



Scottish Natural Heritage

## LOCH OF ISBISTER AND THE LOONS

### Site of Special Scientific Interest

#### SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 1031

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#### Purpose



The Loons

This is a public statement prepared by SNH for owners and occupiers of the SSSI. It outlines the reasons it is designated as an SSSI and provides guidance on how its special natural features should be conserved or enhanced. This Statement does not affect or form part of the statutory notification and does not remove the need to apply for consent for operations requiring consent.

We welcome your views on this statement.

Natural features of Loch of Isbister and the Loons SSSI	Condition of feature (date monitored)	Other relevant designations
Basin fen	Favourable, maintained (July 2002)	Very wet mires often identified by an unstable 'quaking' surface (SAC)
Breeding bird assemblage	Favourable, maintained (January 2007)	
Pintail, breeding	Favourable, maintained (May 2002)	

#### Description of the site

Loch of Isbister and the Loons Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is a complex wetland area in the north west of Mainland and is of national importance for its plants and birds.

The site is Orkney's best example of a basin fen and sits in a shallow natural basin, fed by burns and springs. Over thousands of years, vegetation has gradually encroached on the Loch of Isbister and formed a range of habitats, including peatland. Relatively small differences in water levels and soil fertility across the site favour different plant species and give rise to the complex mosaic of vegetation that characterises the site today. The site in particular contains excellent examples of vegetation that forms on the margins of lochs. The mosaic of habitats supports a very rich variety of wetland plants, including autumnal water-starwort, slender-leaved pondweed and the regionally scarce fragrant orchid.

The site also supports a wide variety of breeding wildfowl including (common Orkney names follow in brackets): wigeon, mallard (stock duck), teal, tufted duck, red breasted merganser (sawbill, harle), shoveler and shelduck (sly goose) together with a nationally

important population of pintail. Over recent years an average of three pairs have bred on the site representing 6% of the British population. Other species breeding on the SSSI are curlew (whaup), redshank, lapwing (teeick, teeo), snipe (horse-gowk) and Arctic tern. Greenland white-fronted geese also use the site in the winter months.

Loch of Isbister and the Loons SSSI is also designated as Loch of Isbister Special Area of Conservation for the features detailed in the table below. The site is internationally important as a high quality example of a naturally nutrient rich water body and is also used by internationally important numbers of otters.

The features on the site are regularly monitored and currently they are all in a favourable condition. The extent and composition of the basin fen feature is in a similar condition to the last site condition monitoring and no invasive species were found to be present. The site continues to support a wide range of breeding birds and the average number of pintail breeding at the site has remained steady.

<b>Features of overlapping Natura sites that are not notified as SSSI natural features</b>	<b>Condition of feature (date monitored)</b>	<b>Designation (SPA or SAC)</b>
Naturally nutrient-rich lakes or lochs which are often dominated by pondweed	Favourable, maintained (August 2004)	Special Area of Conservation (SAC)
Otter	Favourable, maintained (September 2004)	SAC

### **Past and present management**

Part of the site is owned by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and is managed as part of the Loons and Loch of Banks nature reserve. Water levels within the site are partially controlled by the operation of a basic stone sluice, which lies in the Loch of Isbister outflow, outwith the site boundary. Management of water levels is subject to an agreement between RSPB and the sluice owner, but the level of control afforded by the sluice is somewhat limited. During a period of low water, what appeared to be a ditch and dyke system was observed on the exposed bed of the loch. This could be evidence of a much lower water level in the past and management of the surrounding area as wet meadows.

Part of the RSPB's holding has been entered into a Rural Development Contract (RDC) offered under the Scotland Rural Development Programme (SRDP). This includes implementation of a grazing plan in order to benefit ground nesting waders by providing a diverse habitat.

There are no walking trails within the site and visitors to the RSPB reserve are instead encouraged to use a bird hide or alternative viewpoint next to the road in order to minimise disturbance. Information about the reserve is provided at both these sites.

The site is also periodically fished for brown trout by the Orkney Trout Fishing Association. Shooting is currently discouraged by all owners of the SSSI.

The northern section of the site has been subject to extensive peat cutting in the past and this continued up until shortly after the Second World War.

**Objectives for Management** (and key factors influencing the condition of natural features)

We wish to work with the owners and occupiers to protect the site and to maintain and where necessary enhance its features of special interest. SNH aims to carry out site survey, monitoring and research as appropriate to increase our knowledge and understanding of the site and its natural features and to monitor the effectiveness of its management.

Future funding for positive environmental management may be available under RDC's.

The EU Habitats and Birds Directives oblige Government to avoid, in SACs and SPAs, the deterioration of natural habitats and the habitats of species, as well as disturbance of the species for which the areas have been designated, in so far as such disturbance could be significant in relation to the objectives of these Directives. The objectives below have been assessed against these requirements. All authorities proposing to carry out or permit to be carried out operations likely to have a significant effect on the European interests of this SSSI must assess those operations against the relevant Natura conservation objectives (which are listed on our website through the SNHi - SiteLink facility).

**1. To maintain the extent and structure of the habitat.**

The condition of this wetland site is highly sensitive to changes in water level. Ensure as far as possible that water levels are retained at an appropriate level. Several pools within the basin fen habitat are directly connected to the Loch of Isbister and any significant changes in water levels in the loch could adversely affect the basin fen. In particular, any reduction in the Loch of Isbister water level, even on a seasonal basis, could be damaging.

**2. To avoid significant disturbance to typical species within the site specifically to the breeding bird populations.**

Excessive disturbance can affect the breeding success of nesting birds. Management of the site as a nature reserve ensures that responsible access is promoted through the provision of a bird hide and interpretation boards. However, any increase in recreational use of loch through activities such as shooting, angling or walking would increase disturbance to breeding birds.

**3. To maintain the distribution of typical species throughout the habitat by ensuring that the conditions and processes required to support them are sustained.**

The current grazing regime on the site, including that supported by SRDP within the RSPB's holdings, is not thought to cause any adverse effects. However, changes in the grazing regime could adversely affect the notified features, with the basin mire areas being identified as particularly sensitive.

**Other factors affecting the natural features of the site**

Pollution: Although the Loch of Isbister has a naturally high nutrient level any increase could have an adverse effect on the site. Agricultural run-off and pollution from point sources can cause increases in nutrient levels. The Orkney and Shetland Area Advisory Group to the Scotland River Basin Management Plan has identified Loch of Isbister as one of a number of high quality small water bodies within Orkney potentially at risk from diffuse pollution.

Date last reviewed: 01 March 2011

