



Location and Context

The *Strath – Ross & Cromarty* Landscape Character Type occurs mainly along the west coast of the area and often acts as a transitional link between a water body and the interior of the region. These linear or curved, enclosed landscapes are settled and relatively intensively farmed, contrasting with the surrounding moorlands and hills. One inland example, between Garve and Lochluichart, terminates in a relatively small inland loch.

Key Characteristics

- Sinuous or curved channels with steep sides channelling through upland and mountainous landscapes.
- Wide flat strath floor at the coast or terminating water body, where the presence of water dominates.
- Narrowing channel inland, with a rising strath floor, terminating at a narrow glen or mountain pass.
- Meandering central river, becoming broad and braided at the lower end, terminating in wetlands and pebbly beaches.
- Abrupt change in topography from strath to slope emphasised by change from regular field patterns to forest, woodland and moorland.
- Riparian woodland and patches of native woodlands on the strath floor and lower slopes.
- Limited settlement, usually located at inland bridging points at the entrance to straths.
- Rural estate landscapes including broad, green, regular fields of pasture, large estate houses and associated features such as farm buildings, stone walls and policy woodlands.
- Occasional small linear crofting townships and small holdings on slopes adjoining the road access.
- Through-road along the strath length located on the edge of the strath floor.
- Historic land use evidence in abandoned 19th and early 20th Century settlements.
- Restricted views in upper reaches, channelled along the strath, contrasting with openness of the wide strath at the lower end, the latter enhanced by reflection of light on the sea or terminal loch.
- Intriguing views along curved straths which are enhanced on un-improved roads which closely follow the curving landform of the strath sides.

Landscape Character Description

Landform

The *Strath – Ross & Cromarty* Landscape Character Type comprises a wide, flat strath floor, usually at the coast, which narrows as it channels through higher ground to create a linear space. There is a strong definition between the sloping strath sides and floor. *Strath – Ross & Cromarty* landscapes are characterised by being open to the sea or a large water body at one end and terminating inland within higher moorlands or mountains. The length of straths is highly variable. Some are relatively short and their characteristics remain influenced by their proximity to the coast. Their floors are relatively level, rising to between 20 metres and 45 metres above sea level. Longer straths rise up to 150 metres above sea level and cut inland by as much as 7 kilometres, or 20 kilometres in the case of Strathcarron. The strath sides are usually very steep and often rocky at the lower end. In many the slopes remain steep as the strath cuts into high moorland, hills and mountains. At the inland end there is often a constriction into a narrow glen or mountain pass. Strathcarron consists of a gradually narrowing pass, which eventually opens out before merging into a broad, unfarmed strath within the *Rounded Hills and Moorlands Slopes – Ross & Cromarty*.

Landcover

The *Strath – Ross & Cromarty* Landscape Character Type tends to contain a diverse range of elements and land use, and often this varies depending on the distance to the sea and quality of soils. The usually abrupt change of topography from slope to strath floor is reflected in a difference in land use, from woodland and moorland to regular field patterns, which typically relate to the linear form of the strath. Water is a key element, often in the form of a river or loch. In many straths the floor opens to a sea loch, creating an area of salt-water marshes with a higher water table, and tree cover tends to be replaced by scrub vegetation and marsh plants. These coastlines are often threaded with braids of natural river channels. This diverse, highly natural edge contrasts with the smooth pasture fields and regular boundaries inland. Riparian woodland occurs in many straths next to rivers and loch shores. Conifer forestry blocks are found in some straths, particularly upon the foot slopes, emphasising the sense of enclosure and creating patterns with their contrasting edges, shapes and colours.

Settlement

There is a long history of human settlement in these straths, evidenced by archaeological finds. Prehistoric evidence is scarce. Burnt mounds situated close to Kinlochewe may be Late Bronze Age in date. Early Medieval evidence is again rare though the early monastery and later chapel or church at Applecross retains a spiritual importance. By far the majority of visual archaeological remains in these straths belongs to the last 300 years and includes townships, farmsteads, kilns and cultivation remains. Rural estates are a common feature, many of which are associated with broad valley floors, divided into green pastures on good alluvial soils. These areas feature large estate houses, old walled enclosures and entrance gates, mature woodland, policy trees and agricultural buildings. The main settlements tend to be located at bridging points or at the mouth of the strath creating focal points. Occasional small linear crofting settlements and smallholdings are also located along the access routes through some straths. Where the remains of later 19th and early 20th Century abandoned settlements are visible this creates a sense of history. Fish traps, of medieval or post-medieval date, exist at various coastal locations.

These straths contain through roads which usually follow the edges of the strath floor at the break of slope, highlighting its linear form. Many of these straths have become major pan-highland transport routes, and the traditional through roads, which typically fitted the detailed landform, have been engineered into long, curving main roads. These tend to appear as service corridors when also associated with elements such as road signs, parking areas and

power lines, which run parallel to the road for easy access.

Perception

The character varies along the length of straths, from relatively enclosed, sheltered pastures to more open broad green fields, wetlands, broad river braids and natural shorelines. The open strath floor is the central visual focus, with views directed along and between opposite slopes. Visibility is limited where the strath curves through the landscape, resulting in a gradual change of scenery and a sense of intrigue. This is enhanced on un-improved roads which more closely follow the line of slopes.

The sense of enclosure within the strath is partially influenced by landcover. An open water body provides the least enclosure of space, whilst vertical elements such as trees and buildings create further enclosure and their vertical edges emphasise the flatness of the strath ground. Blocks of woodland physically and visually break up the open character by subdividing the central space and reducing the extent of views along the strath. The sheltered, enclosed, farmed and settled character of these straths, and the presence of human activity, results in a landscape which is distinct from the surrounding uninhabited upland landscapes. At the coast or terminal water bodies, the strath landscape opens out, providing a sudden change in the degree of enclosure. The open skies, longer views and reflection of light from water contrasts strongly with the confines of the interior of longer straths.

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.