

**EAST HALLADALE
Site of Special Scientific Interest**

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 585

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Purpose



This is a public statement prepared by NatureScot 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.

This Statement is available in Gaelic on request.

Natural features of East Halladale SSSI	Condition of feature (date monitored)	Other relevant designation
Blanket bog	Favourable, maintained (July 2007)	Special Area of Conservation (SAC), Ramsar
Breeding bird assemblage	Favourable, maintained (June 2015)	Ramsar
Dunlin, breeding	Favourable, recovered (June 2015)	Special Protection Area (SPA), Ramsar
Golden plover, breeding	Favourable, maintained (June 2015)	SPA

See Annex 1 for a list of natural features of overlapping protected sites

Description of the site

East Halladale Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) lies to the east of Strath Halladale and straddles the Caithness-Sutherland border. It is the northern-most of a group of peatland SSSIs that extend south from here to Morven and Scaraben. The site is internationally important for blanket bog, breeding birds including dunlin and golden plover, and others. These species naturally occur at low densities and require large areas of undisturbed land.

The body of peat under the blanket bog is also a large store of carbon. Keeping this carbon locked up in the peat and promoting land management that maintains the peat-forming process makes an important contribution to reducing Scotland's carbon emissions, helping to combat climate change. Undisturbed peatlands also offer a buffer against floods and droughts further downstream by soaking up water during heavy rainfall and releasing it gradually during dry weather.

East Halladale SSSI forms part of the Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands SAC, part of the Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands SPA and part of the Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands Ramsar site. A list of the habitats and species that are protected by each of these designations

can be found in Annex 1 below. Part of the southern end of the site also overlaps with part of Forsinard Flows National Nature Reserve (NNR).

The site was extended in 2022 to include two areas where blanket bog is being restored following the felling of conifer plantations.

Blanket bog

A more or less continuous blanket of peat extends across the watershed to the east of Strath Halladale. It is interrupted only by many streams, lochs and occasional rocky outcrops. A central low ridge of hills runs north/south through the site. Most of the hills, which rise to 243m altitude at Cnoc an Fhuarain Bhain, have at least a thin covering of peat, although the greatest extent of blanket bog is within the range 120-220m altitude. The different types of blanket bog that are found on this site reflect the range of slopes, aspect and altitude. These features all influence the species and structure of the different peatland types. These different types form a huge mosaic of different peatland habitats across the site.

Deer sedge, heather and common cotton grass dominate the vegetation on the SSSI. Purple moor grass and hare's tail cotton grass are also abundant in certain areas. *Sphagnum* bog mosses form dense carpets in some areas, such as ridges between the long narrow pools to the west of Allt nan Each. This area is characterised by the presence of *Sphagnum austinii* hummocks, a species only found in areas of relatively undisturbed blanket bog. Another moss species, *Sphagnum fuscum* is more abundant amongst the widely spaced, oval pools which occur to the west of Loch Sainn. Two nationally scarce plant species occur on the site - small cranberry and dwarf birch.

When monitored during July 2007, the blanket bog was found to be in favourable condition. The extent of the blanket bog had been maintained since previous monitoring visits. Species typical of this habitat such as heather, cotton grass and *Sphagnum* mosses were found on the site. There were no signs of recent damage due to overgrazing or burning, though deer trampling had disturbed the ground in some localised areas. Some active drainage ditches were present across the site and have reduced the water table in the ground immediately adjacent to them. A follow up visit to this site in 2013 confirmed that appropriate management was in place to maintain the blanket bog in favourable condition.

Breeding bird assemblage

The extensive blanket bog, heath covered hills, lochs and streams provide ideal habitat for a variety of moorland birds. High numbers of golden plover, greenshank and dunlin return to breed on the peatlands each spring. Waterbirds, including red-throated diver, black-throated diver, greylag goose and common scoter breed on the site. Golden eagle, merlin, hen harrier and peregrine have also been recorded.

The breeding bird assemblage was monitored in 2015. A range of birds typical of moorland and open water habitats was found on the site, including teal, common scoter, greenshank, snipe and peregrine falcon. Overall the breeding bird assemblage was found to be in favourable condition.

Dunlin and golden plover

The densities of dunlin and golden plover are particularly notable and were well above average densities across the Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands at the time of original designation.

Both the dunlin and golden plover populations were monitored in 2015. The populations of these waders have fluctuated on this site over the years. Dunlin numbers had increased since previous monitoring in 2009, so this species was assessed as having recovered to favourable condition. Golden plover numbers remained in favourable condition.

Conditions off site may be influencing the population of dunlin and golden plover. Forestry established along the edges of the SSSI reduces the breeding densities of some waders including dunlin. The removal of forest blocks and the cutting back of the edges may have reduced or removed this impact. Some drains have also been blocked with beneficial effect on the blanket bog habitat upon which the waders depend.

Other interests

Throughout the site a range of wet and dry heath communities occurs on the better-drained slopes and the numerous lochs and lochans support several swamp and aquatic plant communities. The site also provides suitable habitat for foraging and breeding otters.

