Scottish Natural Heritage

ROUSAY
Site of Special Scientific Interest

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 1386

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Purpose

Photograph credited to Anna French

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 Rousay SSSI	Condition of feature (date monitored)	Other relevant designations
Blanket bog	Unfavourable, no change (July 2004)	
Maritime cliff	Unfavourable, recovering (June 2008)	
Mesotrophic loch	Favourable, maintained (August 2004)	
Subalpine wet heath	Unfavourable, no change (July 2004)	
Vascular plant assemblage	Favourable, maintained (August 2009)	
Breeding bird assemblage	Favourable, maintained (May 2002)	
Seabird colony, breeding	Unfavourable, declining (June 2009)	SPA
Arctic skua (Sterna paradisaea), breeding	Unfavourable, declining (June 2007)	Special Protection Area (SPA)
Arctic tern (Stercorarius parasiticus), breeding	Unfavourable, declining (June 2007)	SPA
Guillemot (Uria aalge), breeding	Favourable, recovered (June 2009)	SPA
Kittiwake (Rissa tridactyla), breeding	Unfavourable, declining (June 2009)	SPA

Features of overlapping Natura sites that are not notified as SSSI natural features	Condition of feature (date monitored)	Designation (SPA or SAC)
Fulmar (Fulmarus glacialis), breeding	Favourable, recovered (June 2009)	SPA

Description of the site

Rousay Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is located on the island of Rousay which is separated from the Orkney mainland by the Eynhallow Sound and Wyre Sound. The SSSI covers a large part of the interior of the island and includes a stretch of coastline on the north and west. The site includes large areas of blanket bog and subalpine wet heath. Other habitats which form part of the SSSI include maritime cliff and a mesotrophic loch (showing some enrichment by nutrients). Together, these habitats support a wide range of breeding birds and a number of uncommon flowering plant species.

Rousay SSSI is the third largest area of moorland in Orkney and contains large tracts of blanket bog which grades into heath on the steeper slopes and maritime cliff along the coast. The maritime cliff, which includes the cliff top vegetation and adjoining heath and grassland, is characterised by its low growing wind clipped strucuture. It comprises plants tolerant of the salt laden winds such as sea plantain and thrift. It is a well known location for the nationally scarce Scottish Primrose *Primula scotica.* Rousay contains some of the most extensive areas of this type of specialised habitat within Orkney.

Within the blanket bog areas, bog mosses (Sphagnum moss) are actively, but slowly forming new peat as dead material is gradually compressed under layers of new vegetation. At its highest point the site rises to 250 metres and these exposed tops support a range of plants which are normally associated with a much higher altitude. These include dwarf willow, Alpine bearberry and Alpine saw-wort. From these moorland hills, burns drain through dales, or valleys, and some have created nutrient-rich flushes. These flushes carry nutrients from the underlying bedrock (Rousay flagstone) which has created species-rich areas supporting plants such as black bog rush, various sedges, grass of Parnassus, and bog pimpernel.

Further inland, Muckle Water supports several scarce plants, including the locally scarce quillwort, water lobelia and the nationally scarce pondweed *Potamogeton lucens* and the only known Orkney site for *Potamogeton. x angustifolius.* The nutrient-rich loch contrasts with the nearby Peerie Water which is oligotrophic (nutrient-poor). This difference demonstrates the influence of the underlying bedrock.

The range of habitats present on the site provides nesting and foraging areas for a variety of birds. The cliffs provide an important breeding area for a wide range of seabirds, including (common Orkney names in brackets): guillemot (Aak), kittiwake (Kittick), fulmar (Mallimack), razorbill (Coulter-neb), puffin (Tammy Norie), shag (Skarf) and black guillemot (Tystie). Beyond the cliffs arctic terns (Tirrick) and arctic skuas (Scootie Allan) breed in numbers of national significance. Further inland, the moorland provides nesting and foraging areas for a wide range of birds including red-throated diver (Rain goose), wigeon, teal (Ateal), common sandpiper (Steenie Pouter), hen harrier (Cattabelly), merlin (Smyril), red grouse (Muir-hen), golden plover (Pliver), dunlin (Boondie), snipe (Horse-gokk), curlew (Whaup), great skua (Bonxie) and, short-eared owl (Cataface),

The SSSI also supports nationally scarce flowering plants including serrated wintergreen, round-leaved wintergreen, Scottish primrose and shady horsetail.

