Scottish Natural Heritage
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LOCH OF WESTER
Site of Special Scientific Interest

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 1041

The Links, Golspie Business Park, Golspie, Sutherland, KW10 6UB.
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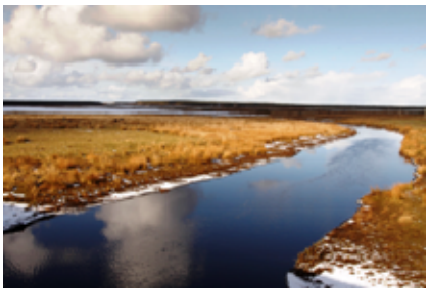
Purpose



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.

This Statement is available in Gaelic on request.

Natural features of Loch of Wester SSSI	Condition of feature (date monitored)	Other relevant designations
Mesotrophic loch	Favourable, maintained (July 2004)	Special Area of Conservation (SAC) (also known as 'Naturally nutrient-rich lakes or lochs which are often dominated by pondweed')
Whooper swan, non-breeding	Favourable, maintained (March 2008)	Special Protection Area (SPA), Ramsar

Features of overlapping Natura sites that are not notified as SSSI features	Condition of feature (date monitored)	SPA or SAC
Greenland white-fronted goose, non-breeding	Favourable, maintained (March 2010)	SPA, Ramsar
Greylag goose, non-breeding	Favourable, maintained (April 2001)	SPA, Ramsar

Description of the site

Loch of Wester Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is a shallow, mineral-rich loch with abundant, submerged vegetation and large areas of fen and marshy grassland around the margins. It is located less than 1km west of Sinclair's Bay, around 9km to the northwest of Wick. The site is designated as Loch of Wester Special Area of Conservation (SAC) for its internationally important loch habitat. Loch of Wester is also a component of the Caithness Lochs Special Protection Area and Ramsar site which supports internationally important wintering populations of whooper swan, Greenland white-fronted goose and greylag goose.

Mesotrophic loch (a loch with a moderate level of nutrients)
Loch of Wester was formed as the sand dunes on Keiss Links developed and impounded a shallow body of water with a mean depth of just 0.5m. The loch has a moderate level of nutrients which allows an abundance and variety of aquatic plants to grow here. The loch drains to the sea by a slow flowing tidal river which is approximately 1.5km in length. The first 300m of this river, between the loch and the old stone road bridge, is within the SSSI boundary.

There are several species of fine-leaved pondweeds (Figure 1), stonewort and a well-developed marginal fen. Two aquatic species of note that occur here are slender-leaved pondweed *Potamogeton filiformis* and a stonewort *Chara aspera* which are both nationally scarce. The marginal fen community is dominated by species such as bottle sedge, meadowsweet, marsh cinquefoil and yellow-flag iris but there are also some locally uncommon plants such as water sedge and globe flower.

Monitoring of the loch habitat took place in summer 2004 and it was found to be in favourable condition. Plant species known to exist within this type of loch were located during the survey, including the notable pondweed and stonewort species. In addition, ivy-leaved duckweed was recorded for the first time, which is the most northerly record of this species. No non-native or invasive plant species were recorded from the loch or its margins and there were no surface algal blooms, although moderate amounts of filamentous algae were present.

Figure 1. Fine-leaved pondweed

Figure 2. Whooper swan

Whooper swan
Whooper swan (Figure 2) breed in Iceland and migrate south to spend the winter in Britain and Ireland. Loch of Wester is an important site for wintering whooper swan as over 1% of the British population roost and feed here. The population of whooper swan in Caithness is also important because the county lies towards the northern limit of this species' wintering distribution.

The average winter peak count of whooper swans on Loch of Wester between 2005 and 2008 was 87 birds. Although this is a decrease on the average winter peak count of 183 between 1995 and 2000, these changes in numbers are within acceptable limits of population fluctuation. The swan feature was assessed as being in favourable condition.

Greenland white-fronted goose and greylag goose
Loch of Wester forms part of the Caithness Lochs Special Protection Area (SPA), together with six other sites in Caithness. Between them, these lochs support internationally important wintering populations of whooper swan, Greenland white-fronted geese and Icelandic greylag geese.

Other interests
Loch of Wester is an important site for other species of wintering wildfowl including wigeon, pochard, tufted duck, teal and goldeneye. Although not notified for its breeding birds, the site is important in this respect and supports species such as redshank, curlew, dunlin, snipe, ringed plover, and red-breasted merganser. The waterside vegetation is also home to birds such as sedge warbler and reed bunting. Teal, tufted duck, grey heron and mute swan are also noted as breeding at the site.

This wetland habitat is also important for aquatic insects. A nationally scarce water beetle (*Coelambus novemlineatus*) is found here.

