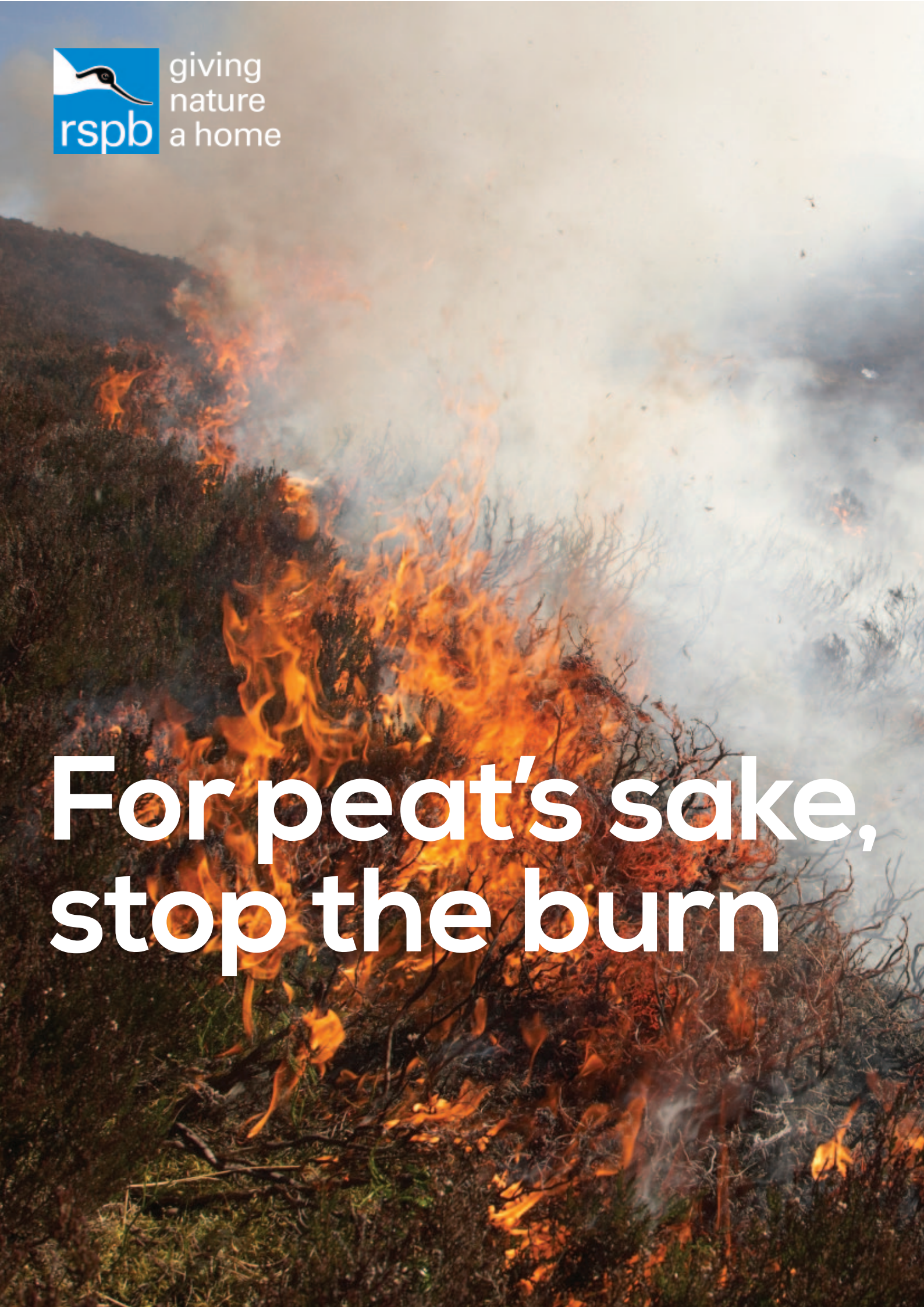
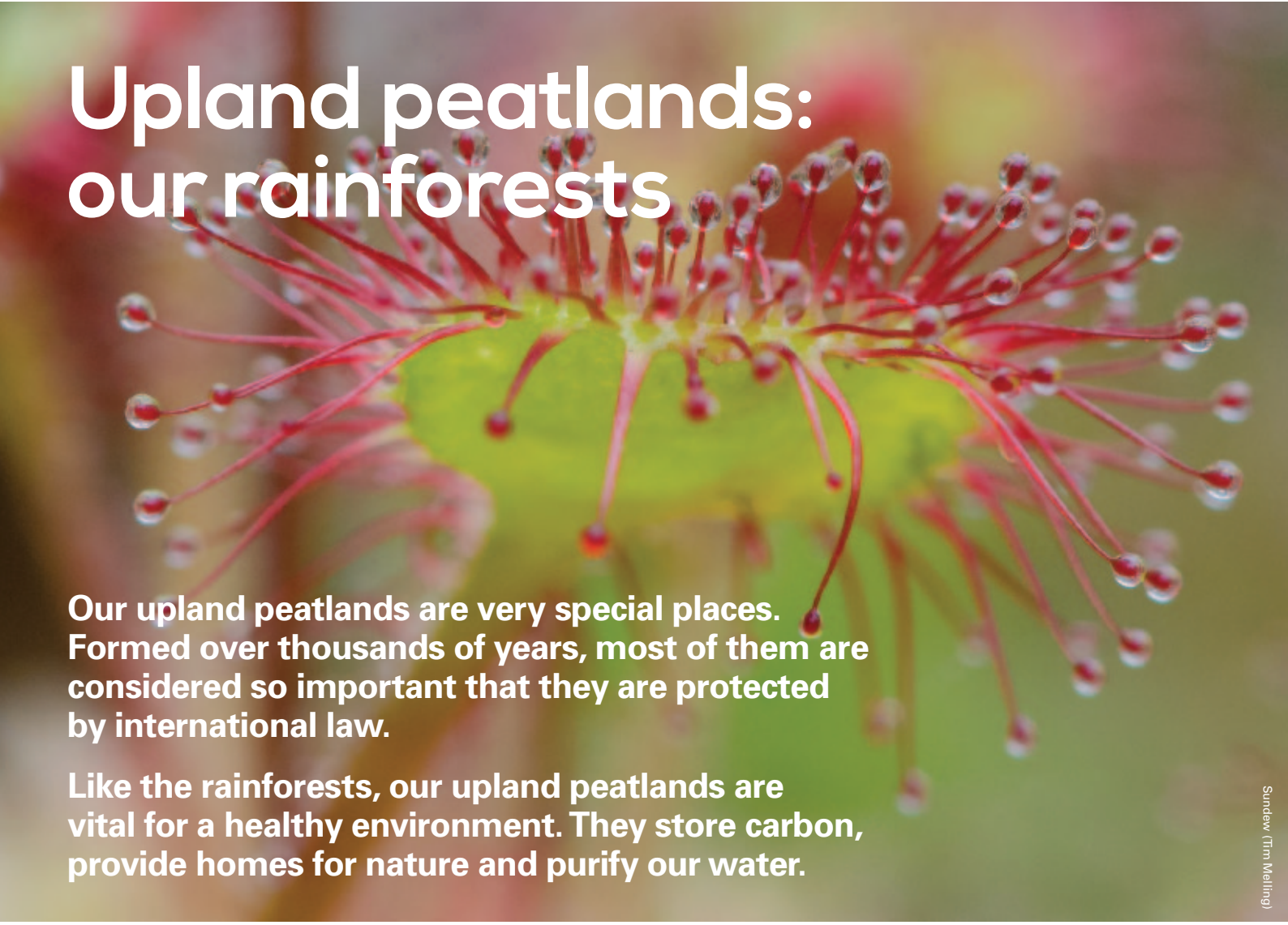
rspb giving nature a home



