Scottish Natural Heritage

SULE SKERRY
Site of Special Scientific Interest

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 1506

54/56 Junction Road
Kirkwall
Orkney
KW15 1AW

Tel: 01856 875302
E: NORTH@snh.gov.uk

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 Sule Skerry SSSI	**Condition of feature (date monitored)**	**Other relevant designation**
Seabird colony, breeding	Favourable, maintained (June 1998)	Special Protection Area (SPA)
Puffin (*Fratercula arctica*), breeding	Favourable, maintained (June 1998)	SPA
Shag (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*), breeding	Favourable, maintained (June 1998)	SPA
Storm petrel (*Hydrobates pelagicus*), breeding	Favourable, maintained (July 2001)	SPA

Features of overlapping Natura sites that are not notified as SSSI natural features	**Condition of feature (date monitored)**	**Designation (SAC or SPA)**
Gannet (*Morus bassanus*), breeding	Favourable, maintained (July 2004)	SPA
Guillemot (*Uria aalge*), breeding	Favourable, maintained (June 1998)	SPA
Leach's petrel (*Oceanodroma leucorhoa*), breeding	Favourable, maintained (July 2001)	SPA

Description of the site

Sule Skerry Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is a low-lying island situated 60 kilometres west of Brough Head in the north-west of Orkney Mainland. The island rises

to about 15 metres and the centre is covered by a deep layer of peaty soil with rocky outcrops. Vegetation is limited due to a combination of salt-spray and guano, but in summer, the centre is dominated by a dense waist-high covering of scentless mayweed.

The centre of the island provides ideal nesting conditions for Atlantic puffin (common Orkney name: tammie norie) and European storm petrel (alamotti or mootie). The peaty soil is riddled with puffin burrows and tens of thousands of pairs return to the site each year to breed. Storm petrel may also nest in burrows or in holes in walls and Sule Skerry SSSI supports a population of over 300 pairs, many of which nest in cracks in the foundations of the railway line.

European shag (skart) nest in colonies on the cliffs along the rocky coastline and the site supports about 720 breeding pairs. Other breeding seabirds include Northern fulmar (mallimack), lesser black-backed gull, herring gull (whitemaa), great black-backed gull (baakie or swaabie), kittiwake (kittick), Arctic tern (tirrick), guillemot (aak), razorbill (cooter-neb) and black guillemot (tystie).

The site is monitored by SNH and the results of the last site condition monitoring are summarised in the table above with all features in favourable condition. In 1998, at least 58,700 pairs of puffins were present, a 35% increase on the previous count in 1993. This is line with a general increase in puffin numbers in Britain in the second half of the 20th century following major declines earlier that century. The first reliable count of storm petrels, in 2001, found 309 pairs.

Sule Skerry SSSI, along with Sule Stack SSSI, is also designated as Sule Skerry and Sule Stack Special Protection Area (SPA). Together the two islands provide an internationally important breeding site for a range of seabirds as shown in the tables above.

Puffin and burrows in the interior of Sule Skerry	Shag and guillemot nesting on the rocky cliffs
	

Past and present management

There is no management of the site currently but in the past Sule Skerry was probably an important source of food. Until the late eighteenth century annual trips were made to Sule Skerry in order to hunt seals during November. However, this practice ceased after the loss of the expedition in 1786 when 19, of a crew of 22, were lost. Eggs were also harvested from Sule Skerry and Sule Stack and as recently as 1890, 100 dozen eggs were said to have been available for sale in Stromness.

Sule Skerry is occupied by the Northern Lighthouse Board who maintain a lighthouse on the island. During construction of the lighthouse, associated works included the construction of a landing place and a tramway in order to transport materials and supplies and these are still in use. The power supply to the light has recently been updated and is supplied by solar panels and wind generation. Technicians visit the island from time to time in order to conduct routine maintenance to the lighthouse and associated structures.

The Met Office also operates an Automatic Weather Station from Sule Skerry which measures a range of meteorological data.

Due to the island's remoteness and the difficultly of landing, recreational visits are rare but visits by conservation groups occasionally occur. A number of research activities have occurred in the past with bird ringing groups gathering data on the seabird species present on the island.

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.

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 principal management objective for this site is:

1. To maintain the favourable condition of the internationally important breeding seabird colony

Many of the factors which affect the breeding success and long-term population trends of seabirds relate to conditions at sea, which cannot be influenced by on-site management. However, the following measures are relevant to owner/occupiers and visitors:

a) avoiding significant disturbance of breeding seabirds or activities which may damage nesting habitats.

Puffin burrows riddle the peaty soil in the centre of the island and can be collapsed by as little as walking across them. More generally, excessive disturbance of breeding seabirds can reduce their breeding success.

Given the remoteness of the island, visitor numbers are currently very low and

their impact is limited. Any proposals to substantially increase tourist numbers would require careful planning. Similarly, while ringing of seabirds at this site provides useful information to inform wider seabird conservation, research activities should be carefully planned and parties should adopt appropriate techniques to minimise disturbance or damage to nesting grounds.

Maintenance works to the lighthouse and associated structures or to the weather station may also have an adverse impact on the breeding seabirds. Disturbance can best be avoided by conducting such works outwith the breeding season.

Puffins nest below some of the lighthouse buildings and care should be taken when planning maintenance to these buildings to ensure puffin habitat is not destroyed. Storm petrel also utilise man made structures and nest in holes and cracks in the walls and the embankment of the tramline. Modification or removal of these structures would result in a loss of habitat for the storm petrel and should be avoided.

b) preventing introduction of mammalian predators

The birds on the island are largely protected from human influence by their isolation. They benefit from the absence of ground predators such as mice, rats or cats. Major colonies of burrow-nesting seabirds, such as puffins and storm petrels, can only thrive where such predators are absent.

Accidental introductions of ground predators could occur when moving equipment and stores onto the island for routine maintenance of the lighthouse or weather station or by other visiting parties. Particular care should be taken to prevent any such introductions, which would be highly detrimental to the breeding seabirds.

Accidental introduction of predators is also possible in event of any vessel being wrecked or grounded on the island.

Other factors affecting the natural features of the site

Sand eels: sand eels are an important food source for breeding seabirds and any significant declines or changes in distribution of sand eels is likely to have a detrimental effect on the breeding success of the seabird colony.

Pollution: Oil spills and other pollution incidents at sea could have a damaging effect on the seabird colony. Attempts are being made to make the surrounding sea area a Marine Environment High Risk Area (MEHRA). There was a small spill of fuel oil near the island in spring 2011 following grounding and break-up of a fishing vessel.

Climate change: Significant changes to rainfall regime may affect puffins (e.g. through erosion of the peaty soil which the puffins use to build their burrows or through flooding of burrows during the breeding season). Rising sea levels would threaten this low lying island and the species which it supports. .

Date last reviewed: 11 August 2011