

CITATION

**DUNCANSBY HEAD
SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST
Highland (Caithness)**

Site code: 564

NATIONAL GRID REFERENCE: ND 402735 to ND 393681

OS 1:50,000 SHEET NO: Landranger Series 12
1:25,000 SHEET NO: Explorer Series 451

AREA 66.73 hectares

NOTIFIED NATURAL FEATURES

Geological: Geomorphology: Coastal Geomorphology of Scotland

Biological: Coastlands: Maritime Cliff
Birds: Seabird colony
Birds: Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*)
Birds: Guillemot (*Uria aalge*)
Birds: Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*)

DESCRIPTION

Duncansby Head Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is located on the northeast coast of Caithness. The site extends along a 6.5km section of coastline between Duncansby Head and Skirza Head. The site has been designated for the nationally important coastal landforms, coastal vegetation and breeding seabirds.

Geology

The coastline between Duncansby Head and Skirza Head is one of the finest stretches of cliffs in mainland Britain. The cliffs are cut into bedrock of 'Middle Old Red Sandstone', originally laid down as layers of sandy and muddy lake sediments around 390 million years ago.

The site is of national importance for the spectacular and diverse range of plunging cliffs, stacks, arches and caves, and the numerous deep, long, vertical-sided geos, including text book examples such as the Geo of Sclaites. The famous pyramid-shaped Stacks of Duncansby show the effects of different rates of erosion above and below sea level. The upper parts of the stack have been eroded more quickly by wind and rain than the bases of the stacks have been eroded by the sea.

The site is of particular importance for the clear relationship displayed between geological structure and coastal form. Weaknesses in the bedrock are clearly exploited by erosion and the cliffs cut into harder 'Upper Caithness Flagstone Group' bedrock sections are steeper than those cut into the softer 'John o' Groats Sandstone Group' bedrock sections. A further important feature is the rock 'shore platform', which extends underwater for up to 100m from the base of the cliffs.

/see overleaf

Maritime Cliff (vegetation)

Duncansby Head SSSI is designated for the maritime cliff vegetation. This is found on some of the cliff ledges and above the cliffs in a narrow strip, typically about 100m wide. There is a good representation of species-rich maritime heath in a mosaic with maritime grassland. Key species of the maritime heath are: heather *Calluna vulgaris*, bell heather *Erica cinerea*, crowberry *Empetrum nigrum*, juniper *Juniperus communis*, and bird's-foot-trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*. Maritime grassland supports red fescue *Festuca rubra*, thrift *Armeria maritima*, ribwort plantain *Plantago lanceolata*, devil's-bit scabious *Succisa pratensis*, spring squill *Scilla verna* and scurvy grass *Cochlearia anglica*.

Vegetation communities on the cliff tops and ledges support plants such as Scots lovage *Ligusticum scoticum*, bell heather *Erica cinerea*, creeping willow *Salix repens*, sea campion *Silene uniflora*, angelica *Angelica sylvestris*, red campion *Silene dioica*, roseroot *Sedum rosea* and primrose *Primula vulgaris*.

Seabird colony

More than 10,000 pairs of seabirds use the cliffs to nest in the crevices and ledges making this site of national importance for breeding seabirds. The seabird colony includes fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*, guillemot *Uria aalge* and kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla*, razorbill *Alca torda*, puffin *Fratercula arctica*, shag *Phalacrocorax aristotelis*, cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*, herring gull *Larus argentatus*, great black-backed gull *Larus marinus* and black guillemot *Cephus grylle*.

Fulmar, guillemot and kittiwake

This site provides suitable breeding ledges for particularly large numbers of fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*, guillemot *Uria aalge* and kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla*. More than 1% of the UK population of kittiwake, more than 2% of the UK population of fulmar and more than 5% of the UK population of guillemot nest here.

NOTIFICATION HISTORY

First notified under the 1949 Act: 1962

Re-notified under the 1949 Act with a 36ha increase in area: 1975

Re-notified under the 1981 Act with a 9.1ha increase in area: 23 August 1985

Notification reviewed under the 2004 Act: 18 June 2009

REMARKS

Measured area of site corrected (from 83.1ha).

Duncansby Head SSSI is part of North Caithness Cliffs Special Protection Area (SPA) which is designated for the birds listed below.

Breeding seabird assemblage

Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*)

Guillemot (*Uria aalge*)

Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*)

Peregrine (*Falco peregrinus*)

Puffin (*Fratercula arctica*)

Razorbill (*Alca torda*)