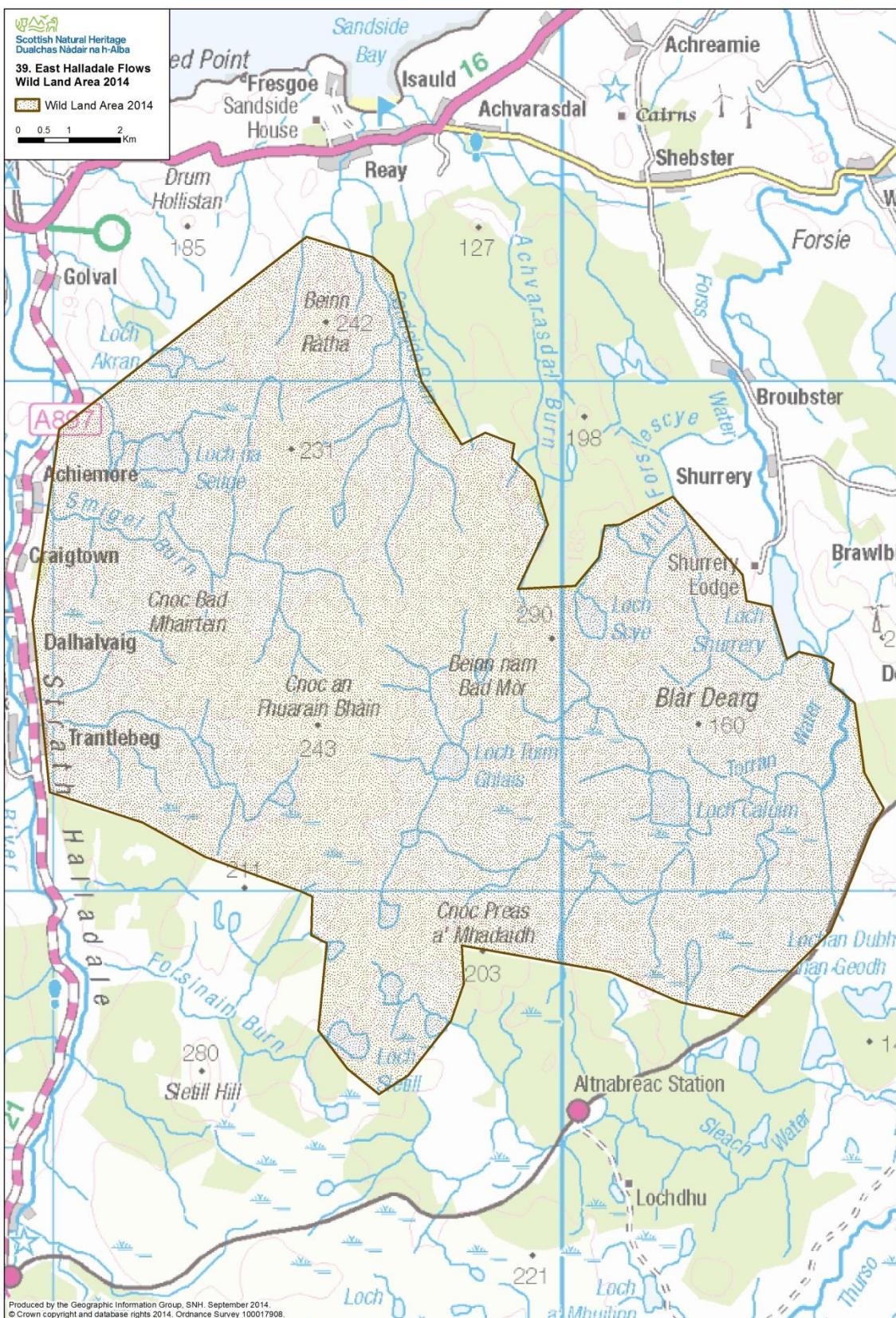


East Halladale Flows Wild Land Area



Context

This Wild Land Area (WLA) extends 159 km² across Caithness and the eastern edge of Sutherland, between Reay in the north, Strath Halladale in the west, and Ben Dorrery in the east. It is one of a group of three areas distinguished by extensive low lying peatland, in contrast to many of the more mountainous WLAs. Only its western side is flanked by a main road, although to the south the railway line and isolated Altnabreac station enable access. The WLA is currently surrounded on its north, east and southern sides by large conifer plantations which were established mainly in the 1970s and 80s.

It is located within part of The Flow Country, which is recognised as the largest expanse of blanket bog in Europe and covers half of the total area of Caithness and Sutherland. The Caithness peatlands comprise peat mosses that overlie compressed, clayey, poorly-drained glacial till - gently undulating sheets of rubbly glacial material laid down by ice during glaciation.

The WLA is uninhabited, although the settlements of Strath Halladale lie outside its edge to the west and there are groups of houses at Broubster, Shurerry and Dorrery to the east. A number of roads pass just outside the WLA within these same areas; however, it is not easy to see into the WLA from these, because of the screening effect of intervening slopes. In contrast, the best route from which to gain open views from the edge is the railway line between Forsinard and Scots Calder which is slightly elevated.

There are a limited number of tracks or paths entering the WLA and it tends to be visited by few people, except for the peak of Beinn Ràtha in the far north, or for fishing, deer stalking, land management or habitat survey. At a broad scale, management of the Caithness and Sutherland peatlands is currently guided by a strategy developed by the LIFE Peatlands Project.

