



Scottish Natural Heritage
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EILEAN HOAN **Site of Special Scientific Interest**

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 1692

The Links, Golspie Business Park, Golspie, Sutherland, KW10 6UB.

Tel 01408 634063

north_highland@snh.gov.uk

Purpose



This is a public statement prepared by SNH for owners and occupiers of Eilean Hoan. 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 Eilean Hoan SSSI	Condition of feature (date monitored)	Other relevant designations
Greenland barnacle goose (wintering)	Favourable maintained (March 2008)	Special Protection Area (SPA)
Great black-backed gull (breeding)	Unfavourable declining (June 2008)	

Description of the site

Eilean Hoan Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) lies off the north coast of Sutherland, approximately 3.5km east of Durness. The island has an internationally important wintering population of Greenland barnacle geese and a nationally important breeding population of great black-backed gull.

Greenland barnacle goose

A flock of over 800 Greenland barnacle geese visit the island during the winter. These birds fly south from their summer breeding grounds in Greenland and take advantage of the grazing on this and other islands around the west coast of Scotland (and Ireland). Together with Eilean nan Ron, the islands have been designated a Special Protection Area (SPA) known as the North Sutherland Coastal Islands. The geese roost and feed on the maritime grassland but are also known to feed on improved agricultural land on the mainland in the Durness area.

The high numbers of barnacle geese wintering on Eilean Hoan is attributable to three factors: a lack of predators, sheep grazing and a lack of disturbance. Eilean Hoan forms a safe area for geese to roost since its isolation from mainland Sutherland means that the geese are not exposed to predators such as foxes. Sheep grazing on the island at the current level benefits the over-wintering goose population by preventing rank vegetation encroaching onto geese feeding sites. In addition, given its remote location, the island is relatively undisturbed by humans with the exception of low flying military aircraft, however no incidences of significant disturbance to the

geese have been reported. Low flying aircraft can cause the geese to take to the air, but the effect is temporary.

Monitoring of the barnacle goose population took place in March 2008. 832 geese were counted on Eilean Hoan, and 205 on Eilean nan Ron resulting in the SSSI and SPA population being assessed as in favourable condition.

