



**Scottish Natural Heritage**  
**Dualchas Nàdair na h-Alba**

All of nature for all of Scotland  
Nàdair air fad airson Alba air fad

**LON A' CHUIL**  
**Site of Special Scientific Interest**

**SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT**

**Site code: 534**

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

**Tel 01408 634063**

**north\_highland@snh.gov.uk**

**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.

<b>Natural Features of Lon a' Chuil SSSI</b>	<b>Feature condition (date monitored)</b>	<b>Other relevant designation</b>
Blanket bog	Favourable, maintained (July 2006)	Special Area of Conservation (SAC), Ramsar
Breeding bird assemblage	Favourable, maintained (June 2004)	Ramsar
Greenshank	Favourable, maintained (June 2004)	Special Protection Area (SPA)

**Description of the site**

Lon a' Chuil Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) lies to the east of Strathnaver in the north of Sutherland, approximately 2km east of Syre. It is an extensive area of rolling peatland that marks the watershed to the east of Strathnaver and forms the headwaters of the River Helmsdale. The site has internationally important blanket bog habitat and associated breeding birds, with the numbers of breeding greenshank being unusually high.

Lon a' Chuil SSSI forms part of the internationally recognised peatlands of Caithness and Sutherland and is one of the most extensive areas of blanket bog in the world. These peatlands also support internationally important populations of upland birds and otters, both of which naturally occur at low densities and require large areas of undisturbed land. The body of peat under the blanket bog is also a large store of carbon. Keeping this carbon locked up in the peat and continuing land management that maintains the peat-forming process makes an important contribution to reducing Scotland's carbon emissions, helping to combat climate change.

**Blanket bog**

The relatively complex topography and geology of this area produce a great variety of peatland types. The valley side and terrace bogs which dominate the area are generally connected by way of other peatland types or areas of thinner peat. The vegetation of these areas is dominated by heather, deer sedge, cross-leaved heath and cotton grass species. Purple moor grass is more local, and tends to occur on slightly richer ground such as that found along the small burns. *Sphagnum* or bog moss forms extensive carpets in many of the wettest areas. Although not common, ladder fens, which are a distinctive mire type characterised by a series of parallel pools, occur within the site, mainly towards the southern end.

Monitoring of the blanket bog took place in July 2006. The extent of the blanket bog had been maintained since previous monitoring visits and the plant species typical of this habitat including *Sphagnum* bog mosses, dwarf birch and bog myrtle were recorded from the site. Grazing pressure was assessed as being moderately high but at present the damage to vegetation is within acceptable levels. Drainage ditches were still active on the site, but their impact on the vegetation appeared to be limited to a few metres either side of the drain. Overall the blanket bog was found to be in favourable condition.

Sundew	Golden plover
	

**Breeding bird assemblage**

The site supports a wide range of breeding moorland birds. Most of these breed on the site itself, while others breed nearby and use the site for feeding. Waterfowl including red-throated diver and greylag goose breed on the lochs. Wading birds including greenshank, golden plover, snipe and dunlin breed and feed on the blanket bog, with greenshank having been recorded at densities well above the average for Caithness and Sutherland.

Monitoring of the breeding bird assemblage and greenshank population on Lon a' Chuil SSSI was carried out in June 2004. The state of the breeding bird assemblage is assessed by awarding points to each species of birds based on their rarity, then calculating a score for the site by summing the points of each species recorded during monitoring visits. Red-throated diver, greylag goose, teal, peregrine falcon, red grouse, golden plover, dunlin, snipe, greenshank, common sandpiper and raven were among the species recorded on the site. The score calculated for Loch a' Chuil SSSI reached the target for peatland sites and the breeding bird assemblage was found to be in favourable condition.

## **Greenshank**

This site has particularly suitable habitat for greenshank, and high densities of this wading bird are found here. During Site Condition Monitoring in 2004, the density of breeding greenshank was found to be more than double the average density recorded in a survey across suitable habitat in Caithness and Sutherland in 1987. The area of suitable greenshank habitat has been maintained since previous surveys and the greenshank population was found to be in favourable condition.

