



Scottish Natural Heritage

## STROMNESS HEATHS AND COAST

Site of Special Scientific Interest

### SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 1499

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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.

Natural features of Stromness Heaths and Coast SSSI	Condition of feature (and date monitored)	Other relevant designations
Coastal Geomorphology of Scotland	Favourable, maintained (November 2002)	
Non-marine Devonian	Favourable, maintained (November 2002)	
Maritime cliff	Favourable, maintained (July 2008)	Special Area of Conservation (SAC)
Subalpine dry heath	Favourable, maintained (July 2008)	SAC

#### Description of the site

Stromness Heaths and Coast Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) contains some of Orkney's most dramatic coastal scenery and includes the two rock stacks, the Castle of Yesnaby and North Gaulton Castle. With large colonies of *Primula scotica* (Scottish primrose), this is one of the best places in the islands to see this tiny, globally threatened plant. Along the clifftops, extreme exposure to wind and salt spray has produced some of the best and most extensive areas of maritime grassland and maritime heath anywhere in the UK. Red fescue, sea plantain, thrift and spring squill are just some of the plants that carpet the maritime grassland. The site is also a Special Area of Conservation because of its internationally important coastal vegetation. Further inland, as the sea's influence reduces, the land gradually develops into first maritime heath and then inland heath. The maritime heath, outstanding for its quality and coverage, is made up of dwarf shrubs such as common heather, bell

heather, crowberry and creeping willow, along with lichens, a variety of grasses, sedges and wildflowers such as mountain everlasting and wild thyme. This is where *Primula scotica* is found.

To the geologist the cliffs at Yesnaby and the Gaulton coast provide fascinating examples of the Devonian rocks known as Old Red Sandstone. The Yesnaby cliffs were created from the sand that originally formed dunes around an extensive freshwater lake called Lake Orcadie about 400 million years ago. The earliest traces of life are found in these rocks. The fossilised remains of primitive plants that once lived in the lake form small bun-shaped masses of banded rock called stromatolites. The site is particularly noted for a variety called horse-toothed stromatolites. The rock that makes up the south Stromness coast provides a wealth of information about the environmental conditions at the time it was formed. The coastline of the SSSI continues to change through erosion caused by pounding Atlantic breakers. This has created a remarkable range of features, including caves, arches, geos, stacks and shore platforms.

The site is of interest locally for the birds it supports. These include a pair of peregrine falcons, which regularly nest on the sea cliffs, and Row Head, which is noted for its colonies of guillemots and kittiwakes. The site is also home to small breeding numbers of Arctic skuas, great skuas and a small colony of Arctic terns.

<b>Features of overlapping Natura sites that are not notified as SSSI natural features</b>	<b>Condition of feature (date monitored)</b>	<b>Designation (SPA or SAC)</b>
Base-rich fens	Favourable, maintained (August 2009)	SAC

### **Past and present management**

The SSSI is owned and occupied by several individuals and part of the site has been used for grazing sheep at specified levels under individual management agreements, which have now ended. Conservation activities on other parts of the site involve no active management activities and these are left ungrazed in order to maintain the present condition of the maritime heath and grassland.

The majority of the site is currently managed through the Orkney Maritime Heathland and Maritime Grassland Scheme which appears to be having a positive effect on the vegetation as the frequency and diversity of species has been maintained. Future funding for positive environmental management is available in the Rural Priorities scheme, part of the Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP).

Stromness Heaths and Coast is also within the Hoy and West Mainland National Scenic Area and Yesnaby in the north of the site is popular with visitors for its seabird and geological interest.

### **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 the

management agreements.

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).

**1. To maintain the condition and extent of the coastal habitats, including sea cliffs, maritime heath and grassland.**

Maintain and, where appropriate, enhance the diversity of the maritime grassland and maritime heath, and the expanse of the maritime heath. Maintain stocking at a level at which there is no obvious damage to the vegetation from over-grazing or trampling and the vegetation continues to support key species such as spring squill and Scottish primrose.

**2. To maintain the condition and extent of the subalpine dry heath.**

Maintain and enhance the subalpine dry heath ensuring stocking is at a level at which there is no obvious damage to the vegetation from over-grazing or trampling.

**3. To maintain the extent, visibility and accessibility of the geological features to facilitate education and research.**

Maintain the visibility of the geological features by preventing dumping or storing of materials which would hinder or detract from the notified features. Ensure that, as far as possible, no unauthorised removal of geological specimens occurs.

**Other factors affecting the natural features of the site**

Fossil collecting: Unauthorised removal of fossils, particularly horse-toothed stromatolites, has been noted and although to date this has been small scale any continued removal may affect the interest of the site.

Fly tipping: Illegal dumping of material has occurred in the past and although this has been on a small scale it has prevented safe access to the natural features.

Vehicles: The inappropriate use of recreational vehicles on the site at Yesnaby has resulted in some damage to the maritime grassland in the area.

Date last reviewed: 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2010