



Purpose



Arctic skua

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.

Natural features of North Hill SSSI	Condition of feature (date monitored)	Other relevant designations
Maritime cliff	Favourable, maintained (June 2008)	
Arctic skua (breeding population)	Unfavourable, no change (August 2006)	Special Protection Area (SPA)
Arctic tern (breeding population)	Unfavourable, declining (August 2006)	SPA

Description of the site

The North Hill Site of Special Scientific Interest comprises the northern headland of the island of Papa Westray, from Leapers Geo in the east to The Sneck on the west. The headland rises to 48 metres above sea level at its highest point and is surrounded by a rocky coastline. The cliff top consists of narrow strips of coastal grassland grading to maritime sedge heath further inland. The maritime heath provides an important nesting site for Arctic skuas and Arctic terns.



The maritime cliff vegetation is typified by plants which are adapted to living in a salty environment, including thrift, sea plantain and spring squill. It varies in nature, especially away from the cliffs, where it develops characteristics of wet or dry heathland. Throughout, it has a high diversity of flowering plants, many with a low growing habit due to the wind exposure. Plants found here include limestone bedstraw, Iceland yellowcress, field gentian, frog orchid, alpine bistort and adder's tongue, but the most notable amongst them is the nationally scarce Scottish primrose. North Hill is the largest area of maritime heath vegetation in Orkney.

The maritime cliff and heath on North Hill supports a nationally and internationally important colony of Arctic terns and Arctic skuas. In 2006, 70 apparently occupied territories were recorded for Arctic skua in the SSSI and 529 pairs of Arctic terns were present; representing 3.3% and 1% of the Great Britain population respectively.

The maritime cliff was monitored in June 2008 and was found to be in a favourable

condition. Monitoring of the Arctic tern and Arctic skua populations was last carried out in August 2006 and both species were found to be in an unfavourable condition. This is part of an ongoing decline at the site and mirrors a similar pattern elsewhere. It is generally accepted that these declines are due to factors which are not related to site management, such as prey availability, marine pollution or weather conditions .

North Hill SSSI is designated as part of the Papa Westray (North Hill and Holm) Special Protection Area (SPA) which qualifies for its Arctic tern and Arctic skua populations.

Arctic tern in flight	Scottish primrose
	

Past and present management

The site has been managed by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) in agreement with the North Hill grazing committee since 1976. Grazing rights are still exercised by the graziers. Grazing is an important part of the site management which helps to maintain the structure and diversity of the vegetation.

The site was entered into the Orkney Maritime Heathland and Maritime Grassland Scheme in 2006 for five years and a grazing plan was implemented to benefit the vegetation. In the future, positive environmental management can be delivered under the Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP).

Up to 2,000 people visit the RSPB reserve each year, mainly during the summer season. Visitors are encouraged to join the RSPB's summer warden on guided tours around the perimeter of the island to minimise disturbance to the breeding birds and prevent erosion of the heath. Display boards are provided to explain the wildlife interest and the sensitive nature of the site.

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 its management.

SNH encourages applications to relevant schemes such as Rural Development Contracts (Rural Priorities) that aim to deliver positive management consistent with site objectives.

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). **To maintain the maritime cliff habitat in favourable condition by:**

- Maintaining stocking at a level at which there is no damage to the vegetation from over-grazing or trampling and the habitat continues to support key species such as spring squill and Scottish primrose.
- Avoiding damage from fire as this can cause loss of the key mosses which sustain the moorland and bog habitat .

2. To restore the populations of breeding terns and skuas to favourable condition by:

- avoiding significant disturbance to these birds during the breeding season
- maintaining the habitat in good condition to ensure suitable nesting conditions.

Whilst current numbers of both the Arctic Skua and the Arctic Tern are unfavourable, it is considered that factors outwith management control are having the most influence. This could be due to reduced availability of prey. Good grazing management of the land should maintain suitable nesting areas. Avoiding significant disturbance during the breeding season through the promotion of responsible access as specified in the Scottish Outdoor Access Code should assist in keeping the area favourable for breeding.

Other factors affecting the natural features of the site

Pollution: Oil spills and other pollution incidents at sea would have a damaging effect on the seabird colony.

Sandeels: The breeding seabirds are largely dependent on the sandeel population for feeding. Any significant decline of the sandeel population is likely to have a detrimental effect on the breeding success of the seabird colonies.

Climate change: Direct impacts leading to more frequent severe weather conditions and indirect impacts, such as rising sea temperatures, affecting the abundance or distribution of prey species.

Date last reviewed: 17 February 2012