



**Scottish Natural Heritage**  
**Dualchas Nàdair na h-Alba**  
 All of nature for all of Scotland  
 Nàdair air fad airson Alba air fad

**LOCH OF MEY**  
**Site of Special Scientific Interest**

**SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT**

**Site code: 1671**

**The Links, Golspie Business Park, Golspie, Sutherland, KW10 6UB.**  
**Tel 01408 634063**

[north\\_highland@snh.gov.uk](mailto:north_highland@snh.gov.uk)

**Purpose**



This is a public statement prepared by SNH for owners and occupiers of Loch of Mey 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.

<b>Natural features of Loch of Mey SSSI</b>	<b>Condition of feature (and date monitored)</b>	<b>Other relevant designations</b>
Transition grassland	Favourable, maintained (August 2007)	
Breeding bird assemblage	Favourable, recovered (May 2005)	
Greenland white-fronted goose (non-breeding)	Favourable, maintained (March 2008)	Special Protection Area (SPA), Ramsar site

<b>Features of overlapping Natura sites that are not notified as SSSI natural features</b>	<b>Feature condition (date monitored)</b>	<b>SPA or SAC</b>
Greylag goose (non-breeding)	Favourable, maintained (April 2001)	SPA, Ramsar site
Whooper swan (non-breeding)	Favourable, maintained (April 2001)	SPA, Ramsar site

**Description of the site**

Loch of Mey Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is located near the north coast of Caithness, 11km west of John O'Groats. The site is designated as an SSSI for the nationally important wetland habitat surrounding the loch as well as the populations of breeding birds and wintering Greenland white-fronted goose. Loch of Mey is one of seven sites in Caithness that form the Caithness Lochs Special Protection Area (SPA) and Ramsar site and which together support internationally important wintering populations of Greenland white-fronted goose, greylag goose and whooper swan.

### **Transition grassland**

The loch is bordered by an area of wet grassland that is seasonally flooded and is rich both in species typical of grassland and those that are found in fen and swamp. Drier parts of the site have silverweed and meadowsweet whilst marsh marigold, marsh cinquefoil and bottle sedge can be found in wetter areas. There are impressive stands of common spike rush at the loch margins and large patches of yellow flag iris near the western and northern edges of the loch. The wetland fens and grasslands on this site are an important example within the range of Caithness habitats. In addition the loch is important because it supports a population of nationally scarce narrow small-reed.

The transition grassland was monitored in 2007 and was found to be in favourable condition. The extent of the habitat had not changed and no invasive or non-native species were recorded. Most of the site had typical grassland or wetland vegetation, however there was some scattered willow near the south end of the loch where there had been no recent grazing. Although the willow was not of concern during this survey it is possible that it might spread further in future, which would be of concern if willow were to replace grassland habitat over a wider area.

### **Breeding bird assemblage**

Loch of Mey is an important site for breeding birds and it is at the northerly limit of the breeding distribution for some species. The relatively undisturbed grassland and heath provide excellent nesting habitat for waders and hen harrier while the fen offers a home for water birds, sedge warbler and reed bunting.

The following species of birds were recorded during monitoring in 2005: little grebe, grey heron, mute swan, teal, shoveler, shelduck, snipe, redshank, ringed plover, common tern, cuckoo, sedge warbler and reed bunting. The diversity of bird species breeding on the site and the continued suitability of the habitat for these species meant that the breeding bird assemblage was assessed as being in favourable condition.

### **Greenland white-fronted goose**

Greenland white-fronted geese roost at Loch of Mey between late September and late April. There are two groups of this species in Caithness, one concentrated around Loch of Mey and the other around Broubster Leans to the west. Greenland white-fronted geese breed in Greenland and winter exclusively in Britain and Ireland. The majority of the species overwinters in the west of Scotland and Ireland, so the population that spends the winter in Caithness is close to the northerly limit of their wintering range. Loch of Mey is therefore an important site for the maintenance and distribution of the Greenland white-fronted goose population both within Caithness and Britain as a whole. Although individuals from the Loch of Mey group also roost at nearby Loch Heilen, Loch of Mey seems to be increasingly used as the most common roost site. The geese often roost at the east side of the loch and disperse during the day to forage on nearby fields.

