

CITATION

STRATHY COAST SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST Highland (Sutherland)

Site code: 1689

NATIONAL GRID REFERENCE: NC 739639 to NC 890654

OS 1:50,000 SHEET NO: Landranger Series 10
1:25,000 SHEET NO: Explorer Series 448, 449

AREA: 675.18 hectares

NOTIFIED NATURAL FEATURES

Geological: Structural and metamorphic geology: Moine

**Biological: Coastlands: Machair
Maritime cliff
Sand dune
Saltmarsh**

Vascular plants: Vascular plant assemblage

DESCRIPTION

Strathy Coast SSSI covers a section of the north Sutherland coast centred around Strathy Point, 7km to the east of Bettyhill. It comprises north, east and west facing cliffs, interrupted by beach systems at Armadale, Strathy and Melvich. The site is notified for the nationally important maritime cliff, sand dune, machair and salt marsh habitats found along the coast and for the assemblage of rare plants. It is also notified for the Moine rocks around Portskerra.

Moine (geology)

This nationally important site is crucial to our understanding of the history of deformations that shaped the geology of this part of Scotland. The Moine rocks exposed along 1.5km of coast around Portskerra originated as sands and muds on the seabed around 1.1 billion years ago. Intense heat and pressure within the Earth's crust first altered the sandstone and mudstone, and then certain minerals separated out to create a banded rock called migmatite. Magma was intruded into these rocks in at least three episodes, forming igneous rocks that were then altered by further heat and pressure. Younger intrusions of the Strath Halladale Granite Complex illustrate a period of folding and shearing around 450 million years ago. The junction between the Moine rocks and overlying Devonian sandstones, and the complex inter-relationships between the many rock types, are superbly exposed in a small area.

Machair

Areas of machair south of Armadale Bay, Strathy Bay and Melvich are found on the largely calcareous shell sand and support a rich variety of flowering plants. Birds-foot trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*, wild thyme *Thymus polytrichus*, common self-heal *Prunella vulgaris*, frog orchid *Coeloglossum viride* and cowslip *Primula veris* are all found within the machair habitat.

Maritime cliff (vegetation)

The cliff top maritime grasslands of Strathy Coast are both varied and extensive and show complete succession to maritime heaths and sub-maritime grasslands. In the absence of grazing, the rock crevices, cliff ledges and islands support red fescue *Festuca rubra* and thrift *Armeria maritima* grassland, with common scurvygrass *Cochlearia officinalis* and Scots lovage *Ligusticum scoticum* also abundant. Where there is a degree of shelter, these communities can develop into rich meadows with yarrow *Achillea millefolium* and occasionally purple oxytropis *Oxytropis halleri*. The most widespread grassland has a blue-green sward of sedges, including glaucous sedge *Carex flacca* and carnation sedge *Carex panicea*. Large populations of the nationally scarce Scottish primrose *Primula scotica* are found between Kirtomy and Strathy and near Portskerra.

Sand dune (vegetation)

The sand dune habitats of this site are of exceptional quality. They typically show complete succession from pioneering strandline communities with sea sandwort *Honckenya peploides* and sea rocket *Cakile maritima*, through mobile dunes with colonising species such as marram grass *Ammophila arenaria* and sand couch grass *Elytrigia juncea*, to mature fixed dunes. Field gentian *Gentianella campestris*, frog orchid *Coeloglossum viride* and common twayblade *Listera ovata* are widespread. The nationally rare purple oxytropis and the eyebright *Euphrasia rotundifolia* also occur in this habitat.

Saltmarsh

An area of saltmarsh has developed in the sheltered intertidal section of the Halladale River behind Melvich beach where silty and gravelly muds have accumulated. This is unusually extensive for the north coast and has a typical range of species, including saltmarsh rush *Juncus gerardii* and sea-milkwort *Glaux maritima*.

Vascular plant assemblage

Five nationally scarce or rare plants grow on this site: Scottish primrose, purple oxytropis and three species of eyebright (*Euphrasia rotundifolia*, *E. foulaensis* and *E. marshallii*). Two of these plants – Scottish primrose and *Euphrasia rotundifolia* – grow in Britain and nowhere else in the world. This site is particularly important for Scottish primrose as this plant grows only in Sutherland, Caithness and Orkney, making the populations on this site some of the largest in the world.

NOTIFICATION HISTORY

First notified under the 1981 Act: 6 June 1997

Notification reviewed under the 2004 Act: 16 September 2010

REMARKS

Measured area of site corrected from 652 ha.

Part of Strathy Coast SSSI is also designated as Strathy Point Special Area of Conservation (SAC) for the European habitat: vegetated sea cliffs.