The Story of Cairnsmore of Fleet National Nature Reserve

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The Story of Cairnsmore of Fleet National Nature Reserve

Foreword

Cairnsmore of Fleet National Nature Reserve (NNR) is situated in the Wigtown district of Dumfries and Galloway on the B796 road, approximately 10 km from Gatehouse of Fleet and 8 km from Creetown. The imposing granite hill that is Cairnsmore of Fleet stands above Wigtown Bay and is one of the most southerly of the Galloway Hills. It is the only remaining large area of un-afforested ground stretching from the Fleet river valley bottom to summit top. There is a diverse range of upland habitats, heather moorland, blanket bog and wind clipped summit heath, all of which provide a home to species such as bog cotton, sundew, sphagnum moss and heather, wheatear, skylark, curlew, black and red grouse. Peregrine falcon, hen harrier and merlin hunt the moorland, and if you’re lucky a golden eagle may also be seen. Brown hares inhabit the lower ground with their cousin, the mountain hare, at higher altitude. Red deer and wild goat can be seen on the hill, with roe deer found where the reserve meets with forestry ground.

Cairnsmore of Fleet is one of a suite of NNRS in Scotland. Scotland’s NNRS are special places for nature, where some of the best examples of Scotland’s wildlife are managed. Every NNR is carefully managed for both nature and people, giving visitors the opportunity to experience our rich natural heritage. The trails, visitor centre and car parks all make Cairnsmore of Fleet a truly accessible reserve for all to explore and enjoy.

The Reserve Story has background information on the reserve and its history. It briefly describes the wildlife on the reserve, the history of the land use before it became a reserve and past management of wildlife, people and property on the reserve. The future management of the reserve is covered in a 10-year management plan.
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Maps of Cairnsmore of Fleet NNR

Regional map
1 Introduction

Situated in southwest Scotland the reserve covers 1,922 hectares (ha) and lies predominantly on the eastern side of the granite hill of Cairnsmore of Fleet. It extends from the visitor centre below the Clints of Dromore, to Craignelder in the north and from the Knee of Cairnsmore in the west, to Little Mulltaggart in the east.

The reserve lies off the B796 between Creetown and Gatehouse of Fleet. It is open all year with a visitor centre and car park. From the visitor centre there are short circular walks of moderate ability of the “in-by” farm, viaduct and Clints of Dromore. Picnic benches and further parking are available under the Big Water of Fleet viaduct, which straddles the River Fleet. To the west of the site, the summit path can be accessed via the Cairnsmore estate off the A75 at Palnure.

The total land area within the NNR is 1,922 ha. Scottish Natural Heritage’s (SNH) predecessor, the Nature Conservancy Council, purchased 1,314 ha of land from the Forestry Commission in 1974 and declared the NNR in 1975. A further 608 ha are subject to Nature Reserve Agreements with neighbouring landowners, which include the summit of Cairnsmore of Fleet.

The site was chosen as representative of the granite uplands of Galloway and has continuity between un-afforested moorland and montane ground above the potential tree limit. The habitats present at Cairnsmore of Fleet were formerly widespread in the Southern Uplands, but have been much reduced over the past 60 years by land use changes from predominately hill farming and sporting interests to a greater proportion of forestry and recreational use.

The national conservation designation in the UK is the Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Cairnsmore of Fleet was originally notified in 1968, it was re-notified as a SSSI in 1986 and again in 2009. The features for which Cairnsmore of Fleet is designated are listed in Table 1. The SSSI covers a wider area (3,836.65 ha) than the NNR.

The NNR lies within the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere. The Biosphere designation is awarded by The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) to areas renowned for their special environments which are valued by local people. The biosphere, one of over 650 around the world, covers over 5,000 square kilometres and is home to 95,000 people.
Table 1: Designated and qualifying features for Cairnsmore of Fleet

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The reserve takes its name from Cairnsmore of Fleet, one of the most southerly of the high Galloway Hills. This is one of the wildest parts of southwest Scotland.

Cairnsmore of Fleet sits in a commanding location overlooking the Cree Estuary. On a clear day views from the summit extend south across the Solway Firth to the Lake District and the Isle of Man, west across the Irish Sea to Ireland, and north over the Galloway Hills to Ayrshire and beyond.

