



### Location and Context

The *Low Forested Hills* Landscape Character Type occurs in eastern Moray as a ridge of tree-covered higher ground running east-west, located to the south of the *Coastal Farmlands – Moray and Nairn*.

### Key Characteristics

- A ridge of higher ground between the coastal farmland to the north and the upland farmland basin to the south.
- Steeper slopes to the north descend from about 300 metres to the coastal plain; gentler southern slopes descend to the upland farmland of 100-150 metres.
- Extensive woodland, mostly coniferous, caps the higher ground. It also occurs to lower levels on the sharper north and western slopes.
- Pastoral fields, mostly divided by fences, adjoin the lower edges of the forestry.
- Infrequent farmsteads and cottages are served by a network of minor roads.
- Views are extensive from this higher ground which feels relatively remote and contrasts with the neighbouring busier areas to the north and south.

### Landscape Character Description

#### *Landform*

The landform of the *Low Forested Hills* Landscape Character Type comprises low, broad, gently undulating and widely spaced hills, which are the far northern and eastern margins of a large upland land mass descending from the Cairngorms to the coast. The bedrock of this land mass is exposed as cliffs at the nearby coastline. The area is probably at the eastern extent of the last glaciation, and the gentle rounded hills and valleys show little obvious sign of glacial activity.

The hills form a gentle arc, aligned roughly west–east. The land rises relatively steeply in the north and west up to about 300 metres, from the coastal plain and Spey Valley. Further east the height of hills gradually decreases as it merges with lower agricultural land in Banff and Buchan, and is punctuated by distinctive conical hills such as the Bin of Cullen and Knock Hill. On their south and east sides, the hills have very gentle slopes and indistinct, broadly curving tops which, when viewed from within the elevated interior, form a sweeping, barely undulating skyline. Several short, high level, valleys are formed in the shallow saddles between the hills, and include small burns. The southern parts of the designed landscape of Cullen House take advantage of these characteristics in its 18<sup>th</sup> Century informal design. The long, sinuous valleys of the Rivers Isla and Deveron, with their alluvial soils, occur beyond the southern perimeter of the area.

### *Landcover*

The dominant land uses are farming and forestry. Forests cover the majority of the area and their location on higher ground makes them relatively prominent. Forests consist mostly of large scale, geometric areas which clothe the upper slopes of hills, and form simple landscapes of uniform colour and height, contrasting sharply with the colour and detail of adjacent pastures. On the northern and western flanks of hills, forests occur down to lower levels. Exposed tops and undulating hills above forest plantations support areas of heather moorland and acid grasslands. The few areas of native woodland which exist are in small isolated pockets associated with individual farmsteads.

Agriculture is the other land use, mostly pastoral medium scale fields with fence boundaries. Fields reach higher up the slopes on the south and east, more gently sloping, sides of the hills. The remains of historic settlement are not extensive, with some prehistoric funerary cairns and a fort around the Bin of Cullen in the east. Agriculture in the valleys, and peat-cutting on the high ground, has existed since mediaeval times. The rectilinear field pattern dates from the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

### *Settlement*

Settlement is very sparse, consisting of scattered farmsteads and cottages served by a network of minor roads that reach uphill from the shallow valleys and villages of adjacent character types. Few roads traverse the ridge; they usually end at a high farmstead. Roads are absent in forested areas, however an extensive network of forest tracks is used for recreation.

### *Perception*

On the elevated northern and western periphery there are far-reaching views from passes to the coastal plain and Moray Firth. Southwards, views are extensive across the adjacent farmland with its planned villages and towns, to the Speyside hills and the Cairngorms area. The ridge forms a simple, generally wooded, skyline to the surrounding lower farmed land, coast and valleys.

This area contrasts with the busier, more intensively farmed areas that surround it. The lack of through-routes means it can feel relatively remote.



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.