

CITATION

RINNS OF ISLAY
SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST
Argyll & Bute

Site code: 1354

NATIONAL GRID REFERENCE: NR 235620

OS 1:50,000 SHEET NO: Landranger Series 60
1:25,000 SHEET NO: Explorer Series 353

AREA: 8784.95 hectares

NOTIFIED NATURAL FEATURES

Geological:	Structural and metamorphic geology:	Dalradian
	Geomorphology:	Coastal geomorphology of Scotland
Biological:	Bogs:	Blanket bog
	Coastlands:	Maritime cliff
		Machair
		Sand dune
	Woodlands:	Scrub
	Birds:	Breeding bird assemblage
		Chough <i>Pyrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i> , breeding
		Corncrake <i>Crex crex</i> , breeding
		Hen harrier <i>Circus cyaneus</i> , breeding
		Greenland barnacle goose <i>Branta leucopsis</i> , non-breeding
		Greenland white-fronted goose <i>Anser albifrons flavirostris</i> , non-breeding
		Whooper swan <i>Cygnus cygnus</i> , non-breeding
	Invertebrates:	Beetle assemblage

DESCRIPTION

The Rinns of Islay SSSI lies on the western peninsula of the island of Islay on the west coast of Scotland. Extending from near Ardnave in the north to Portnahaven in the south, the western shores are exposed to the Atlantic Ocean. It is a large site with geological, biological and ornithological interest over a mosaic of open habitats with coastline, boggy moorland, woodland scrub and low-intensity agricultural land.

The Rinns of Islay SSSI contains internationally-important exposures of rocks whose affinity is uncertain. The succession of Colonsay Group rocks is almost entirely visible in the coastal rocks, along the north-west edge of the SSSI. The rocks originated as sea-floor muds and sands, which were then much folded. In the south, a second group of rocks, the Rinns Complex, is seen below a complicated contact zone. These igneous rocks (cooled from molten rock) have been greatly altered by heat and pressure. The geology is important because these rocks cannot be easily related to rocks elsewhere in Scotland of similar age. The Colonsay Group only occurs on western Islay and on the islands of Colonsay and Oronsay, but it is similar to rocks of North America, Greenland and northern Europe, dated at over 440 million years old. The rocks of the SSSI are crucial to developing theories of the formation of the former Caledonian mountain belt. Elsewhere in south-west Scotland this belt consists of the Dalradian Supergroup.

Another geological site within the Rinns of Islay at Machir Bay, Kilchoman, is of national importance for its geomorphology. It is an excellent example of a complex beach-dune-machair assemblage. The wide, high-energy beach is backed by a range of forms, e.g. low embryo dunes, an active foredune ridge, multi-ridged mature dunes, re-depositional sandhills and extensive machair. The machair plain of windblown sand, up to 60 m above sea level, is of exceptional interest as it drapes other features, including high-level glaciomarine terraces (made in a sea under an ice shelf), scree slopes and rock plateaux. Also of great interest are some beaches, glacial terraces and relict cliff-lines which the machair partially obscures.

The site contains a nationally-important area of blanket bog. Much of the site is covered by blanket peat of varying depths, with significant areas in the north and along the central spine of the peninsula. With high rainfall and a low level of evapotranspiration (water loss from plants to the air), peat deposits such as those at Cultoon Bog are still growing. Typical species include the bog-mosses *Sphagnum* spp. and cotton-grasses *Eriophorum* spp. More base-rich peatlands with fen vegetation occur at Loch a'Bhogaidh, Loch Treunaidh and around Loch Gorm and Loch Corr. The bogs are also of international importance as roosting habitat for wintering Greenland white-fronted geese.

The maritime cliff coastal grasslands and heaths on the site are nationally-important and are examples of extremely exposed coastlines, e.g. at Rubha nam Faing there is classic wave-cut coastal vegetation and on the north-west coast there are fine examples of coastal juniper/bearberry heath. Some of the species found include roseroot *Sedum rosea*, sea campion *Silene uniflora*, and sea pink (thrift) *Armeria maritima*. Vegetation of crevice and ledge habitat and lichen-covered rocks are also present.

