



Conservation Grazing Case Study 2
Coed Crafnant





Conservation Grazing Case Study 2: Coed Crafnant

Location & background

Coed Crafnant and Dolbebin – collectively known as Coed Crafnant - is a North Wales Wildlife Trust reserve of around 48ha in total, situated on the northwest slopes of the Rhinogydd in north Wales. The habitat is mainly Atlantic oak and broadleaved woodland (“Celtic Rainforest”) with small areas of heath. These woodland areas are designated as part of the Meirionnydd Oakwoods and Bat Sites SAC, and are particularly important for woodland birds, lesser horseshoe bats, and lower plant assemblages.

Previous management & problems identified

The woodland is separated from the Rhinogydd by dry stone walling, and is internally divided into Crafnant and Dolbebin. There are further derelict walls, structures, and platforms within the site – some associated with 19th century mine workings and many for livestock. The heft of feral goats on the Rhinogydd have had access to the site to varying degrees, and with varying impacts.

NWWT acquired Coed Dolbebin in 1972 and Crafnant in 1982, and repaired the boundaries against excessive trespass grazing.

There are nearly 100 nestboxes across the site, with records of Pied Flycatchers, redstarts, and nuthatches as well as Great and Blue tits.

An important factor to consider is potentially conflicting priorities – while woodland regeneration, maintaining a closed canopy, and expansion up the slopes is important, the same regeneration threatens the lower plants for which the site is so highly rated. Similarly, occasional feral goat access may be beneficial but if left unmanaged can become a threat to the habitat. Using fewer, larger animals should have a more controlled effect; with the physical impact of larger animals trampling areas of dense bracken and allowing light to reach the ground flora.

Grazing re-introduction: requirements and costs

It was intended to use cattle to graze the site, due to their larger body size and trampling effects, and manner of grazing. However, the site is accessed across neighbouring farmland with potential biosecurity concerns. Ponies can have a similar trampling effect, and are a simpler option in terms of movements and regulations. There is also an opportunity here to support native rare breeds such as the Carneddau ponies.

A small amount of tree removal along the boundary fence took place to enable minor repairs. A small gate was installed in the wall between Crafnant and Dolbebin. A 5m x 5m enclosure was constructed to aid future comparative monitoring. Finally, a sturdy pen was designed and constructed, that would be suitable for semi-feral ponies in the future. Total cost for these works was £7,275 exc VAT for construction and access, and £500 towards the tree work. Further works have been carried out without Celtic Rainforest Wales funding.

There is a permissive footpath across the site, and regular access by volunteers to monitor the nest boxes, so “grazing here” signage has been provided.



Grazing year 1

Coed Crafnant is being grazed over winter 2020/21 with a pair of Shetland ponies to begin assessing the impact. They have been seen selecting grass from the mounds of moss, and have begun making tracks through bracken stands. However, the trampling effect is proportional with their small size when compared with cattle. They are maintaining excellent body condition and general health – this is noteworthy as we do not have the option of providing mineral licks here, in case such licks would encourage further goat trespass.

In February 2021, the ponies were led from Crafnant to Dolbebin over some of the rougher and steeper terrain. Their extreme hesitance illustrates that they are not confident exploring the whole site, so longer term are not ideal grazers for Crafnant. However, their good nature and relationship with people makes for simpler handling than, for example, trying to herd semi-feral ponies.

Monitoring

All project sites have Common Standards Monitoring (CSM), breeding bird, and lower plant surveys done before any work begins to establish a baseline. These will be repeated at the end of the project giving a 6- or 7-year gap. It is expected that some features will be slow to react to the management changes.

In the medium term, fixed point photography at least twice per year will guide planning for the following grazing season, and will build up a more detailed picture of changes over time.

In the short term, observations by the grazier, site warden, and grazing officer influence immediate decisions within the framework of the planned season. For example, when to move the animals to the next compartment, or if weather conditions mean they need to come away early.

In addition, there is an enclosure plot within Coed Crafnant to enable comparisons of grazed and ungrazed habitat.

Expected challenges

The nature and terrain of these reserves means that not many contractors are willing to quote for works. We chose to use a very experienced contractor, given the degree of precision required to work around particular tree trunks and rocks.

We initially hoped to use the neighbour's livestock, but they refused citing concerns about the steep and rocky terrain. It was then a challenge to find a grazier who would be able to check on their animals frequently due to the site's location. As a stopgap, NWWT and project staff are helping to check the Shetland ponies; and a small adjustment to the project's budget for this site will enable higher grazing support payments.

A minor point to note for administration – the use of Livestock Units is imperfect due to varying sizes of ponies especially. Therefore, it's best to also have a range of herd size e.g. "3 - 5 individuals" and to also build-in a degree of flexibility to respond to changing habitat conditions.



The consenting process for protected sites is very thorough, and in this case required detailed surveys of specific branches and stones where we wanted to install a gate. This extra time and cost needs to be accounted for in any similar projects.

Unexpected challenges

The conflicting site priorities took some time to work through, which delayed the start of our work on Crafnant. Fortunately, the delay was only a small part of the length of the project itself i.e. there is still enough time to show positive impact on the woodland features.

A local “domestic” pony keeper was approached, and expressed more concern about bracken toxicity than about terrain. Although known to be toxic, there is minimal risk of ingestion as long as sufficient other food is available. This also applies to other unsuitable vegetation such as acorns. However, this is another barrier to some animal keepers that should be kept in mind.

The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted site works, with missed seasonal monitoring opportunities and contracted works delayed for several months. This delay led to Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) consent being renewed for a further year, and the decision to use the Shetland ponies over winter as a pilot.

