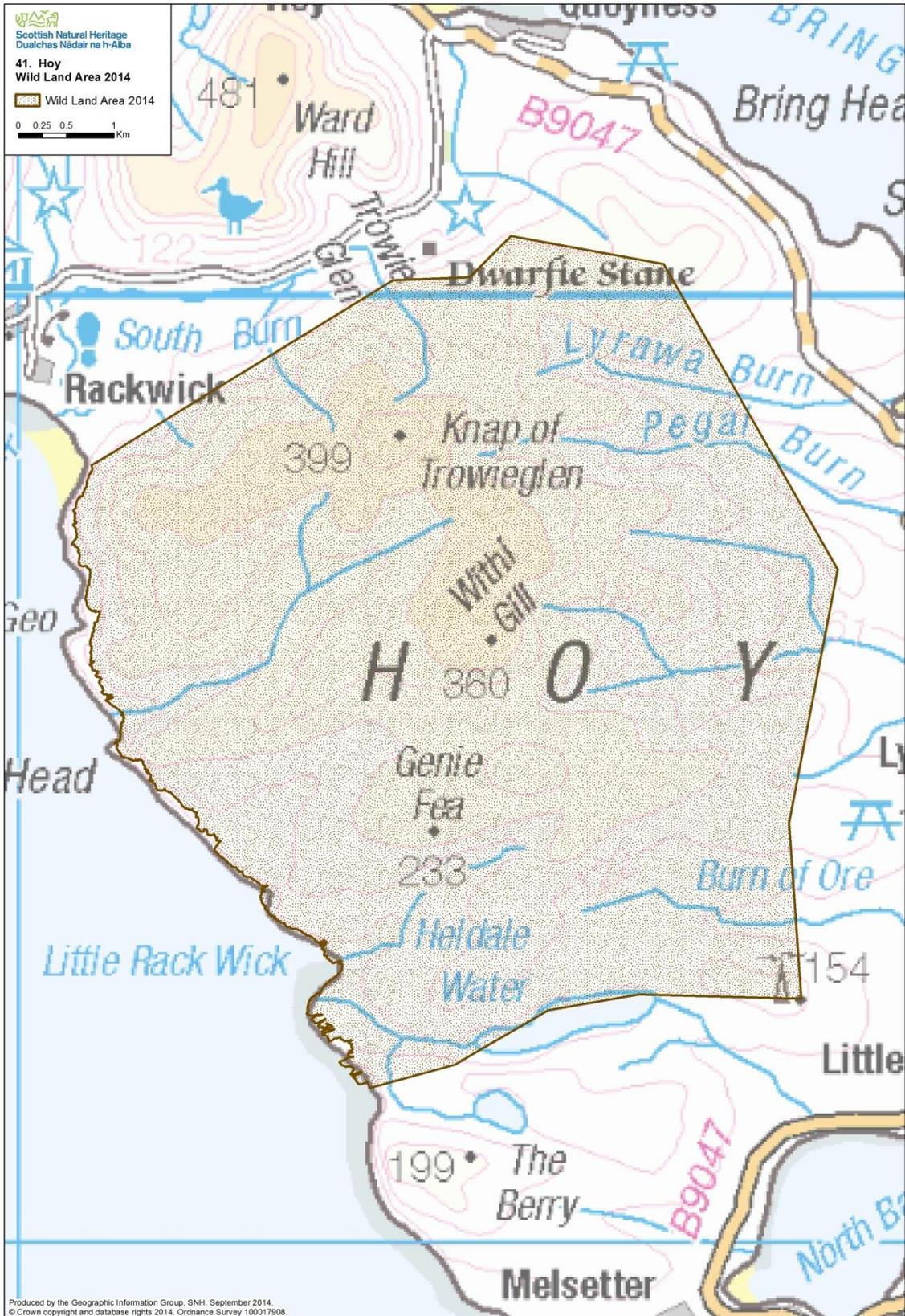


# Hoy Wild Land Area



## Context

Hoy is one of 11 island Wild Land Areas (WLA), and at 50 km<sup>2</sup> one of the smallest nationally, reached by ferry from Mainland (Orkney). The area is broadly oblong in shape and includes the interior hills of the island. One of 12 WLAs defined in part by the coast, access from the road is restricted to the north, east and south.

