



### Location and Context

The *Forest Edge Farming* Landscape Character Type is found around the eastern boundary of Ross and Cromarty. It occurs in broad bands along the mid to upper reaches of convex slopes, between the *Rounded Hills and Moorland Slopes - Ross and Cromarty* and the lowlands of Easter Ross. This area marks a transition between lowlands and uplands, and the type develops upland characteristics towards the higher elevations. *Forest Edge Farming* has a complex composition dominated by a traditional pattern of farming and large conifer forestry blocks. The proportion of forest cover is much higher than the farmed and forested lowlands to the east, outwith the Ross and Cromarty area, and the lower edge of forests often marks the boundary between the two areas.

### Key Characteristics

- Gentle to moderately steep convex slopes, occasional minor straths and glens with sinuous burns and rivers, and occasional high level, flatter undulating moorlands.
- Rocky, steeper slopes occur in the southern part of the type.
- Mix of agriculture and farming, varying from an equal balance to marginally more agriculture.
- A patchwork of semi-improved and improved pasture, arable fields, conifer forestry blocks, woodlands, shelterbelts, trees and hedges.
- The topography and geometric pattern of enclosure are emphasised by walls, hedges and hedgerow trees.
- Variable field sizes, many are large and open and dominate the landscape; others are smaller and create diverse patterns and textures.
- The contrasting upland character of higher ground emphasised by stone walls, rough grassland and less tree cover.
- The scale of woodlands is in keeping with the geometry of fields and narrow roads.
- Conifer forests vary in size, the larger ones superimposed on the field pattern.
- The edge of forestry blocks creates enclosed spaces around fields and buildings, and forms a dark background to enclosed features.
- Tree cover creates enclosed or intermittent distant views and helps to screen structures such as pylons and masts,
- Far reaching views to the south and east from high ground or open areas, often

framed and enhanced by foreground trees.

## **Landscape Character Description**

### *Landform*

*Forest Edge Farming* is found on middle elevation slopes of Ross and Cromarty (between 50 and 300 metres above sea level), at the base of the rounded hills of adjoining Landscape Character Types. The landform of this type below *Rounded Hills and Moorland Slopes – Ross and Cromarty* comprises gentle to moderately steep convex slopes, occasionally incised by the upper reaches of minor straths and valleys which carry sinuous burns and rivers. The slopes are occasionally rolling, and sometimes flatten to form large, perched, gently sloping or undulating moorlands. Below the *Rounded Rocky Hills – Ross & Cromarty* the landform is steeper and contains smoothed and rugged rocky outcrops.

### *Landcover*

The mainly south-east aspect of these slopes provides a beneficial aspect for settlement, agriculture and forestry. The free draining soils over old sandstones support landcover of semi-improved and improved pasture or cultivated arable fields, interspersed with conifer forests, woodlands, shelterbelts, trees and hedges. The balance of farmland to forest cover varies. In many places they are in equal proportions, and in others there is marginally more agricultural landuse.

The agricultural landscape is a complex array of open spaces sub-divided by field boundaries. The strong geometric pattern of enclosure is more prominent where stone walls, gorse hedges and hedgerow trees line this framework, and these accentuate the slope of the topography. Field sizes vary, and although common components such as farm buildings and field boundaries exist, large open fields can dominate the visual composition of the landscape. Conversely, the pattern of smaller fields increases the sense of enclosure and contains a diversity of features which add to the variable pattern and texture of the landscape. In the upper reaches of side valleys, the land appears poorly drained; farming becomes less intensive and is accompanied by stone dykes, rougher pastures, and less tree cover.

Woodlands and trees are key components of this landscape, comprising small estate copses, shelterbelts, hedgerow and roadside trees, and conifer blocks of different sizes and shapes. The scale of woodlands relates to the geometry of the fields and narrow roads, often producing a patchwork of open and enclosed spaces. Larger conifer forestry blocks seem superimposed upon this farmland pattern. The largest forests tend to be located on the higher ground of this landscape. In some areas, restructuring has softened the hard geometric edges and revealed more of the underlying landform. Forests often act as the main enclosing elements in the landscape and affect the microclimate. For example, in the lee of the north-facing edge, there may be a marked drop in temperature and increased wind turbulence. Many conifer forests are easily accessible from large settlements in the Moray Firth, and contain recreation facilities such as car parks, picnic sites and trails.

### *Settlement*

The location of settlement and roads responds to the land use pattern of the agricultural landscape. Settlements include individual houses and cottages, groups of small holdings, sometimes with modern housing, and many rural estates. Buildings tend to be dispersed and are sited either in direct relation to the main road network or along small farm tracks, giving an overall managed and populated image. The relatively dense, mainly narrow road system

tends to follow field boundaries and contours, often in straight lines and with sharp corners to change direction. Occasionally, minor roads extend along short valleys before terminating, and a few climb to the high, open moorlands above the forest cover in adjoining types.

This Landscape Character Type is heavily influenced by the presence of high voltage lines and pylons. Their large stature and linear routes create dominant visual focal lines through the landscape. These structures contrast with the smooth topography and locally dominate the rural character of the landscape. However, their visual influence is reduced by the presence of roadside trees and woodlands. The close proximity of these slopes to lowland settlements and roads provides opportune locations for several communication masts, some of which are visible on skylines, others merge with the back drop of forests.

There is a long history of human settlement within the *Forest Edge Farming* Landscape Character Type. Abundant evidence of prehistoric settlement takes the form of chambered cairns, with an important group in the valley of the River Alness, other burial cairns and field systems, and forts. Later settlements are visible throughout, with abandoned farm steadings and croft houses indicating changing land use patterns in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Some of these are accompanied by their related field systems. From the more recent past and often still in use, many areas contain rural estates, with features such as large estate houses and designed landscapes, lodge houses and entrance gates, walled enclosures, mature woodland and agricultural buildings.

#### *Perception*

The nature of the crops and deciduous woodland present in this landscape results in seasonal contrasts within this landscape. The changes in colour and texture accentuate the pattern of enclosures. The patchwork of conifer forests and fields coupled with the variable landform creates a landscape of different spatial experiences, from visually permeable shelterbelts enclosing individual fields, to extensive conifer forests which create a series of enclosed 'rooms' within which farm holdings are located. The largest conifer forest blocks, usually at higher elevations, can seem quite imposing due to their large scale, vertical edges, high density and dark colour.

The density and height of conifer forests screens many man-made structures and often restricts distant views, or provides intermittent glimpses. This tends to focus attention towards details within the landscape, with views directed to fields or buildings within the spaces created by forests. Other sensory qualities such as the noise and movement of wildlife and trees are heightened. The dark uniform forest backdrop highlights any features in front of it, for example, light farm buildings tend to become contrasting, dominant focal points. These features also provide a relative scale to the forest edge. In a few elevated areas, the geography of an entire region to the south-east is visible. In these locations the farmed and settled lowlands and river plains can be seen stretching out below, across falling slopes and plains, and extending beyond to the firths and mountains to the south and east. Foreground trees often frame these views and heighten the sense distance.

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.