

NCA 17 Orton Fells

Overview

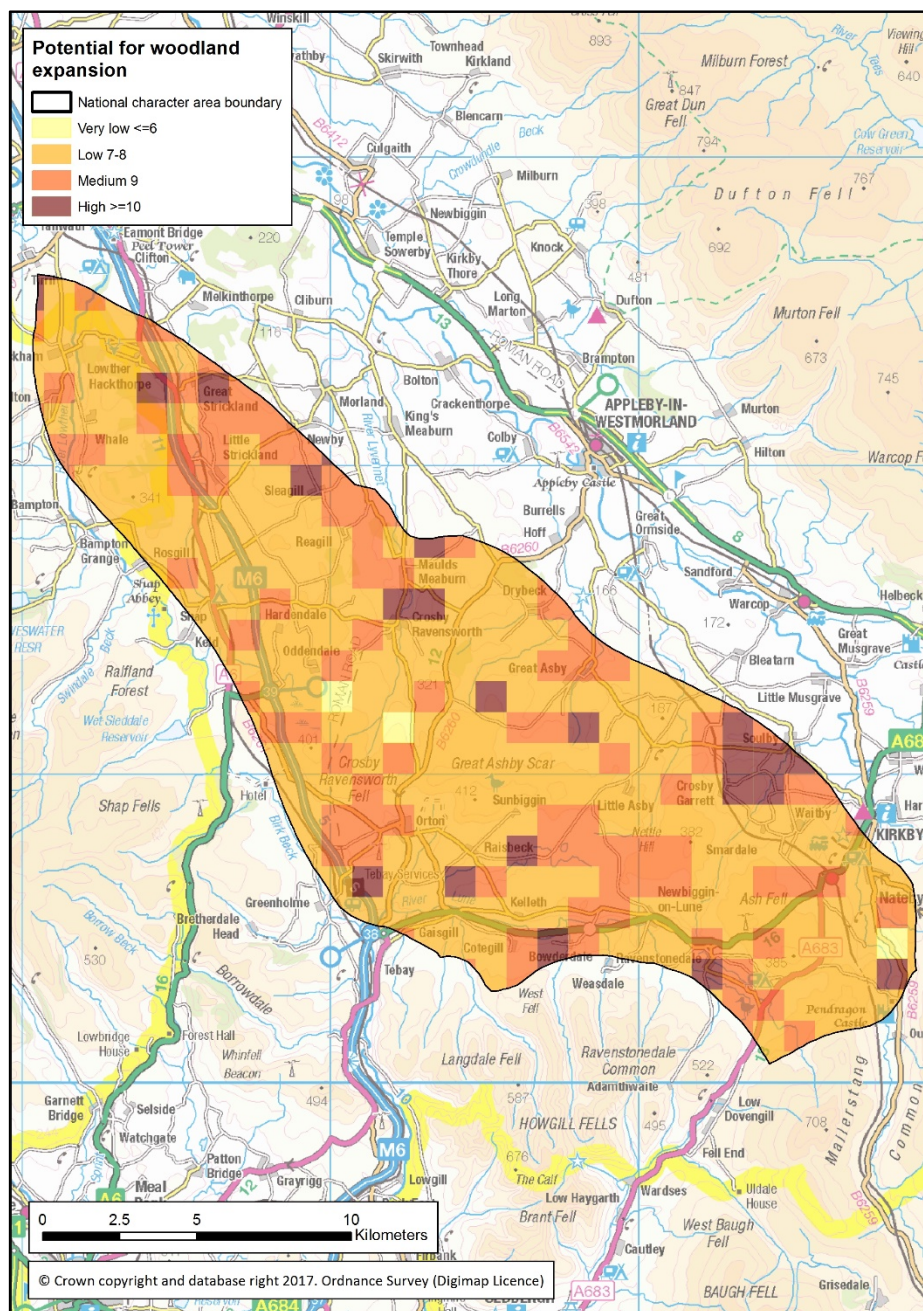
The NCA covers a limestone plateau dominated by limestone pavements, upland heath, and calcareous and acid grassland. Its character is one of open fell, and it is included within the Upland and Upland Fringe Agricultural Landscape Type. Large areas are protected by natural environment designations, including a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) around Asby, and a National Nature Reserve (NNR) at Smardale Gill. Nearly three quarters of the NCA is designated landscape, with the southern part of the NCA within the Yorkshire Dales National Park, the northern end within the Lake District National Park, and a small part of the North Pennines AONB extending into the south-eastern boundary. The Lake District National Park is also designated as the Lake District World Heritage Site. The area is dominated by stock rearing, with some dairy farms. The landscape has extensive areas of open, rough grazing, with enclosed pastures and meadows bounded by drystone walls or stone-faced hedgebanks on lower-lying land. The field pattern is dominated by irregular enclosures or enclosed strip fields. The central limestone fells are largely unsettled, and the settlement pattern is one of small villages and hamlets along the valleys of the River Lowther and River Lune to the south and west, and the River Eden and its tributaries to the east. The NCA contains the major transport corridor that carries the A6, M6 and the West Coast main railway line. Woodland cover is very low, at only 5% of the NCA and with less than 1% ancient woodland, which reflects the open limestone landscape of the upland. There are occasional ash trees on the fells, but ash woodlands are largely restricted to the steep sides of lower valleys. Of note is the Ash and Wych Elm gill woodland in Smardale Gill, a NNR. There are some small shelterbelts and plantations both coniferous and broadleaved, especially around settlements. One of the largest concentrations of plantations is in the designed landscape of Lowther Park, at the northern end of the NCA. Here, extensive coniferous planting was carried out from the end of the 19th century.

The Historic Environment Character

There is a rich resource of archaeological monuments within the NCA, with evidence of settlement from the Neolithic period onwards, including stone circles and burial mounds. There are settlement earthworks thought to date from the Romano-British period. The present-day settlement pattern was established in the later medieval period, comprising planned villages often laid out around village greens and surrounded by extensive arable open fields. Although these open fields began to be enclosed from the end of the medieval period and some settlements shrank, many are still legible in the form of well-preserved settlement earthworks and enclosed strip fields. The central Limestone fells were used as common grazing land, particularly suited to sheep farming, and seasonal shieling settlements survive as earthworks. Several individual farms were in the ownership of monasteries, particularly Yorkshire Cistercian monasteries such as Byland Abbey, and were run as granges specialising in sheep. More recently, quarrying has been a major industry around Shap.

Opportunities for Woodland Expansion

The mapping of historic and natural environment attributes indicates there is only a low potential for woodland expansion, reflecting the landscape character and sensitive ecological nature of the open limestone fells, and its significant archaeological resource. The mapping suggests that there are clusters of higher potential where new woodland could be absorbed in the lower-lying areas, around settlements and in the river valleys. This supports the opportunities identified in the NCA profile, such as buffering existing woodland, expanding and linking fragmented woodlands especially within the narrow valleys and in riparian zones to slow flood flows and improve infiltration. Any new planting, however, should take account of the strong historic landscape character of the NCA, particularly the enclosed strip fields and ancient enclosures.



NCA 17 Orton Fells