



**Scottish Natural Heritage**  
All of nature for all of Scotland

**LOCH OF SKENE**  
Site of Special Scientific Interest

**SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT**

**Site code: 1038**

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**Purpose**



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.

**Description of the site**

Loch of Skene is a shallow, nutrient-rich loch, fringed by reedbed and willow carr.

The loch attracts large numbers of wildfowl and common gulls in autumn and winter, in particular internationally important numbers of greylag geese but recently also pink-footed geese. In addition, the numbers of roosting common gulls are regularly of national or international importance. The loch is nationally important for wintering goldeneye.

<b>Natural features of Loch of Skene SSSI</b>	<b>Condition of feature (date monitored)</b>	<b>Other relevant designations</b>
Greylag goose	Unfavourable, declining (November 2008)	SPA, Ramsar
Pink-footed goose	Not formally assessed	
Common gull	Favourable, maintained (February 1999)	
Goldeneye	Favourable, maintained (February 2001)	

Greylag and pink-footed geese are generally present in autumn and winter when they roost on the loch, mostly at night. Greylag goose numbers became increasingly important in the 1980s, with peaks averaging<sup>1</sup> 5 500 by 1986. Numbers were highest in the early 1990s, with peaks averaging 10 840 by 1995. Populations then fell to lower levels in the 2000s, averaging 5957 by 2003, and fell further to only 27 and 32 in 2006/7 and 2007/8 respectively. In contrast, the number of pink-footed geese

<sup>1</sup> The averages referred to in this paragraph are the average of peak counts taken over a five year period. This method is used to reduce the high variability that can occur in bird numbers from year to year.

increased massively in recent years, with peaks averaging 13 363 by 2003. The changes reflect national trends in goose populations and movements that are unrelated to the management of the loch. The Icelandic population of pink-footed geese has grown steadily since the early 1980s. There appears to be a northward shift in the distribution of wintering greylags in Scotland, with 60% of the wintering greylags now found on Orkney.

The size of the common gull roost is difficult to assess by ordinary counts because the gulls are only present at dusk and night when visibility is poor. Occasional specialist surveys indicate that the gull roost is regularly of national or international importance. For example, a survey in 2003 recorded 17 284 common gulls.

The loch has held large numbers of goldeneye in autumn and winter since the 1970s. Goldeneye feed on the loch during the day and roost there at night. They have increased from an average of 150 to 400 by the end of the 1980s, before declining to 200 by the end of 1990s, and recently increasing again, back up to 250, and still remaining at levels of national importance. Recently, goldeneye has started to breed on the loch.

Loch of Skene is classified as a Special Protection Area and Ramsar site, qualifying for greylag geese.

The loch is regionally important as an autumn and winter roost for a variety of wildfowl, as one of relatively few large water bodies in north-east Scotland. In addition to the species mentioned above, mallard, widgeon, teal, pochard, coot and mute swan are often found on the loch. They feed on the loch during the day and roost there at night.

In the 1980s and 1990s numbers of goosander over winter were occasionally of national importance, but recently numbers have apparently declined.

An influx of whooper swan occurred in the 1990s, with numbers of national and European importance, averaging 203 birds (2% of British total). Numbers declined steadily though the late 1990s and it is now only an occasional visitor, the last significant number being a count of 85 in November 2003.

The breeding bird community is moderately diverse and includes tufted duck, osprey (1 pair, since 2003), and probably also little grebe. The tufted duck breeding population has not been surveyed in detail but an average of 98 birds in March in 1997-2000 and 2002 equates to just over 0.5% of the of British breeding population.

Away from the shallowest waters around its margins, the loch has a dense community of aquatic plants. The habitats fringing the loch include beds of reed canary grass and wet woodlands of birch, willow and alder. The woodland fringing the north-east of the loch, comprising willow-birch carr and beech, is categorised as an ancient woodland, as it is shown as woodland on both the first edition OS maps of 1860 and the older, Roy maps of 1750. The alder woodland by the inlet is also shown on the Roy Map. The pine plantations to the west of the loch were established more recently.

The loch and the semi-natural habitats around the loch support a number of local or rare plant species, including annual water-starwort, lesser pondweed, flat-stalked

pondweed, shoreweed, needle spike-rush, coral root orchid and lesser butterfly orchid.

Loch of Skene is an important site for otter, which is a qualifying interest of the River Dee Special Area of Conservation.

### **Past and present management**

The main inlet and outlet to and from the loch are the Kinnernie and Leuchar Burns, in the northwest and south of the loch. The loch was dammed to provide water to power a hydro scheme generating electricity for Dunecht House. Given the volume of water contained by the dam it is covered by the Reservoirs Act and has to be maintained accordingly.

Water depth in the loch is controlled through a sluice on the outlet to Leuchar Burn. It is the policy of the Estate to keep the sluice closed with water level dictated by water flow into the loch. Water height above the crest of the weir varies from between 0 and 240mm. Maintenance works are required from time to time under the Reservoirs Acts and also to the islands and channel leading from the Tower Lodge boathouse. For maintenance the water level is lowered and then allowed to recover naturally.

The margins of the SSSI are used for occasional shooting of wildfowl and the control of pest species. The artificial and natural islands on the loch are also used as a base for wildfowling. Periodic strimming is carried out, to keep the vegetation low, along with repairs to stonework.

The loch is also used for sport fishing (pike and trout) and commercial eel fishing once occurred.

Recreation on the loch includes sailing between 1 March and 30 June each year. Since the introduction of the Land Reform Act there has been increasing interest from other recreational users - canoeists, kayakers and windsurfers - as Loch of Skene is one of few large water bodies in the north-east of Scotland and in close proximity to Aberdeen. A path provides access around parts of the loch.

The principal land use in the loch's catchment is agriculture, although approximately 13% is coniferous and deciduous woodland (Owen 1983). The plantations adjacent to the loch have been managed under various forestry schemes.

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

We wish to work with the owner and occupier to protect the site and to maintain and where necessary enhance its features of special interest. We aim to carry out site survey, monitoring and research as appropriate to increase our knowledge and understanding of the site and its natural features.

The EU Habitats and Birds Directives oblige Government to avoid, in SACs and SPA, 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 SiteLink facility).

## **1. To maintain the conditions which attract existing bird populations**

As with most freshwater bodies, it is the management of the catchment which has the principal influence on the ecology of the loch. Whilst the management within the SSSI boundary is in harmony with the scientific interest of the site, the nutrient status of the loch became increasingly eutrophic in the latter quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, causing algal blooms and depleting aquatic plant communities. The source of these additional nutrients is associated with diffuse and point agricultural sources (Owen, 1983). However, with the rapid expansion of nearby residential areas at Westhill and Kirkton of Skene, additional pressure from surface water drainage is becoming a potential concern.

SNH, the owner, local authority, local ornithologists and recreational users have developed local recreational guidance in accord with Scottish Outdoor Access Code. Guidance panels have been erected in spring 2010 in two places near where there is some parking. The working group will try to ensure that access to the loch is taken in a responsible way and impacts on the natural heritage interests of the loch will continue to be monitored.

## **2. To maintain the largely undisturbed habitats fringing the loch**

The reedbeds around the loch are largely undisturbed and do not require any management. They are an important habitat for otter and many birds. Forestry management should continue to avoid disturbance to the rare birds that nest in trees adjacent to the loch.

Date last reviewed: 20 June 2011.