



## Scottish Natural Heritage Dualchas Nàdair na h-Alba

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

### MONACH ISLES

Site of Special Scientific Interest

### SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 1178

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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.

This statement is available in Gaelic on request.

Natural features of Monach Isles SSSI	Condition of feature (date monitored)	Other relevant designations
Machair	Favourable, maintained (June 2009)	SAC (Dune grassland)
Sand dune	Favourable, maintained (June 2009)	SAC (Shifting dunes with marram)
Breeding bird assemblage	Favourable, maintained (June 2009)	
Black guillemot, breeding	Unfavourable, no change (May 2001)	
Greenland Barnacle goose, non-breeding	Favourable, maintained (March 2008)	SPA

Features of overlapping Natura sites that are not notified as SSSI natural features	Condition of feature (date monitored)	SPA or SAC
Common tern, breeding*	Unfavourable, no change (June 2001)	SPA
Little tern, breeding	Unfavourable, declining (June 2001)	SPA
Grey seal	Favourable, maintained (November 2003)	SAC

\* this species included in error and currently being removed from SPA.

## **Description of the site**

The Monach Islands or Heisgeir are comprised of five low-lying isles with some rocky shores, skerries and low cliffs. The three larger islands of Ceann Ear, Ceann Iar and Shìvinish are joined at low tide by sandy fords and have a range of machair and sand dune types. **Ceann Ear** has high active sand dunes with thick marram grass at the north-east end, which grade into a large flat central area of machair through dune ridges and damp machair hollows which include plants like adder's-tongue fern, field gentian, frog orchid, and marsh pennywort. The south end of Ceann Ear is rocky with maritime heath and wet grassland supporting plants such as creeping willow, spring squill, tormentil, marsh cinquefoil, marsh marigold and common sedge. This southern end also contains two small lochs, Loch nam Buadh and Loch Sniogravat. **Shìvinish** is largely sand dune at the north end with maritime grassland at the south end. **Ceann Iar** has large areas of stabilised dune grassland whilst at the south-west end there is a partly seasonal freshwater marsh. **Shìllay** the westernmost island is much rockier than the others and has maritime heath and grassland vegetation with some small pools. The easternmost island of **Stockay** is a rock platform covered by an eroding dune ridge and strandline vegetation.

The sand dunes and machair were monitored in June 2009. The typical and characteristic plant species were present. No obstructions to sediment movement. Rabbits are present on the islands and although burrowing was widespread numbers were not considered to be causing damage to the habitat. These habitats were considered to be in favourable condition.

The islands are also of national and international importance for their bird interest. In March 2008, 520 wintering Greenland barnacle geese were counted (about 1% of the GB population), which means they are considered to be in favourable condition.

The black guillemot colony is one of the largest in the UK with a notable concentration on Shìllay, although it breeds on the other islands too. 565 individuals were counted in April 2001 which would indicate that the black guillemot population is in an unfavourable condition, probably related to offshore factors. The little tern colony is currently in an unfavourable condition. However there has been no change to the nesting habitat used by this species and terns are known to use a number of nesting areas away from the Monachs.

The assemblage of breeding birds includes other seabirds such as the cormorants on Stockay, little terns, Arctic terns, fulmar and shag. Additional breeding birds include sea duck such as eider and shelduck, and on the freshwater lochans there are a few breeding wildfowl. The islands also support populations of breeding waders, including oystercatcher, lapwing, dunlin, and ringed plover. All these birds can be assigned a score, and in 2009 the score was 25 which meant the breeding bird assemblage was in favourable condition.

The islands are also important in autumn, as the breeding site for the largest colony of grey seals in Europe, and the islands are designated as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) under the EU Habitats & Species Directive due to this.

## **Past and present management**

Apart from the Shìllay, which is owned by the Northern Lighthouse Board (NLB), the islands form part of North Uist Estate. All the islands are managed as a National Nature Reserve under agreements with the owners since 1966. The old Schoolhouse on Ceann Ear is owned by the Trust for Heisgeir.

In the past, the islands were formerly inhabited until 1947 and were crofted. Up until the early 19th century, the islands supported about 100 people, growing their own crops and managing large numbers of cattle and sheep. A runrig system of agriculture existed until the late 19th century. Today, the Monachs are one of the few areas that have uncultivated machair.

Currently, the grazing tenant for Ceann Ear, Shìvinish and Ceann Iar, runs a flock of around 250 breeding ewes and tups, with lambs taken off in summer. The grazing tenant for Shìllay

runs a very small number of ewes on the island. There is no grazing on Stockay as it is too small to provide useful land.

Although there are limited landing and tourist facilities, the islands are visited by a number of both local and mainland based charter boats, as well as fishermen (mostly in summer for lobster) and private boat owners. There is also seaweed (carrageen) collection by one individual for commercial purposes.

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

We wish to work with the owners and tenants to protect the site and to maintain, and where necessary, enhance its features of special interest. SNH will 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 National Nature Reserve 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, 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 and extent of machair and sand dune habitats**

Maintain stocking at a level that supports the diverse range of species typical of a grazed machair and sand dune system.

Ensure other activities do not adversely affect the machair and sand dune habitats.

#### **2. To maintain the population and distribution of the breeding birds and wintering barnacle geese**

Prevent the colonisation of the islands by ground predators e.g. rats and mink.

Maintain the stocking at a level which will produce a short winter sward suitable for barnacle geese and a range of sward heights in spring for breeding birds.

#### **3. To avoid significant disturbance to the breeding birds (especially black guillemot and tern colonies) , wintering barnacle geese and breeding grey seals**

Ensure human disturbance does not adversely affect the wildlife of the islands.

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

#### Climate change:

Warming sea temperatures may affect fish availability for seabirds, especially terns. Storm episodes may increase in future and could affect seabird and seal productivity. Increased storminess and sea level rise may threaten low-lying dune and machair systems. Recent storms have removed much of the sandy soils from Stockay.

Marine Pollution (including oil spills): Marine pollution incidents could have significant effects on many of the breeding birds. There have been instances of fuel leakage and boats running aground around the Monachs in the past.

Date Last Reviewed: 15 September 2009