The reserve extends from the Clints of Dromore (92 metres (m)) in the south, to Craignelder (601m) in the north to the Cairnsmore summit (711m). Cairnsmore hill is a granite mass, oval in shape, measuring 8 kilometres (km) by 6km. The summit forms a distinctive ridge with high cliffs and screes along its eastern side. The lower ground is moorland with areas of blanket bog of varying depths of peat.

The two most extensive habitats of the site are heath and bog. Both are similar in that they have varying amounts of heather on largely peaty soils. Very simply the bog is wet and the heath drier, although only by a matter of degrees!

Typically, upland moorland, which includes bogs and heaths, develops in Scotland on summits or gentle slopes with an altitude of 250m to 1000m. The thickness of peat can be a distinguishing feature between heath and bog, with heathland peat being shallow and relatively dry. In bogs, the peat is deeper and wetter and may vary from 1.5m to over 10m in depth. In areas of bog where peat is thick its capacity to hold water is greater, creating poorly aerated, acidic and cold conditions. Because of this, decomposition is suppressed and the peaty soils are lacking in minerals and nutrients.

**Summit vegetation** - the summit ridge of Cairnsmore of Fleet has two main types of mountain vegetation; montane grassland and dwarf shrub heath. The heath has species such as dwarf willow, stiff sedge and woolly fringe moss. These cover the gently sloping areas around the summit and the lower summit slopes. The grassland areas consist of taller vegetation where the dominant species are mat grass and blaeberry with heath rush. The montane grassland here was probably once heath that has been modified by grazing activity.

**Moorland** - the heather moorland is the driest type of moorland; here heather, bell heather and blaeberry are some of the dominant plants. Although water is usually plentiful many of these plants appear to have adapted for living in drier conditions and have developed particular features to reduce water loss; these can be spiny or waxy leaves, hairs or pores arranged in grooves. Such plants are said to be xeromorphic. They may have developed these features because of the exposed and
windswept nature of Cairnsmore; this could mean they lose water by evaporation through their leaves or because the rate at which their roots can take in water is reduced in the cold and low oxygen condition of the peat.

As ground conditions get wetter, cross-leaved heath, heath rush, purple moor grass, cotton grass and mat grass can be found.

**Blanket bog** – this is the wetter moorland; here there are numerous colourful mosses to be seen. These are mostly various species of sphagnum and tussocks of hair moss. Carnivorous plants, such as the round leaved sundew and common butterwort, are found on the blanket bog. These plants show yet another adaptation to living in the low nutrient environment; the sticky hairs on their leaves trap small insects, which the plants are able to digest through chemicals they produce in their leaves.

**Wildlife**

**Birds** - the reserve is an important breeding site for birds of mountain and moorland. Historically golden eagle bred on the cliffs and occasional sightings are still recorded. Peregrine falcon, merlin, kestrel, raven and buzzard still breed regularly. Hen harrier is a frequent visitor during winter months.

Red grouse numbers have fluctuated greatly and are generally found in four main areas of the reserve. Black grouse can also be found in small numbers.

Golden plover and dotterel have both been recorded nesting on the summit areas.

**Mammals** - red deer use the main hill and central area of the reserve throughout the year, whilst around the boundary with forestry, roe deer can be seen.

A herd of wild goats roam the reserve; it may be that they descended from animals abandoned by crofters during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Small numbers of foxes, mountain hare and stoats occur. Brown hares are regularly seen close to the farmhouse or on the “in-bye” land as it is known.

**Amphibians and reptiles** - common frogs and palmate newts are present in the damper areas around pools streams and ditches. Adders are present throughout as are common lizards. Slow worms have been recorded along the Clints of Dromore.

**Insects** - dragonflies and damselflies can be seen hunting along the banks of the River Fleet or over bog pools.
Seventeen species of butterfly have been recorded on the site and over 120 species of moth.

Other UK species of Conservation Concern found here include the small pearl–bordered fritillary, large heath and broad–bordered white underwing, a montane moth species associated with woolly fringe moss heath found at over 600m. Argent and sable, a daytime flying moth, is found over the open moorland and bogs. Beetles are also well represented; the golden green ground beetle is a nationally notable species.

