

CITATION

DRUMOCHTER HILLS
SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST
Perth and Kinross, Highland (Badenoch and Strathspey)

Site code: 541

NATIONAL GRID REFERENCE: NN 630765

OS 1:50,000 SHEET NO: Landranger Series 42
1:25,000 SHEET NO: Explorer Series 393

AREA: 9688.13 hectares

NOTIFIED NATURAL FEATURES

Geological: Geomorphology: Fluvial geomorphology of Scotland

Biological: Upland habitats: Montane assemblage

Vascular plants: Vascular plant assemblage

Birds: Breeding bird assemblage

DESCRIPTION:

Drumochter Hills 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. Drumochter Hills consists of a high altitude plateau cut by a series of steep-sided corries and stream gullies. It is important for its well-developed montane vegetation, which includes a number of nationally rare plant species in a wide range of habitats, and its assemblage of arctic and upland breeding birds. The Allt Dubhaig in the Pass of Drumochter is of geological interest for its fluvial geomorphology.

The Allt Dubhaig, a burn which lies to the east of the Sow of Atholl and flows southwards towards Dalnaspidal, is an excellent natural example of the changes in channel shape and sediment characteristics that occur along a water course. The rapid change from a steep mountain torrent with a coarse gravel bed to a low-gradient, sinuous stream on the nearby floodplain with its sand-sized sediments makes it an ideal natural laboratory for investigating processes of sediment transport. It is one of the most intensively studied river reaches in Scotland.

Much of the underlying geology of Drumochter Hills consists of Moine schists, which is interrupted in places with calcareous bands which form base-rich outcrops and give rise to montane springs and flushes which increase the species diversity. This varied geology combined with the high-altitude, late-lying snow and relatively continental climate has led to a rich and varied range of arctic-alpine flora. The montane assemblage on the hills is well adapted to the sub-arctic environment and includes a range of habitats including alpine, dry and wet heathland, late snow bed vegetation, montane springs and fens, high altitude grasslands, blanket bog, and rock cliff ledge and rock crevice communities. The combination of these habitats makes Drumochter Hills a valuable site botanically.

The site supports a wide range of vascular plants many of which are of restricted distribution including several very rare species. Menzies, or blue, heath *Phyllodoce caerulea* is known only in 3 localities in the UK, one being on the Sow of Atholl. These and other arctic-alpine plants, such as alpine mouse-ear *Cerastium alpinum* and alpine saxifrage *Saxifraga nivalis*, all remnants from the end of the last glaciation, survive today as they are well suited to the cold snowy conditions of these mountains.

Drumochter Hills is also important for its ornithological interest. This is largely a result of the site's extensive heathland and other montane habitats which provide suitable habitat for a number of arctic species such as dotterel, ptarmigan and snow bunting, and upland species such as golden eagle, merlin, peregrine, wigeon, golden plover, dunlin, and ring ouzel. This combination of arctic and upland species is found at few other localities in Britain.

NOTIFICATION HISTORY

First notified under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949: 1955 as Sow of Atholl SSSI, and 1972 as Drumochter Hills.

Re-notified under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981: 31 July 1985

Notification reviewed under the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004:

11 February 2011

REMARKS

Measured area of site corrected (from 9690 ha).

The railway line is excluded from this site.

Most of Drumochter Hills SSSI is designated as Drumochter Hills Special Area of Conservation (SAC) for the European habitats listed below:

Acidic scree;
Alpine and subalpine heaths;
Blanket bog;
Dry heaths;
Montane acid grasslands;
Mountain willow scrub;
Plants in crevices on acid rocks;
Species-rich grassland with mat-grass in upland areas;
Tall herb communities;
Wet heathland with cross-leaved heath.

Part of the River Spey Special Area of Conservation (SAC), which is designated for the species below, runs through the middle of Drumochter Hills SSSI.

Atlantic salmon (*Salmo salar*);
Freshwater pearl mussel (*Margaritifera margaritifera*);
Otter (*Lutra lutra*);
Sea lamprey (*Petromyzon marinus*).

Most of Drumochter Hills SSSI is also designated as Drumochter Hills Special Protection Area (SPA) for the bird species listed below:

Dotterel *Charadrius morinellus*, breeding;
Merlin *Falco columbarius*, breeding.