

# East Caithness Cliffs

Marine Protected Area



The black guillemot's  
east coast stronghold

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## Marine Protected Area

East Caithness Cliffs Marine Protected Area (MPA) encompasses nearshore waters off the coast between Wick and Helmsdale used for foraging by over 1,500 breeding black guillemots. This is the most important area on the east coast of the UK for this charismatic Scottish seabird. Unlike other auks which feed offshore, the black guillemot is typically found feeding close inshore, rarely dispersing far from its breeding area even in winter.



The black guillemots, also known as tysties, live on the rocky crevices and ledges of the sea cliffs adjacent to the MPA. The sandstone cliffs which rise to 150 m at Berriedale, have been weathered by the action of the sea to provide ideal nesting conditions for breeding seabirds and the black guillemots jostle for space amongst an estimated 300,000 other tenants.



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Location: 58° 15.987' N 003° 18.869' W

Area: 114 km<sup>2</sup>



A black guillemot in winter plumage

## Protected Feature & Conservation Objective

Biodiversity: black guillemot.

The aim is to **conserve this feature** in order to make a long lasting contribution to the MPA network.

The MPA overlaps the seaward part of the East Caithness Cliffs Special Protection Area (SPA), designated for internationally important numbers of other seabirds including razorbill, black-legged kittiwake, northern fulmar and common guillemot.

Out from the coast, the sea bed within the MPA drops away gradually, ideal for the black guillemots that feed in these rich tide-swept waters. Using their wings to propel them through the water they forage for fish and crabs on the sea bed to depths of about 50 m, holding their breath for up to 2½ minutes! Unmistakeable in the summer, they have bright red legs and feet. They are otherwise black apart from a large white oval patch on each wing. In the winter they turn white with black barring on their backs and black wings - a “salt and pepper” plumage. Much like us, black guillemots can be left or right-‘handed’ - they carry the fish they catch in their bills and show a preference for the direction in which the heads of their prey point.

# Further Information

Further information on Nature Conservation MPAs, the wider network and protected areas management is available at [www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/marine/marine-environment/mpanetwork](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/marine/marine-environment/mpanetwork)

For Nature Conservation MPA site documents and more on the fascinating range of marine life to be found in Scotland's seas, please visit

[www.snh.gov.uk/mpas](http://www.snh.gov.uk/mpas) - for territorial waters

[www.jncc.defra.gov.uk/scottishmpas](http://www.jncc.defra.gov.uk/scottishmpas) - for offshore waters



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Joint Nature Conservation Committee

## The Caithness cliffs

