



Location and Context

The Beaches, *Dunes and Links* – *Aberdeenshire* Landscape Character Type extends from Fraserburgh to Peterhead, and from Collieston to Aberdeen on the eastern coast of Aberdeenshire. The areas form consistent stretches of long, broad sandy beaches backed by rolling extensive dunes. The coastline is even with Rattray Head, Scotstown Head and Forvie Ness forming subtle points edging long gently curving beaches. A very wide, gentle gradual transition occurs between this low-lying landscape and the very gently undulating and open *Coastal Agricultural Plain* to the west with largely uninterrupted views occurring from adjoining farmed coastal plains to sea.

Key Characteristics

- Long and gently curved sandy beaches backed by wind-sculpted seaward dunes to the east and comparatively solid landward dunes to the west.
- Low-lying scrubby grassland and occasional areas of wetland and pools forming immediate coast hinterland.
- Gradual transition between coast and *Coastal Agricultural Plain* of flat to very undulating pastures used mainly for sheep grazing.
- Saltmarsh, pools and inlets around higher farmland pastures.
- Few trees, with vegetation limited to coastal grassland, moss and marram which hold shifting sands together.
- Farm buildings in the area west of Loch of Strathbeg sited on subtly higher knolls above salt marsh.
- Containment within the dunes contrasting with expansive long beaches and open skies.
- Sense of naturalness and remoteness.

Landscape Character Description

Landform

The *Beaches, Dunes and Links* – *Aberdeenshire* Landscape Character Type constitutes a

continuous stretch of sandy beaches backed by extensive rolling dunes. The coastline is even with Rattray Head and Scotstown Head forming subtle points edging long gently curving beaches.

Advancing and receding ice sheets have been the principle agents of landscape formation in the area covered by these areas, creating a flat hinterland. A broad range of beach and dune-related features are present including storm beach ridges which have responded to sea level rises in historical times. Significant sand accumulation has occurred at Rattray and much of the Ythan, where extensive high dune systems are backed by scrubby sand flats and in places dune pools and saltmarsh. Northwards, wave-induced longshore drift has deposited shingle that now separates the Loch of Strathbeg, formerly a tidal lagoon and now the largest dune lake in Britain, and the historic port of Old Rattray from the sea.

A very gradual transition occurs between this low-lying landscape and the very gently undulating and open *Coastal Agricultural Plain - Aberdeenshire* farmland to the west with largely uninterrupted views occurring from adjoining farmed coastal plains to sea.

Landcover

The ephemeral, wind-sculpted seaward dunes merge with shifting sands to the east and the comparative solidity of the landward dunes to the west. These large dunes are visible from some distance across low-lying farmland which forms the immediate hinterland to the coast.

The reed-rimmed and very shallow Loch of Strathbeg, RSPB reserve and the largest dune lake in Britain, is barely contained by the dunes seaward and gently rising pasture elsewhere. Dune slacks contain smaller pools and inlets often used by sheltering wildfowl.

Saltmarsh, pools and inlets weave around higher farmland pastures at the transition with the *Coastal Agricultural Plain - Aberdeenshire* which forms a gradual merging with the coast.

Vegetation along the coast is limited to the spreading, knitted mats of coastal grassland, moss and marram which hold together the shifting sands of the dunes and are themselves swept and combed by the wind, thus emphasizing the strong sense of movement created by sand, waves and skies. Flora in the Loch of Strathbeg area is enriched by the presence of calcareous sands.

Extending across the immediate hinterland are pastures, which vary from flat to very gently undulating, are used principally for sheep grazing. There are few trees although the long broadleaf shelterbelts of Rattray House to the south of Loch of Strathbeg stand out in this low-lying and open landscape. Any occasional solitary trees stand out amidst expansive flats and huge skies.

Settlement

There are few landmarks along this stretch of coast, although a Stevenson-built lighthouse (1895) marks the jagged reefs off Rattray Head.

Farms are sited within the coastal pastures behind dunes, with the few settlements associated with inlets and also set back from the coast, such as Newburgh. The harbor town

Peterhead is the largest settlement in this Landscape Character Type. Otherwise this unstable landscape is almost devoid of settlement. Farm buildings in the area west of Loch of Strathbeg are sited on subtly higher knolls set above salt marsh and sheltered by clumps of broadleaf trees. Large industrial buildings and infrastructure is sited on the flat hinterland of Rattray Head and the St Fergus Gas Terminal, creating prominent features which can be viewed from miles inland. Coastal development increases close to Aberdeen.

Notable historic features include the remains of medieval churches and burial grounds at St Combs, St Fergus and Forvie. The last is located together with the remains of a deserted medieval village, in the middle of Forvie National Nature Reserve. There is also the deserted burgh of Rattray, including the remains of the medieval chapel of St Mary and the site of the castle; and the remains of a World War II line of pill boxes around Rattray Head.

Perception

Containment is experienced within the dunes, contrasting with the expansiveness of long beaches and open sea and skies. A strong sense of naturalness is associated with this coast, enhanced by the flocks of wildfowl seen on inland water bodies, saltmarsh and fields, especially in the winter. It is possible to feel remote on the beaches as dunes contain views of industrial features located within the immediate coastal hinterland.



This is one of 390 Landscape Character Types identified at a scale of 1:50 000 as part of a national programme of Landscape Character Assessment republished in 2019.

The area covered by this Landscape Character Type was originally included in the Banff and Buchan LCA (Cobham Resource Consultants), published 1994 and South and Central Aberdeenshire LCA (Environmental Resources Management), published 1998; and Aberdeenshire Landscape Character Review (Carol Anderson Landscape Associates), published 2014.