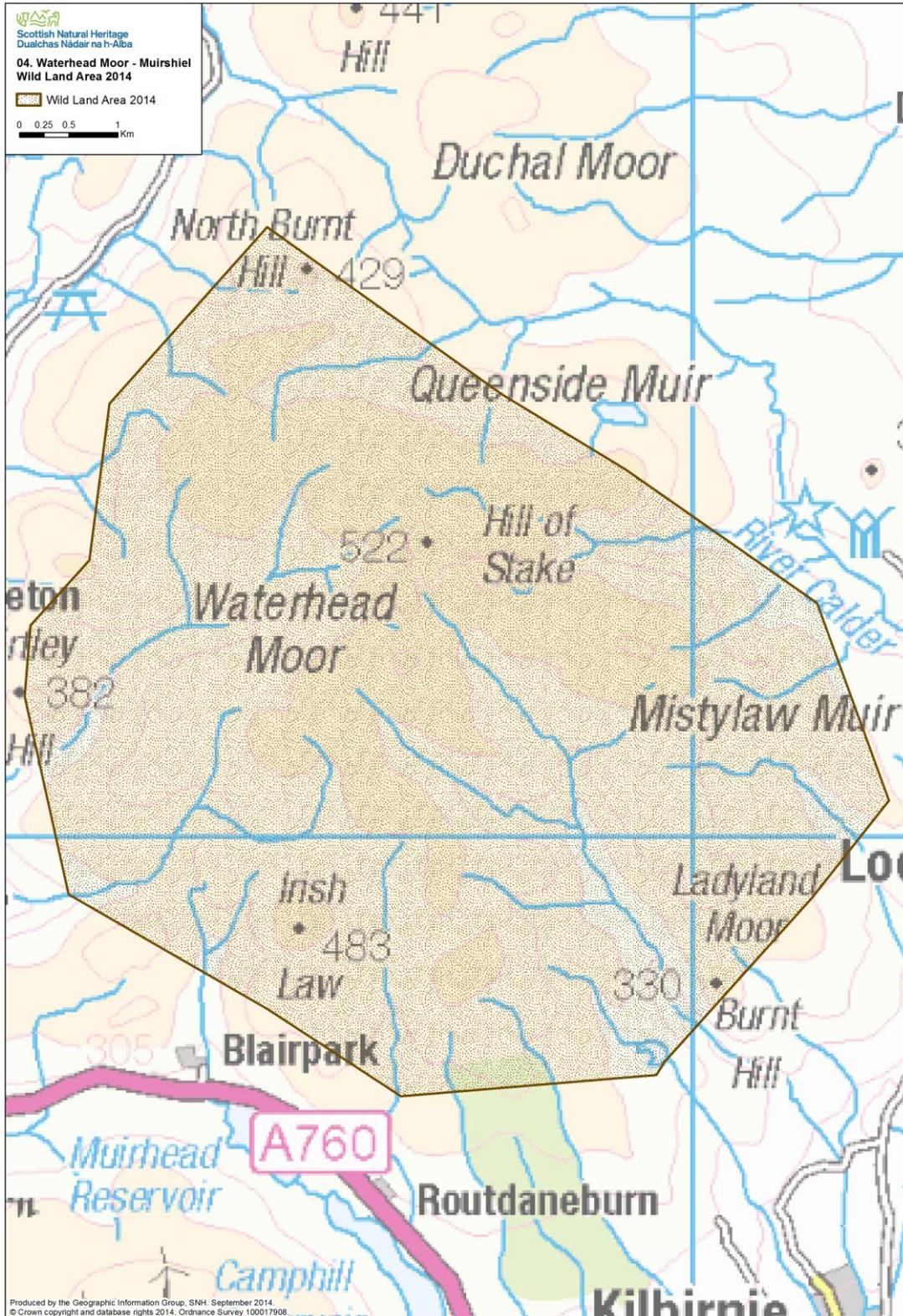


# Waterhead Moor - Muirshiel Wild Land Area



## Context

Waterhead Moor - Muirshiel is one of only three WLAs to the south of the Highland Boundary Fault, all of which are relatively isolated and small in extent (at 50 km<sup>2</sup> this is the smallest of all mainland WLAs). It consists of open, rolling plateau moorland which forms the high moorland core of the Clyde Muirshiel Regional Park, dissected by steep-sided glens and punctuated by several small but steep peaks. Lying less than 30 km from the centre of Glasgow it is the most accessible of all the WLAs and offers a wide range of recreational activities, attracting many visitors. Facilities include Muirshiel visitor centre, which lies nearby to the east and Greenock Cut visitor centre, further to the north. The disused barytes mine at Muirshiel is accessed by the heritage trail from the visitor centre and an off road driver training area is based in the same area.<sup>i</sup>

The WLA lies partly within North Ayrshire and partly in Renfrewshire. The south western area forms part of a Special Landscape Character Area (SLCA)<sup>ii</sup> and much of the area is included within the Renfrewshire Heights Special Protection Area.

From within the WLA, its *extent* is generally obvious from the views of roads, settlements, forest plantations and infrastructure which surround and lie outwith it. Some narrow glens and lower-lying parts of the interior are more enclosed with fewer views, where the *extent* is less evident and the wild land qualities stronger.