The Greenland white-fronted geese are counted by volunteers. The population was assessed between the winters of 2005/06 and 2007/08 and was found to be in favourable condition. Several counts were made each winter and the peaks for each winter were averaged over a three year period, resulting in a mean peak of 169 birds. This mean peak was compared with the baseline figure of 217 (taken from winters of 1990/91 to 1994/95). Although the latest count was lower than the baseline number,



the change was assessed as being within the range of normal fluctuations in the population. The most recent counts still showed that more than 1% of the national population of Greenland white-fronted geese roost at the Loch of Mey.

**Other interests**

The loch is relatively undisturbed by human activity and as a result whooper swans, Icelandic greylag geese and duck such as wigeon, teal and mallard all use the loch in considerable numbers in the winter.

The loch has a population of the nationally scarce slender-leaved pondweed, *Potamogeton filiformis*.

The great yellow bumblebee *Bombus distinguendus* has been recorded near to the site and probably uses parts of the SSSI as well. Formerly widespread in Britain, it is now restricted to north and west Scotland, and remains threatened by agricultural change. The great yellow bumblebee is associated with extensive areas of herb-rich grasslands where red and white clover, meadow vetchling, knapweed and thistles are important food plants. It is included on the Scottish Biodiversity List and is a UKBAP priority species. Caithness is now an important area within the UK for this species.

Flag iris	Common snipe
	

**Past and present management**

Parts of the margins of the loch are used for sheep grazing. Wildfowling also occurs on the site during the legal wildfowling season. Best practice is to avoid disturbance to non-quarry species, especially the Greenland white-fronted geese which are protected throughout the year.

The present area and water level of Loch of Mey are a result of drainage during agricultural improvements which occurred over 100 years ago. The outflow drain at the north end of the site has been cleared periodically since then to maintain the current area and water level of the loch. The outflow drain was most recently unblocked in 2008.

A bird hide has been built just outside the SSSI by the Caithness branch of the Scottish Ornithologists' Club. This allows people to view the interesting bird life without disturbing any of the wildlife or trampling the vegetation.

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

We wish to work with land managers 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.

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 list of Operations Requiring Consent, 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, distribution and extent of the transition grassland habitat**

Water quality plays a crucial role in the condition of wetland habitats and if this is maintained, then no active management is needed for this site at present. Any increase in drainage, abstraction or other activities affecting the hydrology of the site and the wider catchment should be considered carefully. Agriculture and forestry operations within the Mey catchment should be carefully managed to prevent the input of excess chemicals, nutrients or sediment into watercourses in order to maintain the high water quality required by the fen vegetation.

The majority of the site is so wet that it is clearly unsuitable for vehicles. Any vehicle use should be restricted to drier parts of the site during dry periods, taking care not to break through the surface of the vegetation.

Drier areas of the site would benefit from light grazing that ensures that tall, rank vegetation does not overwhelm smaller plants. Stocking levels should however be low enough to allow plants to flower and set seed and to avoid excessive poaching of the ground.

### **2. To maintain the populations of breeding and wintering birds**

This objective can be met if the habitat is maintained following the advice given in the objective above and there is no significant disturbance of the birds in summer. Disturbance can reduce the breeding success of birds on the site. They may be discouraged from choosing Loch of Mey as a nest site or be flushed from their nests, which puts the eggs or chicks at risk from chilling or predation. Any management activities on or around the site should be planned to minimise disturbance to breeding birds. The main breeding season for birds is April to July inclusive.

### **3. To maintain the populations wintering Greenland white-fronted goose, greylag goose and whooper swan**

This objective can be met if the habitat is maintained following the advice given in Objective 1 and there is no significant disturbance of the birds in winter.