In recent years, heather beetle has caused problems. Its larvae feed on young shoots of heather and, as a result of mild winters and changing climatic conditions, numbers have escalated. As in other parts of Scotland, areas of heather have died back as a consequence.
3 A history of Cairnsmore of Fleet

Land Use

The wildlife and habitats of Cairnsmore of Fleet NNR are a direct result of Man's management over hundreds of years. It is thought that during the medieval period land use in the area was primarily sheep and goat grazing and hunting for game. The Cistercian monks probably moved flocks onto Cairnsmore of Fleet every summer.

It was not until the late 18th and early 19th centuries that land use changed. The introduction of enclosures and the clearances of small tenants, together with the introduction of a predominantly sheep based culture, with a few shepherds looking after large flocks, saw areas like Cairnsmore of Fleet supporting fewer people. It was during this period when sheep farming increased, with less emphasis on hunting, that small quantities of lead and other minerals were mined in the area. The railway, for which the viaduct was constructed in 1860, led to a boom in grouse shooting. Effectively from this point Cairnsmore of Fleet was divided in two. The western side of the hill was used principally for sporting purposes and some cattle grazing, whilst the eastern half was used primarily for sheep with sporting use a secondary interest.

Big Water of Fleet Viaduct

Three important changes in land use have taken place since the Second World War. First, sheep farming became the major use of the land. Secondly, sporting use declined in importance. Thirdly, much of the surrounding area was planted with coniferous forest.
Decline of Woodland

Evidence from pollen in peat deposits shows that Galloway was once covered with alder, oak and birch forest, which was at its greatest extent during the Atlantic period, between 4000 and 6000 B.C. It is thought that the Cairnsmore of Fleet area was suitable for deciduous tree growth well into the historical period.

During the Atlantic period it is thought the only parts of Scotland without trees would have been the mountain areas over 2000ft in the west. This would mean that the summit plateau has had no tree growth on it for at least 10,000 years.

Records indicate that prior to the Roman invasion forest clearance in Galloway was insignificant. However the Roman legions appear to have spent much of their time occupied doing just that. Although documentary evidence from the end of the Roman period until the later Middle Ages is scarce, it is generally assumed that between 1400 and 1700 much of the natural woodland in lowland Scotland was removed. Fire was a powerful tool for clearing land and in the wars between the Scots and the English reference is often made to the burning of land.

Maps of 1596 show small deciduous woods at Cullendoch and Cullendoch Moss up towards the Clints of Dromore; these woodlands no longer exist.

Farming

The earliest evidence for cultivation dates to the Bronze Age in the areas to the south which are rich in archaeological remains from this period.

Farming, and in particular sheep rearing, increased in importance from Roman to medieval times. There is evidence of the Cistercian monks having granges (a country house with farm attached) and shielings (summer shepherd’s huts) across the Galloway hills, and they probably used Cairnsmore of Fleet for summer grazing. These sheep-farming medieval monks are also said to have carried out muirburning to improve their grazing.

The droving of cattle to markets in England first started in the early 1600s and it is likely that between the 14th and 18th centuries there was mixed grazing on all the Galloway moors. In 1684 there is mention of the land from Bardrochwood to the top of Cairnsmore of Fleet as being good pasture and some corn land. These comments are supported by General Roy’s maps of 1745 which mark the riggs in fields caused by generations of ploughing at Little Cullendoch.

The first enclosures started in the 1720s, when smaller tenants were cleared, to be replaced by introduction of a sheep monoculture, with a few shepherds looking after larger flocks. At this time the Cairnsmore of Fleet moors became the headquarters of
Billy Marshall, leader of the Galloway gypsies who, with his gang, demolished dykes on Cairnsmore of Fleet during 1724.

The gang hid out in ‘Billy Marshall’s cave’ on the north end of Cairnsmore of Fleet, where they stored the spoils from their activities, which included smuggling. A report from the tenants of the Cuil reported up to 80 packhorses journeying past the Door of Cairnsmore laden with contraband. William ‘Billy’ Marshall was reputedly born around 1672 in Ayrshire, surviving until around 1792, and if Cairnsmore was his headquarters, it may be that there was little farming on this land during his most active years.

