



Scottish Natural Heritage
Dualchas Nàdair na h-Alba

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OUSDALE BURN
Site of Special Scientific Interest

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 1262

The Links, Golspie Business Park, Golspie, Sutherland, KW10 6UB.

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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 Ousdale Burn SSSI	Condition of feature (and date monitored)
Upland birch woodland	Favourable, maintained (February 2002)

A small part of Ousdale Burn SSSI overlaps with Berriedale Cliffs SSSI which is designated for cliff-top vegetation and breeding seabirds. Berriedale Cliffs SSSI is a component of East Caithness Cliffs Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Special Protection Area (SPA). A list of the features of these sites is given in Annex 1.

Description of the site

Ousdale Burn Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is located near the east coast of Caithness, approximately 6km north-east of Helmsdale. The site is designated for the nationally important birch woodland habitat that is found here. Woodland is a comparatively rare habitat in Caithness and, with the nearby Langwell Water and Berriedale Water SSSIs, this site contributes to the largest area of deciduous woodland in the county.

Upland birch woodland

The steep slopes surrounding Ousdale Burn support open birch woodland, interspersed with areas of aspen, rowan, bird cherry and willow. Birch-hazel woodland also occurs on outcrops of the more nutrient-rich Caithness flagstone. The woodland understorey contains species such as dog rose and honeysuckle. The diverse ground flora is made up of tall flowering plants and ferns with some areas of species-rich grassland. Typical fern species such as hard fern occur, while black spleenwort grows in rock crevices. Other characteristic plants include greater woodrush, bugle and wood sorrel.



Monitoring carried out in February 2002 found the woodland to be in favourable condition. The two deer fenced exclosures established in 1994 had successfully reduced grazing and browsing over the majority of the woodland. Comparison with aerial photographs from 1995 confirmed that the woodland extent had increased due to

regeneration at the woodland edges. The woodland contained an appropriate mix of native tree species, dominated by birch with scattered rowan and hazel. The ground flora contained a variety of characteristic woodland plants such as wood sorrel, sweet woodruff and opposite-leaved golden saxifrage. Seedlings, saplings and mature trees were all recorded.

There was good tree regeneration in parts of the upper enclosure, and there were no concerns regarding grazing or trampling by animals. However, deer had got into the lower enclosure due to damage to the fence, and the woodland here had suffered localised heavy trampling and browsing, including some damage to young trees. The fence was subsequently repaired. There was also concern that the dense growth of bracken could be suppressing tree regeneration in parts of the enclosures. This situation needs to be monitored to establish whether bracken control may be necessary in future. Although the woodland was assessed as being in favourable condition overall, the trees in the small unfenced area between the two enclosures had suffered from heavy grazing and trampling. If this continues, the woodland will be split into two separate parts. This part of the woodland will therefore require to be enclosed, or the grazing pressure reduced significantly, to ensure that it regenerates.

Other interests

The small pearl-bordered fritillary butterfly has been recorded on this site.

Damage caused by deer to a sapling	Wood sorrel
	

Past and present management

Part of the site is used for grazing sheep and cattle. Outwith the farmland, the surrounding area is principally used as a sporting estate, with deer and red grouse being the main quarry species.

The owner also manages the site for its conservation interest under a long-term Management Agreement with SNH. This has involved erecting two large enclosures within the site to restore the woodland through natural regeneration. The enclosures (amounting to approximately 30ha and extending slightly outside the SSSI boundary) were erected under a Woodland Grant Scheme in 1994, and enclose approximately 90% of the woodland habitat. Formerly, moderately large numbers of red and roe deer wintered within these woods, which, together with year round grazing by sheep and

cattle, prevented the woodland from regenerating. The exclosures have also allowed the rich ground flora to flourish. The watergates on the exclosures have been repaired several times to ensure continued protection of the woodland.

There are no facilities for tourists and few people visit the site due to the steep sided nature of the site. The design of the exclosures has ensured access to the broch in the southwest of the site is maintained.

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 monitor the effectiveness of the management agreement.

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, where 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).

The list of Operations Requiring Consent, 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 woodland

The woodland should support the full range of typical tree species of mixed age and should contain a diverse mosaic of open and more shaded habitat types. The current extent of the woodland should also be maintained. It is important to avoid fragmentation of the woodland so that species from one part of the wood can move through continuous suitable habitat to reach other parts of the wood. Dead timber within the woodland, both standing and fallen, provides an important habitat particularly for fungi and invertebrate species and should not be removed from the site. Fires should not be started within or close to the woodland and care should be taken not to allow muirburn to spread into the woodland.

Large herbivores, including domestic stock, should continue to be excluded from the exclosures by well-maintained fences. The watergates on the exclosures need to be checked regularly and repaired if necessary. Complete lack of grazing can be a problem too as this can lead to excessive bracken growth which can suppress natural tree regeneration and dominate the ground flora, to the exclusion of the current diverse range of plants. Future monitoring visits should consider the need for bracken control.

In the longer term, the aim should be to remove the fenced exclosures and reintroduce light grazing. This should happen when natural regeneration is well-established and at a suitable height. However, the external grazing pressure will need to be at a level which avoids damage to the woodland and ensures that it continues to regenerate.

The condition of the woodland which currently lies outside the exclosures should be improved by reducing the grazing pressure to allow trees to regenerate and the ground flora to flower and set seed. Light grazing is beneficial as this creates small open patches that allow tree seedlings to establish. Grazing and trampling also helps to prevent bracken from becoming too dense. However, it is important that the grazing pressure is not so great that all seedlings and saplings are eaten and the ground flora is damaged by grazing or trampling. The main damage to young trees is likely to be in winter when animals use the woodlands for shelter.

Date last reviewed: 20 January 2011

Annex 1 List of features of Berriedale Cliffs SSSI, East Caithness Cliffs Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and East Caithness Cliffs Special Protection Area (SPA) that overlap a small part of Ousdale Burn SSSI

Features of overlapping sites that are not notified as natural features of Ousdale Burn SSSI	Feature condition (date monitored)	SSSI, SAC or SPA
'Maritime cliff' (vegetation) also known as 'Vegetated sea cliffs'	Favourable, maintained (July 2009)	SSSI and SAC
Seabird assemblage, breeding	Favourable, maintained (July 1999)	SSSI and SPA
Cormorant, breeding	Unfavourable, declining (July 1999)	SPA
Fulmar, breeding	Favourable, maintained (July 1999)	SSSI and SPA
Great black-backed gull, breeding	Unfavourable, declining (July 1999)	SPA
Guillemot, breeding	Favourable, maintained (July 1999)	SSSI and SPA
Herring gull, breeding	Unfavourable, declining (July 1999)	SPA
Kittiwake, breeding	Favourable, maintained (July 1999)	SSSI and SPA
Peregrine, breeding	Favourable, maintained (May-June 2006)	SPA
Puffin, breeding	Favourable, maintained (July 1999)	SPA
Razorbill, breeding	Favourable, maintained (July 1999)	SSSI and SPA
Shag, breeding	Unfavourable, declining (July 1999)	SSSI and SPA

Please refer to the Site Management Statement for Berriedale Cliffs SSSI for more details of recommended management of these features.