

**SWEEPING MOORLAND AND FLOWS –
CAITHNESS & SUTHERLAND**



Location and Context

The *Sweeping Moorland and Flows* Landscape Character Type occurs extensively across Caithness and east Sutherland, forming a flat, gently undulating and generally smooth landform. Transitions between the *Rocky Hills and Moorland* and *Rounded Hills - Caithness & Sutherland* tend to be subtle.

Key Characteristics

- Gently sloping or undulating landform which lies generally below 350 metres.
- Occasional isolated hills of limited height form local landmark features.
- Lochs and mature, meandering rivers.
- Very distinct flora, dominated by sphagnum mosses, produced by the wetness and infertility of the flows.
- Areas of peat cuttings and haggings.
- Pockets of improved grazing, mainly within the outer fringes of sweeping moorland.
- Coniferous forest forming a dominant characteristic within some parts of this landscape character type.
- Ribbons of broadleaf woodland occasionally run along the water courses and loch edges.
- Very sparsely settled with dispersed crofts, farms and estate buildings largely found on the outer edges of this landscape or near a strath.
- Vehicular tracks within parts of the landscape.
- Wind farms, transmission lines, the A9 and a network of minor roads are key features within the more modified outer fringes within Caithness.
- Long, low and largely uninterrupted skylines offering extensive views across this landscape and result in a feeling of huge space.
- Consistent views to the distant *Lone Mountains* and *Rugged Mountain Massif – Caithness & Sutherland*.
- Great sense of exposure on areas of flat peatland on upland plateau.
- A strong sense of remoteness is associated within the largely uninhabited, inaccessible core flows and moorlands of this landscape.

Landscape Character Description

Landform

This flat, gently undulating and generally smooth landform largely accords with areas of blanket bog and supports a diverse range of wet heath, grassland and mire. Occasional isolated hills, such as Ben Alisky and Ben Dorrery, stand out amidst extensive areas of lower-lying moorland, despite their limited height. Sweeping moorlands often have lochs and mature meandering rivers which sit within the shallow valleys and basins in the landscape creating focal features. Large areas of flatter peatlands, the Flows, lie within the core of Caithness and are patterned with a dominant intricate network of water courses, dubh lochans and a diverse range of pool systems, with wet, spongy, vegetation. The Flows areas merge gradually with surrounding sweeping moorland.

Landcover

This Landscape Character Type has a simple composition of moorland and mire, which forms low, smooth and largely uninterrupted skylines, and huge skies resulting in a high degree of exposure and extensive visibility. The ground-hugging vegetation of the blanket bog accentuates the predominant smoothness of the terrain. Some areas of the distinct flora of sphagnum mosses are particularly conspicuous on account of their vibrant colours. Areas of peat cutting and haggings create dark brown scarring, conspicuous amidst heather and grass-dominated moorland and mosses. Where pockets of improved grazing exist on the outer fringes of the moorland these areas appear as green islands within the surrounding rough vegetation. They tend to relate to the present or past location of farm or croft buildings and their enclosures. Coniferous forestry has a strong presence in some areas, particularly the more modified outer fringes, interrupting the continuity of the moorland cover. Removal of forest and restoration of areas of underlying blanket bog is being undertaken in some locations. Fragments of broadleaf woodland along water courses and loch edges mainly comprise birch, alder, willow and rowan species.

Settlement

This is currently a very sparsely settled landscape. However, the Landscape Character Type encompasses a huge land area and contains a broad range of monuments. Evidence for early prehistoric settlement in more favourable locations is evidenced through the presence of chambered cairns, other forms of burial cairns and occasional stone settings. Later prehistoric monuments include burnt mounds, hut circles with their attendant field systems, and brochs. Settlement continued into the medieval period, with farms and crofts occupying the most fertile ground, and shieling activity in more remote locations. The 18th and 19th Centuries saw the abandonment of many farms and crofts in favour of sheep rearing, but today most of the folds and shelters built at this time are ruinous.

Settlement today takes the form of dispersed crofts, farms and estate buildings on outer reaches of the Landscape Character Type, or near straths. The location of ruined buildings, field boundaries and drainage channels represent a history of past depopulation. Archaeological features are notably rich at the transition with the *Strath – Caithness & Sutherland* and *Coastal Crofts and Farms* Landscape Character Types. Vehicular tracks are used mainly to provide access for deer stalking and to fishing lochs and peat cuttings. The Inverness/Thurso railway is aligned through the core of this character type and single track roads, such as the A836, cut through areas of sweeping moorland in the west. Within Caithness the A9 and a network of minor roads, as well as wind farms and transmission lines, are more prominent features within the more modified outer fringes of the Landscape Character Type.

Perception

The landscape has a strong sense of naturalness and remoteness, particularly at its core away from more settled and modified outer fringes. Their distinctly natural character is heightened by a rich diversity of birds, including plover and curlew, whose evocative calls contribute to the perception of wildness.

The *Sweeping Moorland and Flows* forms the setting to the *Lone Mountains*, the distinctive form and prominence of these mountains being accentuated by the simple, open and expansive nature of the low-lying moorland which surrounds them. Some areas of flat peatland occur on areas of upland plateau, for example, Knockfin Heights and also on the top of cliffs along the north coast of Caithness. The elevation of these areas and their surrounding space creates an even greater sense of exposure, particularly upon the edges of the landform, where distant views across land and sea are afforded.

Views are long with uninterrupted largely uninterrupted skylines. Rapidly changing light and weather conditions are reflected in the smooth vegetation cover and loch systems. The *Sweeping Moorland and Flows* are important in providing a simple foreground to views of distant *Lone Mountains* and *Rugged Mountain Massif – Caithness & Sutherland*, complementing the distinctive form of these mountains and accentuating their height and prominence. Views from the A9 between Latheron and Spittal, the B871, A836 and from the A838 across the low-lying moorland of A'Mhoine to the distant mountains are particularly dramatic.



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 Caithness and Sutherland LCA (Stanton, C) published 1998; and Caithness and Sutherland Landscape Character Review (Carol Anderson Landscape Associates), published 2015.