

CITATION

LOWER RIVER CONON SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST HIGHLAND (Easter Ross and Cromarty)

Site code: 1105

NATIONAL GRID REFERENCES: NH 458554; NH 493544; NH 530540; NH556573

OS 1:50,000 SHEET NO: Landranger Series 26
1:25,000 SHEET NO: Explorer Series 431 & 432

AREA: 281.47 hectares

NOTIFIED NATURAL FEATURES

Biological: Woodlands: Wet woodland

Biological: Fens: Open water transition fen (includes swamp)

Biological: Coastlands: Saltmarsh

DESCRIPTION

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.

The wet woodland occurs on the floodplain of the river, in old river meanders, as well as on islands in the river especially at the mouth of the river Conon near Conon Bridge. Alder *Alnus glutinosa*, bay willow *Salix pentandra* and grey willow *Salix cinerea* dominate in areas where the water table is constantly high. Drier areas support ash *Fraxinus excelsior*, common oak *Quercus robur* and downy birch *Betula pubescens*. A varied shrub and ground flora is present reflecting the range of soil types and wetness across the site. Greater tussock sedge *Carex paniculata* occurs in very wet areas near Easter Moy and guelder rose *Viburnum opulus* occurs on Garrie Island. Exposed river gravels are an important part of the site, providing niches for regeneration of alder.

There are a range of open-water transition fen communities at the interface between the River Conon and adjacent land including woodland. These are especially well developed in the vicinity of Moy Island and at the mouth of the Conon. 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*. Extensive reed beds dominated by *Phragmites australis* are present in tidal areas near the mouth of the river. Where flooding is more seasonal tall herb fen communities are well developed with meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria*, skullcap *Scutellaria galericulata*, valerian *Valeriana officinalis* and in drier areas wood crane's-bill *Geranium sylvaticum*, lesser butterfly-orchid *Platanthera bifolia* and northern bedstraw *Galium boreale*.

Downstream of Conon Bridge, the site supports saltmarsh and this becomes increasingly dominant as the salinity and tidal influences increase. The complex delta system supports lower, mid, upper and strandline saltmarsh communities. Where salinity is greatest plants such as thrift, *Armeria maritima*, sea club-rush *Bolboschoenus maritimus*, sea plantain *Plantago maritima*, sea milkwort *Glaux maritima*, mud sedge *Juncus gerardii* and saltmarsh grass *Puccinellia maritima* occur. Creeks and back channels are also present with one flowered spike-rush *Eleocharis uniglumis* and the rare dwarf spike-rush, *Eleocharis parvula*. The saltmarsh is ungrazed.

NOTIFICATION HISTORY

First notified under the 1949 Act as Conon Islands SSSI: 1974

Re-notified under the 1981 Act as Conon Islands SSSI: 26 February 1985

Re-notified under the 1981 Act as Lower River Conon SSSI: 6 November 1995 with a 116.3 ha increase in area. Boundary amended at confirmation on 31 July 1996 with a 5.7 ha reduction in area.

Notification reviewed under the 2004 Act: 19 November 2009

REMARKS

Measured area of site corrected from 287 ha.

Part of Lower River Conon SSSI overlaps Conon Islands Special Area of Conservation (SAC) designated for the European habitat: Alder woodland on floodplains.

Part of Lower River Conon SSSI also overlaps part of the Cromarty Firth Special Protection Area (SPA) designated for the birds listed below:

Birds: Bar-tailed godwit *Limosa lapponica*
 Common tern *Sterna hirundo*
 Curlew* *Numenius arquata*
 Dunlin* *Calidris alpina alpina*
 Greylag goose *Anser anser*
 Knot* *Calidris canutus*
 Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*
 Oystercatcher* *Haematopus ostralegus*
 Pintail* *Anas acuta*
 Red-breasted merganser* *Mergus serrator*
 Redshank* *Tringa totanus*
 Scaup* *Aythya marila*
 Whooper swan *Cygnus cygnus*
 Wigeon* *Anas penelope*
 Waterfowl assemblage

* indicates assemblage qualifier only