For peat's sake, stop the burn

Upland peatlands: our rainforests



Our upland peatlands are very special places. Formed over thousands of years, most of them are considered so important that they are protected by international law.

Like the rainforests, our upland peatlands are vital for a healthy environment. They store carbon, provide homes for nature and purify our water.

Sundew (Tim Melling)

A burning issue

We like to think of our uplands as wild places, where we can enjoy walking in the vast and tranquil open spaces. However, most of them are being managed on an industrial scale. This can cause problems.

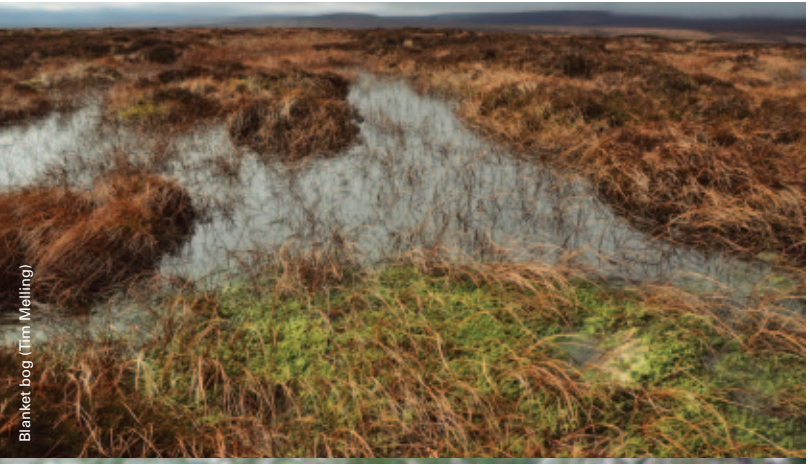
Despite their importance, England's upland peatlands are in a very poor state. In fact, Natural England – the agency responsible for protecting our countryside – states that only 4% are in good condition. They have been affected by a range of damaging activities for many years, including industrial atmospheric pollution, drainage, over-grazing, forestry, and burning. In places, the plants that cover the surface have been lost, exposing the peat.

Burning is widely used in the uplands to provide the best conditions for producing red grouse for shooting. Carefully managed burning in itself is not normally cause for a concern. However, when burning takes place on deep peatlands, it can permanently damage or destroy these very fragile habitats. In contrast, we recognise that burning has an important role to play in maintaining areas of dry heath and are keen to see heather restored away from deep peat areas.

