



### Location and Context

The *Cliffs - Orkney* Landscape Character Type occurs as narrow cliff-tops above dramatic rocky vertical cliffs mainly along the western coastal edge of high hills on Hoy, West Mainland, South Ronaldsay and Westray. They are also found on lower coastal margins usually on the eastern seaboard and adjoining Inclined Coastal Pastures on South Ronaldsay, East Mainland and Eday. *Cliff - Orkney* are interrupted by occasional small bays usually of the *Enclosed Bays* or *Coastal Basin* Landscape Character Type.

### Key Characteristics

- Natural, irregular coastline of high and low cliffs of layered rock strata with many eroded coastal features and occasional waterfalls.
- Abrupt vertical edge to rough grass, heath and montane vegetation.
- Maritime grassland and maritime heath habitats.
- Soil-stripped cliff tops and browned vegetation from sea action and spray in exposed areas.
- Mainly uninhabited areas often backed by uninhabited hills and moorland.
- Rich in history and archaeological evidence of a human occupation, ritual use and conflict.
- The sound and sight of sea bird colonies and sea action on cliffs.
- Spectacular and dramatic coastal scenery and views, iconic of Orkney.
- A sense of remoteness and wildness.

### Landscape Character Description

#### *Landform*

The *Cliffs - Orkney* Landscape Character Type consist of a narrow coastal edge of cliffs and cliff tops adjoining the coastal hills or inclined pastures which slope down to this character type. The coastline is highly irregular in detail but in general indentation is limited to small scale inlets and bays of adjoining types. The cliff tops are usually level or sloping seaward, and end abruptly at vertical rocky cliffs. The exposed horizontal or tilted strata of sandstones and flags has been weathered to different hues of red and ochre, and sculpted into striking features by high-energy wave action and exposure to Atlantic storms. These features occur

frequently along the coast and include geos (clefts), gloops (blow holes), caves, stacks and arches, with wave cut, slabbed platforms at the base of some cliffs. The power of the sea is illustrated by high level storm beaches, such as at Sacquoy head on Rousay and Yesnaby on West Mainland where boulders lie as much as 80 metres inland at the top of 18 metre high cliffs. Cliffs adjoining hill areas are very high, reaching over 200 metres above sea level. The highest cliffs at St. John's Head on Hoy tower vertically up to 335 metres from sea level. At 137 metres above sea level the Old Man of Hoy is the highest sea stack in the British Isles. In contrast the low cliffs adjoining sloping pastures rarely exceed 20 metres above sea level. In higher heath areas on Mainland several small upland burns descend in natural routes to the coast. The larger land mass and glaciated valleys of Hoy drain to large burns which create spectacular coastal waterfalls on the north and west coast of Hoy.

### *Landcover*

Cliff tops are covered with thin soils and a combination of rough grass and maritime heath extending right to the cliff edge, which appear semi-natural in character. Many cliff tops are stripped of soil by wave spray erosion which extends up to 40 metres inland, and remaining grasslands are often browned by the effects of sea spray. In less exposed areas the smooth, bright green grass land contrasts with the colour and texture of the sandstone and flags. The saline gley soils and influence of sea spray results in salt tolerant flora of maritime grasslands on lower cliffs, creating carpets of colour when in flower. The salt laden air and exposure to Atlantic storms prevents tree growth over most of this character type. The cliffs and adjacent heaths are prime nesting sites for sea birds and these landscapes boast some of Europe's major sea bird colonies.

Rough grazing is the main land use on generally unenclosed land. Occasional coastal footpaths and car parks cater for the mainly low key recreational and tourism use, often focused at historic and archaeological sites.

### *Settlement*

The land is mainly uninhabited today, however the rich archaeology and built heritage bears witness to a long history of human occupation, ritual use and conflict from prehistoric times to the 20th century. Characteristic features are prehistoric remains of cairns, brochs and promontory forts, such as the chambered cairn at Isbister, South Ronaldsay, and Broch of Borwick, Yesnaby wartime structures such as the firing range at Yesnaby, Mainland and the First and Second World War batteries and camps at Hoxa Head, South Ronaldsay. Other notable features are the remains of the 12th and 13th century Chapel at Brough of Deerness perched on a stack off the coast of Deerness, East Mainland and several prominent, white, mainly 19th and 20th century lighthouses.

### *Perception*

The Orkney coastline in this character type makes spectacular scenery, for example in north Hoy, Marwick Head, and at The Gloop on the Deerness coast. This presents an iconic image of the Orkney Islands, and the Hoy cliffs are landmark features in views from Pentland Firth sea crossings.

The natural forces which have shaped this landscape continue to be the overwhelming influence on the landscape experience. These are some of the most exposed landscapes in Orkney, commanding expansive views of the coastline, to the hills and stacks of Hoy and Mainland, and out to sea. The backdrop of Hoy's dramatic profile is a characteristic component of views from the Mainland cliffs, illustrating the contrast between Mainland's glacial deposition landscape and Hoy's glacially eroded mountains.

Uninhabited parts of this landscape are inaccessible by road and usually unenclosed, with a

strong sense of remoteness, which is enhanced by the visible evidence of past human use. The coastal cliffs and heaths support some of the largest colonies of sea birds in Britain and their wheeling movements and calls are a distinctive part of the experience of these landscapes. Particularly in cliffs backed by moorland and hills, the openness and exposure, natural cliff landscapes and heathland colours, the sight, sound and smell of birdlife and the power of the sea, and views to the Atlantic horizon all combine to impart strong wildness characteristics.



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 Orkney LCA (Turnbull Jeffrey Partnership), published 1998.