



Scottish Natural Heritage

**Avon Gorge
Site of Special Scientific Interest**

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 108

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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

Avon Gorge site of special scientific interest (SSSI) comprises the steep, wooded banks of the River Avon, approximately 2km south-east of Grangemouth. The site is one of the few remaining ancient, semi-natural woodland sites in the Falkirk area. The underlying geology is of Lower Old Red Sandstones, Millstone Grits and Carboniferous Limestone overlain by glacial deposits of sands, gravels, clays and boulder clays. The water quality of the river is now reasonable, although previously it has been badly polluted by industrial, mining, domestic and agricultural waste.

The woodland has been extensively felled in the past. As a result, there are few remaining old, mature native tree specimens, with most of the ash and oak having been felled around the late 19th century. Both sycamore and beech were probably planted after this period of felling and some specimens are 150 years or older. Prior to the spread of Dutch elm disease, elm was a dominant component of the woodland. However, from the mid-1970s onwards, all mature elm trees were killed off. Ash and elm are regenerating vigorously and in places there are a good number of semi-mature ash, which may have been planted. The small numbers of oak, mostly found on the south bank, are not regenerating, probably due to the closed canopy. There are only a small number of mature alder in the wetter parts of the wood and there appears to be little alder regeneration. Sycamore is abundant in much of the wood and is regenerating vigorously throughout. Beech is less abundant but does form small stands with occasional individual trees and scattered regeneration. A single stand of balsam poplar has been planted next to the river on the north bank, which is spreading by suckering. There are a variety of smaller native deciduous tree and shrub species including hazel, rowan, birch, hawthorn and bird cherry, although none of these species



are abundant.

On the mainly basic soils there have developed a rich and varied ground flora, including several plants which are rare in the district, for example, alternate-leaved golden saxifrage, moschatel, hemp agrimony, pendulous sedge and lily of the valley. The dominant ground flora comprises brambles, bluebells, great woodrush, nettles and bracken. Wet flushes with distinctive plant communities also occur. The invasive exotic Himalayan balsam and, to a lesser extent, leopard's-bane, are scattered throughout the wood. Mosses and liverworts are abundant, although no notable species have been recorded.

The wood also has a notably rich insect fauna, being the most northerly locality for several species of beetle associated with dead trees and leaf litter, including three nationally notable species. A regular supply of deadwood is therefore an important requirement. Badgers have been recorded in the area and otters are also present along this stretch of the River Avon.

Site condition monitoring, carried out in 2004, recorded the upland mixed ash woodland as being in unfavourable condition. This was attributed to the lack of species considered to be native or naturalised to the locality and to the relatively low levels of deadwood recorded at sample points.

Natural features of Avon Gorge SSSI	Condition of feature (and date monitored)
Upland mixed ash woodland	Unfavourable, no change (August 2004)

Himalayan balsam	View of south side of site
	

Past and present management

Past management

The woodland has been extensively felled and replanted in the past, resulting in the present abundance of sycamore and beech. Mr Chris Staples, a shooting tenant, has

taken a considerable interest in the management of the wood for nature conservation in recent years and has undertaken various management tasks. In 1988, a Woodland Grant Scheme was agreed. As a result, sycamore and beech were hand-felled and some sycamore regeneration was removed. Several hundred elms, which had died as a result of Dutch elm disease, were also removed by hand. An area on the north bank was also felled, with sycamore, beech and dead elms being mechanically extracted. Natural regeneration of ash, elm and sycamore and brambles is now abundant, particularly in these areas.

Cattle were wintered in the woodland until 1974; disused fencing associated with this activity has since been removed from the site.

A clay mine was operational at the east end of the north bank from the beginning of the 20th century until 1981. It is now maintained by the Bo'ness Heritage Trust as a tourist attraction.

Farm waste has been dumped at various points on the woodland edge on both sides of the valley, although this does not appear to have been such a problem in the last few years.

Present management

There are two largely disused pheasant enclosures in the wood, although pheasants are still occasionally released. A small amount of shooting and pest control of foxes, mink, grey squirrels and corvids is carried out by the shooting tenants.

Sycamore is the most abundant mature tree species and is regenerating vigorously throughout the wood. Beech is locally common and is also regenerating. Although ash and elm are also regenerating well, sycamore and beech currently form at least half of the woodland canopy and this proportion is likely to increase rather than decrease if woodland management is not carried out. Sycamore is likely to regenerate well in any areas of felling, so ongoing management to favour ash and elm will probably be required.

Himalayan balsam and, to a lesser extent, leopard's-bane, are common throughout the wood and could potentially grow into dense stands, particularly along the riverbanks. They could be controlled but would be exceedingly difficult to eradicate completely due to their widespread distribution and vigorous growth.

There is an SNH Management Agreement for 9.5 hectares of the northern part of the site for management of the woodland, particularly in the context of controlling non-native species including sycamore, Japanese knotweed and Himalayan balsam.

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 the management.

- 1. In the long term, achieve a more diverse, natural age and stand structure including field and shrub layers. As part of this aim, there should be an increase in the proportion of native tree and shrub species and a reduction in the proportion of invasive exotics, i.e. sycamore and beech.**
- 2. Maintain a large quantity of standing and fallen deadwood on site to support the beetle communities and other associated species.**

These objectives can be achieved by continuing liaison with owners and occupiers on their continued management of the woodland. The SNH Management Agreement for the north side of the site expires in December 2010 and options for management of the entire site via the Scottish Rural Development Programme should be explored up to and after that time.

- 3. Promote public access if this can be achieved without compromising the nature conservation interest of the site.**

This objective can be achieved by continuing liaison with owner/occupiers and Falkirk Council with an aim to develop existing access and enhance links to the site from the wider area.

- 4. Liaise with landowners to prevent the tipping and discharge of waste into the woodland.**

Other factors affecting the natural features of the site

The site is adjacent to Avondale landfill site and windborne waste occasionally accumulates within the SSSI. Although unlikely to affect notified features, this is an unsightly problem and detracts from public enjoyment of the SSSI.

Date Last Reviewed: 24 March 2010