The high hills and cliffs of Hoy stand out within an archipelago of otherwise low-lying islands, and it provides a remote western edge to Scapa Flow. Upon the island itself, Hoy differs between its west and east sides: on the east are the main settlements and key road (B9047) across the island, in addition to industry and agriculture, set around the sheltered bays and sounds within Scapa Flow; whilst, on the west, the interior and coast is open, elevated and uninhabited.

Hoy, like the rest of the Orkney Isles, is formed of Old Red Sandstone, built up as layers of sediment mixed in with ancient lava flows. This is revealed most spectacularly along the exposed cliffs of the west coast, which are amongst the highest cliffs found in the UK.

Orkney possesses a long history of occupation, with a high number of archaeological features. The wild land qualities of the WLA, however, are not strongly influenced by historic features, apart from the northern edge towering above the Dwarfie Stane, an unusual rock-cut tomb.

The Hoy hills form an undeveloped backdrop to adjacent coastal communities and roads. During good visibility, the hills and western cliffs are also very prominent from Caithness and the ferry between Scrabster and Stromness, from which their towering height seems awe-inspiring. There are regular vehicular and passenger ferry services between Hoy and mainland Orkney, some of which travel via the islands of Graemsay or Flotta.

Hoy attracts a relatively high number of visitors, particularly to Lyness, Rackwick, the RSPB reserve in the north of the island and to the Old Man of Hoy. Within the WLA itself, however, there tends to be few visitors – partly because there are no constructed paths into the area and thus access is very challenging, but also because the area tends to be overlooked in favour of the hills and coast north of Rackwick, which include the Old Man of Hoy and Ward Hill, the island's highest peak.

The northern part of the WLA lies within the Orkney National Scenic Area, whose description<sup>i</sup> highlights that '*...with their towering red cliffs, the Atlantic coastline creates a spectacular scene...*' It also describes that, '*...with their corries, deep U-shaped valleys and pattered ground, these rugged, moorland hills reflect their glacial history*'.

## Key attributes and qualities of the wild land area

- **A relatively small area of wild land that sits within a wider archipelago, with a prevailing strong influence of the sea and exposure**

Located within the archipelago of the Orkney Isles, Hoy forms just one part of a complex composition of islands, bays and sounds – the sea never being far away. The Hoy hills offer a spectacular elevated vantage point of this wide composition and even further away to Caithness. These views include distant *human artefacts and contemporary land use* outwith the WLA – both on land and sea.

There is a predominantly high degree of exposure across the area and the wider land and seascape, and high winds strongly influence natural processes such as soil and rock weathering, as well as the nature of waves along the coastline. These all contribute to a strong *sense of naturalness* throughout the WLA, whilst expansive views under ‘wide skies’ appear *awe-inspiring* in their horizontal extent and revelation of changing weather.



- **The east and west sides of the area contrast strongly in landform, access and remoteness, with a hidden interior in-between that has a strong sense of remoteness and sanctuary**

This WLA contrasts strongly between its west and east edges and the interior. The west side is marked by high cliffs towering above the Atlantic, whose precipitous rock faces are *awe-inspiring*; whilst, in contrast, the eastern hill slopes merge more gradually into coastal settlement, infrastructure and crofting outside the WLA. In between is a central range of rounded open hills that can rarely be seen from outside the area due to screening by intervening slopes, and thus possesses strong qualities of *remoteness and sanctuary*.



From within the WLA, the contrasting edges are difficult to see as they ‘drop away’ from the elevated tops of the interior; however, they can be viewed in part from some of the central hill tops. From these locations, the isolation of the WLA and the wider island is clearer to appreciate, resulting in an increased *sense of remoteness*.

- **Dramatic, towering sea cliffs in the west that lead to perceived awe and naturalness**

The western cliffs of Hoy tower above the sea below – their vertical element emphasised in contrast to the horizontal expanse of the adjacent sea and peatland either side. Their *rugged* and precipitous nature is *awe-inspiring*, as well as being of high *risk* to visitors, whilst the presence of stacks, pinnacles, waterfalls, scree slopes and beaches indicate their very dynamic nature. This, in combination with the changing state of the sea, a high numbers of sea birds, and exposure to strong south westerly winds, conveys a strong *sense of naturalness*.