During the 18th century, moor farms were said to have march (boundary) dykes and dykes around the in-bye. Attempts to improve moorland fertility were made by paring and burning. The top layer of turf was ploughed off, collected and burnt. The ash and charcoal was then spread and the area sown with oats the following summer. Maybe this was practiced on Cairnsmore, but repeated cropping in this way eventually exhausted the soil fertility, so that many landlords prohibited the practice.

The commissioning of a detailed plan of Cullendoch and Dromore in 1810 possibly indicates the change from mixed pastoralism to sheep monoculture on Dromore. This was presumably done with a view to increasing the revenue from the farms. It is also likely that with this switch to a sheep monoculture, systematic muirburn was adopted to improve grazing for sheep. Before this time, mixed grazing would have meant the herbage was palatable to a wider range of graziers.

There do not appear to have been any major changes in farming practice at Cairnsmore since the late 19th century. However, during the 1960s the progressive
loss in the profitability of sheep farming led to many unprofitable upland farms being planted with conifers.

**Game Management**

It is likely that management for game has been as much a part of the relationship between man and the land as farming sheep has been. Evidence suggests that even early man may have burned forest underbrush to improve grazing for the animals he hunted.

Probably the most significant event for Cairnsmore with regard for game was the opening of the Castle Douglas to Portpatrick railway in 1861-2, for it is shortly after this (in 1868) that the first game-bag records are found.

Since Cairnsmore was first opened up for commercial grouse shooting in the 1860s it is likely that strip burning for grouse was introduced. Indeed the whole of the Cairnsmore estate, apart from the summit, was strip burnt whilst leased to the Duke of Bedford. This continued until the 1950s.

Apart from the adoption of muirburn practice, the other most significant management practice was probably the intensifying of vermin control. Indeed the attitude of the 19th century landowner to vermin is well illustrated in the moor management chapter of ‘Grouse and Grouse Moor’ by G Malcolm and A Maxwell, which lists every conceivable predatory and omnivorous mammal and bird as a threat to grouse.

Despite this, there is no evidence to suggest that vermin on Cairnsmore were ever subjected to the level of control suggested above, although control did take place and reference of payments to under keepers of vermin money can be found. By that time raptors, magpies, crows, ravens, black backed and herring gulls, stoats, weasels, rats, hedgehogs, cats and foxes were probably controlled on Cairnsmore as intensively as on the rest of the estate.

After the Second World War, records suggest that Dromore was only lightly keepered and evidence suggests that during the last century the use of Dromore for game was secondary to its sheep interest. However, this was not the case on the west side of the hill.

Management on the estate for game intensified and regular payments were made to tenant farmers for the losses they incurred as a result. Increasingly the farming practices became uneconomic.

The expenditure on game management produced results; grouse shooting before the war regularly saw 70 brace a day shot. About 40 people were employed in two squads for a day’s drive and usually there were eight drives a season, with three guns per day. The south western slopes of Cairnsmore of Fleet, from the Door across to the Cuil, were reputed to be the best for grouse.

After the war things started to change and shooting on Cairnsmore saw different beats being let to different shooting syndicates and the gradual decline of the importance of game management.
Introducing New Species

1891 saw the start of a concerted effort to introduce deer onto the estate. By 1907 a report states that a herd of red deer had become established. By 1914 they had been encouraged onto the moor and by the 1930s there were “any amount of deer”.

Deer were not the only attempted introductions. Black partridges from India, quail and partridge are also listed.

Other land uses

Before 1845 some small-scale mining took place. Then in the mid 19th century there was a boom, and the mines were quickly worked out. The Dromore lead mine was probably opened during the 1840s when extraction was mainly opencast. During the 1914-1918 war the mine was also worked for copper and zinc. Four workers were employed, with two working underground.

Undoubtedly the largest change in land use in the area over the last century was the move away from a sheep based land use to conifer forestry. Around Cairnsmore of Fleet this change has occurred since the last war.
A Brief History of Wildlife Recorded At Cairnsmore

1690  Cairnsmore is noted for its red deer and red grouse. Eagles are common and the rivers rich in salmon.

1794  Grouse (both red and black) are in decline. Partridge, hare, woodcock, rabbit, badger, fox and polecat are present. Loch Grannoch has healthy numbers of Arctic charr, but salmon have declined in the River Fleet.

