



Location and Context

The *Strath – Caithness & Sutherland* Landscape Character Type includes all of the major straths in this area. They create linear spaces, with open floors typically containing a river or loch.

Key Characteristics

- Straths range from fairly straight deeply incised troughs to more winding valleys with a number of minor side glens.
- River terraces and hummocky lower side slopes a common feature.
- Water is a key characteristic with straths accommodating a central river meandering across the floodplain, often traced by clumps of birch and alder.
- Lochs in some straths, where a string of small lochs add to the scenic richness of the lower strath.
- Areas of wetland often present on the strath floors.
- Smooth and fairly large pastures the predominant land cover on the floodplains of the straths, commonly enclosed by wire fences.
- Semi-improved pastures, heather and grass moorland and coniferous plantations covering lower side slopes.
- Increasing extent of moorland and woodland generally further up the straths, where the floodplain narrows and settlement is sparser.
- Smaller strip-fields present on often hummocky, lower side slopes and associated with croft houses arranged in linear groups raised on terraces above the floodplain and sometimes backed by woodland.
- Some crofts within the *Straths* more randomly dispersed or staggered on lower hill slopes.
- Occasional small farms located in the broader and more fertile parts of the straths.
- Settlement generally denser within the lower reaches of many straths, especially at bridging points, on the coast and close to major roads.
- Many areas rich in archaeology with cairns, roundhouses, brochs and old field systems, usually found on side slopes.
- Abandoned crofts, particularly within the upper straths and in narrow side glens.
- Focus in views from roads provided by a number of estate shooting lodges, and clustered, predominantly 19th Century, often estate style buildings.

- Narrow roads, commonly aligned along the edge of the floodplain, from which views are strongly channelled by the side slopes.
- *Rounded Hills* often forming prominent edges to the straths with shapely well-defined hills, providing a distinctive skyline and scenic backdrop.
- Highly scenic backdrop of mountains often revealed in some of the upper reaches of these straths.

Landscape Character Description

Landform

The *Strath – Caithness & Sutherland* Landscape Character Type ranges from fairly straight deeply incised troughs to more winding valleys with a number of minor side glens. The degree of enclosure of the strath is dependent on the height and steepness of containing hill slopes. Many straths are strongly contained by steep-sided *Rounded Hills – Caithness & Sutherland*, such as Carrol Rock within Strath Brora, although a few are more open where they border the lower and more gently undulating *Sweeping Moorland and Flows* or are associated with larger loch basins. The narrow Strath of Kildonan, for example, is strongly enclosed by high and steep-sided *Rounded Hills – Caithness & Sutherland* while Strath Oykel and Strath Tirry are broader and more open because of the relatively low and gently sloping *Rounded Hills – Caithness & Sutherland* and *Sweeping Moorland and Flows* which contain them.

Landcover

All of the straths feature a floodplain which is predominantly under pasture with relatively large fields. Lochs and some areas of wetter pasture, moss and stunted Scots pine and birch woodland occur on the floor of some straths. Wetland is particularly extensive in lower Strath Fleet, where the causeway of The Mound has influenced the development of richly diverse fen and estuarine alder woodland. Less fertile glacial moraine on the floodplain of lower Strath Brora supports wet heath and Scots pine and birch woodland. The deep glacial trough of Strath Cuil is unsettled and covered with richly diverse woodland.

Varying proportions of semi-improved and rough grazing interspersed with mixed woodlands cover side slopes and some smaller strip-fields are present on often hummocky, lower side slopes within some straths where they are associated with croft houses. Rough pasture, heather moorland and woodlands tend to increase within the less settled and narrower upper straths. Strath Oykel features particularly extensive forestry on relatively gently graded side slopes.

Settlement

The sheltered and often fertile straths are relatively well-settled and accommodate access roads and other communications. A number of settlements are located on the coast at the entrance to the *Straths – Caithness & Sutherland*, taking advantage of fertile alluvial fans and sheltered natural harbours. While these coastal areas are defined as the *Coastal Crofts and Small Farms*, a gradual transition occurs with the lower parts of the straths where settlement is generally more concentrated. Within the upper straths, settlement is sparser with occasional estate shooting lodges with associated mixed policy woodlands and some loosely clustered crofts present in places.

Many of the straths are rich in archaeological features, including cairns, roundhouses, brochs and old field systems, usually found on the side slopes. These are particularly evident in Strath Brora, Strath More (most notably Dun Dornadilla or Dun Dornaigil broch) and Strath Naver. Abandoned crofts are also present, particularly within the more remote

upper straths and in narrow side glens.

Wind farm development sited in the interior of these uplands is visible from some of the straths where the skyline of containing hills dips or is breached by side valleys.

Perception

Views are generally focussed along straths from the narrow roads. A highly scenic backdrop of mountains is often revealed in some of the upper reaches, for example views from upper Strath Broira to the remote hills around Ben Armine and from Strath Cassely to Ben More Assynt.



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.