



Scottish Natural Heritage

**LOCH RUTHVEN**  
**Site of Special Scientific Interest**

**SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT**

Site code: 1047

**EAST HIGHLAND AREA**  
**Fodderty way**  
**Dingwall Business Park**  
**DINGWALL**  
**IV15 9XB**

**Tel: 01349 865333**

**Fax: 01349 865609**

**Email: [EAST\\_HIGHLAND@snh.gov.uk](mailto:EAST_HIGHLAND@snh.gov.uk)**

**Purpose**



RSPB

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 Ruthven is a shallow hill loch of approximately 150 hectares, situated 220 metres above sea level. Birch woodland surrounds much of the rocky shoreline, along which are found pockets of bottle sedge. At the western end of the loch, the open water gives way to a diverse bottle sedge-dominated swamp, fen and rush pasture. To the south of the loch lie the cliffs and crags of Stac Gorm (Gaelic for the blue peak) and Craig Ruthven, and to the north the site is bordered by wooded hills.

Loch Ruthven is a SSSI because it is an outstanding example of an unmodified loch of moderate nutrient status, and because it supports a diverse array of breeding waterfowl. The loch is a feeding, roosting and nesting site for 15 bird species including little grebe, wigeon, tufted duck, red-breasted merganser, oystercatcher, snipe and curlew. Black-throated divers have also been recorded here and raptors (including osprey and hen harrier) regularly hunt over the SSSI.

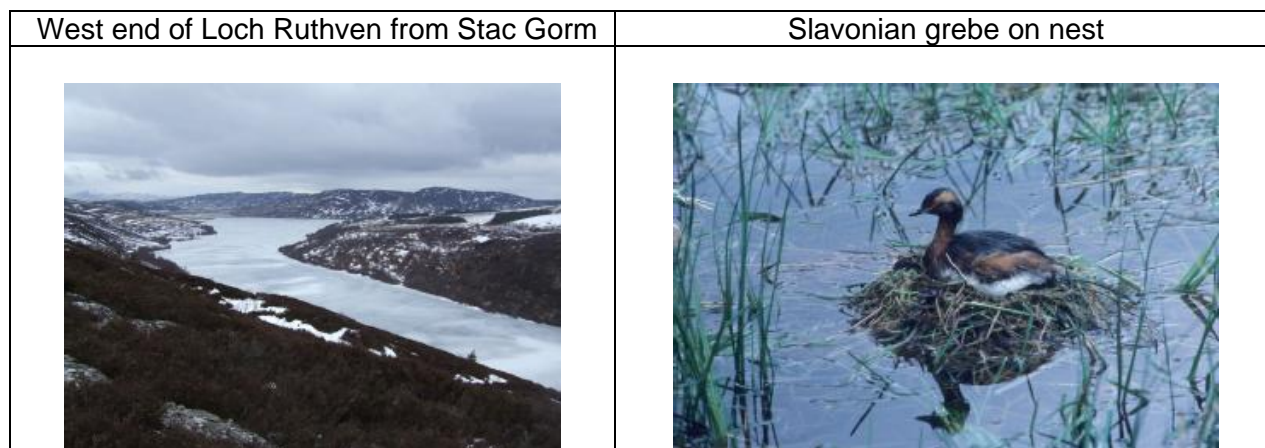
Loch Ruthven is also a SSSI because it is the most important breeding locality for Slavonian grebe within Britain, supporting consistently high numbers of this species. An average of 20.4 breeding pairs was recorded at Loch Ruthven between 2000 and 2004 and 15.6 pairs between 2005 and 2009 (37% of the British breeding population).

The site is of European importance as a Special Protection Area (SPA) for the population of breeding Slavonian grebe.

Loch Ruthven has also been designated a Special Area of Conservation (SAC)

because it is considered to be one of the best examples in the United Kingdom of a water body of moderate nutrient status, and for supporting a significant population of otters.

When monitored between 2001 and 2004, the natural features of the SSSI, SAC and SPA were all considered to be in favourable condition. The loch was clean, free of sediment and there were no invasive non-native plant species. There was a diverse breeding bird assemblage and a healthy population of breeding Slavonian grebes (although there are indications of a recent decline).