The cliffs are difficult to see from the WLA interior due to landform screening. This means they are often encountered in surprise, maximising the *arresting* nature of their experience. The coastline is,

however, slightly scalloped in line, including a number of geos and bays, which allows views along the cliffs from the promontories. The cliffs are at their highest within the northern part of the WLA, gradually descending towards the south.

- **Subtle, gently-sloped hill slopes at a broad scale, containing a complex distribution of bog, pools, peat hags and burns at a local level, contributing to the sense of naturalness**

The interior hills of Hoy are large and rolling in nature, with gentle slopes, a prevailing sense of openness, and simple ground cover. The simplicity of this composition appears *awe-inspiring*, with smooth 'clean' landform horizons appearing in stark contrast to the vertical west, north and eastern edges.

The hills are mainly vegetated, with a simple covering of bog and heath vegetation which, in combination with the gentle slopes, allows fairly open access. There are, however, local areas of *rugged* ground, pools, hags and burns that are more *physically challenging* to cross or negotiate. In addition, there are a number of narrow glens that cut grooves within the hill landform and contain features such as waterfalls and landslips which amplify the *sense of naturalness*.



The interior hills appear subtle in shape, with views of interlocking landform ridges and glens seen receding into the distance. This subtlety of form, in combination with the simplicity of ground cover and lack of landmarks, means it tends to be difficult to perceive scale, orientate and navigate within the landscape, resulting in a *sense of risk*. These attributes also mean that the WLA may seem much more *extensive* than it actually is, especially because, from the interior, it seems to extend out to sea beyond the furthest visible hill horizon.

The interior hills are mainly hidden from outside the WLA - primarily because of the screening effect of the steep outer facing slopes and cliffs. In reverse, this also means that the area immediately surrounding the WLA tends to be hidden from the interior hills, apart from when seen from the outside hill edge. This means that human elements located immediately outside the WLA are largely screened from the hill interior and this consequently possesses a strong *sense of remoteness and sanctuary*. In contrast, human elements located further away from the WLA, for example boats, ferries and fish-farms upon the sea, can be more prominent.



- **A distinctive high, simple and remote hill backdrop within the Orkney archipelago**

Due to the convex slopes and gently interlocking layout of the Hoy hills, their distinctive landform tends to be most clear when seen from a distance. From here, their vertical scale, steep sides and sweeping skyline seems *awe-inspiring*, heightened by the contrast to the surrounding horizontal emphasis of the sea and other islands. This contrast also tends to be increased by the difference in ground cover – the slope vegetation or cliffs typically much darker than brighter green grasses upon lower lying ground.



In some locations, the *arresting* qualities of this backdrop are diminished by views of features upon the outer slopes such as electricity poles which stand out in their vertical line and regular, repetitive spacing.

- **Few visitors and artefacts within the interior, despite the proximity of settlements and roads outside the area**

There is little evidence of people within the WLA and it contains no paths. Access across the area thus requires walking off-path, increasing the *physical challenge* and *sense of risk*. It tends to be most difficult where burns need to be crossed and around the west, north and eastern edges, where slopes are steep and high cliffs prohibit boat access. Within the elevated interior, slopes are gentler, although crossing blanket bog remains challenging.

Within most of the interior, there are no *human artefacts* or evidence of *contemporary land use*, including fences. This, in combination with the ‘emptiness’ of the peatland and *physically challenging access*, contributes to a strong sense of *remoteness, solitude and sanctuary* - particularly high where surrounding slopes also contribute to a sense of seclusion. The only exception to these conditions occurs within the southern third of the WLA. Here, even though there is a strong sense of *solitude* because of few visitors, the *sense of naturalness, remoteness and sanctuary* is diminished by the cumulative effects of sheep grazing and views out to the east and south to elements outside the WLA. These include the prominent mast, service buildings and powerlines on Binga Fea (including lights at night), the wind turbine near Lyness and the Heldale water treatment buildings and track, as well as more distant elements, including boats, fish farms and the wind turbine and industrial development on Flotta.




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#### Endnotes and select references

<sup>i</sup> SNH (2010) *The special qualities of the National Scenic Areas*. SNH Commissioned Report No 374.

**Site assessment carried out August 2014**