



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

Ailsa Craig Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) lying 15.5km west of Girvan is composed of fine grained granite and is bounded by almost perpendicular cliffs to the south and west. Such cliffs provide ideal nesting sites for thousands of breeding seabirds.

The gannetry is of national and international importance being the fourth largest in Britain with 23000 pairs of gannet, equivalent to 14% of the EU breeding population. Other nationally important species belonging to the seabird assemblage include razorbill, guillemot, kittiwake, and herring gull. The targets for the gannet and seabird assemblage population size have been met and therefore their condition is regarded as favourable.

The insect assemblage of Ailsa Craig includes the nationally rare blowfly, *Calliphora uralensis*, a species associated with the carrion derived from the islands breeding bird colonies. Ailsa Craig is believed to be the most southerly point in the range of this species. The condition of the flies is favourable due to the continued supply of carrion. The island is also of interest due to the occurrence of the nationally scarce ground beetle, *Agonum gracilipe*. This beetle is found on the steep bare scree slopes to the east of the island and the condition of the beetles is favourable due to the continued presence of suitable habitat. Of further note is the well established population of slow worms.

Interesting plants on Ailsa Craig include white ramping fumitory *Fumaria capreolata*, slender thistle *Carduus tenuiflorus*, rock sea-spurrey *Spergularia rupicola* and a single isolated aspen tree *Populus tremula*. Another curiosity is the tree mallow, *Lavatera arborica* which is at its most northerly recorded site in Britain.

Ailsa Craig represents the lowest level plumbing or root of a volcano that along with

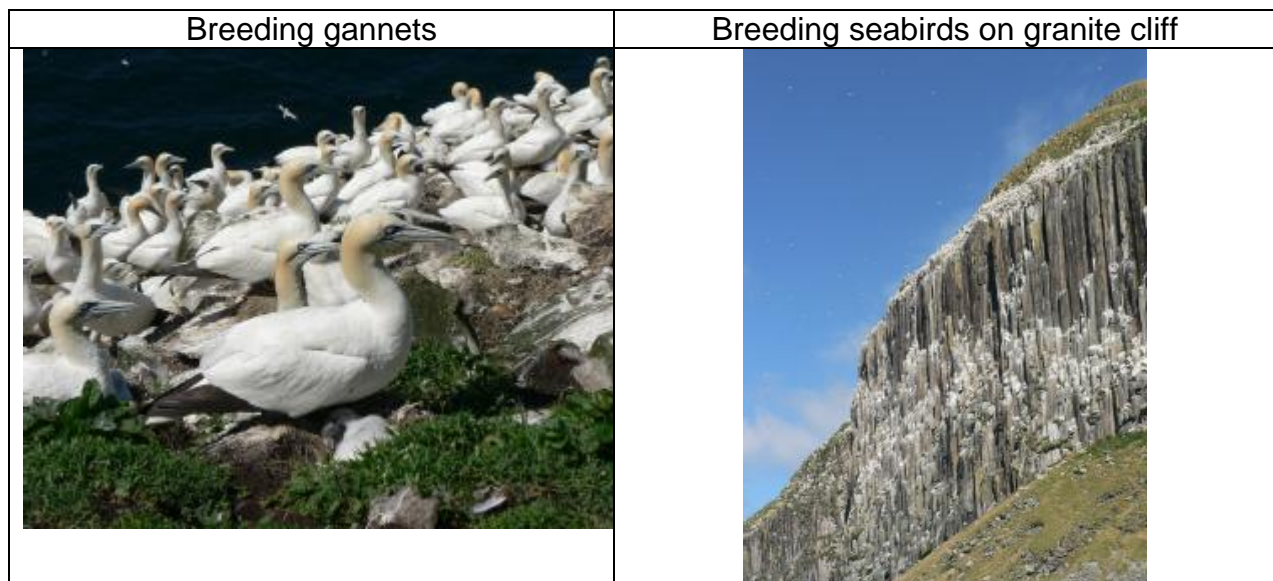
volcanoes on Arran, Mull, Rum and Skye, formed around 60 million years ago when the crust between Scotland and Greenland/North America was being stretched and pulled apart to form the North Atlantic. The rock is similar to granite in composition but is much finer grained and hence is called 'microgranite'. The site is geologically nationally important because the mineral composition of the distinctive blue-grey microgranite is unusual and unique among the rocks of this age in the UK. It has also been possible to determine the direction of ice flow during the last glacial period (~10,000 years ago) from exposed rock surfaces on the island. Due to the stable environment and lack of potential threats, the condition of the geological feature is favourable.

Ailsa Craig also qualifies for classification as a Special Protection Area (SPA) under the European Community (EC) Directive 79/409/EEC on the Conservation of Wild Birds for regularly supporting breeding populations of European importance of the following migratory species: gannet (23,000 pairs representing 14% of the EU population), and lesser black-backed gull (1,800 pairs representing at least 1.5% of the breeding Western Europe/Mediterranean/Western Africa population). Ailsa Craig also qualifies for classification as an SPA for its seabird assemblage of international importance. During the breeding season, the area regularly supports 65,000 individual seabirds including: guillemot, kittiwake, herring gull, lesser black-backed gull, and gannet.