1810  Golden eagles known to nest on Cairnsmore of Fleet.

1845  Corncrake, water rail, partridge, bittern, osprey and polecat are on Cairnsmore of Fleet and at Loch Grannoch. Red deer and ptarmigan have disappeared.

1870s  Wildcats have disappeared.

1876  Green spleenwort fern is abundant on Cairnsmore. Starry saxifrage is present on the summit.

1894  Red kites breed at Loch Grannoch.

1914  Red deer are successfully re-introduced.

1940  Buzzards cease breeding.

1950  Peregrine falcon and raven are in decline.

1960s  Golden eagles are still breeding.

1972  Arctic Charr had disappeared from Loch Grannoch by this date.

1980s  Peregrine falcon and raven numbers are increasing, buzzards are breeding, but golden eagles no longer breed on site. Records are made of moths, flies, dragonflies and beetles.

Summary

Over the last two centuries, changes in the vegetation of the area away from the natural deciduous woodland, with birch scrub, heath and montane vegetation at increasing altitude has resulted in a decline in species richness. The first major factor in this was the gradual and progressive destruction of deciduous woodland by Man's activity and climate change. A more rapid factor was the move to a sheep monoculture that necessitated the need for regular burning to retain stable heath vegetation. This change was strengthened by the increase in sporting for grouse, which also relied upon burning as a management tool. The scrub vegetation was replaced by a heather dominated habitat which itself has in places been replaced by one containing mat-grass, purple moor grass and bracken if burning and grazing are not finely balanced.
4 Management of Cairnsmore of Fleet NNR

SNH and its predecessors have maintained the reserve using grazing as a tool to achieve, conservation objectives for the SSSI and the NNR.

Although Cairnsmore of Fleet NNR was originally managed for wildlife, people are also encouraged to enjoy these special places too. Over the years visitor facilities have been designed and managed to ensure that people can enjoy the reserves without harming or disturbing the wildlife that lives there.

Extensions to the reserve have been made through Nature Reserve Agreements (NRA) with neighbouring landowners.

The upland nature of the site, the way forestry developed and the consequent lack of good in-bye land makes the farm uneconomic in farming terms. SNH ownership means that the habitat can be managed to maintain and, where possible, improve the natural heritage interest.

In February 2000, SNH started a review of all of the then 71 NNRs in Scotland. Cairnsmore of Fleet NNR was one of six for which the case was re-examined as to how best it could fit the requirements of an NNR.

A further review in 2015 concluded the Cairnsmore of Fleet NNR met the criteria for NNR status. In future the reserve will form an important part of the core area of Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere.

Management of the natural heritage

SNH have been working to restore upland habitats and improve the biodiversity on Cairnsmore of Fleet NNR.

Management aimed at increasing the proportion of heather dominated vegetation at the expense of purple moor grass. This consisted in reducing grazing pressure by controlling wild herbivores on higher ground and using SNH’s own sheep flock in the hills. In the past we also stimulated heather growth by burning and swiping heather.

Logistical problems and poor weather conditions meant that until 2006, muirburning to the extent required had not been carried out for a number of years. Although some heather swiping has taken place since, this is limited by the wetness of the ground and the risk of damage to vegetation by tractors used for this task.

Some experimentation with grazing by cattle to break up the purple moor grass and encourage dwarf shrub heath vegetation was tried prior to the outbreak in 2001 of Foot and Mouth Disease. This was not very successful, principally because the cattle used were not a hill breed. In 2006 20 head of more suitable cattle returned to a specific part of the hill. This second trial ended in 2014.

Some culling of deer and feral goats takes place on the reserve, to ensure numbers are maintained at a level compatible with the conservation objectives for the NNR and with the needs of adjacent land managers. This control programme is in line with
an agreed management plan with stakeholders and land managers covering the wider area of the Galloway Hills.

During 2002/3 work started to improve the habitat for black grouse; this has included some small scale planting of rowan, silver birch, willow and alder extending native woodland within low level areas. Significant restructuring of the edges of the conifer plantations adjacent to the NNR has been implemented by the Forestry Commission following research on the biodiversity benefits this provides. This includes reducing the altitude of the upper edges of the forests and the re-planting of some edges with broad leaved trees and shrubs.

