Scottish Natural Heritage
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LOCH URIGILL
Site of Special Scientific Interest

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 1668

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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.

This statement is available in Gaelic on request.

Natural features of Loch Urigill SSSI	**Condition of feature** (and date monitored)	**Other relevant designations**
Oligo-mesotrophic loch (slightly enriched freshwater loch)	Favourable, maintained (July - 2004)	
Black-throated diver	Favourable, maintained (July - 2003)	Special Protection Area (SPA)
Breeding bird assemblage	Favourable, maintained (July - 2003)	

Description of the site

Loch Urigill Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is located 2km east of Elphin at the southern edge of northwest Sutherland. The loch is nationally important as an example of a nutrient-poor loch with some enrichment, and for the range of birds that breed here. In addition, the site is internationally important for breeding black-throated diver.

Oligo-mesotrophic (slightly enriched) loch

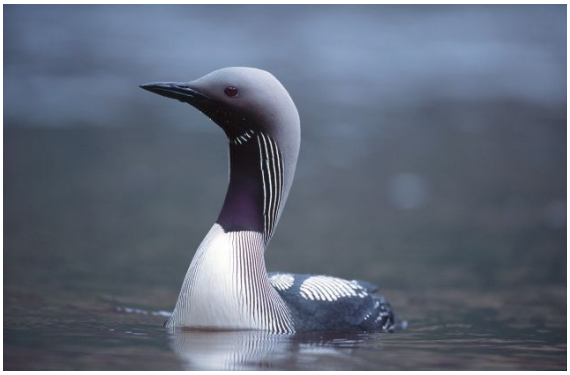
Most of the catchment of Loch Urigill lies to the south and west, and the loch is fed by two main burns, the Crom Allt and Allt an Achaidh. It shows characteristics of both nutrient-poor and slightly richer loch types, possibly as a result of the influence of both the surrounding limestone geology and the heath and blanket bog vegetation.

The loch is unusually rich in plant species. The shallow waters around the edge of the loch, together with some of the open water areas, support a particularly diverse range of plant species. The submerged plants include some nationally scarce species of pondweed including the long-stalked pondweed *Potamogeton praelongus* and the

slender-leaved pondweed *P. filiformis.* Other aquatic species include six other species of pondweed, shoreweed, awlwort, quillwort and alternate water-milfoil. This rich and diverse freshwater flora also provides food and shelter for a wide range of birds.

The freshwater interest was monitored in July 2004. The water quality was good with a low sediment load and no algal blooms. The aquatic plant community was similar to that found in the previous detailed survey in 1988. The overall assessment was that the loch had been maintained in favourable condition.

In terms of Water Quality Classification for the Water Framework Directive, the 2006 data shows the outflow burn (Na Luirgean) to be quality A – excellent.

Black-throated diver	Looking east over Loch Urigill
	

Birds

The islands in Loch Urigill have been regularly used as nesting sites by black-throated divers. Up to two pairs of black-throated diver nest at this site, representing more than 1% of the British breeding population and are therefore of national importance. Other waterfowl which breed by the loch are wigeon, tufted duck, mallard and teal, while ringed plover and common sandpiper breed around its margins. The surrounding heath and mires also support a wide range of species, particularly waders, including greenshank, dunlin, redshank, curlew, golden plover and snipe. The range of breeding bird species in this area is of national significance.

The assemblage of breeding birds was monitored in July 2003. Black-throated diver, wigeon, teal, red-breasted merganser, ringed plover, dunlin, snipe, curlew, redshank, and greenshank were all recorded. The black-throated diver feature was monitored at the same time. Two pairs have been recorded regularly although chick production has been poor because nesting attempts have failed either due to flooding of the nest or as a result of predation. The habitat for breeding birds generally was in good condition. Both the breeding bird assemblage and the black-throated diver population were assessed as being in favourable condition.

Other interests

Although not designated, other features of interest include the wooded islands whose base-rich soils give rise to a herb-rich ground layer which contrasts markedly with the vegetation and soils of the surrounding moorland. Also, around the mouth of the Crom

Allt, and in a lagoon (the old mouth) to the east of it, is a rich swamp with plant communities which have a very limited distribution in Assynt for example extensive areas that are dominated by bottle sedge and marsh cinquefoil and the community around the nitrogen-rich springs in the south-east corner of the lagoon. These springs support an area of tall deep green vegetation including purple moor grass, mare's tail and blue water-speedwell. These communities form part of a mesotrophic swamp around the mouth of the Crom Allt which also has patches of common club rush, common spike rush and branched bur-reed with islets containing purple moor grass. This habitat is important for nesting birds, providing suitable nest sites and protected areas where young birds can feed.