<b>Natural features of Loch Ruthven SSSI</b>	<b>Condition of feature (and date monitored)</b>	<b>Other relevant designations</b>
Mesotrophic loch	Favourable maintained (August 2004)	SAC
Breeding bird assemblage	Favourable maintained (October 2001)	
Slavonian grebe	Favourable maintained (July 2002)	SPA

<b>Features of overlapping Natura sites that are not notified as SSSI natural features</b>	<b>Condition of feature (date monitored)</b>	<b>SPA or SAC</b>
Clear water lakes or lochs with aquatic vegetation and poor to moderate nutrient levels	Favourable maintained (August 2004)	SAC
Otter	Favourable maintained (July 2004)	SAC

### Past and present management

Loch Ruthven lies in an area of considerable pre-historic and post-medieval activity, although most of the archaeological sites lie outside the SSSI. There are four possible crannogs within the loch and a Scheduled Ancient Monument exists at Tom Buidhe Fort. Human influence within and around the SSSI is likely to have been intense and continuous, and would have entailed the netting and snaring of fish and wildfowl, the cutting of trees and rushes for domestic use and the use of pastures by the shore for grazing animals.

In the more recent past the land use has been dominated by adjacent farming and forestry. As part of a management agreement with SNH in 1988 an area of 3.4 hectares along the northern shore was fenced to encourage the regeneration of native trees, and in 1989 a further 255 native trees were planted. Further planting of native trees was carried out in the early 90s, but there has been limited regeneration probably due to browsing by deer.

The loch has a long history as a brown trout fishery. It is very popular with anglers, and boat fishing for brown trout takes place through a permit system that is organised by the local fishing syndicate.

Part of Loch Ruthven is owned and managed by the RSPB as a public nature reserve. A bird hide is located on the south shore, near the eastern end of the loch. About 8,000 people visit the hide each year, and many will also walk along stretches of the shoreline and on to the surrounding hills.

RSPB carry out positive management for Slavonian grebes and also undertake research into the species. There is an ongoing program of sedge bed creation, and willow cuttings have been planted along the shore. This management provides further nesting sites for the grebes as well as providing shelter from predators and adverse weather conditions.

In 1998, a code of conduct (the "Grebe Cross Code") was launched aimed at raising awareness about the potential problem of disturbance to grebes from anglers and other recreational activities. This code was disseminated to all local fishing interests. The code and other interpretation highlight the viewing facilities at Loch Ruthven, partly to minimise disturbance to grebes at other more vulnerable sites.

The catchment surrounding Loch Ruthven is used for farming, forestry, sporting, recreation and residential purposes. Rough grazing, deer stalking and grouse shooting is concentrated on the higher moorland areas to the south and west. Extensive sheep and cattle grazing occurs on the less productive grassland. A small area of arable farmland can be found at the western end of the loch.

Commercial conifer plantations extend across much of the catchment, mainly in the north and east. Approximately half of the loch shore is fringed with native woodland.

Loch Ruthven has been used as a breeding site for Slavonian grebes for many years, and existing management is considered to be compatible with the nature conservation interests of the site.

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

We wish to work with the owner 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, and to monitor the effectiveness of the management.

The EU Habitats and Birds Directives oblige Government to avoid, in SAC 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 condition of the loch and of shore habitats used by wetland birds and otters by, for example:**

- maintaining the medium nutrient status of the water through careful fertiliser use and creating waterside buffer strips to intercept run-off in the catchment
- managing grazing pressure (especially in winter);
- avoiding poaching of the loch shore by fencing where necessary
- maintaining suitable otter holt habitat such as hollow tree roots;

**2. To maintain or preferably increase the population and breeding success of Slavonian grebes by, for example:**

- reducing / avoiding significant disturbance by keeping to the Grebe Cross Code and promoting it to visitors (copies are available from RSPB Inverness and SNH East Highland Area offices);
- by avoidance of the introduction of non-native fish species, especially pike;
- conservation and / or enhancement of sedge beds where appropriate;
- continuing research on the factors affecting the Slavonian grebe population;
- ensuring positive visitor management through the provision of facilities for enjoyment and understanding of Slavonian grebes and other bird species;
- monitoring the impact of predators, eg mink, and considering control if necessary.

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

There are a number of off-site factors that may be affecting the breeding population of Slavonian grebes that are currently the subject of research by RSPB.

**Date last reviewed:** 17 March 2010