Scottish Natural Heritage

LOWER RIVER CONON
Site of Special Scientific Interest

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 1105

EAST HIGHLAND AREA
Fodderty Way
Dingwall Business Park
Dingwall
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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

The Lower River Conon SSSI consists of several semi-natural areas on the floodplain of the River Conon extending approximately 12km from near Contin to Dingwall in Easter Ross. It supports a varied mosaic of habitats including wet alluvial woodland, fens, brackish marsh and saltmarsh.

Alluvial alder woodland occurs on the floodplain and banks of the river, in old river meanders, as well as on Garrie Island and other islands in the river. Alder and willow dominate in areas where the water table is constantly high whilst drier areas support ash, oak and birch. Greater tussock sedge *Carex paniculata* occurs in very wet areas near Easter Moy and guelder rose *Viburnum opulus* occurs on Garrie Island.

Adjacent to the river and back channels, particularly on Moy Island, are a range of fen marsh and swamp communities reflecting the transition from freshwater to terrestrial habitats. The main fen communities are dominated by tall sedges such as bottle sedge *Carex rostrata,* and bladder sedge *Carex vesicaria*. Other locally abundant species are branched bur-reed *Sparganium erectum,* reed canary-grass, *Phalaris arundinacea* and water horsetail *Equisetum fluviatile*. Exposed river gravels are an important part of the site, providing niches for regeneration of alder.

The mouth of the river, where conditions are more saline and coastal, supports saltmarsh and brackish fen with salt tolerant plants dominated by tall herbs and grasses. Extensive reed beds dominated by *Phragmites australis* are also present in

tidal areas near the mouth of the river. None of the features of interest are grazed.

The Lower River Conon SSSI is also part of Conon Islands Special Area of Conservation (SAC) designated for its alder woodlands on the floodplain. Most flood plains in Scotland have been cleared of woodland for agriculture and human settlement. This site is an example of a relatively unmodified dynamic floodplain woodland system which, together with associated fen and saltmarsh habitats, grades to coastal habitats. This situation is now rare in Europe.

The Cromarty Firth (including part of the Lower River Conon SSSI) has also been classified as a Special Protection Area for its breeding populations of osprey and common tern, its wintering populations of whooper swan, bar-tailed godwit and greylag geese and its overall wintering waterfowl assemblage (including wigeon, pintail, scaup, red-breasted merganser, oystercatcher, knot, dunlin, curlew and redshank).

The woodland habitats were monitored in August 2002 and found to be in an unfavourable condition due to the amount of non native species (including sycamore and Himalayan balsam). Subsequent management has improved the condition of the woodland but further work is required.

The open water transition fen and saltmarsh habitats were monitored in 2001 and 2002 and found to be in a favourable condition.

The important bird populations of the Cromarty Firth SPA were monitored between 2000 and 2004 and were largely in favourable condition. However, populations of breeding common tern and wintering scaup and whooper swan had declined within the SPA. Common terns do not breed within the Lower River Conon SSSI and there is no on site management that could be undertaken to improve the condition of wintering population of scaup and whooper swan within this part of the SPA.

Saltmarsh at the mouth of the River Conon	Open water transition fen, Moy Island
	

Natural features of Lower River Conon SSSI	**Condition of feature** (and date monitored)	**Other relevant designations**
Wet woodland	Unfavourable, declining (August 2002)	SAC
Open water transition fen	Favourable, maintained (August 2002)	
Saltmarsh	Favourable, maintained (August 2001)	

Features of overlapping Natura sites that are not notified as SSSI natural features	**Condition of feature** (date monitored)	**SPA or SAC**
Alder woodland on floodplains	Unfavourable, declining (August 2002)	SAC
Bar-tailed godwit	Favourable, maintained (February 2000)	SPA
Common tern, breeding	Unfavourable, declining (June 2000)	SPA
Curlew*	Favourable, maintained (February 2000)	SPA
Dunlin*	Favourable, maintained (February 2001)	SPA
Greylag goose	Favourable, maintained (November 2001)	SPA
Knot*	Favourable, maintained (February 2000)	SPA
Osprey, breeding	Favourable maintained (October 2004)	SPA
Oystercatcher*	Favourable, maintained (February 2001)	SPA
Pintail*	Favourable, maintained (February 2000)	SPA
Red-breasted merganser*	Favourable, maintained (February 2000)	SPA
Redshank*	Favourable, maintained (February 2000)	SPA
Scaup*	Unfavourable, no change (February 2000)	SPA
Whooper swan	Unfavourable, no change (February 2001)	SPA
Wigeon*	Favourable maintained (February 2000)	SPA
Waterfowl assemblage * indicates waterfowl assemblage	Favourable, maintained (February 2000)	SPA

Past and present management

Much of the former floodplain of the River Conon has been greatly modified by the installation of drainage systems and riverbank engineering to create productive agricultural land. The SSSI now consists of a series of largely isolated woodland blocks surrounded by agricultural land. The remaining woodlands and fens are generally those areas too wet to have been converted to agriculture. Some of the wettest areas were retained as part of the floodplain drainage system.

Wooded areas have been used for timber and firewood production. They also provide cover for game and at Brahan some of the trees were planted as part of the designed landscape. Part of Contin Island is grazed by domestic stock although most of the alder woodland has now been fenced to exclude grazing by stock.

The hydrology of the river has been modified and regulated by the installation of hydro-electric power generation in the upper catchment. As a result, flood events are less frequent than in the past. The River Conon itself has long been used and managed for angling. It is an important salmon river and some backwaters are also used for trout fishing.

Conservation management has recently taken place in several parts of the site including work under the Wet Woodlands Restoration LIFE project (which ended in 2002) and continuing work led by the Cromarty Firth Fishery Board, Management has focussed on the removal of invasive non-native plants (including sycamore, the shrub Ninebark *Physocarpus opulifolius*, Himalayan balsam *Impatiens glandulifera* and rhododendron), the expansion of alder woodland and restoration of former river channel habitats. Such efforts benefit the features of interest on the site and fish populations.

SNH has a current management agreement with one of the owners on this SSSI. The objectives of the agreement are to remove the invasive non-native plants thereby helping to address the currently unfavourable condition of the wet woodland feature.

The area around Maryburgh, including the SSSI, contains an extensive footpath network, used by the public and people renting holiday accommodation. Garrie Island and to a lesser extent the peninsula at Kildun are also used by the residents of Maryburgh and Conon Bridge for walking. There is some interpretation of the natural heritage of the site.

The area of saltmarsh and mudflats at the mouth of the river has been used for fishing and wildfowling but are now largely unmanaged.

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 monitor the effectiveness of the

management.

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, 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 improve and then maintain the condition of the alder woodland habitats by, for example, managing invasive non-native plant species and allowing dynamic river processes to operate.

2. To increase the extent and connectivity of woodland and fen habitats where possible (both within and adjacent to the site).

3. To maintain the extent and condition of the saltmarsh habitats.

4. To maintain conditions suitable for supporting important wintering bird populations and breeding osprey.

Other factors affecting the natural features of the site

The site is subject to significant influences from upstream catchment management particularly where this affects the hydrological regime and flood patterns. Management of invasive non-native species within the wider catchment is also required.

Rising sea levels (and the presence of flood protection banks near the mouth) are likely to affect the extent and distribution of saltmarsh and nearby woodland habitats.

Date last reviewed: 19 November 2009