The Covid-19 pandemic also had an impact on feral goat management locally, with a large group (70 – 80) of goats seen in Coed Dolbebin in December 2020. Although a small amount of trespass grazing has been “built in” to expectations, this number of animals over a long period of time could be a threat. As such, adding further grazing pressure – albeit a different type – must be carefully managed.

The pre-gate-installation survey was fantastic news for the site in terms of the number, range, and rarity of species found; however it highlighted the potential risks of undertaking works.

A minor frustration has been imprecise GPS signal under the canopy, which affects finding photo monitoring points, especially if different individuals are carrying out the task.

Future plans

The overall aim is for long-term equilibrium, rather than the current see-saw of over- and under- grazing. The future of Crafnant is linked closely with the management of feral goats on the Rhinogydd; there is no way to permanently and entirely exclude them from the site.

In the medium term, a small number of Carneddau or similar native semi-feral ponies are the proposed solution, to live on site all year round. This will depend on post-Project funding, either for a private grazier to continue or perhaps for NWWT to consider purchasing stock. *Stock ownership by eNGOs is not an impulse decision.*

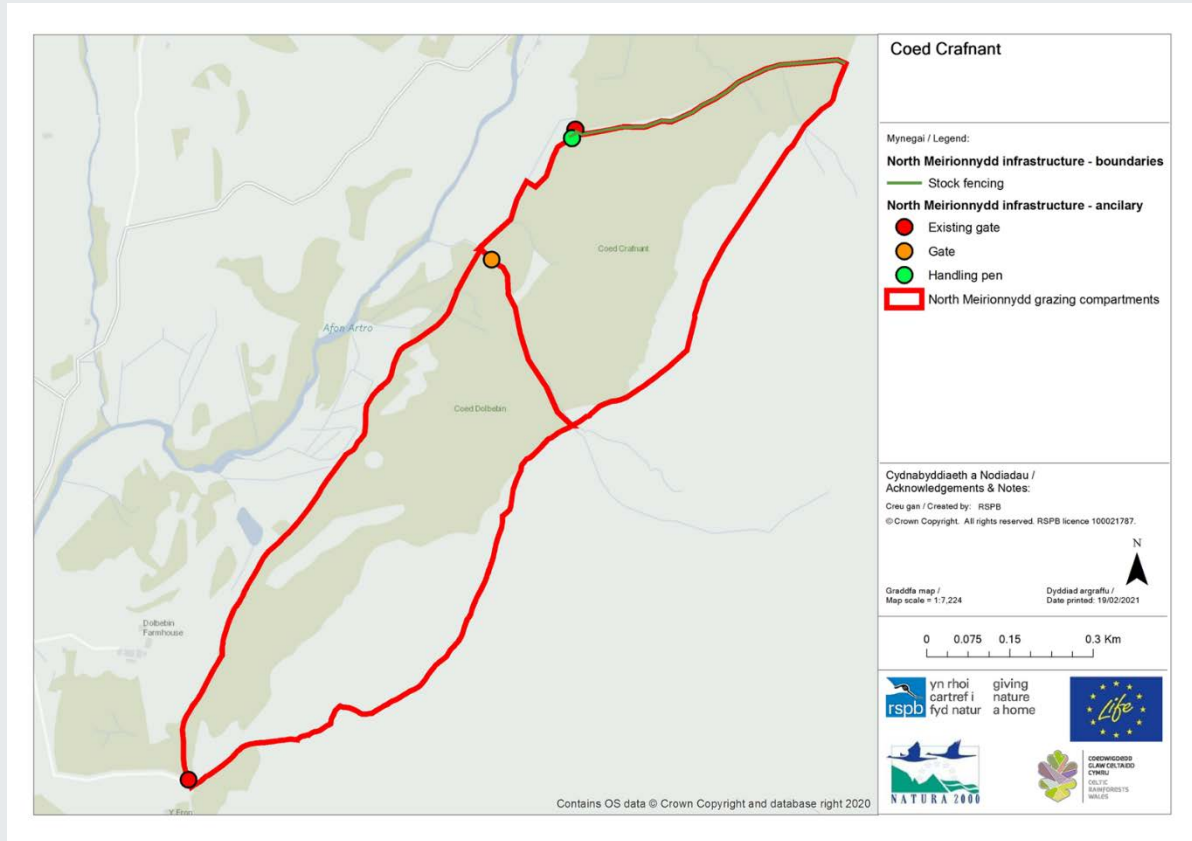
Longer term, grazing levels will need to adjust according to climate conditions and levels of woodland regeneration required – changing grazing seasonality to allow saplings to grow on, or protecting individual saplings. Although complete grazing exclusion is an option, it is then very easy for the habit of grazing to cease, for graziers to find other land, for infrastructure to decline, and for reintroduction to be low on the landowner’s long list of important tasks.



While the current Shetland ponies do come to call, a small semi-feral herd would be very time consuming to find and check regularly. Therefore, a GPS tracking collar would be offered to the grazier and its use encouraged.

Summary

	Coed Crafnant	Coed Dolbebin
Grazed area (approx. Ha)	20	27.7
Season	All year in rotation	All year in rotation
Current or most recent number of ponies	2	2
Consented maximum number of ponies	5	5
Current stocking density (livestock unit / ha)	<0.1	<0.1
Consented maximum stocking densities (livestock unit / ha)	0.2	0.15
Outcome so far	Promising start for site conditions and pony health.	Localised impacts only



Map of Coed Crafnant site





Coed Crafnant's enclosure within the bracken – and the weather conditions that can be challenging for photography!



The Celtic Rainforests Wales project has received funding from the LIFE Programme of the European Union.' or an equivalent translation.