



**Scottish Natural Heritage**

All of nature for all of Scotland

## **BEN VRACKIE**

### **Site of Special Scientific Interest**

#### **SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT**

Site code: 194

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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.



### **Description of the site**

Ben Vrackie is a moderate altitude mountain (841m) in east Perthshire which forms a backdrop to Pitlochry which is 5 km to the south. It qualifies as a SSSI on account of its upland vegetation, which includes a number of nationally rare plant species in a wide range of habitats, and its rich assemblage of upland birds. It is one of the series of arctic alpine sites on calcareous schists in Tayside, Stirling and Argyll; such sites are a rare type in Britain.

The site is recognised for its diverse and botanically rich upland species. The most diverse and botanically rich areas are found where calcium concentrations are high, due largely to the calcareous mica-schists that make up the majority of Ben Vrackies geology. Bands of calcium rich rocks outcrop to form crags and ridges which give way to rich tall-herb vegetation and some alpine willow scrub communities including whortle-leaved willow *S. myrsinites*. These crags also provide a habitat for rare species such as purple oxytropis *Oxytropis halleri* and alpine milk-vetch *Astragalus alpinus* which are found on only one or two Scottish hills. Where calcium rich spring water reaches the surface, areas rich in sedges and rushes (known as flushes) develop. Species like Scottish asphodel *Tofieldia pusilla* and alpine rush *Juncus alpinoarticulatus* are found, as well as in several locations the very rare brown bog rush *Schoenus ferrugineus* which was transplanted from Loch Tummel in the 1950's before the population there was destroyed when the loch level was raised for the hydro scheme.

Elsewhere the predominant habitat on the site is heathland with lower slopes having mainly heather with blaeberry *Vaccinium myrtillus*, whilst crowberry *Empetrum nigrum* is found on the higher slopes. The heather cover is, however, thought to be decreasing within the site.

The lower ground also provides habitat for a wide range of breeding moorland birds, including hen harriers, merlin, peregrine and short-eared owls.

<p>Blaeberry <i>Vaccinium myrtillus</i></p>	<p>Hen harrier <i>Circus cyaneus</i></p>
	

**Current condition of the natural features**

Ben Vrackie SSSI has been surveyed as part of SNH’s 6-year programme of Site Condition Monitoring.

The site’s vascular plant assemblage was surveyed in 2002 and it was concluded that this feature is in favourable condition, with 10 of the 15 key species recording a status of favourable condition including 5 Red Data Book species.

The site’s assemblage of breeding birds was surveyed in 2003 and it was concluded that this feature is in favourable condition, with a good range of typical moorland birds being recorded such as red grouse, wheatear, snipe, redshank and golden eagle.

The habitats on the site (the ‘upland assemblage’) were surveyed in 2006 and it was concluded that this feature is in favourable condition, with the upland assemblage component habitats comfortably reaching their target i.e. no measureable decline of individual component habitat types.

A summary of the latest site monitoring information is given below:

Natural features of Ben Vrackie SSSI <sup>1</sup>	Feature condition (date monitored)
Breeding bird assemblage	Favourable Maintained (May 2003)
Upland assemblage	Favourable Maintained (May 2006)
Vascular plant assemblage	Favourable Maintained (July 2002)

**Past and present management**

The predominant habitat is heathland. However, in places, probably as a result of

<sup>1</sup> A ‘Rocky slopes’ natural feature was also monitored but this feature has now been subsumed into the habitat ‘upland assemblage’.

grazing pressures and past burning pressures, heathland has given way to acid grassland, mostly mat grass *Nardus stricta*.

High grazing levels by sheep and to some extent red deer, together with muirburn, has led to heather loss and the restriction of certain species to the less accessible ungrazed cliff areas.

Ben Vrackie's close proximity to Pitlochry and the fact that paths on Ben Vrackie now link in with Pitlochry's walk network means that it is quite heavily visited by locals and visitors. Foot path erosion by visitors to the hill has been particularly noticeable on the final leg to the summit from Loch a' Choire. A footpath repair programme started in 1997 and maintenance is expected to be ongoing.

Ben Vrackie is also very popular with botanists due to its splendid upland flora.

Deer stalking occurs on the hill.

### **Present management**

The Site Condition Monitoring survey of the upland habitats in 2006 noted trampling and grazing by sheep. Evidence of this was particularly noticeable on the gentle slopes surrounding Loch a' Choire and the corrie or glen of Allt Eachainn to the west of this, as well as the southwest corner of Corrie an Lochain below Creag Tharsuinn.

A large area of burning on the east of Creag Tharsuinn was evident. With some of the burning occurring on a very steep slope between Loch a' Choire and the calcareous outcrops on the southern side of Ben Vrackie.

Trampling by visitors is localised to the calcareous rocks on the south side of Ben Vrackie, and the main summit. There is erosion close to the *Oxytropis* cliff ledges although it is unclear if this caused by trampling by walkers or sheep.

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

### **Long Term Objective for Management**

The long term goal for the site is to maintain Ben Vrackie SSSI as favourable habitat for its botanical interest and its range of breeding bird species. There is concern that muirburn and stock numbers are having a detrimental effect on the habitat condition. The 2006 SCM survey noted that some of the steep slopes have been burnt which can lead to vegetation loss through erosion. Appropriate muirburn, grazing and public access are integral to the achievement of this long-term goal.

**The objectives for the site are:**

- 1. To maintain or improve the condition and extent of the upland habitats, and where possible restore the heathland habitats across the site;**
- 2. To maintain the populations of the rarer vascular plants;**
- 3. To maintain the populations and distribution of breeding birds.**

These objectives can be achieved by adhering to the Muirburn Code particularly on

steep slopes; where possible reducing grazing levels on sensitive habitat; and managing visitor pressures away from the more sensitive plant and breeding bird areas by maintaining existing track ways and marking waypoints.

We wish to work with the owners and occupiers 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, its natural features and the effectiveness of management.

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

None known

**Date last reviewed:** 9 February 2010