The WLA is not covered by landscape designations, although it forms part of the backdrop to two Special Landscape Areas (SLAsⁱ) to the south: the Bens Grian and Loch nan Clar SLA; and The Flow Country and Berriedale Coast SLA. The majority of the area is designated for conservation, including SSSIs, Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas covering both its value as a habitat and the diverse range of breeding birds it supports. The Flow Country is also on the Tentative List for designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Within the listⁱⁱ it states: '*The Flow Country is also unusual in that it provides an extensive area of wild land and solitude on an otherwise highly developed and densely populated island. As wild areas such as these are typically mountainous... large, continuous areas such as the Flow Country are exceptional*'.

Key attributes and qualities of the wild land area

- An awe-inspiring simplicity of landscape at the broad scale, with a strong horizontal emphasis, ‘wide skies’ and few foci**

At the broad level, this WLA comprises mainly flat, gently sloping or undulating peatland with simple vegetation cover. Given the large extent over which this occurs, this creates an image of extreme simplicity and openness which results in a strong *sense of awe*. The openness of the landscape means it is very exposed and views of ‘wide skies’ and dynamic weather conditions emphasise the *naturalness* of the landscape, whilst also increasing the perceived *sense of risk*.



There are few dominant foci within the peatland. In most places, this means attention alternates between the skyline and the foreground habitat, for example bogs, pools and mossy vegetation, highlighting elements that contribute to the *perceived naturalness* of the area. Where foci do occur, they tend to be formed by vertical elements that stand out against the horizontal landform, such as the distinct hill of Beinn Ràtha within the WLA and the lone mountains of Morven, Scaraben, Ben Loyal and the Bens Grian outside the area. These isolated features typically attract greater focus than in other landscapes because of the simplicity of the surrounding landscape from which they are seen.

- A remote, discrete interior, with limited access and a strong sense of solitude**

The elevated slopes surrounding the peatland interior typically screen this from lower-lying locations around the margins, despite the slopes being relatively gentle. In reverse, this also means that lower-lying human elements outside the WLA, such as settlement and roads within adjacent straths, tend to be screened from most of the interior, leading to a strong *sense of remoteness and sanctuary*.

There are not many tracks or paths entering the WLA and none at all in the west or crossing the area from one side to the other. Given that it is very difficult to walk off-path due to the boggy ground, this strongly limits access to the area and there are few visitors, amplifying the *sense of solitude*.

Despite few people accessing the WLA’s interior, it is viewed by relatively high numbers of people whilst travelling by train along the railway line at the south eastern edge of the area. Being slightly elevated, this offers open and distant views to both the north and south (across the adjacent Causeymire – Knockfin Flows WLA 37), although these views are fleeting and interrupted along sections by structures such as derelict wind breaks. In reverse, the railway line itself is surprisingly hidden within views from most of the WLA interior due to the subtle screening effect of the intervening peatland slopes. In addition, when trains are seen, although they attract attention due to their sound, noise and movement (and lights at night), this interruption is brief.

There are some historic buildings, enclosures and drains within the WLA interior that indicate more active management in the past. The typical isolation, small scale, and low-key siting and character of these mean their effects are usually localised.



- **A rugged and complex pattern of hidden burns, lochans and pools at the local level, despite the landscape's simple composition at the broad scale**

The peatland landform is predominantly flat, gently sloping or undulating at a broad scale; however it is very *rugged* at a local level, with a combination of rough vegetation, bogs, meandering rivers, lochans and pools (although these may be seasonal and dry-up in summer to reveal depressions). Whilst the stunning pattern of the pools and lochans is revealed on maps and aerial photographs, it is very difficult on the ground to discern the distribution of these, as they appear hidden within the low, subtle undulations. This irregularity amplifies the *sense of naturalness* and means it is extremely difficult and *physically challenging* to walk through the peatlands, as it is impossible to know ahead where the watercourses or waterbodies lie in order to select a direct route, with a consequent need to weave around and over the obstacles. In combination with an absence of landmarks with which to orientate or judge distance, this means that crossing the area off-path results in perceived high *risk*.



- **A remarkably open landscape with extensive visibility, meaning tall or high features in the distance are clearly visible**

The great openness of the peatland means there are extensive and far-reaching views – across the WLA, but also towards the margins and beyond. Within these views, the simplicity of the landcover means it is typically difficult to perceive scale and distance, so the area often appears more *extensive* than it actually is.

Within the open views, distant mountains often form key foci and landmarks, as discussed previously. In some places, these views also include *human artefacts* and *contemporary land uses* that are tall or elevated, and thus appear prominent in contrast to the horizontal emphasis of the peatlands. These elements are mainly located at or beyond the edge of the WLA and include high voltage power lines, wind farms, telecom masts, fences and conifer trees. Where visible across the open expanse of the WLA, these elements can seem to shrink the perceived *extent* of the area.

Conifer plantations currently have cumulative effects around the margins of this WLA, seeming to collectively edge the area in an arc from the north east, to the east and south west. The plantations diminish some of the area's *awe-inspiring* qualities of openness, as well as its *perceived naturalness*, and are particularly prominent due to their contrast of colour, texture and form (highlighted further during snow cover upon the peatland).



The existing plantations also interrupt perception of the area extending into the adjacent Causeymire-Knockfin Flows WLA (37) to the south and to *arresting* features in the distance such as the isolated hills of Ben Alisky, Morven and Scaraben. Evidence of ongoing felling activity can also influence the sense of *solitude* and *sanctuary*.

Endnotes and select references

ⁱ The Highland Council (2011) *Assessment of Highland Special Landscape Areas*. Inverness, The Highland Council.

ⁱⁱ Information available at <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5679/>

Site assessment carried out September 2014