

CITATION**BEN ALDER AND AONACH BEAG
SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST
Highland (Badenoch and Strathspey)**

Site code: 176

NATIONAL GRID REFERENCE: NN 490740

OS 1:50,000 SHEET NO: Landranger Series 42
1:25,000 SHEET NO: Explorer Series 393

AREA: 6658.29 hectares

NOTIFIED NATURAL FEATURES**Geological****Structural and metamorphic geology: Dalradian****Biological**

Upland habitats: Upland assemblage
Vascular plants: Vascular plant assemblage
Non-vascular plants: Bryophyte assemblage
Non-vascular plants: Lichen assemblage
Birds: Breeding bird assemblage

DESCRIPTION

Ben Alder (1148m) and Aonach Beag (1114m) lie in a remote area between Lochs Ericht and Laggan approximately 11km southwest of Dalwhinnie. They are considered geographically and ecologically intermediate between the mountains of the western and eastern Highlands.

Ben Alder and Aonach Beag SSSI contains important outcrops of Dalradian rock - originally sediment in an ancient ocean 800-500 million years ago, that was buried and compressed into rock then folded and heated (metamorphosed) during a mountain building event around 460 million years ago.

Rocks in the Coire Cheap and Aonach Beag area lie in the Geal Charn - Ossian Steep Belt, an important narrow zone over 50 km long where the rock layers are close to vertical, and which divides areas of distinctly different deformation to north-west and south-east. This area is of national importance because, despite the strong deformation, the original relationship between the rocks units (including units of the Grampian Group and the younger Appin Group) and details of their deposition as sediments can be deciphered.

Rocks further south on the eastern flank of Ben Alder and in Coire na Lethchois lie south-east of the Geal Charn - Ossian Steep Belt, and are nationally important for excellent exposure of three superimposed episodes of folding. Interpretation of this

area is crucial to understanding the formation of the Geal Charn - Ossian Steep Belt, which in turn is fundamental to elucidating the origins and evolution of the Dalradian rocks throughout the Grampian Highlands.

The site supports a wide range of habitats which together comprise the upland assemblage, including plant communities such as upland heath, montane heath, montane snowbed, flushes, mires and calcareous grassland.

The large summit plateau supports a range of high level plant communities including alpine heaths with widespread areas of woolly-fringe moss-stiff sedge *Racomitrium lanuginosum* – *Carex bigelowii* heath and montane acid grasslands. The high altitude metamorphosed limestone supports alpine and subalpine calcareous grasslands. This area is particularly rich in plant species which include the mountain avens *Dryas octopetala*, cyphel *Minuartia sedoides*, sibbaldia *Sibbaldia procumbens* and starwort mouse-ear *Cerastium cerastoides*. The summit of Aonach Beag also has a variety of late snow bed communities including the three-leaved rush *Juncus trifidus* heath which has developed in the hummocky hollows.

The site has many springs and flushes with the late snow bed and associated spring communities supporting some rare species such as hare's-foot sedge *Carex lachenalii*. Flushes below the limestones support rich stands of yellow mountain saxifrage *Saxifraga aizoides* and rare mire types dominated by the very rare russet and scorched alpine sedges *Carex saxatilis* and *Carex atrofusca*.

The cliffs, rocky slopes and screes support a characteristic flora with species such as mountain bladder-fern *Cystopteris montana* and rare montane willows and small areas of tall herb communities.

The sub alpine communities include bearberry-heather *Arctostaphylos-Calluna* heath, cross-leaved heath *Erica tetralix* wet heath and extensive heather *Calluna* heath grading into heather-deergrass *Calluna-Trichophorum* blanket bog.

This wide range of plant communities contains rare and scarce plants which make up the important vascular plant assemblage. This includes blue heath *Phyllodoce caerulea* which has only been found in three locations in the United Kingdom all of which are within the Ben Alder and Aonach Beag mountains.

This area is considered exceptional for its bryophytes associated with upland habitats and long snow cover, including nationally rare species. Some northern Atlantic liverworts have their eastern outposts in the Ben Alder range and these include *Scapania nimbosa* and *Herbertus aduncus*.

The area, particularly the limestone outcrop, supports a rich and diverse lichen assemblage with many rare species present of which four are only found at this site in the UK. One very distinctive species found on the limestone is goblin lights *Catolechia wahlenbergii*, which is an eerie yellow-green colour.

The breeding bird assemblage associated with the bogs, heaths, montane plateau and lochs includes ptarmigan, golden plover, dotterel, dunlin and black-throated diver.

NOTIFICATION HISTORY

First notified under the 1949 Act: 1964

Renotified under the 1981 Act and extended: 13 May 1987

Notification reviewed under the 2004 Act: 17 March 2010

REMARKS

The measured area of the site corrected from 6769.4 ha.

Ben Alder and Aonach Beag SSSI is also Ben Alder and Aonach Beag Special Area of Conservation (SAC) designated for the European habitats listed below. Those parts of the SSSI above 750m (extending to 2860ha) are also Ben Alder Special Protection Area (SPA) designated for the bird listed below.

Habitats: Acidic scree
 Alpine and subalpine calcareous grasslands
 Alpine and subalpine heaths
 Blanket bog
 Dry heaths
 High-altitude plant communities associated with areas of water seepage
 Montane acid grasslands
 Mountain willow scrub
 Plants in crevices on acid rocks
 Plants in crevices on base-rich rocks
 Tall herb communities
 Wet heathland with cross-leaved heath

Birds: Dotterel *Charadrius morinellus*