In recent years, some efforts have begun to restore peatlands through the reduction of grazing and the blocking of drains. However, little or no attempt has been made to use alternatives to burning such as cutting.

Natural England recently concluded that burning on deep peatlands is bad for carbon storage, bad for water quality, and bad for some plants and wildlife. Burning on deep peat takes place across the English uplands but it is particularly intensive in the Peak District.

Natural England has a legal duty to restore our protected areas so they should bring about an end to burning on deep peat now. The practice should only be permitted in circumstances where it is the only feasible way to prevent the risk of wildfire through the creation of fire breaks.



Blanket bog (Tim Melling)

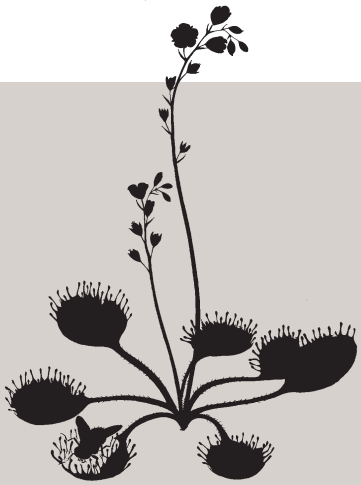
Curlew nesting in cottongrass (Tim Melling)

Carbon

Healthy peatlands are great at storing carbon.

In England, the poor condition of our upland peatlands is releasing 350,000 tonnes of CO_2 into the atmosphere each year; the equivalent produced by 140,000 cars annually.

Most of this CO_2 is released as a direct result of burning plants on peatlands. Following burning, the removal of the plants on the surface leaves areas of bare peat, which dries. As this happens, the stored carbon is lost as CO_2.



Case study: Changing land management in the Goyt Valley, Peak District

United Utilities provide drinking water to seven million people, sourced from land under their direct management control. In the Goyt Valley, Peak District, United Utilities implemented a no burning approach, together with other measures such as drain blocking.

Results show:

- improvements in water quality and less colour in the water downstream
- the water table is now closer to the surface vegetation
- positive changes to the habitat, including increased sphagnum mosses and other blanket bog plants

Water

Our upland peatlands are crucial for storing, retaining and purifying water.

70% of our drinking water comes from upland areas many of which are dominated by peatlands.

Water quality is strongly related to peatland condition. Burning upland peatlands makes the water that runs off it brown, and water companies have to spend a lot of money each year removing this peat colour so we can have clear drinking water in our homes.

Our upland peatlands are located above a number of high flood-risk towns, such as York and Hebden Bridge. By soaking up water and considerably slowing down the speed that it runs into our rivers, healthy peatlands can also reduce flood risk.

Sphagnum moss (Tim Melling)

Common hawker (Tim Melling)

Bog rosemary (Tim Melling)

Nature

In good condition, our upland peatlands provide a home for a vast range of wildlife such as hen harriers, dunlins, mountain hares, sundews and sphagnum mosses.

Burning on upland peatlands leads to the loss of sphagnum moss, and exposes and damages the peat surface, leading to the loss of peat (erosion) and the loss of stored carbon.

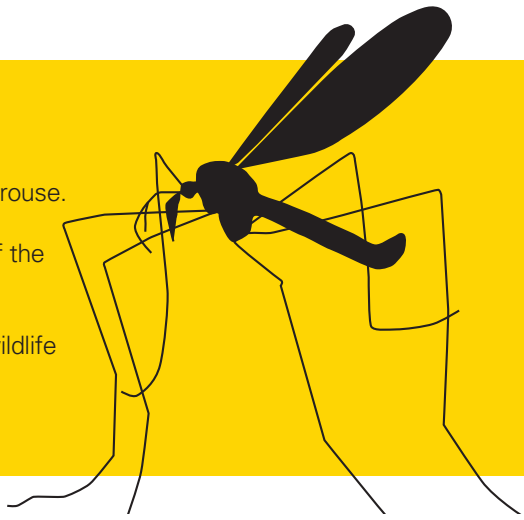
In England, burning has changed many upland peatlands, replacing their characteristic mix of plant life with a monoculture of heather or grasses.

Case study: Cranefly at Lake Vyrnwy, Wales

Craneflies are a vital food source for many upland birds, including golden plovers and red grouse.

A study a Lake Vyrnwy discovered that the cranefly population depends on the wetness of the soil and that the eggs and the larvae will die if they dry out.

As burning causes peatlands to dry out, it has a detrimental effect on this insect and the wildlife that feeds on it.



How you can help

The RSPB believes Natural England should bring about an immediate end to the burning of our special upland peatlands except in exceptional circumstances when required to prevent the risk of wildfire.

We also want landowners to personally commit to stop burning on deep peat.

You wouldn't burn a rainforest. . .

Show your support now by signing the pledge enclosed with this leaflet.

For more information, please contact:

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Pat Thompson, Senior Uplands Policy Officer, RSPB. Email: pat.thompson@rspb.org.uk

Working together to give nature a home

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Life

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