



### Location and Context

*Moorland Hills - Orkney* are found on the hilliest parts of Orkney Mainland, Rousay, Eday and Hoy. On West Orkney Mainland this type forms a central spine and is surrounded mainly by *Rolling Hill Fringe*. On Rousay it forms the distinctive horseshoe-shaped ring of hills. On Eday, the north-south alignment of hills reflects that of the rock strata. On Hoy this type is extensive and wild, and adjoins the dramatic coastal of *Cliffs - Orkney*. This Landscape Character Type usually merges with lower lying pasture and often encloses *Peatland Basins*, *Coastal Basins* or *Loch Basins*.

### Key Characteristics

- Undulating hill land with many meandering burns.
- Widespread heather moorland, with rough grass land and peat bog, mostly unenclosed.
- Active and redundant peat cutting sites.
- Few and isolated farmsteads and tracks.
- Occasional hill dykes and signs of sub-peat and later farmsteads and field systems.
- Bronze Age barrows on skyline recognisable by the unnatural topographic variations.
- Contrast between dark, muted colours of moorland and adjoining green, ordered lowland fields.
- Distinctive landforms recognisable from other islands.
- Open landscape lacking fences and with few structures.
- Elevated vantage points giving views to other islands.
- A sense of wild character in remoter parts of Hoy.

### Landscape Character Description

#### *Landform*

The *Moorland Hills - Orkney* Landscape Character Type consists of low to moderate elevation hills which vary from being quite steeply undulating, for example on parts of Hoy and Rousay, to more gentle slopes on northern West Orkney Mainland. The hills are underlain by the glaciated open, sinuous folds of Old Red Sandstone, overlain with glacial

till deposits at lower levels, which gives them their smooth, rounded, gentle topography. Heights range from 50 metres up to 400 metres above sea level, with the highest hills occurring on the erosion resistant Upper Red Sandstones underlying most of Hoy south of Rackwick. Here, the lower slopes are divided in long, east-west convex folds and large burns meander through the broad, smooth sided valleys, often fed by a fan-shaped network of small meandering tributaries draining the large basin areas of high peat bog. Hills on Rousay rise steeply from the sea and dominate the island landscape, their slopes notable for the clearly visible terraced profile, possibly resulting from ice scouring, and revealed by thin soils. A few moderate sized lochs occur in shallow depressions on lower slopes. On Hoy, groups of many small lochans are scattered across the slopes on level areas and depressions. In a few places this type meets the coast at low cliffs, for example in north Rousay and east Hoy. The high cliffs to the west of this type are within the *Cliffs - Orkney* Landscape Character Type.

#### *Landcover*

Substantial peat cover laid down in post-glacial times supports mainly heather moorland and rough grassland. In other areas the very acid conditions created by sandstone generate thinner peaty soils with montane species at higher altitude. There are large areas of blanket bog and heather or grassland bog on these slopes indicating the poor drainage. The widespread occurrence and frequency of heather in this type can impart a superficial uniformity, but this masks the variety of semi-natural plant communities which harbour a diversity of wildlife interest. The flushed peaty slopes, basins and alluvial channels carry a wide range of swamp, rush and sedge dominated vegetation.

The land is mostly unenclosed rough grazing, although some small fenced grazings are found on the periphery of the hill land. The moorlands have been extensively cut for peat for fuel in both ancient and modern times and there are many tracks leading across peatland expanses and up slopes. Many areas have re-vegetated and in other areas dark peat or light coloured substrate is exposed.

#### *Settlement*

There are very few and isolated settlements consisting of farmsteads served by tracks and a few minor roads. On the West Orkney Mainland the few roads pass over saddles between hills. Vertical structures of telecommunications, telegraph and electricity poles and wind turbines occur infrequently, where they are prominent man-made features, contrasting with the generally open and rolling topography and giving an indication of scale. Mechanical extraction results in large plots worked by surface stripping which are prominent on the hillsides sometimes over large areas, for example around Heldale Water on Hoy and at Orphir. Extensive peat cutting is also visible on Rousay, Eday and West Orkney Mainland.

The relatively recent development of peat over the past thousand years has occurred since initial human habitation of the islands and it is likely that significant sub-peat archaeological features are present, for example, on Rousay and Eday.

The few known archaeological sites tend to occur around the lower margins, although deep peat may be masking other sites. Hill dykes, early boundaries of hill grazing, are still visible on some of the lower slopes, although moorland occasionally extends below them. These

are associated with sub-peat archaeological farmsteads. Bronze Age barrows occur on the hills, and were designed to be recognisable on the skyline by the unnatural topographic variations. A distinct pattern of several ruined farmsteads, centred within rectangular field boundaries, occurs across the edge of the area on Rousay, evidence of attempts to survive after clearance from earlier settlements on the island. The Second World War battery at Scad Head faces Houton Head on the west mainland. This battery was built into the steep moorland hills that characterise the east coast of Northern Hoy and incorporates the local topography into its design.

### *Perception*

The distinctive landform of *Moorland Hills - Orkney* often helps to distinguish between the different mountainous islands. For example, the topography of Rousay is immediately recognisable from other islands - the significant hill mass contrasts with the generally lower profile of the other islands. The Hills of Hoy form a notable backdrop to many views in West Orkney Mainland. The hills offer significant vantage points for views onto lower lying land and, in many places the sea, and themselves are good reflectors of prevailing weather: in drizzle they appear bleak and less colourful; in sunshine their colours are vibrant and contrast with blue skies and distant views of water.

The combination of gentle, rounded landform and mainly low moorland vegetation creates a simple landscape of mainly uniform texture and muted colours, and there is a strong contrast with the green, ordered pastures of lower land, usually emphasised by an abrupt boundary between inbye and outbye. Peat cutting patterns are often very evident and contrast with the smooth texture, creating dark, extensive linear scars against the orange red and brown moorland colours, or light-coloured stripes from exposed vegetated substrate. Tracks to peat cutting areas can also be prominent, cutting up the hills sides. Where peat cutting has been abandoned, there are softer linear impressions resulting from heath vegetation re-establishment, and are accentuated in low sun. The openness and lack of fencing and walls accentuates the sometimes bleak character of this landscape, and reflects the historic use as common hill grazing in many areas. There is a sense of wild character in less accessible areas of Hoy, parts of which form a Wild Land Area, which lack paths, modern structures and modern, large scale peat cutting. The rounded hills of these areas can rarely be seen from outside the areas due to screening of intervening slopes and therefore possess strong qualities of remoteness and sanctuary.

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.