In March 2003, we commissioned McCauley Land Research to undertake a habitat assessment of Cairnsmore of Fleet, with a further commission in Nov 2003. Then contractors developed an indicator which aimed at monitoring the health of the habitats by focussing on the condition of heather.

The research results, which were a firm foundation from which to decide the future planning for the site, are now being re-assessed and the grazing pressure on the reserve will be reviewed for the latest Management Plan.

Management for People

People are encouraged to explore the southern end of the reserve at Dromore. There is a circular marked walk around the farm in-byde land. Access to the viaduct is particularly popular with local people. Recently a route onto the Clints of Dromore to the mid hill ground has been created. Further consideration will be given to an all-abilities walk around the lower ground.

The national cycle route (NR7) passes through Dromore on its way to Clatteringshaws. Racks are provided for cyclists who wish to stop and explore the site.

Further improvements are proposed and these include upgrade of the visitor centre, refreshing interpretation and signage

The main access onto the Cairnsmore of Fleet summit follows the path up the western side of the hill, from near Cairnsmore House. A car parking area has been developed behind the Lodge by Graddoch Bridge to address.
problems with the old parking arrangements which could no longer cope with the current level of demand.

Consideration is being given to encourage access onto the higher ground from the Queensway, near Murray’s Monument, taking people up onto Craignelder, Meikle Mulltaggart and the summit. This would create a day-long walk north to south.

**Property Management**

SNH owns approximately 68% of the NNR, with the remainder being under Nature Reserve Agreements with two neighbouring landowners.

There is an office on the reserve. We also have a farmhouse, and farm buildings, for which we have solely responsibility. The infrastructure includes the visitor centre at Dromore, the footpaths, small car parks, and picnic areas. All visitor facilities require regular maintenance.

SNH has shared responsibility for the boundary, or march, fences.

The equipment and vehicles used at Cairnsmore of Fleet are dedicated to the site, with occasional use by other reserves within Dumfries and Galloway as appropriate.

SNH endeavours to follow best practice in its management. So management of the reserve ensures compliance with Health and Safety legislation; this includes updating the fire plan and carrying out risk assessments on a regular basis. As the reserve includes management of livestock, bio-security measures are also implemented on Cairnsmore of Fleet.

SNH has aspirational sustainability criteria for its buildings, and intends to adopt best practice by conventional and innovative ways to demonstrate the benefits of this greener approach. This includes purchasing equipment and materials from sustainable local sources, recycling of materials, green energy generation and supply. Solar panels were installed to this end on the reserve office and the farmhouse in 2013. The NNR has been a warded a Green Tourism Business Award, Gold standard in 2015 in recognition of these.

![Summit cairn at Cairnsmore](image-url)
Conclusion

Cairnsmore of Fleet NNR is one of the most remote places in southwest Scotland. In the words of visitors it can give enjoyment of a wild, upland landscape accessible to a large number of people from a wide audience of experience and abilities.

The awareness, understanding and enjoyment it provides is something that we are proud of and will build on in the years to come. Somewhere, everyone can enjoy, appreciate, understand and value this special place and the wildlife which depends on it.
Photographs & maps

Photography by Lorne Gill/SNH, Andrew Bielinski
Maps by Eleanor Charman, GIG, SNH.

Acknowledgments

The first edition (2007) of the Story of Cairnsmore of Fleet was been written by Kevin Carter (Reserve Manager) and Susan Luurtsema (Managed Sites Officer) and approved by Chris Miles (Area Manager – Dumfries and Galloway).

This second edition of The Story of Cairnsmore of Fleet has been edited by Francois Chazel (Reserve Manager) and Susan Luurtsema (Operations Officer), and approved by Jonathan Warren (Operations Officer – Southern Scotland).

Links

For information about Scotland’s National Nature Reserves and further information about Cairnsmore of Fleet NNR please go to: www.snh.org.uk/nnr-scotland

For information on the protected areas associated with Cairnsmore of Fleet NNR please go to: www.snh.org.uk/snhi/

Other useful links:

Scottish Natural Heritage www.snh.org.uk
Joint Nature Conservation Committee www.jncc.gov.uk