## **Past and present management**

The site is mainly managed for deer stalking, sheep grazing and conservation. Peat cutting for domestic use takes place within the site boundary. Other management activities include maintenance of existing fences, occasional use of low ground pressure vehicles and muirburn in certain areas.

SNH's Peatland Management Scheme (PMS) agreements cover a large proportion of the site. These promote good conservation management. The maximum number of sheep grazing the site has been agreed between SNH and the crofting tenants on land covered by PMS agreements. Areas in which muirburn can take place have been agreed between owners and SNH and all burning complies with the Muirburn Code. The majority of the area covered by PMS agreements will not be burnt. Stock feeding is not permitted within areas of the SSSI covered by PMS agreements and a single area has been identified for supplementary feeding of deer. Peat cutting takes place in agreed areas. An established ATV track runs through the site and owners and tenants have agreed to use this where possible, or vary their routes and avoid soft ground when using vehicles on the blanket bog.

Forest Enterprise own a small area in the southwest corner of the site. This area is not planted though it is adjacent to conifer plantations. It is mostly outwith the deer fence and Forest Enterprise do not carry out deer control on the SSSI.

There are no facilities for visitors and few people visit the site at present although it can be viewed from the public road between Syre and Kinbrace which runs through the site.

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

We wish to work with the owners 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 management agreements.

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, 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, extent and distribution of the peatland habitats.**

Blanket bog depends on a continuous cover of special vegetation which continues the peat-forming process and protects the underlying body of peat. Damage to the moss cover exposes the peat surface to erosion from extremes of weather (drying, frost, wind) and trampling from animals.

Some grazing of peatland habitats is beneficial, but deer stocks should be maintained at levels which result in no obvious damage to this vegetation from grazing or trampling.

Use of vehicles can also cause damage. Off prepared tracks, only low ground pressure vehicles should be used and care should be taken in their use. The choice of route is important: soft ground, sharp turns and areas where erosion is beginning to start should be avoided as any bare peat can be very slow to re-vegetate.

Muirburn in areas covered by a management agreement (such as a Peatland Management Scheme agreement or Rural Development Contract) must follow the agreed muirburn plan. Outwith areas covered by a management agreement, any muirburn should be carried out following the Muirburn Code which recommends avoiding the burning of blanket bog and deep peat. Muirburn can cause serious long term damage to blanket bog.

It is important to maintain the natural water table in peatland habitats so no new drains should be made, nor existing ones cleared. It would be beneficial to block old drains that are still active as these drains alter the natural water table and dry out the peat on both sides of the drain. They are also likely to continue to cut down through the peat until the underlying mineral layer is reached, causing fragmentation of the bog.

Peat cutting for domestic purposes can be carried out without damaging the blanket bog by continuing to cut from existing banks, and replacing the turf with the vegetation upwards as soon as possible. This will allow new peat to start to form again in the area that has been cut and minimise drying out of the bog. SNH should be consulted before any new peat banks are opened since careful positioning of peat banks is needed to ensure that large areas of blanket bog are not accidentally damaged by altering drainage patterns.

**2. To maintain the water levels, water quality, extent and distribution of the clear water lochs and dubh lochans.** Management in the areas around lochs should avoid activities that would release sediment, excessive nutrients or chemicals into the water. Activities that might alter the water levels of lochs should be avoided. This objective can readily be achieved by maintaining the present management of lochs that allows natural processes to continue with minimal intervention or disturbance.

3. **To maintain breeding bird populations and to avoid significant disturbance of birds during the breeding season.** If the habitats on this site are maintained, following the advice given in the two Objectives for Management immediately above, breeding bird populations are also expected to be maintained. Disturbance can reduce the breeding success of nesting birds. It is important that any potential activities on the site are carefully planned to safeguard the nesting birds.

