



### Location and Context

The *Rounded Mountain Massif* Landscape Character Type occurs as several large patches across the southern and eastern part of Ross and Cromarty. It consists of the high, core mountain groups which sit within a broad belt of lower, smooth rounded hills, moorland slopes and straths. Slopes are often steeper, and summits are higher and frequently more angular and rocky than in the surrounding *Rounded Hills and Moorland Slopes – Ross & Cromarty*. To the north, this type merges with usually lower *Rounded Hills* in Caithness and Sutherland. *Rounded Mountain Massif* also occurs next to rugged mountain types in Ross and Cromarty, Caithness and Sutherland and Inverness District. The rounded mountains often reach similar heights to *Rugged Mountain Massif - Ross & Cromarty*, yet appear lower due to the differences in landform and elevation of mountain bases.

### Key Characteristics

- High, broad-based, smooth sided, lobed mountains found in discrete groups set within, and sweeping down to, smooth, lower hills and high level straths and u-shaped valleys, giving a sense of grandeur.
- Well-defined summits with either a rounded or angular profile. Often both occur on the same summit where rounded tops have been sculpted by glacial activity into corries and cliff faces.
- Similar height to *Rugged Mountain Massif – Ross & Cromarty*, but appear lower due to their landform.
- Fresh snow lines disclose the true height of the mountains.
- Rugged or stony summits and extensive moorland groundcover.
- Strong relationship with adjoining *Rounded Hills and Moorland Slopes – Ross & Cromarty* type which unifies the mountain groups into a vast landscape.
- Limited settlement, few footpaths or other structures, and little evidence of historic or current land use.
- Far reaching views from upper reaches to the mountains, plains and firths in adjacent areas.
- Vastness of the landscape due to simple lines of mountain profile, sweeping horizons, undifferentiated ground cover, and few man-made structures to indicate scale.
- Wild character over much of the area.

## Landscape Character Description

### *Landform*

*Rounded Mountain Massif* was formed by glacial and post-glacial erosion of a vast, southeast inclined tableland of mainly Moine schist bedrock. The type comprises groups of high, smooth-sided, lobed mountains between 600 and 1000 metres above sea level, with high-level, radiating spurs and pronounced rounded or angular summits. Convex to concave slopes with simple lines sweep down to u-shaped valleys and the broad, open straths of adjacent types, conveying a sense of grandeur. The width and base of these mountains is large scale in relation to their height, giving a broad and bulky form, such that summits appear lower than the adjoining *Rugged Mountain Massif – Ross & Cromarty*, which have a similar height range. The mountains are usually surrounded by slightly lower rounded hills and moorland slopes, and high straths of between 120 and 250 metres elevation, which accentuates this illusion. There is a strong relationship with the adjoining *Rounded Hills and Moorland Slopes – Ross & Cromarty* which weaves between the mountain groups. The smooth, curved profile and moorland vegetation unifies the two types into a vast landscape.

Summit areas tend to consist of a group of tops, which may be angular or smooth, and frequently both. The rugged part of summits reflect past glacial activity which has sculpted high-level corries, precipitous summit cliffs and hanging valleys, often seen as the eroded portion of a rounded top. Broad, smooth shoulders radiate from summits, creating a pattern of curved folds radiating from the mountain summit and sides. Deep gullies are repeatedly etched into the smooth mountain sides, creating contrasting, irregular linear forms that break up the broad bulk of the mountain. River gullies extending down the gently interlocking spurs become meandering rivers where the topography flattens out across u-shaped valleys and the wide straths of adjoining types. Natural lochs sit within many of the straths and basins within this character type.

### *Landcover*

Convex summits strewn with frost shattered rock summits and concave slopes of stony soils overlain with peat merge and enhance the smooth profile. Low lying heather and rough grassland ground cover gives a smooth texture to the hills highlighting their simple forms. Large blocks of coniferous forestry occur in a few locations on the lower slopes around the more sheltered margins, and within interior glens and straths, due to their gentle slopes being largely free draining. These forestry blocks continue downslope to adjacent types, such as *Forest Edge Farming*. These areas also support a scattering of very small remnants of broad leaved woodland, and one small area of Caledonian pinewood forest.

### *Settlement*

Modern settlement and roads are absent. A few rough tracks and paths pass through glens and straths, and occasionally traverse the slopes, to access the interior. The visible drawdown of occasional reservoirs and associated dams, tracks and buildings introduce one of the few signs of human activity. Historic artefacts are rare in this high-elevation landscape. Abandoned medieval or post medieval farmsteads and agricultural land is found in a few locations in glens, particularly near lochs and rivers, and there are a few small-scale traditional peat extraction sites. These, coupled with shieling sites within valleys and corries that provided seasonal grazing, constitute the main evidence for human activity.

### *Perception*

Views in this landscape are far reaching and panoramic, across open, sweeping foreground landforms. On the hill tops, the eye is drawn to adjacent summits and across to distant mountains and hills, or to the farmed plains and firths to the east. Where there are multiple summits, the eye seeks a dominant focal point. Lower down, the curved upper slopes of the mountains often hide the true summit from the viewer, unless viewed from afar. The overall

experience of this open, exposed landscape is one of vastness, emphasised by the undifferentiated ground cover and few scale indicators. Two large windfarms occur on high ground to the east of this type, which form prominent, moving features in views from adjoining mountains, hills and straths, giving a measure of scale and distance which is otherwise absent, and signifying the exposed nature of this landscape. Outwith these areas there is a sense of remoteness due to the overall lack of roads, settlement and built structures. Combined with the wide sweeping horizons, and the exposed and sometimes rugged summits, this creates a wild character in the landscape.

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 Ross & Cromarty LCA (Ferguson McIlveen), published 1999; and by Ross & Cromarty LCA Review (Deb Munro), published 2015.