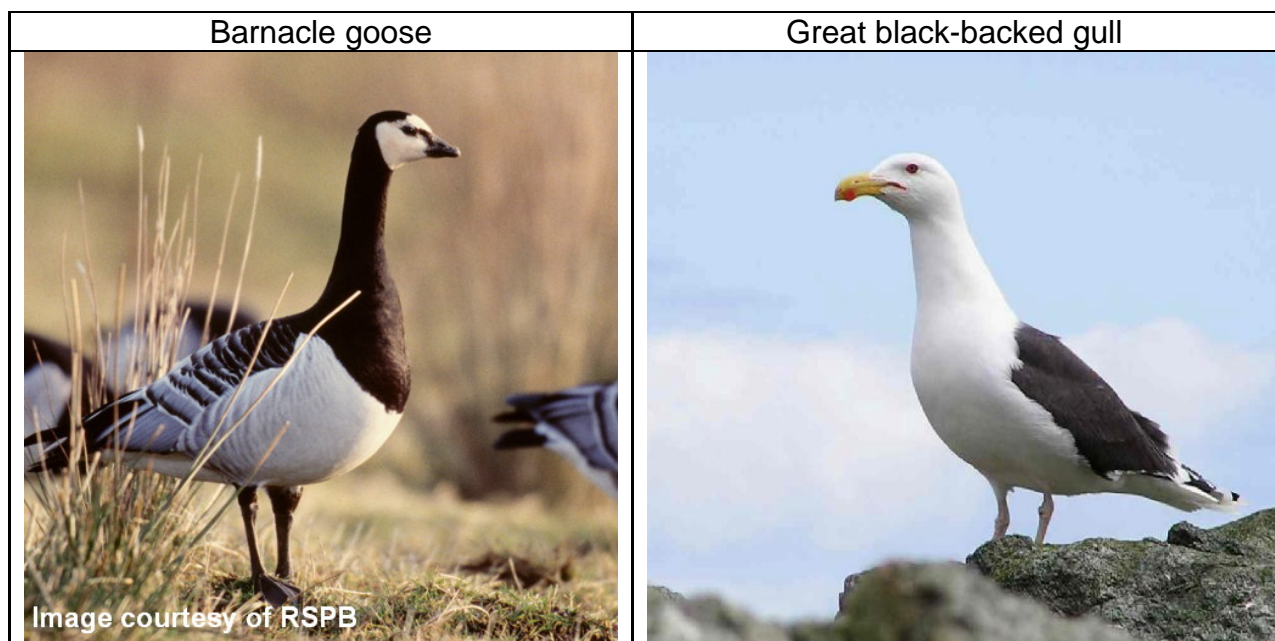
Great black-backed gull

Eilean Hoan also supports a nationally important breeding population of great black-backed gull. The island is characterised by sea cliffs which provide abundant ledges upon which the gulls are able to nest. In addition, the coastline and terrestrial habitats provide opportunities for foraging for shellfish, other birds and carrion. The nesting great black-backed gulls experience little in the way of disturbance during the breeding season due to the island's relatively remote location.

Monitoring of the gull population is undertaken on an annual basis by the RSPB. The number of great black-backed gull pairs that occupied nests decreased from 2006/2007 figures from 247 to 148 pairs in 2008. Of those 148 pairs, only 68 bred successfully. The decline in the gull population is thought to be due to restricted food supply. The Great black-backed gull population was assessed as being in unfavourable condition due to the decline in the number of breeding pairs.

Other interests

In addition to the notable bird populations described above, Eilean Hoan has a varied breeding seabird population including storm petrel, lesser black-backed gull, arctic tern, fulmar, shag and herring gull. The island supports plant communities influenced by the maritime environment, including maritime grassland and a small pocket of maritime heath to the north-east of the island. Herb-rich calcareous grassland is found on the limestone cliff tops. Over 60 species have been recorded including the unusual frog orchid on the limestone outcrops. Eilean Hoan also supports a breeding colony of grey seals in autumn.



Past and present management

Historically the island was cultivated by a crofting community. The island is now uninhabited by humans but sheep (ewes and followers) still graze on the island which is part of Durness Common Grazings.

The RSPB have leased the island since 1979 due to the importance of the island for wintering Greenland barnacle geese. Few people visit this site due to the isolation of the island and the difficulties in landing by boat. Most of the people who do reach the island are part of research/monitoring groups who do so in summer when there are suitable sea conditions.

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 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).

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 size and distribution of the population of overwintering Greenland barnacle geese and to avoid significant disturbance to these birds

Geese use Eilean Hoan because they are largely undisturbed (both by humans and potential predators such as foxes) and support short-sward grassland on which the geese feed. Continued grazing on the island is essential to prevent rank vegetation building up that could make the site unsuitable for geese to feed. However, very high levels of sheep grazing could reduce the availability of food for the geese. Stock numbers on the island are therefore an important factor in maintaining the Greenland barnacle geese population. At present, few people visit the island in winter, so human disturbance to the geese is unlikely. Any future proposals affecting the island or the surrounding area should ensure that they do not create any increase in disturbance during the winter months. Potential predators of geese should not be introduced to the island.

2. To increase the size of the population of breeding great black-backed gull and to avoid significant disturbance to these birds

Great black-backed gulls use this island due to the availability of nesting and foraging habitat, the lack of mammal predators and because it is relatively undisturbed. The breeding population has declined since 1998 with circumstantial evidence indicating that it is as a result of a reduction in food supply, possibly due to altered fisheries practices or climate change altering the availability of fish. Land managers are clearly not able to influence the availability of fish for the gulls to eat, however it is possible to minimise other risks to the population including predation and disturbance. Potential predators of great black-backed gull eggs include rats, mink and hedgehogs. Species such as these should not be introduced to the island. Disturbance to Eilean Hoan is currently minimal given its relatively remote location.

Date last reviewed: 17 September 2009