



**Scottish Natural Heritage**  
All of nature for all of Scotland

**DRUMOCHTER HILLS**  
**Site of Special Scientific Interest**

**SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT**

Site code: 541

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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**

Drumochter Hills Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is a large upland site 23km north west of Blair Atholl and 1km south of Dalwhinnie on the boundary between Highland and Perth and Kinross districts. The range of hills is bisected by the Pass of Drumochter which provides an important line of communication with the railway and trunk road between Inverness and the north, and Perth and the south.

The site consists of high altitude plateaus (up to almost 1000m) which are cut by a series of steep-sided corries and stream gullies to form an intervening series of round topped ridges. The hills are aligned in a north-east south-west direction bordered to the west by Loch Ericht. The main bedrock consists of acidic Moine schists, which is interrupted in places with calcareous bands forming base-rich outcrops. Drumochter is nationally important for its well-developed montane habitats and its unusual assemblage of breeding birds.

This site was selected as an SSSI on account of its rich and extensive arctic-alpine plants and habitats. The extensive high altitude and late lying snow support habitats and species which are particularly well adapted to this hostile environment, including alpine, dry and wet heathland, high altitude grasslands, montane springs and fens, blanket bog and cliff ledge and rock crevice communities. The combination of these habitats, which are of international importance because of their rarity in Europe, makes Drumochter Hills an important and interesting site botanically.

The site also supports and is notified for its wide range of vascular plants many of which are of restricted distribution including several very rare species. These and other arctic-alpine plants, remnants from the last glaciation, survive today as they are well suited to the cold snowy conditions of these mountains.

Menzies or blue heath *Phyllodoce caerulea* is known only from 3 localities within the UK,



one being on the Sow of Atholl; this species has special protection under Schedule 8 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. In east Drumochter mountain bog sedge *Carex rariflora* is locally frequent in high altitude marshes. There are a number of montane willow shrubs, such as the nationally scarce downy willow *Salix lapponum* – the Cama' Choire contains a reasonable extent of this habitat, making it one of the best locations in Britain. This habitat is very rare in the UK with less than 10 hectares in total. Other rare species include alpine mouse-ear *Cerastium alpinum*, alpine saxifrage *Saxifraga nivalis*, rock sedge *Carex rupestris* and the alpine lady fern *Anthyrium distentifolium*. Although not notified for this feature, Drumochter is also an important site for bryophytes in the Cairngorms area. This is largely due to the pockets of calcareous ground in the bigger corries (RDB species *Splachnum vasculosum* and *Sphagnum lindbergii*), separating this site out from the others in the Cairngorms range.

The site also supports and is notified for its assemblage of breeding birds with arctic species such as dotterel, ptarmigan and snow bunting, and upland species such as golden eagle, merlin, peregrine, greenshank, wigeon, golden plover, dunlin, and ring ouzel. This combination of arctic and upland species is found at only a few other localities in Britain.

Allt Dubhaig, a burn flowing southwards on the west side of the Pass of Drumochter, is of national interest for its fluvial (river) geomorphology. It is an excellent natural example of the changes in shape and form of a water course along its length from its steep mountain torrent to its sluggish sinuous stream on the nearby floodplain.

The most of Drumochter Hills SSSI has been designated as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) on account of the extent of its internationally important alpine heaths and grasslands, blanket bog, snow-bed communities and the mountain willow scrub. The site has also been designated as a Special Protection Area (SPA) because of the populations of breeding dotterel and merlin. The breeding population of dotterel is estimated to form up to 8% of the UK population, whilst up to 1% of the UK population of merlin breed in and around the site - see table for full list of habitats and species.

Part of the River Spey Special Area of Conservation (SAC), which is designated for salmon, otters, freshwater pearl mussel and sea lamprey, runs through the middle of Drumochter Hills SSSI.

Drumochter Hills SSSI	Male ptarmigan in winter plumage
	

## Current condition of the natural features

Drumochter Hills was surveyed as part of SNH's programme of Site Condition Monitoring. At the time of condition monitoring in 2004 the **montane assemblage** (mosaic of upland habitats) was considered to be in favourable condition. Every habitat type has a critical area, below which the long term viability of the habitat will be under threat. An assessment was made of the total area of each broad habitat type on Drumochter Hills. Despite many individual habitats being classed in unfavourable condition (see table of Natura features below) largely because of grazing and trampling impacts from red deer, the total area of each is above this critical limit and the upland habitat mosaic has been recorded as in favourable condition.