Several of the tributaries of the River Halladale, which has a significant population of Atlantic salmon, flow through this site. Small tributaries such as these can be important spawning grounds for salmon and trout. Salmon and trout in the River Halladale also need a steady supply of clean water, some of which will come from this site.

Sphagnum moss	Golden plover
	

Past and present management

The site is primarily used for deer stalking and rough grazing for sheep. Regular management activities include muirburn, the use of vehicles and pest control. A deer fence runs close to the western boundary of the site, preventing deer movement between the SSSI and the lower croft ground in Strath Halladale. A number of tributaries of the River Halladale flow through the site and these are managed as part of the game fishery on the river. Trout fishing also occurs on hill lochs within the site. The area to the south of the site owned by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) is managed primarily for nature conservation.

The southern boundary of the site was extended in two places in 2022 to include areas where conifer plantations were felled between 1996 and 2006 with the aim of restoring blanket bog. To further this aim, work has been undertaken with funding from NatureScot’s Peatland ACTION. Ongoing management in this area includes dam creation, brash crushing, furrow blocking, plough ridge reprofiling and control of conifer regeneration.

A series of agreements with land managers aims for the site to be managed so that both the red deer population and the notified habitats can thrive. Peatland ACTION and the Agri-Environment Climate Scheme (AECS) schemes provides financial support for management which maintains and enhances the condition of the notified features, for example re-wetting the peatland by blocking drains.

Part of East Halladale SSSI lies within the Forsinard Flows National Nature Reserve (NNR), which is managed by the RSPB. As such, it attracts visitors including bird watchers, though numbers are limited by the effort required to access much of the site. The RSPB’s Visitor Centre

at Forsinard has excellent interpretation of the peatlands of Caithness and Sutherland and the majority of visitors to the NNR remain close to the Visitor Centre or nearby trails.

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

We wish to work with land managers to protect the site and to maintain and where necessary enhance its features of special interest. NatureScot aims to carry out site survey, monitoring and research as appropriate to increase our knowledge and understanding of the site and its natural features and monitor the effectiveness of the management and management agreements.

The Conservation (Natural Habitats, &c.) Regulations 1994, as amended, 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 Regulations. 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 conservation objectives (which are listed on our website through the NatureScot – SiteLink facility).

A list of Operations Requiring Consent forms part of the formal notification documents of the SSSI. These, and the discussions on land management involved in the issuing of formal consents, are intended to minimise the threat of any damage to the natural features.

1. To enhance the condition, extent and distribution of the peatland habitats.

Blanket bog depends on a continuous cover of special vegetation which continues the peat-forming process and protects the underlying body of peat. Damage to the moss cover exposes the peat surface to erosion from extremes of weather (drying, frost, wind) and trampling from animals.

Some grazing of peatland habitats is beneficial, but sheep and deer stocks should be maintained at levels which result in no obvious damage to this vegetation from grazing or trampling.

Use of vehicles can also cause damage. Off prepared tracks, only low ground pressure vehicles should be used and care should be taken in their use. The choice of route is important: soft ground, sharp turns and areas where erosion is beginning to start should be avoided as any bare peat can be very slow to revegetate.

Muirburn in areas covered by a management agreement must follow the agreed muirburn plan. Outwith areas covered by a management agreement, any muirburn should be carried out following the Muirburn Code, avoiding blanket bog and deep peat.

It is important to maintain the natural water table in peatland habitats so no new drains should be made, nor existing ones cleared. It would be beneficial to block old drains that are still active as these drains alter the natural water table and dry out the peat either side of the drain. They will also continually cut down through the peat until the underlying mineral layer is reached creating further bare peat erosion surfaces.

Restoration management will need to continue for several more decades in areas that are currently recovering to peatland from being planted with conifers. A low level of deer grazing is likely to be helpful in controlling future conifer regeneration although any larger seedlings will need to be felled. Continued brash crushing or brash removal in areas where there is deeper brash is also likely to be beneficial. Construction of dams to block furrows in areas where this has not already been done is also likely to speed up peatland recovery. These areas should continue to be protected from fire and from any other activities that might hinder peatland recovery.

2. To maintain the water levels, water quality, extent and distribution of the clear water lochs and dubh lochans.

Management in the areas around lochs should avoid activities that would release sediment, excessive nutrients or chemicals into the water. Activities that might alter water levels of lochs should be avoided. This objective can readily be achieved by maintaining the present management of lochs that allows natural processes to continue with minimal intervention or disturbance.

3. To maintain breeding bird populations and to avoid significant disturbance of birds during the breeding season.

If the habitats on this site are maintained following the advice given in the two Objectives for Management immediately above, opportunities for uplands birds to breed on this site are also expected to be maintained.