The site is monitored by SNH and the results of the last site condition monitoring are summarised in the table above. Blanket bog and wet heath are both recorded as being in unfavourable condition. However, the baseline data is thought to be inaccurate and a full survey of the vegetation on site is required to clarify this. The maritime cliff feature, although in unfavourable condition, is recovering due to changes in the grazing regime which will benefit the habitat. Arctic skua, kittiwake and the seabird colony are all in unfavourable condition and off- site factors such as food availability and predation are thought to be involved in population declines rather than aspects of site management. By contrast, the guillemot and fulmar features have recovered. Guillemot has increased by 43% on the previous population survey, although this species is also vulnerable to changes in food availability and the recovery may not be sustained.

Part of Rousay SSSI is also part of Rousay Special Protection Area (SPA) designated for the birds listed in the tables above.

Grass of Parnassus	Arctic skua
	

Past and present management

Rousay SSSI is owned and occupied by several individuals and common grazings and has predominately been used for grazing by sheep and cattle. The Quendal and Brings areas were populated until the middle of the nineteenth century. Prior to the clearances, the area would have been more intensively farmed than it is today and evidence of this past occupation is visible in the pattern of houses and fields which can still be seen. Disused peat banks are also visible while some traditional peat cutting for domestic use continues on the site.

Since the early 1990s much of the site has been under various management agreements which were aimed at establishing optimal grazing levels to maintain the habitats. These agreements included SNH Natural Care Schemes which are now being replaced by Rural Development Contracts (RDC). The RDCs have positive management with specified grazing levels and biodiversity objectives which have helped to improve the quality of the habitats and contribute to favourable condition.

Muckle Water and Peerie Water are stocked with trout and are used by anglers. The outflow to Muckle Water is controlled by a dam and sluice at the Suso Burn outlet, which was formerly operated by the now disused mill. This outflow is being managed and regulated to ensure water levels remain at an agreed level.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) manages a reserve at Trumland. As part of their work on the reserve, they maintain trails, provide trail guides and an information board for visitors, monitor the species present and remove invasive species

like salmonberry.

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 to monitor the effectiveness of management.

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 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).Future funding for positive environmental management is available in the Rural Priorities scheme, part of the Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP).

The objectives for site management are:

To restore the blanket bog to favourable condition by:

- Establishing and maintaining grazing levels which allow for growth and flowering of moorland plants and avoid erosion caused by trampling or tracking.
- Avoiding fire on blanket bog as this readily damages the peat forming bog mosses and can lead to vegetation loss and erosion.
- Avoiding enrichment through fertilizers or nutrient input
- Undertaking peat cutting by hand only and ensuring that turfs are replaced vegetation side uppermost.
- Avoiding damage caused by vehicles

To restore the subalpine wet heath to favourable condition by:

- Establishing and maintaining grazing levels which allow for growth and flowering of moorland plants and avoid erosion caused by trampling or tracking.
- Avoiding fires on this habitat as wet heathland is slow to regenerate and exposure to wind will lead to erosion.
- Avoiding enrichment through fertilizers or nutrient input

To continue the recovery of the condition of the maritime cliff habitat by:

- maintaining the grazing levels which allow for a low cropped sward but also the flowering of cliff top plants, especially Scottish primrose, whilst also avoiding erosion caused by trampling or tracking.
- Avoiding damage caused by vehicles

To maintain Muckle Water in favourable condition by.

- preventing decreases in water levels through drainage as this could affect plant species diversity and distribution, as well as use by birds.
- Avoiding the use of fertilisers on ground which drains freely into Muckle water.
- Preventing stock from damaging the water margin by excessive trampling.

To maintain the vascular plant assemblage in favourable condition by: .

- Avoiding the use of fertilisers
- Maintaining a favourable grazing regime which balances the needs of plants to grow and flower against preventing the build up of thatch or scrub.
- Avoiding damage to scarce plants during peat cutting**.**

To restore favourable condition of the of the breeding seabird community by:

- Avoiding disturbance of breeding birds.
- Maintaining the moorland habitat for inland breeding species.

Many of the factors which affect the breeding success of seabirds relate to conditions at sea, which cannot be influenced by on-site management.

To maintain the breeding moorland bird populations in favourable condition by:

- Avoiding disturbance of breeding birds
- Maintaining the bog and heath habitats used for nesting in good condition, as this improves bird breeding success.

Other factors affecting the natural features of the site

Winter moth: The winter moth occurs in most of the Orkney moorlands, where the larvae feed on heather in early summer. If larvae numbers reach outbreak levels, serious damage can be caused to the heather, from which recovery can be very slow.

Sand eels: The breeding seabirds are largely dependent on the sand eel population for feeding. Any significant decline of the sand eel population is likely to have a detrimental effect on the breeding success of the seabird colony. Sand eel availability may also be connected with climate change.

Date last reviewed: 19 January 2012