



Location and Context

The *Coastal Farmlands – Moray & Nairn* Landscape Character Type runs east-west between Inverness and Cullen, in a broad, continuous band some 90km long. This Landscape Character Type lies on the coastal plain between the coastal shore and forests to the north, and farmed and wooded foothills to the south. The central part is locally known as the Laich of Moray.

Key Characteristics

- Expansive, open, flat to undulating coastal plain landscape with frequent, small landforms of fluvio-glacial sands and gravels, often topped with forests, gorse or rougher grasslands.
- Predominantly simple agricultural landscape, punctuated by stone built farms and villages which are connected by an extensive network of rural roads.
- Mainly light, sandy soils and yellow seasonal flowers of gorse and broom.
- Broadly meandering burns and the lower reaches of rivers, often associated with native woodland and wetlands, providing relatively natural features in a highly modified landscape.
- Variation in field pattern, forms of enclosure, tree cover, settlement, road patterns and water bodies which illustrate distinctive differences between the flat former wetland and the more undulating, drier soils.
- Patchwork of mixed arable and pasture fields, yellow flowering gorse and broom, with shelter belts and plantations on drier land.
- Conifer plantations which coalesce to create elongated bands of dark colour contrasting strongly with the paler colours of arable land.
- Broadleaf woodlands and shelterbelts associated with gardens and designed landscapes.
- Established main communication routes of rail and trunk roads linking the larger settlements, off which run the network of minor rural roads.
- Prominence of occasional built elements in a relatively flat, open landscape, particularly large or vertical structures, including grain silos and single and small groups of commercial turbines associated with larger farms.
- Expansive, open long-distance views along the farmland belt, up to the moorland hills, and occasional views to the sea, mixed with more intimate views, foreshortened by undulations and folds in the landform, tree groups, small forests and coastal forests.

Landscape Character Description

Landform

The fertile soils of the coastal plain forming the *Coastal Farmlands – Moray & Nairn* Landscape Character Type range from the very low-lying, flat, drained, former wetlands, such as Loch Spynie and river flood plains, to the gently undulating slopes with frequent fluvio-glacial landforms of sandy gravels, such as the parallel mounds at Meikle Kildrummie. Their location on conspicuously-raised sites marks out Duffus Castle and Spynie Palace as ancient reminders of these historic wetlands.

Woodland and forest cover is generally low, particularly in former wetlands, where the large fields are defined by fences, grass banks and straight, deep ditches. Occasional small, shallow water bodies occur in former wetlands and as kettlehole lochans. The lighter, sandy soils, which often combine with spring winds to generate dust storms, support gorse and broom which is scattered across the landscape in patches, along field margins and road verges. The poorer soils and well-drained slopes of glacial deposits support plantation forests and woodlands, and broad leaved woodlands are often associated with policy plantings, farms and settlements. Major rivers emerge from valleys to the south, and they meander across the coastal plain as their flow rate slows. River courses and banks have been historically modified to prevent flooding of towns and farmland, and extensive, modern flood protection embankments and holding ponds are being constructed at Elgin and Forres.

Landcover

The fertility of the soils has for several thousands of years encouraged agricultural land use. Today's intensive farmland mainly reflects changes from 18th Century to the present, with drained wetlands, enclosed and amalgamated fields and fewer, but larger, farms. Farming is a mix of arable with some pasture, although in many areas arable is dominant and these land holdings tend to be large scale and associated with grain silos. Fields are predominantly large, rectilinear and enclosed indistinctively by fences, banks and drains, as well as gorse hedges. Occasional, extensive long bands of coniferous plantation and shelterbelts create a dark backdrop to the paler large, smooth arable fields and create a simple pattern of vegetation.

Land Use

Although predominantly agricultural, rural areas contain a wide range of other land uses, including distilleries, leisure facilities, schools, light industry, military facilities, the commercial airport and plant nurseries. Historic features include early medieval castles and earthworks, 17th-19th Century designed landscapes, and remnants of the 19th Century rail network.

Settlement

This is a relatively well settled landscape, and the most densely populated area outside of Inverness, with several large established towns, numerous historic planned towns, villages, farms and rural houses, although these are largely absent from poorly drained areas. In rural areas, often associated with tree groups and stone walls, are frequent small groups of farmhouses and steadings, many of which are now converted into houses or expanded into small scale housing developments. Urban centres tend to be compact, dating from the medieval period, and many have recently expanded with housing and commercial development, often creating a highly visible, uniform hard edge which contrasts sharply with the undulations and muted colours of farmland and forests. Near to Inverness, the small area of distinctive enclosed farmed landscapes has been increasingly fragmented and urbanised.

Localised areas of broadleaf woodland and shelterbelts tend to be associated with the designed landscape of historic estates. The larger of these include the Brodie Castle, Darnaway Castle, Gordonstoun House, Innes House, Gordon Castle and Cullen House estates. More open parts of coastal farmland around Elgin and to its west are also

punctuated by a number of more modest designed landscapes associated with a string of smaller 18th and early 19th Century country houses including Boath House, Dalvey, Moy, Invererne, Grange Hall, Milton Brodie, Inverugie and Pitgaveny House. The more exposed landscape to the east of Fochabers contains the 18th Century designed landscapes of Cairnfield House and Letterfourie House are enclosed in more sheltered folds in the landscape.

The easy gradients of the plain carry the east-west rail route and the major east-west trunk roads the A96 and A98, from which extends a network of minor roads and tracks. Several disused rail lines now function as footpaths and cycle ways.

Perception

The expansive, open landscape is generally one of wide horizons, with views only foreshortened by low, folding landforms, occasional small hills, and forests. There is great intervisibility with other Landscape Character Types. The rising hills immediately to the south can be dominant in views providing a simple backdrop of upland moorland and contain at intervals wind farms and telecom masts. Pylon lines sit to the immediate foreground and are backclothed by the hills. There are occasional panoramic views across the plain, out to sea and across the Moray Firth from higher land. In the foreground of views, scattered but prominent natural and built features punctuate the horizontal grain of the agricultural landscape. These include sand and gravel hills, castle towers, wind turbines at Findhorn, grain silos, modern farm buildings, aircraft buildings and towers, out-of-town business parks, industrial buildings, traditional and modern distilleries, and pylons.



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 Moray and Nairn LCA (Turnbull Jeffrey Partnership), published 1998; and by Inner Moray Firth, Inverness and North-Western Moray Landscape Character Assessments Review (Deb Munro Environmental Consultant), published March 2015.