Red-throated and black-throated divers are particularly sensitive to human presence and, along with other uncommon species, are protected by special legislation. Their nests should not be disturbed during the breeding season since eggs may fail to hatch if they become chilled due to the parent birds being disturbed from the nest. Both eggs and young chicks are more likely to be eaten by predators if the parent birds are not there to protect them. It is important that anglers avoid disturbing these birds during the period April to June inclusive, when they are nesting. Anglers should look out for divers when fishing on lochs and keep as far away from their nests as possible if fishing on larger lochs. On small lochs, anglers should move to a different loch if breeding divers are present. A leaflet on 'Black-throated divers and anglers' is available from SNH on request explaining how anglers can help divers by avoiding their nests. Bird eggs and chicks are vulnerable to predation. Foxes, crows and mink are potential predators of eggs or young. Legal control of these species as part of general estate management is likely to be beneficial to breeding birds.

4. **To maintain suitable otter habitat and access routes for otter across the site and avoid activities that might disturb otters.** This objective can also be achieved by maintaining the present management that allows natural processes to continue with minimal intervention. Any known otter holts should not be disturbed. To safeguard the food supply of otters, water quality in burns, rivers and lochs should be maintained by avoiding activities that might add excess chemicals, nutrients or sediment. If any management is planned that might affect banks or piles of boulders where there could be otter holts, advice should be sought from SNH on how to avoid impacts on otters. Any fencing on the site that is likely to cross otter routes should have mesh with a large enough gauge to allow otters to pass through.

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

- **Forestry:** Tree seedlings could potentially spread into the SSSI from the adjacent coniferous plantations damaging the blanket bog habitat. Forestry could also influence the hydrology of the peatland adjacent to the plantation, water flow rates and water quality in burns downstream of plantations. It may also influence breeding bird populations near plantations.
- **Egg collecting:** Some of the rare birds that breed on Lon a' Chuil SSSI are potential targets for illegal egg collecting. Any suspicious vehicles or activity should be reported to the Police as soon as possible.

Date last reviewed: 25 June 2009

#### **Annex 1: List of features of overlapping Natura/Ramsar sites that are not notified features of Lon a' Chuil SSSI**

<b>Features of overlapping Natura/Ramsar sites that are not notified as SSSI natural features</b>	<b>Feature condition (date monitored)</b>	<b>Designation (SPA, SAC or Ramsar)</b>
Acid peat-stained lakes and ponds (dubh lochans)	Favourable, maintained (August 2004)	SAC
Clear-water lakes or lochs with aquatic vegetation and poor to moderate nutrient levels	Favourable, maintained (July 2004)	SAC
Depressions on peat substrates	Favourable, maintained (August 2004)	SAC
Very wet mires often identified by an unstable 'quaking' surface (ladder fen)	Favourable, maintained (August 2004)	SAC
Wet heathland with cross-leaved heath	Not assessed	SAC
Black-throated diver	Favourable, maintained (July 2004)	SPA
Common scoter	Favourable, maintained (August 2004)	SPA
Dunlin	Favourable, maintained (July 2004)	SPA, Ramsar
Golden eagle	Favourable, maintained (July 2003)	SPA
Golden plover	Favourable, maintained (July 2004)	SPA
Greylag goose	Not assessed	Ramsar
Hen harrier	Favourable, maintained (June 2003)	SPA
Merlin	Favourable, maintained (July 2004)	SPA
Red-throated diver	Not assessed	SPA
Short-eared owl	Not assessed	SPA
Wigeon	Not assessed	SPA
Wood sandpiper	Favourable, maintained (June 2004)	SPA
Marsh saxifrage	Not assessed	SAC
Otter	Favourable, maintained (October 2004)	SAC

Note - The list of features of overlapping Natura and Ramsar sites includes habitats and species found in the whole of the Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands SAC, SPA and Ramsar site. Some of these features may not be present on Lon a' Chuil SSSI and the presence of some species may vary from year to year.