



Scottish Natural Heritage

SUMBURGH HEAD
Site of Special Scientific Interest

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 1508

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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 Sumburgh Head SSSI	Condition of feature (date monitored)	Other relevant designations
Palaeontology: Silurian - Devonian Chordata	Favourable, maintained (July 2006)	
Guillemot (<i>Uria aalge</i>), breeding	Unfavourable, declining (June 2007)	Special Protection Area (SPA)
Puffin (<i>Fratercula arctica</i>), breeding	Unfavourable, recovering (May 2007)	
Shag (<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>), breeding	Unfavourable, recovering (May 2007)	
Seabird colony, breeding	Favourable, maintained (June 2001)	SPA

Description of the site

Sumburgh Head Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) consists of high sea cliffs and the outlying sea stacks of the southern most point on the Shetland mainland. The sea stacks are located off Sumburgh Head, The Slithers and Compass Head. The SSSI also includes the low lying boulder strewn headland near Grutness called the Laward. The cliffs are made of old red sandstone which reach up to 100 metres, providing nesting sites for around 28,000 breeding seabirds, making Sumburgh Head one of the largest breeding seabird colonies in Britain. The site is also of national interest for its vertebrate palaeontology as it contains the earliest known fish bed of the Middle Devonian Orcadian Basin, laid down around 398 - 385 million years ago.

The fish bed is located in a small quarry in the cliffs below the lighthouse, where a bed of impure limestone containing fossilised Devonian fish is exposed. These fossil beds

are used to work out the relative ages of rocks in Britain and further afield and are important for understanding the geological history and evolution of the British Isles. The surrounding sandstone rocks were laid down at a time when Britain lay in the arid centre of a supercontinent, before the formation of the present day Atlantic and North Sea. The fish bed shows the sediments which were laid down in a temporary lake that formed periodically in a desert basin that extended from Shetland to the Moray Firth. Amongst the fossils present at Sumburgh Head are the remains of a fish, *Asterolepis thule*, which is found at no other site in the world.

The cliffs also provide an important breeding ground for a variety of seabirds and are notified for their nationally important seabird colony. They are also notified for individual species as detailed in the above table. The SSSI overlaps Sumburgh Head Special Protection Area (SPA) which qualifies for the species listed in the tables above and below.

Site condition monitoring of the seabirds took place in 2001 and 2007 and with the exception of the seabird assemblage and northern fulmar, all were found to be in an unfavourable condition. However, the puffin and shag populations are recovering and this may be due to better count conditions in the case of puffins and recovery from the 1993 Braer oil spill in the case of the shag. The guillemot (along with SPA features Arctic tern and kittiwake) is declining, probably due to a shortage of small fish, particularly sand eels. This may be linked to rising sea temperatures associated with climate change.

The geological interest was monitored in 2006 and was found to be in a favourable condition as the extent, composition, structure and visibility of the site was maintained throughout its length.

Features of overlapping Natura sites that are not notified as SSSI natural features	Condition of feature (date monitored)	Designation (SPA or SAC)
Arctic tern (<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>), breeding	Unfavourable, declining (June 2001)	SPA
Fulmar (<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>), breeding	Favourable, maintained (June 2001)	SPA
Kittiwake (<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>), breeding	Unfavourable, declining (June 2007)	SPA

Guillemot and chick	Puffin
	

Past and present management

The cliffs are inaccessible and have no history of use with the exception of past refuse

dumping in association with the lighthouse. In contrast the Laward has been used in the past as a source of stone for building, specifically the pier and breakwater at Grutness. Today the Laward continues to be used for grazing sheep along with accessible areas of the cliff top. The sheep maintain a short sward which provides a suitable nesting site for the Arctic terns. No management agreements are currently in place on any part of the site.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) also manages part of the site as a nature reserve welcoming 24,000 visitors annually. Educational activities are provided in the form of nature trails, interpretation signs and guided walks to school groups.

The University of Aberdeen also monitors the breeding seabirds for the Shetland Oil Terminal Environmental Advisory Group (SOTEAG).

Objectives for Management (and key factors influencing the condition of natural features)

We wish to work with the owners 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 its 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 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 population and distribution of the seabird population within the site.

Ensure that the site is managed in a way that does not adversely affect the seabird interests.

2. To avoid significant disturbance of the breeding seabird population.

Excessive disturbance can affect the breeding success of nesting birds. It is important that any development of the tourist potential of the site is carefully planned to safeguard the nesting birds. Current good practice, where visitors to the cliffs are kept on the landward side of the wall where there are no puffin burrows helps to prevent disturbance to the puffins and cliff nesting birds. However, the Arctic terns nesting on the Laward are often disturbed by walkers.

3. To maintain the physical and visual integrity of the geological interest of the site.

Commercial and amateur fossil collecting can have a negative impact on the interest of the site. However, due to the inaccessibility of the site this is not considered to be a major threat at present.

Other factors affecting the natural features of the site

Pollution: Oil spills and other pollution incidents at sea would have a damaging effect on the seabird colony.

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 colonies.

Predation: Terrestrial predators, such as feral cats, rats and ferrets can have a major impact on the ground nesting birds.

Date last reviewed: 19 October 2010