Scottish Natural Heritage
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CRAIG LEITH AND MYRETON HILL
Site of Special Scientific Interest

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 420

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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

Craig Leith and Myreton Hill SSSI is located on the steep south-facing slopes of the Ochil Hills, north-west of Alva. The site was selected as a SSSI as it comprises a wide range of habitats supporting a variety of species, some of which are nationally rare. The notified natural features are the upland assemblage habitats, the sticky catchfly plant, the northern brown argus butterfly and the upland mixed ash woodland and wood pasture.

The upland assemblage includes the calcareous and acid grasslands, subalpine flush communities and the vegetation found on the rock outcrops.

The bedrock is of igneous origin, and there are cliffs and rock outcrops spread widely across the site. The rock itself provides suitable habitat for a variety of species. The underlying geology has encouraged a mosaic of different habitats that are botanically rich. Rock rose, wild thyme and crested hair-grass are found in areas of calcareous grassland below Craig Leith. Wet areas, or flushes, support several locally uncommon species amongst vegetation dominated by brown mosses and small sedges. The cliffs on Craig Leith provide habitat for the nationally rare sticky catchfly and the uncommon wood bitter-vetch. Steep rocky slopes and outcrops are widespread and support a diverse range of species including wood crane's-bill and mountain melick.

On the lower slopes there are remnants of the ancient broadleaf woodland, which would at one time have extended along the southern face of the Ochil Hills. The ash woodland in the narrow gorge of the Balquharn Burn is a valuable habitat along with the wood pasture on the lower slopes of Myreton Hill. There are a number of multi-stemmed mature ash trees remaining here, suggesting historical management included pollarding the trees.

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The thin soils on the steep south-facing slopes below Craig Leith support extensive tracts of calcareous grassland, creating the ideal habitat for the rare northern brown argus butterfly. Common rock rose, the caterpillar's food plant, thrives amongst the other calcareous grassland plants including thyme, lady's bedstraw, bird's foot trefoil, fairy flax and meadow oat-grass.

Other habitats on the SSSI include small areas of dry dwarf shrub heath amongst extensive tracts of acid grassland, a basin mire above Craig Leith and patches of gorse and blackthorn. The variety of habitats provides shelter for several species of breeding bird including raven, ring ouzel, wheatear, kestrel and peregrine.

Wood pasture on the lower slopes of Myreton Hill	Sticky catchfly on the Craig Leith cliffs
	

Current condition of the natural features

Upland assemblage

Site condition monitoring (SCM) carried out in 2014 assessed this feature as unfavourable no change. All the targets for the upland acid and calcareous grassland, and the rocky slopes passed with grazing levels assessed as appropriate across the majority of the site. The subalpine flushes were largely favourable; however, the target relating to the extent of bare, disturbed ground failed. This is due to damage caused by the access route to the outer hill damaging one of the flushes.

Sticky catchfly

In July 2008, the cliffs were surveyed for sticky catchfly plants in flower. A total of 248 flowering plants were found on Craig Leith. This compares well with previous records and therefore the population was assessed as favourable maintained.

Northern brown argus

The SCM survey in 2011 assessed the habitat supporting this rare butterfly to be good condition and a couple of butterflies were found. Caterpillar feeding signs were also noted on many rock rose leaves. The condition is favourable maintained.

Natural features of Craig Leith and Myreton Hill SSSI	Feature condition (date monitored)
Upland assemblage	Unfavourable no change (July 2014)
Sticky catchfly *(Lychnis viscaria)*	Favourable maintained (July 2008)
Upland mixed ash woodland (including wood pasture)	Monitoring due 2017
Northern brown argus (*Aricia artaxerxes*)	Favourable maintained (July 2011)

Past and present management

The woodland below Myreton Hill was managed in the past as a wood pasture system. Evidence of pollarding can still be seen in some of the existing mature ash and oak trees. Woodlands were originally managed in this way to allow cattle and sheep to graze underneath the tree canopy, whilst also producing fodder and timber. As pollarding is thought to have ceased about 50 - 100 years ago, some trees are now beginning to deteriorate (splitting often occurs at the area where the pollarding took place). The woodland is currently unfenced and open to grazing. In Balquharn Glen an interesting mix of native broadleaves is found in the upland mixed ash woodland in the deep, steep sided gorge. This woodland type is now nationally rare. Mature oak trees have been planted on the upper slopes of the glen. There is little understorey within the woodland except in the inaccessible sections indicating a history of grazing pressure by sheep.

Myreton Hill shows evidence of pre-Medieval cultivation terraces.

Much of the site is sheep grazed. Current stocking levels are considered to be acceptable for the majority of the natural features, though grazing is having an impact on the woodland by limiting potential tree regeneration.

Patches of dense bracken are found across the site, and spreading into some of the species rich grassland and flush areas. Aerial spraying took place in recent years on the slopes above Balquharn Glen with considerable success. Bracken is limited to the deeper soils on the drier south-facing slopes and does not therefore appear to be spreading on to the calcareous grassland to a concerning extent at present.

On the lower slopes, a mosaic of grassland, gorse, bracken and scrub with scattered mature trees occurs. Occasionally, fires burn here; this is to be discouraged as it causes damage to the vegetation and wildlife, particularly if it is the bird nesting season.

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

The long-term goal is to maintain the notified natural features of the site. Current management is broadly compatible with this goal; however, there is some concern over the extent of bracken encroachment in some areas, and the level of stock grazing within the wood pasture and Balquharn Glen.

The objectives are to:

1. Undertake bracken control where it is encroaching into species-rich grassland habitats.

2. Encourage natural tree regeneration by reducing grazing pressure within the woodland. The options include either fencing off the whole wood, or creating stock proof exclosures where natural regeneration can occur.

3. Maintain the current grazing regime across the open habitats to manage the grasslands

and flush communities.

4. Maintain the populations of rare species, notably the sticky catchfly and northern brown argus, by encouraging appropriate management of their habitats.

We wish to work with the owners 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.

Date last reviewed: 29 November 2016