

The Special Qualities of the Dornoch Firth National Scenic Area

- The contrast between the enclosed west and the expansive east
- Inhabited surrounds within a wilder backdrop of hills and moors
- A wide diversity of woodland cover
- A rich variety of alluvial lands, dunes and links
- The ever-changing firth
- The tranquillity of an undeveloped coastline
- Migdale, a microcosm of the wider Dornoch Firth

Special quality	Further information
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The contrast between the enclosed west and the expansive east</i> 	
<p>The Dornoch Firth exhibits a surprising variety of landscapes, with dramatic contrasts to east and west.</p> <p>To the east there is expansiveness where offshore views lead out to sea and a limitless horizon.</p> <p>To the west there is a sinuous firth and a sense of enclosure, where inland views are bounded by opposing shores against a backcloth of hills.</p>	<p>The NSA unfurls from the narrow pinch-point of Bonar Bridge seawards to the open firth. It is enclosed to the north, west and south by a range of different landscapes. Their juxtaposition creates a remarkably complex interplay of scenery. The contrasts east and west are brought to the fore when crossing the A9 road bridge.</p> <p>Curving, sinuous, undulating natural forms of the shoreline and hills are interwoven, and often interlocking. These forms are set within a broad landscape extending the length of the firth, which tends to be horizontally structured. The landforms and land use appear as layers in the landscape: the rolling, rounded hills provide the backcloth; then there are the lower hill slopes; then the alluvial flats; the firth shoreline, and finally the firth itself.</p> <p>An expansive feel, looking over water to the distant, blue hills, can also be had by looking into the NSA from, for example, Tarbert Ness.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Inhabited surrounds within a wilder backdrop of hills and moors</i> 	
<p>The inner firth wends its way inland until the hills and moors sweep round to provide an undulating backdrop to the green and fertile alluvial lands. This horizon of wilder hills contrasts markedly with the mosaic of farms and woods on the coastal flats – which comes across as an ordered, long-inhabited land.</p>	<p>The Firth is enclosed by hills. To the south, the rounded hills of Ross-shire form an extensive sweep from east to west; their rolling, open slopes convey a sense of grandeur, enclosing views southwards from the northern shores.</p> <p>Passage through the hills is confined to the base of the hill slopes at coastal level, or to the natural road-crossing (B8176) at The Struie. As this road leaves the confines of the hills at Cadha Mòr (Great, Narrow Pass), a broad panorama opens out across the Firth.</p> <p>To the north, the moorland hills are lower, more sloping and can be less pronounced in form. The higher peaks tend to be rocky. An area of sweeping moorland forms a distinctive backdrop to Migdale's settlement and character.</p> <p>Although the hills and moors possess a long history of land use, they come across as wilder and less intensively</p>

	managed than the alluvial lowlands.
<p>• A wide diversity of woodland cover</p>	
<p>The interplay of open ground, trees and woods results in a landscape mosaic of great beauty. In places, dark forests of conifers clothe the hillsides, in others lighter, more rounded, broadleaved woodland reaches the shore. On farmland the fields are often interspersed with small copses or lines of boundary trees, whilst policy plantings adorn the Skibo Estate. This rich variety of vertical form and texture complements the horizontals of the firth itself.</p>	<p>The lower slopes of the Ross-shire rounded hills have blocks, ribbons and belts of forestry plantation, with some deciduous planting. Larger pine woodlands of Struie Wood alternate with smaller copses in the vicinity of estate farms along the coastal route. Together with the small farm holdings located at the forest edge, this results in a complex mosaic.</p> <p>In comparison, the northern shore oakwoods on the lower slopes and lower rolling hills are distinctive. They contrast with the conifers which are prominent on the promontories which project into the firth. The variety of tree-cover on this side includes the extensive policy planting of Skibo Castle, and Skibo estate planting which extends far beyond the parkland policies into Creich.</p> <p>The mosaic-like quality of the landscape is emphasised by the relationship of the planting and promontories. Some promontories projecting into the firth are accessible; others appear cut off by planting including the prominent Dun Creich. The latter forms a strong focal point on the north firth shore.</p>
<p>• A rich variety of alluvial lands, dunes and links</p>	
<p>The low ground of the coastal flats shows endless variety and contrast, whether sandy links or well-managed farmland; level saltmarsh or undulating sand dunes; policy woodland or thickets of whin and broom.</p>	<p>Examples of different landscape types are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Skibo policies and farmland, originally forming part of the 13th century Bishop of Caithness and Sutherland's estate. Despite changes of ownership the estate has enjoyed long periods of stability (1560-1744; 1786-1866; 1900-46) with structured land management and agricultural improvements forming a major scenic component. • The rich alluvial coastal flats form another aspect of land management and settlement, sheltered at firth level and, in places incorporating distinctive geological and fluvial landforms. • The extensive dune systems and sandy links of the outer firth are distinctive. Their characters are complex and varied with different types of naturally occurring formations. • Areas of whin and broom occur throughout the firth shores. Some areas can be extensive, forming thick dense banks and thickets. Although these areas can invade important habitat and pasture, they do add visual diversity.
<p>• The ever-changing firth</p>	
<p>Above all it is the firth itself, with its innumerable bays, sands, flats, shallows and promontories which presents a constantly changing scene – a dynamic foreground to the landscape of farms</p>	<p>In contrast to the surrounding landscape, natural forces rather than human influences are dominant within the tidal waters.</p> <p>The firth possesses many glacial and estuarine landforms. These are valued and recognised by specialists but</p>

<p>and hills beyond.</p> <p>Dynamism comes from the ebb and flow of the tides, the shifting of sediments, the clouds scurrying above, the waves below, and flocks of birds feeding or flying along the shore.</p> <p>The reflections off the water and the wet sands, together with wide-open skies, show dramatic changes in colour and texture on a daily and seasonal basis, with light itself the determining factor in the experience.</p>	<p>appreciated and enjoyed by many - both residents and visitors.</p>
<p>• <i>The tranquillity of an undeveloped coastline</i></p>	
<p>The Dornoch Firth lacks any major ports or industry along its shoreline and possesses a rural ambience of great tranquillity.</p>	<p>The firth is not without its obvious structures. Infrastructure includes the railway along the south side, the A9 crossing, with its long bridge, and the A836 metal bridge at Bonar Bridge. This transport infrastructure offers opportunities for good views of the NSA, whether travelling by train or crossing the bridges, but does not diminish the rural character of the area.</p>
<p><i>Location-specific quality</i></p>	
<p>• <i>Migdale, a microcosm of the wider Dornoch Firth</i></p>	
<p>Migdale, with its loch, agricultural land, woodland, moorland and crag, expresses, an inland variation of the same themes of water, lowland and upland. This diversity in a small area gives Migdale great visual appeal.</p>	<p>Unlike most of the rest of the NSA, the area around Migdale is croftland, with fields generally of a smaller size. Similarities between this area and the wider Dornoch Firth are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The long and linear Migdale Loch, enclosed by prominent ridges and hills. • The low-lying agricultural land at the western end. • A diverse land cover presenting a varied scene, with a mosaic of plantations, croftland, native woodland and other areas of semi-natural vegetation. • The distinctive, prominent, whale-backed form of Migdale Rock (<i>a roche moutonnée</i>) corresponds with Dun Creich – both in form and visually acting as a focal point. • The sweeping moorland on the north shores of the firth act as a hilly backdrop to Migdale loch and crofts. It parallels the backcloth of the higher Ross-shire hills and their relationship with the firth.

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