Moray Firth
Proposed Special Protection Area

One of Europe’s best wildlife sites
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Our Scottish seas are rich in marine life and in winter, the waters of the Moray Firth are a stronghold for one of the largest concentrations of sea ducks and European shag in Great Britain.

The Moray Firth attracts the largest British (GB) wintering populations of long-tailed duck, velvet scoter and shag; the third largest population of scaup; and the largest Scottish wintering populations of common scoter and goldeneye. Important numbers of four other marine birds also spend winter in the Firth. In summer, these waters continue to provide feeding grounds for breeding shag.

The area shown below is proposed as a Special Protection Area (SPA) because it supports these important wintering and breeding populations of marine birds. This area will help protect the birds themselves as well as the rich feeding grounds and sheltered waters on which they depend.

Location: 58° 03.595' N  003° 38.450' W  Area: 1,762 km²
The Moray Firth is the most northerly large estuary in mainland Britain. The proposed SPA is an extensive site stretching seaward from the Helmsdale coast in the north, to Portsoy in the east and it includes the outer Dornoch and Cromarty Firths, Beauly and Inverness Firths, as well as part of the wider Moray Firth.

The numerous firths, inlets and sandy bays provide sheltered areas where birds can moult, roost, rest and feed. These areas are important refuges for wintering birds, some of which have migrated thousands of miles from their breeding grounds in northern Europe and western Siberia. Common eider are present all year round with males forming moultng flocks as early as May.

The area is also important during the summer months for shags. These birds remain in the area making short foraging trips from their breeding grounds along the sea cliffs to the north of Helmsdale.

The variety of habitats within the Moray Firth (e.g. shallow sandy substrates, coastal rocky outcrops and a deep muddy channel) provide an abundance of invertebrates such as crabs, mussels and marine worms as well as supporting important nursery areas for a number of fish species; all of these species provide an important food source for the birds.

All of the birds feed by diving from the water's surface. So these sheltered, rich and shallow waters provide excellent foraging habitat for wintering and breeding birds.

Proposed qualifying interests:

Breeding & Non-breeding
European shag

Non-breeding
Common eider
Common goldeneye
Common scoter
Great northern diver
Greater scaup
Long-tailed duck
Red-breasted merganser
Red-throated diver
Slavonian grebe
Velvet scoter

1 Long-tailed duck; 2 Scaup
Making a response and further information

To make a response online or for more information about the proposals please go to www.snh.gov.uk/MarineBirdSPAs.

If you are unable to make an online response, please contact us and we will send you a copy of the response form.

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To see this leaflet in Gaelic please go to www.snh.gov.uk/MarineBirdSPAs