From outside the WLA, the rolling plateau is widely visible from the settled lowlands that surround it, forming a simple backdrop that contrasts strongly with the urbanised landscape. Misty Law is a distinctive landmark in wider views of the uplands from the east and the cluster of hills around Irish Law feature on the skyline in views from the west.

Steep, often wooded slopes limit views from the west, from nearby settlements such as Largs and from the minor road that follows the Noddsdale Water, but the uplands within the centre of this WLA are widely visible from the Firth of Clyde and from the diverse, small scale landscape of the Garnock valley.

## Key attributes and qualities of the wild land area

- **A wild land area with a surprisingly strong sense of naturalness**

Much of the plateau is covered in wet moorland, consisting of a diverse mix of rough grassland, heather moorland and blanket mire, providing a strong *sense of naturalness*. Small lochans occur on areas of flatter ground and several steeply incised glens, such as those of Raith Burn and Greeto Water, dissect the plateau.



Within these glens, rock outcrops, natural burns, waterfalls, broadleaved trees and luxuriant vegetation add to the *sense of naturalness*, unaffected by *contemporary land uses*. The plateau is also punctuated by well-defined, steep sided summits such as Misty Law, which provide a greater *sense of physical challenge*. Grassland tends to be more prominent on these drier slopes and the hills are often fringed by rocky crags and scree, adding to the *sense of naturalness*.

Sheep grazing is evident and some of the lower-lying parts are also drained by parallel lines of ditches. There is no forestry within the WLA, although some forest plantations to the north east and south east and smaller conifer blocks amongst improved fields to the south of Muirshiel are visible from within. These signs of *contemporary land use* are not widespread and have a relatively localised effect upon the otherwise strong *sense of naturalness*.



- **Few human elements within the WLA, in contrast to the surrounding landscape**

The WLA is notable for the relative absence of *human artefacts and contemporary land use*, in sharp contrast to the lowland areas that surround it.

The moorland is generally unenclosed, but a few post and wire fences cross the area, the most noticeable of these follows the county boundary. There are few obvious footpaths, but stone cairns mark the more prominent hills. Small timber posts and other markers dot the lower areas and some ATV tracks are evident, appearing to randomly cross the moorland. Together with signs of land drainage, these unobtrusive and isolated *human artefacts* have a limited effect on the overall *sense of remoteness and sanctuary*. A constructed track, which provides access to Misty Law (510 m) from the south east, has a more noticeable effect on these wild land qualities.



Although there are few *human artefacts* within the WLA, various types of built development including wind farms outwith the WLA are visible from most of the area. From tops such as the Hill of Stake, human elements are visible in all directions, except to the south west towards Arran.

To the north, several power lines are prominent in views towards Ben Lomond and the Arrochar Alps. Mining infrastructure, river engineering and tracks along the River Calder, Muirshiel visitor centre buildings and designated car parks have a localised but noticeable effect on the wild land qualities of the north western part of the WLA, especially near the former barytes mine track, where there are areas of hard standing, abandoned pipes, concrete abutments, palisade fencing and ground disturbance.



Longer distance views towards the tower blocks of Glasgow, Helensburgh and other settlements along the Clyde valley also have a marked effect on the *sense of remoteness and sanctuary*, due to the extent of the view occupied by built development and the way in which buildings to the north tend to reflect sunlight, so making them more noticeable. From southern parts of the WLA the dispersed settlement pattern of the Ayrshire lowlands is evident beyond several reservoirs, with the cranes at Hunterston ore terminal and shipping on the Firth beyond, visible to the south west.



At night, lighting within settlements is visible in most directions. The sound of traffic on the surrounding roads can be heard and the proximity of Glasgow airport results in regular overhead air traffic. These human elements have a noticeable effect on the *sense of remoteness and sanctuary* but encroach more where there is combined visibility of for example, nearby tracks and fences, power lines, forest plantations, wind turbines and settlements, or where they appear to encircle the WLA.

- **An area where wild land qualities are restricted in extent, but which can be widely appreciated from the surrounding areas**

From much of the interior, with the exception of the narrow incised glens, the relatively small *extent* of this WLA is evident from the surrounding human elements outwith the WLA, visible in all directions. There are also parts of the WLA where extensive views of rolling and deeply dissected moorland are possible, especially from the margins towards the interior, but these tend to be in the context of wider views containing settlements, infrastructure and forest plantations, which reduce the *sense of remoteness and sanctuary*.



The restricted *extent* of the WLA and the predominantly gentle rolling moorland topography reduces the *sense of risk*, although burn crossings, bog holes and drainage ditches filled with vegetation provide a degree of *physical challenge*.

Although the rolling moorland is not generally *arresting*, from the hill tops there are some extensive and inspiring panoramas over the Firth of Clyde to the islands of Cumbrae, Bute and Arran and of Ben Lomond and the Arrochar Alps.

The smooth moorland hills form a comparatively *rugged* backdrop to the surrounding settled and urbanised lowlands, and large numbers of people are consequently able to experience this wild land quality as they move around the surrounding area.

Whereas the sharp contrast between the WLA and its surroundings adds value to the area as a recreational resource, the proximity to the settled landscape, ease of access and relatively small *extent* of the area combine to limit the *sense of remoteness* and the potential for *solitude*.



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#### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> <http://www.clydemuishiel.co.uk> accessed February 2014

<sup>ii</sup> Designated by North Ayrshire Council

**Site assessment carried out November 2013**