Disturbance can reduce the breeding success of nesting birds. It is important that any potential activities on the site are carefully planned to safeguard the nesting birds. Dunlin and golden plover are particularly sensitive to human presence and, along with other uncommon species, are protected by special legislation. Their nests should not be disturbed during the breeding season, since eggs may fail to hatch if they become chilled due to the parent birds being disturbed from the nest. Both eggs and young chicks are more likely to be eaten by predators if the parent birds are not there to protect them.

Red-throated and black-throated divers are particularly sensitive to human presence and, along with other uncommon species (such as common scoter), are protected by special legislation. Their nests should not be disturbed during the breeding season. Anglers should avoid disturbing these birds between April and June when they are nesting. Anglers should look out for divers when fishing on lochs and keep as far away from their nests as possible if fishing on larger lochs. On small lochs, anglers should move to a different loch if breeding divers are present. Islands and diver rafts are likely places for divers to nest and these should be avoided by anglers during April-June.

4. To maintain suitable otter habitat across the site and avoid activities that might disturb otters.

This objective can also be achieved by maintaining the present management that allows natural processes to continue with minimal intervention. Any known otter holts should not be disturbed. To safeguard the food supply of otters, water quality in burns, rivers and lochs should be maintained by avoiding activities that might add excess chemicals, nutrients or sediment. If any management is planned that might affect banks or piles of boulders where there could be otter holts, advice should be sought from NatureScot on how to avoid impacts on otters. Any fencing on the site that is likely to cross otter routes should have mesh with a large enough gauge to allow otters to pass through.

Other factors affecting the natural features of the site

- **Egg collecting:** Some of the rare birds that breed on East Halladale SSSI are potential targets for illegal egg collecting. Any suspicious vehicles, including number plates, or activity should be reported to the Police as soon as possible.
- **Forestry:** Although some of the conifers that had been planted next to East Halladale SSSI have been felled, other plantations remain. Tree seedlings could spread into the SSSI from these plantations, damaging the blanket bog habitat. Forestry could also influence the hydrology of the peatland adjacent to the plantation, water flow rates and water quality in burns downstream of plantations. Birds may also be deterred from nesting near plantations.

Date last reviewed: 22 August 2023

Annex 1: Natural features of other protected areas that overlap East Halladale SSSI.

Natural features of Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands SAC, SPA and Ramsar site that overlap East Halladale SSSI	Feature condition (date monitored)	Designation (SAC, SPA or Ramsar)
Acid peat-stained lakes and ponds (dubh lochans)	Favourable, maintained (August 2004)	SAC, Ramsar
Blanket bog	Unfavourable, no change (June 2017)	SAC, Ramsar
Clear-water lakes or lochs with aquatic vegetation and poor to moderate nutrient levels	Unfavourable, declining (August 2015)	SAC, Ramsar
Depressions on peat substrates	Unfavourable, no change (June 2017)	SAC, part of Ramsar blanket bog feature
Marsh saxifrage	Favourable, maintained (August 2007)	SAC
Otter	Unfavourable, declining (September 2011)	SAC, Ramsar
Very wet mires often identified by an unstable 'quaking' surface (ladder fen)	Favourable, declining (June 2017)	SAC, Ramsar
Wet heathland with cross-leaved heath	Unfavourable, no change (June 2017)	SAC, Ramsar
Black-throated diver, breeding	Favourable, maintained (June 2018)	SPA, Ramsar
Common scoter, breeding	Unfavourable, declining (June 2013)	SPA, Ramsar
Dunlin, breeding	Favourable, maintained (June 2015)	SPA, Ramsar
Golden eagle, breeding	Favourable, maintained (August 2016)	SPA
Golden plover, breeding	Favourable, recovered (June 2015)	SPA, Ramsar
Greenshank, breeding	Favourable, maintained (June 2015)	SPA, Ramsar
Hen harrier, breeding	Favourable, maintained (June 2016)	SPA
Merlin, breeding	Favourable, maintained (July 2004)	SPA
Red-throated diver, breeding	Favourable, maintained (July 2006)	SPA, Ramsar
Short-eared owl, breeding	Not yet assessed	SPA
Wigeon, breeding	Favourable, maintained (June 2018)	SPA, Ramsar
Wood sandpiper, breeding	Favourable, maintained (June 2004)	SPA, Ramsar
Water beetle <i>Oreodytes alpinus</i>	Favourable, maintained (July 2010)	Ramsar
Bog orchid <i>Hammarbya paludosa</i>	Not yet assessed	Ramsar

Lindberg's bog-moss <i>Sphagnum lindbergii</i>	Not yet assessed	Ramsar
Olive bog moss <i>Sphagnum majus</i>	Not yet assessed	Ramsar
Freshwater pearl mussel <i>Margaritifera margaritifera</i>	Unfavourable, no change (April 2015)	SAC, Ramsar

Note - The list of features of overlapping European and Ramsar sites includes habitats and species found in the whole of the Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands SAC, SPA and Ramsar site. Some of these features may not be present on East Halladale SSSI and the presence of some species may vary from year to year.