Past and present management

The SSSI forms part of two sporting estates and is also part owned by the Forestry Commission for Scotland. The sporting estates are managed for red deer stalking, wildfowling and rough shooting. Part of the ground lies within a Common Grazings and is managed for sheep grazing. This ground is covered by a Peatland Management Scheme (PMS) agreement which promotes good conservation management. There is no muirburn, stock feeding or peat cutting on this area. When the current PMS management agreement expires, we would encourage applications for the Rural Development Contract scheme that will replace it.

Conifers have been planted outside the site boundary on land owned by the Forestry Commission; however, many of these areas have now been felled to improve the peatland habitats on the north side of the boundary.

A raft for black-throated divers was installed by Forest Enterprise in 1992 and was then replaced by another by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds on behalf of Forestry Commission Scotland in 2003. It has been maintained on Loch Urigill since then, but has yet to be used by breeding black-throated divers.

There is no road access to this loch and no facilities for visitors. Few people visit the site at present, other than to fish. Access for fishing is usually taken through the forestry plantation tracks from the north of the site near Ledmore Junction.

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

We wish to work with land mangers to protect the site and to maintain and where necessary enhance its features of special interest. SNH aims 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 agreement.

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).

A list of Operations Requiring Consent forms part of the formal notification documents of the SSSI. These, and the discussions on land management involved in the issuing of formal consents, are intended to minimise the threat of any damage to the natural features.

1. To maintain the condition, extent and distribution of the freshwater and loch side habitats

The water quality and plant diversity on this site can be maintained by avoiding pollution or excessive release of sediment within the catchment of the loch. Any enrichment of the loch (for example from fish farm developments) would be inappropriate since this would be likely to alter the ecosystem of the loch, possibly causing the loss of the rare plants that grow here and changes in other aquatic life e.g. fish and invertebrates.

The freshwater habitat on the loch within this site is currently suitable for several rare birds including black-throated diver and so changes in management should be avoided if these would be harmful to divers and other birds. The main changes that might affect nesting divers are fluctuating water levels. Fluctuating water levels can be problematic for nesting divers since they nest very close to the edge of lochs and their nests can easily be flooded if the water level rises, as has happened several times recently on Loch Urigill. Diver rafts can be important in enabling divers to hatch eggs on lochs despite any fluctuations in water levels. Since the raft currently on Loch Urigill has not been used in its present position, it might be worthwhile to try moving it to a different place to see whether this might make it more attractive to divers. This would require further discussion with SNH.

Existing forestry guidelines for work near water bodies should protect the site from pollution or sedimentation from the nearby conifer plantation. In addition, the legal framework provided by the Water Framework Directive (regulated by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA)) provides controls over potentially damaging changes in management of lochs and streams.

2. To maintain the size and distribution of the breeding populations of birds (including black-throated diver) and to avoid significant disturbance to black-throated diver and other birds during the breeding season

If the habitats on this site are maintained, breeding bird populations are also expected to be maintained as long as the birds are not disturbed during the breeding season. It is important that any activities on the site are carefully planned to safeguard nesting birds. Black-throated divers are particularly sensitive to human presence and are protected by special legislation. Disturbance during the nesting season (April – June) can lead birds to desert their nests and increase the opportunities for predators to take eggs or chicks. While young are on the water (June – July) they should not be disturbed unduly. Anglers should look out for divers and keep as far away from their nests as possible. A leaflet on 'Black-throated divers and anglers' is available from SNH on request explaining how anglers can help divers by avoiding their nests. Trampling by herbivores or indiscriminate use of hill vehicles can also disturb nesting habitats, so activities that

might concentrate livestock or deer (such as feeding) and vehicle use should be avoided close to the edges of the lochs.

3. To maintain the food supply for black-throated diver and other birds

Many of the birds that breed on or nearby the loch also feed here during the breeding season. Black-throated divers can only breed successfully if the loch contains adequate stocks of native fish and invertebrates of a suitable size. As mentioned above it is important that the current nutrient status of the loch is maintained by avoiding pollution or sediment release into the loch. It is also important to maintain water levels to maintain the food supply for black-throated diver.

4. To minimise predation on the eggs and chicks of black-throated diver and other birds

Eggs and chicks are vulnerable to predation. Foxes, crows and mink are potential predators of bird eggs or young. Legal control of these species as part of general estate management is likely to be beneficial to the divers. Minimising human disturbance to nesting birds is also important since predators can take eggs or small chicks more easily if their parents are not there to protect them.

Other factors affecting the natural features of the site

- **Egg collecting**: Some of the rare birds that breed on this site are potential targets for illegal egg collecting. Any suspicious activity, including details of cars or car number plates, should be reported to the police as soon as possible.

- **Non-native conifer plantations**: The eggs and chicks of black-throated diver may be eaten by predators such as foxes and crows that have territories in the nearby conifer plantations.

Date last reviewed: 29 January 2009