



Scottish Natural Heritage
Dualchas Nàdair na h-Alba
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Nàdair air fad airson Alba air fad

MORVEN AND SCARABEN

Site of Special Scientific Interest

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 1195

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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 Morven and Scaraben SSSI	Condition of feature (date monitored)
Alpine heath	Favourable, maintained (July 2006)
Subalpine dry heath	Not yet assessed

Description of the site

Morven and Scaraben Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is located 13km west of Dunbeath. This site includes the most northerly high-altitude site in the east of mainland Scotland and is the only extensive upland area in Caithness. The site includes the isolated summit of Morven (706m) to the west and the 7km long Scaraben ridge (400-626m) along the southern edge of the site. The upper slopes of the hills and ridge are steep but most slopes are moderate or gentle. Although the hills are not particularly high, montane plant communities are well-developed even at these low altitudes, due to the northern locality and exposure of the hills. The site has been notified for the nationally important alpine and subalpine heath habitats. The site also forms part of the headwaters of the Berriedale and Langwell Waters which have internationally important populations of Atlantic salmon.

Alpine heath

Alpine heath can be found on the exposed rounded summits of both Morven and Scaraben. There are two distinct types of alpine heath on this site. One type of alpine heath is dominated by low mats of heather and the nationally scarce mountain bearberry. The lichens *Cladonia arbuscula* and *Ochrolechia frigida* and crowberry are also abundant in this habitat. Other plants found in this habitat include low-growing bearberry, trailing azalea, dwarf willow, alpine clubmoss, fir clubmoss and alpine lady's mantle. This type of heather - mountain bearberry heath is mainly found in the north

Highlands and in Orkney. Morven and Scaraben has the second largest area of this type of heath on a SSSI.



The second main kind of alpine heath is dominated by bilberry and woolly hair moss. This habitat is particularly well-developed in a small part of the site on the summit ridge of Scaraben. This habitat has an abundance of other mosses such as *Rhytidiadelphus loreus*, *Pleurozium schreberi* and *Hylocomium splendens*, as well as a scattering of lichens such as *Cetraria islandica* and *Cladonia arbuscula*.

The alpine heath was monitored in 2006. The extent of the habitat had been maintained and the typical plant species for this habitat were recorded. No non-native or invasive plant species were found growing on the heath. There was some localised damage from tracking caused by sheep and deer. There was a high cover of undesirable grasses in some areas. High grass cover can be caused by high grazing pressure, however, it can also be the result of natural causes and the current level of grazing does not appear to be a problem in this habitat. Deer numbers were higher in the past and this site has benefited from the reduction in grazing and trampling. No recent burning was noted, although previous surveys have recorded extensive past burning on the southern slopes of Scaraben. Overall the alpine heath was found to be in favourable condition.

Subalpine dry heath

Subalpine dry heaths dominated by heather, bilberry and bell heather can be found on the lower slopes throughout the site. Damper areas are dominated by heather, bilberry, the bog-moss *Sphagnum capillifolium* and cloudberry. The bilberry-cloudberry heaths are especially well-represented on steep northerly facing slopes. This is one of the best places in Caithness to find cloudberry. Stiff sedge and mosses such as *Rhytidiadelphus loreus*, *Plagiothecium undulatum*, *Pleurozium schreberi* and *Sphagnum capillifolium* are also found in this habitat.

This habitat has not yet been formally monitored.

The nationally scarce mountain bearberry	Wind-clipped heather in the alpine heath
	

Other interests

A variety of other habitats are found on this site. The most extensive of these are the blanket bog and wet heath on the flat ground at lower altitudes. There are also extensive areas of upland grassland, mainly along the sides of burns.

The site has three nationally scarce plant species. Rock whitlowgrass and Alpine saxifrage are found on base-rich outcrops, while mountain bearberry occurs in the alpine heath near the exposed summits.

A wide range of upland birds use this site for breeding and feeding, including wader species such as golden plover, greenshank and dunlin. Ptarmigan have also been recorded on the site. Hen harrier, peregrine, golden eagle and merlin breed on or near the site and hunt over the area.

Parts of the northern and southern boundaries of the site are adjacent to the Berriedale and Langwell Water Special Area of Conservation (SAC) which is designated for its internationally important Atlantic salmon population.

Past and present management

The site is managed by Welbeck Estates for both sporting (deer and grouse) and agricultural purposes. Braemore Common Grazings form part of the eastern section of the site and an agricultural tenant manages part of the site adjacent to the common grazings.

Muirburn is carried out by the Estate and low ground pressure vehicles are used on the site, primarily for deer carcass removal and shepherding purposes.

Until recently the wholemuch of the site was covered by Peatland Management Scheme (PMS) Agreements between SNH and both the Welbeck Estate and Braemore Common Grazings. These PMS agreements promoted conservation management of the site.

The PMS scheme has now been replaced by Rural Development Contracts - Rural Priorities (RDC-RP). RDC-RP include financial incentives for a range of management options which maintain and enhance the condition of upland and peatland sites. Land managers on the site are encouraged to apply to RDC-RP to continue to receive funding for their upland and peatland management. RDC-RPs are awarded on a competitive basis to ensure that contracts are given for proposals that are best able to deliver good conservation management.

In the 1990s the Estate blocked hill drains on two areas. The work was funded by SNH and was undertaken to restore the water table on the blanket bog to allow the peat-forming process to continue.

The site includes the two highest peaks in Caithness, making it popular with hill walkers.

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

We wish to work with land managers 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.

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 alpine heath and subalpine heath

Grazing and trampling by both domestic livestock and deer should be kept at levels that do not damage these fragile habitats. Vehicles should not be used on steep parts of the slopes and areas of fragile exposed soils to avoid damaging the vegetation.

The alpine heath is found on the steep slopes and on the exposed summits of both Morven and Scaraben. No burning of the alpine heath should take place, as the vegetation is kept short by a combination of the slow growth rate of the vegetation, exposure to wind and grazing. The alpine heath can take many decades to recover from fire as the vegetation is particularly slow-growing. This habitat is therefore prone to erosion when bare soil and peat is exposed over a number of years.

Subalpine dry heaths can be found on the lower slopes throughout the site. Muirburn on the subalpine dry heaths should only be undertaken in line with the Muirburn Code.

The Muirburn Code advises against burning on slopes steeper than 1 in 2, in gullies and where the soil is eroding or if there is less than 5cm of soil over the underlying rock. It also states that no burning should be carried out on summits, ridges and other areas exposed to the wind where the heather and other vegetation forms a creeping mat with wind-blasted shoot tips. Burning following the Muirburn Code will avoid burning alpine heath habitat and inappropriate areas of subalpine dry heath.

Other factors affecting the natural features of the site

- Forestry: Conifer seedlings could potentially spread into the subalpine dry heath from the adjacent plantations near Wag and Braemore. It would damage the heath if trees were to become established.
- Climate change: The alpine and subalpine heaths on this site are potentially at risk from climate change.

Date last reviewed: 2 December 2010