Wintering geese and swans are present in Caithness between late September and late April. The exact dates that these birds arrive in Caithness in autumn and leave again in spring varies from year to year, depending on the weather at their foreign breeding grounds, as well as the weather in Caithness. Wintering geese use the Loch of Mey mainly for roosting overnight so it is important to avoid disturbance between dusk and dawn.

Greylag geese are legal quarry between 1 September and 31 January (other than on Sundays or during cold-weather bans on wildfowling). However other species that roost here in winter – Greenland white-fronted goose and whooper swan – are not legal quarry (see British Association for Shooting and Conservation Guide to Quarry Identification below). SNH discourages any shooting of greylag geese on or adjacent to this site because large numbers of birds are likely to be disturbed, including the protected Greenland white-fronted goose and whooper swan.

If wildfowling is to be carried out on the site, SNH recommends that the “British Association for Shooting and Conservation’s code of practice for sporting agents and guides offering inland goose shooting” should be followed. Any wildfowling should be carried out infrequently, with all effort made to reduce disturbance to non-quarry species.

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

The breeding success of the geese and swans that winter on this site is likely to affect the number of birds wintering here. If the overall populations of geese and swans fall due to lower breeding success, fewer birds are likely to overwinter at the Loch of Mey.

Wildfowling outwith Loch of Mey SSSI may affect the number of greylag geese that overwinter on the site since the overall population of this species is likely to increase if fewer birds are shot and decrease if more geese are killed by wildfowlers. If the overall population of greylag geese changes, the number of birds overwintering at the Loch of Mey is also likely to change.

Climate change may alter the distribution of wintering geese and swans. Warmer conditions in winter might lead to an increase in the number of birds that overwinter in Caithness rather than further south. Very cold conditions can cause the water to freeze at Loch of Mey, which encourages geese and swans to seek areas of water that have not frozen for roosting and foraging, possibly at nearby Loch Heilen.

Date last reviewed: 21 October 2010

# BASC Guide to Quarry Identification

## Some Principles

Identifying your quarry is only one aspect of good shooting practice. There are many contributory factors, and understanding and applying them in the shooting field is very important, for several reasons. They will increase your success and enjoyment, keep you a responsible and considerate sportsman or sportswoman, and ensure any losses or wastage of shot birds and animals are kept to a minimum. On the basis that you have the authority to shoot and are fulfilling all relevant legal requirements, then positively identifying your quarry is the first step. You should then take a shot only if you are sure:

- it is safe to do so
- the target is within your range
- your gun/cartridge combination is appropriate for the type and size of quarry you are shooting
- you are confident of hitting and killing the bird or animal
- you will be able to recover the shot bird or animal and, as far as possible, put it to good use.

BASC has codes of practice for all types of shooting. You are encouraged to obtain those which relate to your type(s) of shooting and be guided by the information and advice given. Do also encourage your shooting friends and associates to do the same. For the good of the sport, do not tolerate bad practice, either of your own or of others. Enjoy your shooting!

## GREYLAG GOOSE

*Anser anser*

Size: 75–90 cm (30–35 in)

Large, big-headed, thick-necked, heavy grey goose. Head, neck and most of body uniform pale brownish-grey. Characterised by large size, heavy head and neck with stout bill, and very pale bluish-grey forewing – the latter especially distinctive in flight. Bill bright orange; legs flesh pink. Breast often spotted with black. Young birds similar to adults but generally unspotted, with greyer legs. Can be confused with Pink-footed and White-fronted Goose (protected in Scotland) especially immature birds, and Bean Goose (protected), but all these are smaller and more slightly built by comparison.



Season opens 1 September, and closes 31 January inland (other than on Sundays or during cold-weather bans on wildfowling).

Information taken from the **British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) Guide to Quarry Identification** which is available to download from the BASC website.



[www.basc.org.uk](http://www.basc.org.uk)