

CITATION

**DORNOCH FIRTH
SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST
Highland (Easter Ross and Cromarty, and Sutherland)**

Site code: 527

NATIONAL GRID REFERENCE: NH711879 to NH810884 (north shore)
NH701879 to NH782826 (south shore)

OS 1:50,000 SHEET NO: Landranger Series 21
1:25,000 SHEET NO: Explorer Series 438

AREA: 1993.11 hectares

NOTIFIED NATURAL FEATURES

Biological

Intertidal marine habitats: Eelgrass beds

Coastlands: Saltmarsh

Coastlands: Sand dunes

Vascular plants: Vascular plant assemblage

Birds: Bar-tailed godwit (*Limosa lapponica*), non-breeding

Birds: Whooper swan (*Cygnus cygnus*), non-breeding

Birds: Wigeon (*Anas penelope*), non-breeding

DESCRIPTION

Dornoch Firth Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is located on the east coast between Dornoch (Sutherland) and Tain (Ross-shire). The Dornoch Firth is the most northerly of the large Scottish firths and one of the least industrialised estuaries on the east coast of Scotland. It supports a range of nationally important coastal habitats, plants, birds and mammals.

Coastland and intertidal marine habitats

At low tide, large exposed mudflats reveal extensive eelgrass beds, with populations of both narrow-leaved eelgrass *Zostera marina* and dwarf eelgrass *Zostera noltei*.

Bordering the mudflats, much of the land is very low lying, and supports extensive areas of saltmarsh and meandering tidal creeks. Saltmarsh is present near Dornoch, Ardjachie, Edderton and Poll na Caorach. Saltmarsh species such as glasswort *Salicornia* sp. and saltmarsh-grass *Puccinellia maritima* are found towards the seaward edge. Further inland, these grade into extensive beds of pink thrift *Armeria maritime*, intermixed with sea arrowgrass *Triglochin maritimum* and sea plantain *Plantago maritima*.

Sand dune vegetation at different stages of stabilisation is found in a number of locations. Sand colonised by marram grass *Ammophila arenaria* is constantly shifting its distribution particularly at Dornoch Point, whilst other exposed dune habitat locations are actively eroding through wave action. Large tracts of undulating stabilised dune ridges are found south of Dornoch. Where the dune vegetation is

even more stable, acidic dune grasslands and coastal heathland form a mosaic of rare vegetation types. The heathland at Cuthill and Skibo Links supports extensive and unusual lichen-rich lawns, where several rare lichens are present, including malachite-green felt lichen *Peltigera malacea*.

Vascular plants

The varied coastal habitats support a range of nationally scarce vascular plants. Dwarf eelgrass *Z. noltei* and narrow-leaved eelgrass *Z. marina* thrive on intertidal mud and sand flats where physical disturbance is minimal. Baltic rush *Juncus balticus* and seaside centaury *Centaureum littorale* grow in the transitional zone between upper saltmarsh and damp dune grassland. Pyramidal bugle *Ajuga pyramidalis* grows only in a very small area of the dune heathland at Skibo.

Birds

The site supports nationally important aggregations of non-breeding bar-tailed godwit *Limosa lapponica*, whooper swan *Cygnus cygnus* and wigeon *Anas penelope*. The mud and sand flats provide rich feeding areas for wildfowl and wading birds throughout the year. The saltmarshes also provide autumn and winter foraging areas during high tides and periods of flood. In normal conditions, intertidal flats, saltmarsh and dune vegetation provide high tide roost sites for bar-tailed godwit and other waders.

Very large concentrations of wigeon graze on the eelgrass beds at Edderton sands, Poll na Caorach, Cuthill Sands and east of Ardjachie Point. The site also offers sheltered bays such as Ardmore Bay and Poll na Caorach where waterfowl, such as wigeon and whooper swan, can find valuable undisturbed feeding sites during harsh weather. Loch Evelix is traditionally used by night roosting and foraging whooper swans.

NOTIFICATION HISTORY

First notified under the 1949 Act: 1975 as Lower Dornoch Firth SSSI

Re-notified under the 1981 Act: 23 August 1985 as Dornoch Firth SSSI with a decrease in area.

Notification reviewed under the 2004 Act: 16 December 2010

REMARKS

Measured area of site corrected from 3577.4 ha (marine area below MLWS wrongly included).

The Dornoch Firth SSSI is part of the Dornoch Firth and Morrich More Special Area of Conservation (SAC) which is designated for the European habitats and species listed below and is also part of the Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet Special Protection Area (SPA) which is designated for the birds listed below.

Habitats: Atlantic salt meadows
Coastal dune heathland
Dune grassland
Dunes with juniper thickets
Estuaries
Glasswort and other annuals colonising mud and sand
Humid dune slacks

Intertidal mudflats and sandflats
Lime-deficient dune heathland with crowberry
Reefs
Shifting dunes
Shifting dunes with marram
Subtidal sandbanks

Species: Otter (*Lutra lutra*)
Common seal (*Phoca vitulina*)

Birds: Bar-tailed godwit (*Limosa lapponica*), non-breeding
Curlew (*Numenius arquata*), non-breeding
Dunlin (*Calidris alpina alpina*), non-breeding
Greylag goose (*Anser anser*), non-breeding
Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*), breeding
Oystercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus*), non-breeding
Teal (*Anas crecca*), non-breeding
Wigeon (*Anas penelope*), non-breeding
Waterfowl assemblage, non-breeding

Part of Dornoch Firth SSSI overlaps part of the Moray Firth SAC which is designated for its subtidal sandbanks and population of bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*).