In 2003 the **vascular plant assemblage** was monitored and recorded a status of unfavourable condition. This was largely due to 18 of the 29 species making up the vascular plant assemblage failing two of the site's attributes namely population size<sup>1</sup>, regeneration<sup>2</sup> and numbers of populations<sup>3</sup>. Grazing pressures from red deer was also recorded as being high.

The **breeding bird assemblage** was also monitored in 2003 and was considered to be in favourable condition.

The **breeding merlin population** in 2004 was found to be in unfavourable condition owing to too few breeding pairs – two breeding pairs compared to an expected seven. However it is possible this result was anomalous due to a poor breeding season and another survey is desirable.

A summary of the latest site monitoring information is given below:

Natural features of Drumochter Hills SSSI	Feature condition (date monitored)
Breeding bird assemblage	Favourable Maintained (April 2003)
Montane assemblage	Favourable Maintained (February 2004)
Vascular plant assemblage	Unfavourable (August 2003)
Fluvial geomorphology of Scotland	Not yet monitored

Features of overlapping Natura sites that are not notified as SSSI natural features	Feature condition (date monitored)	SPA or SAC
Acidic scree	Favourable Maintained (February 2004)	SAC
Alpine and subalpine heaths	Unfavourable No change (July 2006)	SAC
Blanket bog	Unfavourable No change (February 2004)	SAC
Dry heaths	Unfavourable No change (July 2006)	SAC
Montane acid grasslands	Unfavourable No change (February 2004)	SAC
Mountain willow scrub	Unfavourable No change (July 2006)	SAC

<sup>1</sup> Population size - at least two populations should have more than 100 plants for annuals and more than 25 plants for perennials.

<sup>2</sup> Regeneration - evidence of a dynamic population structure or evidence of sexual regeneration.

<sup>3</sup> Numbers of population - there should be two or more discrete populations.

Features of overlapping Natura sites that are not notified as SSSI natural features	Feature condition (date monitored)	SPA or SAC
Plants in crevices on acid rocks	Favourable Maintained (February 2004)	SAC
Species-rich grassland with mat-grass in upland areas	Unfavourable No change (February 2004)	SAC
Tall herb communities	Unfavourable No change (February 2004)	SAC
Wet heathland with cross-leaved heath	Unfavourable No change (February 2004)	SAC
Dotterel <i>Charadrius morinellus</i> , breeding	Favourable Maintained (February 2004)	SPA
Merlin <i>Falco columbarius</i> , breeding	Unfavourable No change (August 2004)	SPA
Atlantic salmon ( <i>Salmo salar</i> )	Unfavourable Recovering (October 2004)	SAC
Freshwater pearl mussel ( <i>Margaritifera margaritifera</i> )	Unfavourable Recovering (October 2004)	SAC
Otter ( <i>Lutra lutra</i> )	Favourable Maintained (September 2004)	SAC
Sea lamprey ( <i>Petromyzon marinus</i> )	Favourable Maintained (September 2004)	SAC

### Past and present management

The predominant habitat on Drumochter Hills SSSI is open moorland, the exceptions being Drumochter Lodge, the fields near Dalnaspidal Lodge, the conifer plantations adjacent to the A9, and the A9 corridor itself.

The site is used primarily as deer forest and for red grouse shooting. It has also been grazed by sheep over much of the area, and by cattle on the low ground. The condition of the important alpine and upland plants is affected by the character of this grazing. Whilst land management practices of sheep grazing and deer stalking should be broadly compatible with, and indeed help to maintain the open, grazing-dependant habitats, the intensity and timing of grazing by sheep and deer is currently leading features to an unfavourable condition. Grazing levels have led to heather loss and the restriction of the montane willow scrub and tall-herb communities to the less accessible cliffs and ledges. Recent monitoring indicates that grazing levels are high in some parts of the site, for example the high cover of grasses in the montane moss-heath may be attributed to grazing, whilst in the Cama' Choire long term grazing appears to have led to the loss of the sub-montane heather-dominated *Calluna* heathland to blaeberry.

Small scale cyclical muirburn to reinvigorate the heather is practised over the more accessible parts, primarily for red grouse management. In places, burning has been undertaken which appears not to have followed best practice guidance and fires have in the past encroached into prostrate *Calluna* heath on the steeper windswept ridges. Damage caused by such fires in montane heath can take many years to recover. Burning can cause erosion on steep slopes, the loss of older taller heather which is used by merlin for nesting, loss and prevention of tree and scrub regeneration and in conjunction with grazing, the transformation of heather dominated communities into grass or blaeberry dominated communities. Burning can also damage peatland communities leading especially to the destruction of the 'living' *Sphagnum* layer.