Other breeding birds on Ailsa Craig include the fulmar, peregrine falcon, raven and twite. Ailsa Craig formerly supported a colony of puffins until the end of the 19th century.

Natural features of Ailsa Craig SSSI	Condition of feature (date monitored)	Other relevant designations
Tertiary Igneous	Favourable, maintained (considered to be in good condition in the GCR site document, March 2006)	
Gannet	Favourable, maintained (June 2004)	SPA
Seabird colony	Favourable, maintained (July 2003)	SPA
Beetles	Favourable, maintained (May 2002)	
Flies	Favourable, maintained (May 2002)	

Features of overlapping Natura sites that are not notified as SSSI natural features	Condition of feature (date monitored)	SPA or SAC
Breeding seabird assemblage	Favourable, maintained (July 2003)	SPA
Herring gull	Unfavourable, declining (July 2003)	SPA
Lesser black-backed gull	Unfavourable, declining (July 2003)	SPA
Guillemot	Favourable, maintained (July 2003)	SPA
Kittiwake	Unfavourable, Declining (July 2003)	SPA



Past and present management

At one time Ailsa Craig had a small community of about 30 people comprising of crofters, granite workers and lighthouse keepers. Goats and sheep were kept by many of the islanders. Today, there are no permanent residents or livestock on the island. During the years of habitation on Ailsa Craig the rabbit population was maintained at a low level. As traditional management practices on the island diminished, rabbit numbers rose dramatically and rabbit activity has resulted in localised soil erosion and in several areas the bed rock is exposed. In the late 19th century the brown rat was accidentally introduced to the island. The rats killed and ate young puffins and also preyed upon the young of other species such as fulmar and gulls. As a result the breeding population of puffins on Ailsa Craig was reduced to zero. The Ailsa Craig working group was formed in 1989 to research and oversee the feasibility of eradicating rats from the island. A successful eradication programme was introduced and rats are now absent from the island. It is hoped that this will provide suitable conditions to encourage burrow nesting bird species, such as manx shearwater and puffin, to breed again on the island. Non-breeding puffins have been sighted in recent years and shearwaters are being heard on the island at night as early on in the year as May, the laying period.

Since the 1880's Ailsa Craig has been known as a famous source of granite for curling stones. While stone extraction for curling stones still continues in the quarry, modest demand is met by removal of loose boulders, which requires no blasting and is not considered damaging to the interest of the site. Any extensions or additions to the area worked are subject to planning approval.

In March 2004 the 8th Marquess of Ailsa entered into a lease with the RSPB for the land at Ailsa Craig until 2050. The RSPB manage the site for nature conservation and have produced a 5 year management plan for the Ailsa Craig reserve, which in addition to maintaining and enhancing seabird numbers outlines plans for a Girvan Visitor Development project for educational purposes and raising awareness.

Access to Ailsa Craig is currently managed via a permit system. The permit system

gives priority to recognised ornithological or wildlife groups with an interest in and respect for the natural and built heritage of the island. Day trippers have generally been discouraged, especially during the nesting season. Over the years there have been a few problems with boats taking visitors to Ailsa Craig without a permit. This has resulted in occasional damage and disturbance to property and nesting birds.

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

We wish to work with the owner and/or occupier 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, in so far as 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).

1. **To maintain the population and distribution of the seabird and Gannet populations within the site and where possible enhance the condition of the site for the key seabird colonies** by ensuring that their habitats are maintained.

The effects of the rabbit population need to be assessed to determine their impact on the habitats within the site. Active management of the rabbit population may need to be considered as rabbit activity has resulted in localised soil erosion and in several areas the bed rock is exposed.

To ensure the survival of ground nesting seabird colonies it is of prime importance that rats and other predatory species, such as cats and hedgehogs, are prevented from colonising/recolonising the island. Options should be examined for the implementation of a scheme to detect introduced and/or prevent the introduction of predators to Ailsa Craig.

2. **To maintain suitable conditions to support the key invertebrate interests** by ensuring a continued supply of carrion and suitable habitats for the key species.
3. **To maintain and conserve the geological interest** by ensuring educational groups and visits to exposures only takes place in accordance with the Geological Code. Exposures should also be cleared of and safeguarded from vegetation encroachment or other obstruction. Vegetation encroachment obscures outcrops and hinders access. Any future quarrying activities would need to ensure there were no adverse impacts on the breeding birds and geological feature.

4. **To avoid significant disturbance of the breeding seabird and Gannet populations** by ensuring responsible access to the island is promoted, in accordance with the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (SOAC), through liaison with the owner/occupiers and by maintenance of the permit system. Excessive disturbance can affect the breeding success of nesting birds.

Other factors affecting the natural features of the site

External Factors: The breeding bird populations are dependent on resources outwith Ailsa Craig and therefore rely upon wider control measures, particularly those concerning fisheries and pollution.

Date last reviewed: 25 July 2008