



Scottish Natural Heritage

CREAG DHUBH
Site of Special Scientific Interest

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 455

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Purpose

Birch woodland



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

Creag Dhubh lies south west of Newtonmore, and has been designated as an SSSI because it contains one of the largest and most diverse birchwoods in Badenoch and Strathspey. Part of the Creag Dhubh SSSI includes the River Calder which is designated as part of the River Spey Special Area of Conservation. There are mosaics of other habitats present within and adjacent to the woodlands including grassland, rocky outcrops and heath which add to the diversity of the site.

Birch woodland dominates the lower south-eastern aspects of the hill (Coille na Creige Duibhe) and is also found on part of the northern slopes (Plaide Bheith). On the southern slopes abundant hazel occurs and a calcareous (higher pH) influence results in a very herb rich ground flora. These slopes are topped by cliffs which support notable species such as rock whitebeam. The mosaic of blocky scree, mineral soil, peat and mires create a very diverse woodland. In places the wood has a rich carpet of mosses and liverworts, some of which are "Atlantic" western species, unusual in this part of Scotland. There is also a small Scots pine plantation in the western part of the site.

Although not a notified feature, the habitats in Creag Dhubh SSSI support a variety of interesting insects. These include a rove beetle, *Gabrius scoticus*, which is rare nationally and is thought to inhabit mossy ground on the tops of hills. There are good populations of the nationally scarce pearl bordered fritillary and northern brown argus butterflies, plus other butterflies such as ringlet, small pearl bordered fritillary and Scotch argus. The northern brown argus lays its eggs on rock rose, which is found in the grazed area and on rocky knolls, and the pearl bordered fritillary lays its eggs on



violets, usually within woodland glades in areas where bracken also occurs. There are also several species of moths which have a limited distribution within the UK. These include the sword-grass, argent and sable, netted mountain, galium carpet and small dark yellow underwing.

The site also supports a range of woodland breeding birds including pied flycatcher, redstart, black grouse and siskin.

The birch woodland was monitored in 2002 and was found to be in unfavourable condition. It is thought that winter grazing by red and roe deer and year-round browsing by feral goats is preventing the tree saplings from growing above the level of the surrounding vegetation.

The lower reaches of the River Calder flows through the Creag Dhubh SSSI and is designated as part of the River Spey Special Area of Conservation (SAC), The River Spey is important for its populations of Atlantic salmon, sea lamprey, otter and freshwater pearl mussel. At this location in the River Calder only otter and salmon are likely to be present.

When monitored during 2000-2004, the population of otter in the SAC was considered to be in favourable condition. The population of Atlantic salmon was considered to be in an unfavourable condition due to low densities of juvenile fish in some sections and a depleted autumn component of the adult population. The population is considered to be recovering however.

Rock whitebeam growing on the cliffs	Northern brown argus butterfly common on rock rose at Creag Dhubh
	

Natural features of Creag Dhubh SSSI	Condition of feature (and date monitored)
Upland birch woodland	Unfavourable, no change (July 2009)

Features of overlapping Natura sites River Spey SAC that are not notified as SSSI natural features	Condition of feature (date monitored)	Other designations

Atlantic Salmon	Unfavourable recovering, (October 2004)	SAC
Freshwater pearl mussel	Unfavourable, recovering (October 2000)	SAC
Otter	Favourable maintained, (September 2004)	SAC
Sea lamprey	Favourable, maintained (September 2002)	SAC

Past and present management

Most of the woodland on the site is ancient woodland.

The hill has long been grazed by a range of herbivores including sheep, cattle, ponies, red deer, roe deer, goats, hares and rabbits. Sheep and ponies have largely been removed from most of the hill although low levels of cattle currently graze part of the site in summer, to benefit butterflies. There is a population of feral goats resulting from an introduction some 50 years ago. The numbers of goats peaked at around 100 but they are currently managed to maintain the population of goats at approximately 25-30 animals.

The site continues to be used for sport including stalking of red and roe deer, and grouse shooting. Red deer feed and shelter in the woodland, especially in hard winter weather. The open parts of the hill are managed for grouse including small amounts of muirburn above the present tree line and other species of game birds and sporting quarry are hunted. Other species including feral goats, hares, rabbits, foxes and hooded crows are also controlled.

Until recently there has been little active management of the woodland other than the removal of dead timber for firewood. Between 1993 and the present (2009) several forestry schemes have been implemented including stock and deer fencing, stock removal, and deer control. These have benefitted the woodland habitats by reducing grazing pressure. Bracken has also been controlled in some areas, and new woodland established. A deer fence was also erected in 2005 to prevent deer getting onto the A86 and the farmland below.

The woodland, however, remains in an unfavourable condition because the abundant regeneration is not growing above the height of the surrounding vegetation. This is due to the grazing pressure attributable to a range of herbivores, in particular red and roe deer and feral goats. The incursions of red deer during hard weather in winter can remove most or all of the previous year's growth from the young trees.

The site is popular for informal recreation and access, in particular the area closest to Newtonmore. There is an annual hill race to the top of Creag Dhubh, which necessitates the clearance of narrow sections of scrub/bracken to maintain a clear route.

Pony trekking takes place within the woodlands and the cliffs to the south-east of the site are a popular location for rock climbing where an impressive waterfall can provide high grade ice climbing during prolonged winter frosts.

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

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 and its natural features as appropriate and monitor the effectiveness of the management.

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 SiteLink facility).

1. To improve and maintain favourable condition of upland birch woodland by, for example:

- reducing grazing pressure, particularly in the winter.
- encouraging appropriate expansion of native woodland habitats

2. To maintain structural diversity in the woodland by, for example:

- maintaining key glades and woodland margins for associated invertebrates through cattle grazing or vegetation management.

3. To contribute to meeting the conservation objectives for salmon and otter populations in the River Spey SAC by, for example:

- promoting appropriate riparian habitat management on the River Calder.

Other factors affecting the natural features of the site

Possible future improvements to the A86 road may have an influence on the site.

The site occupies a very prominent position within Badenoch and any major changes in management of the site could have a significant influence on the landscape.

Date last reviewed: 10 March 2010