a semi-permanent fence line, consisting of wooden fence posts and removable electric fence, was installed along the edge of the bracken slope enabling the bracken slope to be managed separately from the rest of the site if needed. The bracken re-growth was stunted allowing more wild flowers and grasses to grow, and early-purple orchids were recorded on the bracken slope for the first time in 2016. Once again, pony grazing had proved to be more beneficial than sheep grazing. As they walk on the slope they trample any young bracken fronds, and create pockets of open ground which has allowed plant species, such as tormentil, betony and harebell, to thrive. The new fencing enables the National Trust to shut in the ponies to graze it harder than other areas, which will help to control the density of the bracken re-growth in the future.



Contractors flailing bracken © Mark Toft