Past and present management
Most of the surrounding land is predominantly low lying agricultural land. The main inflow to the loch comes from the Burn of Hobbiegill which flows into the site from the northwest. There is a conifer plantation adjacent to the north east of the site which also borders this burn. There is also inflow from the Burn of Auckhorn in the north and several smaller burns and drains. Land around the loch is used for sheep and cattle grazing, including on parts of the marginal fen.

The site is frequently used for recreational activities such as fishing, wildfowling and birdwatching. The loch is fished for brown trout, sea trout and occasional salmon both from the shore and from boats in the summer months. Fisheries management in the past has included stocking of trout of River Thurso origin and clearing of small areas of aquatic vegetation. Wildfowling occurs on the loch for geese and ducks. Hides have been erected and some supplementary feeding of waterfowl occurs in areas immediately outwith the site.

To the south side of the loch there is a road/rail track which is used for the fabrication and launch of sub sea pipelines for the oil and gas industry. This track is approximately 30m wide and runs from the beach at Sinclair's Bay inland for around 7km and briefly passes the SSSI at the southern corner.

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

We wish to work with the owners and land managers 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.

The EU Birds Directive obliges 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, where 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.

A list of Operations Requiring Consent forms part of the formal notification documents of the SSSI. These, and the discussions on land management involved in the issuing of formal consents, are intended to minimise the threat of any damage to the natural features.

1. To maintain the condition, distribution and extent of the freshwater and loch habitats

Water levels and water quality play a crucial role in the condition of wetland habitats and if these are maintained, then little active management is needed for this site at present. Any increase in drainage, abstraction or other activities affecting the hydrology of the site and the wider Loch of Wester catchment should be considered carefully to ensure that the high water table is maintained. Agriculture, forestry and wildfowl management operations within the hydrological catchment should be carefully managed to prevent the input of excess chemicals, nutrients or sediment into watercourses in order to maintain the mesotrophic status required by the vegetation. Any enrichment of the loch would be inappropriate since this would be likely to alter the ecosystem of the loch, possibly resulting in algal blooms or excessive growth of aquatic vegetation. Drier areas at the edge of the site would benefit from light grazing that ensures that tall, rank vegetation does not out-compete smaller and shade-intolerant species. Stocking levels should however be low enough to allow plants to flower and set seed and to avoid significant poaching the ground.

As the loch is used for fishing it is important to guard against any pollution from this activity. Outboard motors should be well maintained to avoid water contamination from leakages or spillages.

Controls over potentially damaging changes in management of lochs and streams are covered by the Controlled Activities Regulations (CAR) which is regulated by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA). It is recommended that the guidelines for these regulations are followed.

2. **To maintain the populations of wintering geese and swans**

This objective can be met if the habitat is maintained following the advice given in the objective above and there is no significant disturbance of the birds. Since disturbance can affect overwintering birds any management activities on or around the site should be planned to minimise disturbance to overwintering geese and swans.

Wintering geese and swans may be present in Caithness between late September and late April. The exact dates that these birds arrive in Caithness in autumn and leave again in spring varies from year to year, depending on the weather at their breeding grounds in Iceland and Greenland, as well as the weather in Caithness. Whooper swan can spend the whole day foraging at Loch of Wester as well as roosting here, so any activities during the day in winter should be planned to avoid disturbance to these birds. Wintering geese use Loch of Wester mainly for roosting overnight.

The fishing season on Loch of Wester runs during the summer months. If any geese or swans are present on the loch during the fishing season, care should be taken not to disturb these birds. This is only likely to happen during the early or late part of the fishing season. Old fishing line should be removed as it could entangle birds if it were to be left on the site.

Greylag geese are legal quarry between 1 September and 31 January (other than on Sundays or during cold-weather bans on wildfowling). However other species that roost here in winter – Greenland white-fronted goose and whooper swan – are not legal quarry. SNH discourages shooting of greylag geese that would disturb the protected Greenland white-fronted goose and whooper swan.

SNH consent is needed before any wildfowling is carried out on the site. SNH recommends that the "British Association of Shooting and Conservation's Code of Practice for sporting agents and guides offering inland goose shooting" should be followed and that any wildfowling should be carried out infrequently, with every effort made to avoid disturbance to non-quarry species.

Other factors affecting the natural features of the site

The breeding success of the geese and swans that winter on this site is likely to affect the number of birds wintering here. If the overall populations of geese and swans fall due to lower breeding success, fewer birds are likely to overwinter at Loch of Wester.

Wildfowling outwith Loch of Wester SSSI may affect the number of greylag geese that overwinter on the site since the overall population of this species is likely to increase if fewer birds are shot and decrease if more geese are killed by wildfowlers. If the overall population of greylag geese changes, the number of birds overwintering at Loch of Wester is also likely to change.

Climate change may alter the distribution of wintering geese and swans. Warmer conditions in winter might lead to an increase in the number of birds that overwinter in Caithness rather than further south. Very cold conditions cause the water to freeze at Loch of Wester (due to its shallow depth), which encourages geese and swans to seek areas of water elsewhere.

Date last reviewed: 30 September 2010