Machair is nationally-important and is only found only in the north and west of Britain and Ireland. These low-lying fertile plains have been improved by windblown sand with a high shell-content. These grasslands, as at Machir Bay, are botanically rich as well as forming feeding ground for chough and the bird assemblage. Some typical herb-species recorded are; bird's-foot trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*, wild thyme *Thymus polytrichus* and yellow rattle *Rhinanthus minor*.

The Rinns of Islay sand dunes are nationally important and the dunes systems show vegetational succession. They run inland from mobile patches of colonising vegetation on the shoreline to stable, short-sward, dune grasslands. The dunes are fixed in place by plants such as marram grass *Ammophila arenaria*, lyme grass *Leymus arenarius* and sand sedge *Carex arenaria*. The dune slacks (wet hollows) can be vegetated where the water table is sufficiently high, and are often quite species-rich, including marsh pennywort *Hydrocotyle vulgaris*, marsh bedstraw *Galium palustre* and bog pimpernel *Anagallis tenella*.

Scrub woodland on the Rinns of Islay is nationally important. These are some of Britain's most westerly woods and have good examples of eared willow *Salix aurita* scrub such as at Dun Bhar-a-chlaom. These scrub woods are rare in the district. Hence this scrub is an important community in this part of Islay, as well as within a regional and national context.

The breeding bird assemblage is another reason the Rinns of Islay SSSI is nationally important. Ninety-four species of bird were observed between 1999 and 2003. Several areas of moorland and old pastureland have high densities of wading birds. While there are no ground predators on Islay, there are, however, raptors (birds of prey) that utilise peatland and moorlands for nesting, and have important hunting grounds on the transitions between semi-natural moorland/heath and improved grasslands.

Bird species that are internationally important features in their own right include the breeding and non-breeding chough. Over 10% of the British chough breeding population nest within the site. Breeding adults and newly fledged chicks forage close to nest sites before joining communal roosts near dune areas in the late summer autumn. The population reflects both the availability of nest sites here and the year-round availability of food in the form of invertebrates (such as insects and worms) which thrive within the maritime turf.

The Rinns of Islay SSSI has internationally important numbers of breeding corncrake. Between 2005 and 2007, the site supported more than 2% of the GB population of breeding corncrakes. The coastal fringe and low-intensity agricultural land have good habitats for this species.

The site is also of international importance by virtue of regularly supporting more than 1% of the British breeding population of hen harrier. The mosaic of blanket bog, heath and grassland habitats provides a good supply of small prey, such as voles and pipits.

The site's winter migrant bird populations of Greenland white-fronted geese and whooper swan are internationally important and the Greenland barnacle geese are nationally important. Approximately 7% of the British wintering population of Greenland white-fronted geese use the area both as feeding grounds and for roosting. The barnacle geese occur in significant numbers (~2% of GB population) during severe winter weather. Whooper swans (~1% of British population) pause on the Rinns of Islay during their migration to Ireland.

The nationally important beetle assemblage includes 37 different beetle species. Loch Corr is the single most important site on the island for the water beetle family *Coleoptera* within a western 'Atlantic lake' assemblage. Two species are of particular note: the leaf beetle *Macrolea appendiculata* has its first confirmed record for Scotland here, and a whirligig beetle *Gyrinus distinctus* found here is known from only two other Scottish sites.

NOTIFICATION HISTORY

Whole site was first notified under the 1981 Act: 8 April 1987

One section has been notified previously; Machir Bay (Kilchoman Dunes) in 1974

Notification reviewed under the 2004 Act: 24 March 2011

REMARKS

Measured area of site corrected (from 8311.9 ha)

Part of Rinns of Islay SSSI is part of the Rinns of Islay SAC Special Area of Conservation (SAC), which is designated for the European species listed below, and is also part of the Rinns of Islay Special Protection Area (SPA), which is designated for the birds listed below.

Species: Marsh fritillary butterfly *Euphydryas* (*Eurodryas*, *Hypodryas*) *aurinia*

Birds: Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*, breeding and non breeding

Common scoter *Melanitta nigra*, breeding

Corncrake *Crex crex*, breeding

Greenland white-fronted goose *Anser albifrons flavirostris*, non-breeding

Hen harrier *Circus cyaneus*, breeding

Whooper swan *Cygnus cygnus*, non-breeding