Research has also indicated that trampling of eggs and possibly chicks by deer and sheep can be a cause of mortality amongst dotterel in the Drumochter Hills. This may also affect other ground nesting birds, such as ptarmigan. The longer term implications of this are not however clear.

The montane habitats on Drumochter are vulnerable to damage by hill walkers and access by all-terrain vehicles (ATV's). The SSSI lies within an area of nationally important landscape and the hills on either side of the Drumochter Pass are a popular destination for hill walkers. The 3 Munros to the west of the A9 trunk road, and 2 to the east with easy access means that the site is heavily used by visitors. In winter, the hills especially on the east side, are well used by cross-country skiers. This pressure from visitors has contributed to path erosion and in some cases loss of vegetation, for example the prostrate *Calluna* heath on at least one summit ridge, where lichens and dwarf-shrubs have been damaged by trampling.

There are a number of tracks within the site used for management purposes and ATVs are used to reach remoter areas. Some habitats are quite sensitive to damage from wheels and tracks - recent observations of moss-heath and lichen-heath communities in east Drumochter show signs of damage. Scars as a result of ATV access are particularly noticeable from the low ground up to the edge of the summit plateau. It is thought that recovery from such damage could take up to a decade (or even longer, at higher altitudes). Repeated use could therefore be permanently damaging. Whilst ATVs offer efficiency benefits for stalking (which is necessary to manage deer populations) this should be balanced against habitat damage.

Several blocks of conifers were planted adjacent to the A9 on the east side in the 1980's to help to prevent snow blocking the A9. There is an abandoned quartz quarry west of Drumochter Lodge.

There is a 132/33 kV electricity line along the A9 through the Pass. Loch Ericht is used for generating electricity and there is a generating station on the loch shore east of Coire Bhachdaidh Lodge, as well as a tunnel through the site. There are various dams, weirs and sluices. Water from the Allt Dubhaig is diverted by a dam into the Loch Garry hydro scheme.

The owners of Drumochter Estate have two Forestry Grant Schemes in operation. One around Drum implemented in 1988. The second was implemented in 1989 to fence the woodland adjacent to Loch Ericht to promote birch regeneration.

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

The long term goal for the site is to maintain Drumochter Hills SSSI as favourable habitat for its important alpine and upland montane habitats and its range of breeding bird species. There is concern that muirburn and stock numbers are having a detrimental effect on the habitat condition. Appropriate muirburn, grazing and public access are integral to the achievement of this long-term goal.

#### **The objectives for the site are:**

- 1. To maintain the condition and extent of montane habitats, and where possible restore the heathland habitats across the site;**
- 2. To maintain the populations and communities of the typical and rarer species of vascular plants;**
- 3. To maintain the populations and distribution of breeding birds;**

These objectives can be achieved by:

- Adhering to the Muirburn Code particularly on steep slopes;
- Managing grazing at appropriate levels on sensitive habitats and species by: manipulating stock numbers and controlling deer, increasing available grazing in areas able to tolerate higher grazing levels; improving management of heathland to improve grazing; where possible reducing grazing levels on sensitive habitat through the appropriate use and maintenance of fencing to keep stock and deer away from grazing intolerant habitats;
- Managing grazing levels to maintain or where possible enhance the condition of the grazing dependent habitats and species by: directing grazing into these areas.
- Managing visitor pressures away from the more sensitive plant and breeding bird areas by maintaining existing track ways and marking waypoints.

#### **4. To maintain the geomorphological interest of the site;**

#### **5. To promote the understanding and enjoyment of the features of the SSSI and the landscape of Drumochter Hills through well managed access.**

We wish to work with 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, its natural features and the effectiveness of 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 above 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).

#### **Other factors affecting the natural features of the site**

There is the likelihood that climate change is having as yet unknown effect upon the upland environments of places like Drumochter Hills. However, it is possible that the arctic and sub-alpine plant species which rely on the late lying snow, as well as the fauna that rely on these habitats, will be affected by a warmer temperature. Warmer temperature will also have other environmental consequences including damage due to increased erosion as a result of increased avalanches, snow-melt and flooding. Monitoring has revealed that damage associated with snow melt has caused losses of Menzies heath plants on the Sow of Atholl.

The upgraded transmission line from Beauly to Denny runs through the Pass of Drumochter in the SSSI on the east side of the existing transmission line (which will be removed once the new line is put in). No significant adverse impacts are expected.

**Date last reviewed: 11 February 2011**