

CITATION

**CRAIG HAMMEL TO SGAPS GEO
SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST**
Highland (Caithness)

Site code: 418

NATIONAL GRID REFERENCE: ND361464 to ND297370

OS 1:50,000 SHEET NO: Landranger Series 11 and 12
1:25,000 SHEET NO: Explorer Series 450

AREA: 70.92 hectares

NOTIFIED NATURAL FEATURES

Geological: Stratigraphy: Non-marine Devonian
Biological: Coastlands: Maritime cliff
Birds: Seabird colony, breeding
Guillemot (*Uria aalge*), breeding
Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*), breeding
Razorbill (*Alca torda*), breeding

DESCRIPTION

Craig Hammel to Sgaps Geo Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is located on the east coast of Caithness, 5km south of Wick. The site extends along an 11 km section of coastline between Craig Hammel in the north and Sgaps Geo in the south. The site has been designated for its Devonian age rock sequence, the nationally important colonies of breeding seabirds and coastal vegetation communities. Particularly large populations of razorbill *Alca torda*, guillemot *Uria aalge* and kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla* breed on this site.

Non-marine Devonian (bedrock)

The area around Sarclet Head contains rare exposures of the Lower Devonian rocks (416 to 397 million years old) in the northern part of the Orcadian Basin. The exposed rocks are from the lower part of the Sarclet Group. They include alluvial-fan conglomerates (Sarclet Conglomerate Formation) at the base with an upwards transition to sandstones (Sarclet Sandstone Formation). These rocks may have fluvial (formed by water) or aeolian (formed by wind) origins, or a combination of both. The Sarclet Sandstone Formation is cut by numerous low-angle dislocation planes with chaotically deformed rock layers above them. The origin and timing of the deformation is unclear and could be during or after the sediment deposition. The site is important for providing data necessary for an overview of the tectonics and palaeogeography of the Orcadian Basin.

Maritime cliff (vegetation)

The cliff top vegetation is predominantly maritime grassland. Red fescue *Festuca rubra* is the most common grass close to the coast, whilst further inland this is replaced by Yorkshire fog *Holcus lanatus*. A variety of other plants grow amongst the grasses, including thrift *Armeria maritima*, buck's-horn plantain *Plantago*

coronopus, sea plantain *Plantago maritima*, glaucous sedge *Carex flacca* and grass of parnassus *Parnassia palustris*.

There are patches of maritime heath throughout the site, with a larger area near Sarclet. Heather *Calluna vulgaris*, cross-leaved heath *Erica tetralix* and crowberry *Empetrum nigrum* are typical species in these areas. Spring squill *Scilla verna*, creeping willow *Salix repens*, sea plantain and heath bedstraw *Galium saxatile* can be found growing amongst the heather.

Cliff ledges and crevices provide suitable habitat for plants such as roseroot *Sedum rosea*, sea campion *Silene uniflora* and Scots lovage *Ligusticum scoticum*. Sea mayweed *Tripleurospermum maritimum*, common orache *Atriplex patula* and common scurvy grass *Cochlearia officinalis* grow where nutrients provided by seabird droppings have enriched the soils on ledges and the tops of stacks.

Seabird colony

Large colonies of seabirds breed along this stretch of coastline, taking advantage of the numerous ledges on the old red sandstone cliffs. More than 100,000 seabirds breed here, including razorbill, guillemot, kittiwake, fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*, shag *Phalacrocorax aristotelis*, herring gull *Larus argentatus*, great black-backed gull *Larus marinus*, black guillemot *Cephus grylle*, cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* and puffin *Fratercula arctica*.

Razorbill, guillemot and kittiwake

More than 3% of the British population of kittiwake and 6% of guillemot and razorbill breed on this site, making this site of national importance for each of these species.

NOTIFICATION HISTORY

First notified under the 1981 Act: 17 May 1985

Notification reviewed under the 2004 Act: 24 March 2011 and 8 July 2016 (citation only)

REMARKS

Measured area of site corrected (from 72.92 ha).

Craig Hammel to Sgaps Geo SSSI is part of the East Caithness Cliffs Special Area of Conservation (SAC) designated for the European habitat listed below and is part of the East Caithness Cliffs Special Protection Area (SPA) designated for the birds listed below.

Habitat : Vegetated sea cliffs

Birds : Seabird assemblage, breeding
: Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*), breeding
: Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*), breeding
: Great black-backed gull (*Larus marinus*), breeding
: Guillemot (*Uria aalge*), breeding
: Herring gull (*Larus argentatus*), breeding
: Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*), breeding
: Peregrine (*Falco peregrinus*), breeding
: Puffin (*Fratercula arctica*), breeding

- : Razorbill (*Alca torda*), breeding
- : Shag (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*), breeding

Craig Hammel to Sgaps Geo SSSI overlaps the intertidal part of East Caithness Cliffs Nature Conservation Marine Protected Area (ncMPA) designated for black guillemot (*Cepphus grylle*).