CITATION

STROMNESS HEATHS AND COAST
SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST
Orkney Islands

Site code: 1499

NATIONAL GRID REFERENCE: HY 226135

OS 1:50,000 SHEET NO: Landranger Series 6
1:25,000 SHEET NO: Explorer Series 463

AREA: 747.74 hectares

NOTIFIED NATURAL FEATURES

Geological:	**Geomorphology:**	**Coastal Geomorphology of Scotland**
	Stratigraphy:	**Non-marine Devonian**
Biological:	**Coastlands:**	**Maritime cliff**
	Upland habitats:	**Subalpine dry heath**

DESCRIPTION:
Stromness Heaths and Coast SSSI covers a long stretch of coast from the southern end of the Bay of Skaill to the golf course in Stromness. This stretch of land is situated on the high exposed cliffs of the west coast and the notified features are of stratigraphy and geomorphology. The maritime cliff habitat is also a notified feature.

Almost in the centre of this SSSI coast line is a large area of inshore land which is a habitat notified for its subalpine dry heath.

Geological
This part of the west coast of Orkney is important for coastal geomorphology, providing the best examples of the distinctive sandstone and flagstone cliffs and associated features of Orkney. The coast is exposed to high energy Atlantic swell waves and experiences some of the highest levels of incident storm wave energy in Britain. Under these conditions an excellent range of rock coast features has developed, including various types of cliff form, caves, arches, geos, stacks, shore platforms and features of cliff-top scouring.

At Yesnaby and Gaulton good examples of cliff sections of the Lower Old Red Sandstone Yesnaby Group and the Middle Old Red Sandstone Flagstones are exposed, separated by an intervening unconformity. This is important evidence of the regional relationship between these two sets of Devonian sediments typical of the Orcadian basin. The Lower Old Red Sandstone sediments include large-scale aeolian dunes, which are not found elsewhere in the Lower Old Red Sandstone of the Orcadian Basin. This site is important for the study of Lower Old Red Sandstone environments and Middle Old Red Sandstone lake sediments.

The south Stromness coast is the best section through the lower part of the Middle Old Red Sandstone (Stromness Flagstone Group), showing very diverse lake and playa basin sediments. Special features of the lake sediments include: beach gravels at the base of the section, different types of chemical sediments, stromatolitic limestone beds (some of which show heavy-metal enrichment) and fine-grained dolomite and calcite limestones.

Biological

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. In places where cliff-top communities are strongly influenced by the sea, species such as sea plantain and thrift are co-dominant. These cliff-top communities grade into mosaics of maritime heath and grassland. The coastal heath is often rich in species and is dominated by dwarf shrubs such as heather, crowberry and bell heather. The maritime grassland includes herb-rich sedge dominated vegetation. The nationally scarce Scottish primrose *Primula scotica* thrives locally in this maritime heathland and grassland mosaic. The largest *Primula scotica* colonies occur near Yesnaby.

There is a natural landward transition from the more maritime plant communities into areas of wind-pruned acidic heath. Heathland away from the zone of maritime influence is naturally less species-rich. Throughout the heathland there are base-rich flush and mire communities which support a wide range of grasses, sedges and flowering plants.

NOTIFICATION HISTORY

First notified under the 1949 Act: 1973 as Yesnaby & Gaulton Cliffs SSSI.

Re-notified under the 1981 Act: 14 February 1986 with a 11.8 ha decrease in area.

Re-notified under the 1981 Act: 11 March 1991 as Stromness Heaths and Coast SSSI with a 685.9 ha increase in area.

Notification reviewed under the 2004 Act: 22nd October 2010

REMARKS

Measured area of site corrected (from 755 ha).

Part of Stromness Heaths and Coast SSSI is designated as Stromness Heaths and Coast Special Area of Conservation (SAC) for the European habitats listed below.

Habitats:
- Base-rich fens
- Dry heaths
- Vegetated sea cliffs