



**FAIR ISLE  
Site of Special Scientific Interest**

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 620

Ground Floor  
Stewart Building  
Alexandra Wharf  
Lerwick  
Shetland ZE1 0LL  
Tel: 01595 693345  
Fax: 01595 692565  
northern\_isles@snh.gov.uk

**Purpose**



Sheep Rock, Fair Isle

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.

Natural features of Fair Isle SSSI	Condition of feature (date monitored)	Other relevant designations
Palaeozoic Palaeobotany	Favourable, maintained (April 2004)	
Moorland juniper	Favourable, maintained (September 2007)	Special Area of Conservation (SAC)
Arctic skua ( <i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i> ), breeding	Favourable, maintained (June 2009)	Special Protection Area (SPA)
Fulmar ( <i>Fulmarus glacialis</i> ), breeding	Favourable, maintained (June 2000)	SPA
Great skua ( <i>Stercorarius skua</i> ), breeding	Favourable, maintained (June 2009)	SPA
Guillemot ( <i>Uria aalge</i> ), breeding	Favourable, maintained (June 1999)	SPA
Kittiwake ( <i>Rissa tridactyla</i> ), breeding	Unfavourable, declining (June 2008)	SPA
Razorbill ( <i>Alca torda</i> ), breeding	Favourable, maintained (June 2005)	SPA
Seabird colony, breeding	Favourable, maintained (December 2001)	SPA
Shag ( <i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i> ), breeding	Unfavourable, declining (June 2008)	SPA

Features of overlapping Natura sites that are not notified as SSSI natural features	Condition of feature (date monitored)	Designation (SPA or SAC)
Dry heaths	Unfavourable, no change (August 2006) <sup>1</sup>	SAC
Vegetated sea cliffs	Favourable, maintained (July 2003)	SAC
Arctic tern ( <i>Sterna paradisaea</i> ), breeding	Unfavourable, declining (June 2009) <sup>1</sup>	SPA
Fair Isle wren ( <i>Troglodytes troglodytes fridariensis</i> ), breeding	Favourable, maintained (May 2001)	SPA
Gannet ( <i>Morus bassanus</i> ), breeding	Favourable, maintained (June 2001)	SPA
Puffin ( <i>Fratercula artica</i> ), breeding	Favourable, maintained (May 2001)	SPA

### Description of the site

Fair Isle Site of Special Scientific Interest consists of the whole area north of the Hill Dyke and the coastline south of the Hill Dyke, including all the offshore stacks, cliffs, rocky coastline and boulder beaches.

The geology is Old Red Sandstone, and there is a Geological Conservation Review (GCR) site on Bu Ness which contains the remains of primitive fossil plants including a species not recorded elsewhere in Britain.

The central part of the designated area is covered by short heathland plants - mainly common heather, bell heather and crowberry. An important feature of this heathland, particularly towards the eastern side of the island, is the abundance of prostrate dwarf juniper, an evergreen shrub which is nationally scarce.

Fair Isle supports internationally important numbers of breeding seabirds. The notified seabird features typically comprise greater than 1% of the respective British populations, although there have been declines in the populations of some species, most notably kittiwake (which declined from a peak of 19,340 Apparently Occupied Nests [AON] in 1988 to just 2688 in 2008), and shag (which declined from 1530 AON in 1969 to 235 in 2008). Arctic terns are also in an unfavourable condition and the decline in these species has been linked to a reduction in food supply as sandeels become scarce. Conversely, the breeding population of great skua (Bonxie), reached a peak in 2008, at 294 Apparently Occupied Territories (AOT).

The population of Arctic skua has ranged between 33 (in 2004) and 115 (in 1985) AOT, while population figures compiled for the *Seabird 2000* census for the remaining seabird species features were: fulmar 20,424 Apparently Occupied Sites, guillemot 39,257 individuals and razorbill 3,599 individuals.

The seabird colony as whole is also a notified feature, with 186,900 individuals recorded by the *Seabird 2000 survey*. A component of this seabird colony is Gannet is a recent colonist, its population increasing rapidly with 3582 AON by 2009.

<sup>1</sup> Provisional site condition monitoring report to be completed

Fair Isle has long been recognised as an important bird migration landfall and study site, and the island's bird observatory (founded in 1948) is the northernmost of a network of such centres around the coast of Britain.

The island's ecological isolation is exhibited by its own sub-species or races of the winter wren, starling and wood mouse.

Nationally scarce plants occurring on the site are oysterplant, a species of eyebright (*Euphrasia foulaensis*) and small adder's tongue. Of local importance are rusty sallow and lesser marshwort which are rare elsewhere in Shetland and spear-leaved orache which only occurs on Fair Isle. Arctic-alpine species such as alpine bistort and dwarf willow also occur on Ward Hill. As can be seen in the table below the dry heaths feature is currently in an unfavourable condition. An unusually high rabbit population is putting increased grazing pressure on the vegetation and schemes are in place to reduce the population. Several reseeded areas are slowly reverting to heath and it is anticipated that the condition of the feature will improve.

Nationally scarce invertebrates include a water bug, seven types of ground beetle and two species of spider.

### **Past and present management**

In the past the main part of the SSSI was probably grazed by sheep, cattle and ponies. The stacks and high cliffs are largely inaccessible although the top of Sheep Rock was once grazed. Copper was once mined at Copper Geo on the north west coast and peats cut from some parts of Ward Hill. Within the SSSI are two lighthouses, a telecommunications mast, a small generator hut, the island airstrip and a water reservoir with associated treatment works buildings. The Fair Isle Bird Observatory was originally founded in 1948 near the North Haven. Some small clumps of trees have been established near the present Observatory to provide cover for migrating birds.

Most of the site currently serves as common grazings, grazed by up to 360 pure bred Shetland sheep plus lambs. A compensatory SNH Management Agreement existed between 1987 and 2008, and an application to manage the site under a Rural Development Contract has now been initiated. A small specified area is still used to cut peats for fuel. The main harbour at the North Haven provides berthing for the ferry and a recently built jetty has berths for visiting yachts and local boats during the summer. The Fair Isle Bird Observatory provides accommodation for staff and visitors to study natural history, ornithology and other aspects of island life. The original building was replaced by a new Observatory in 2009. The wildlife and plants of Fair Isle have been extensively researched, surveyed and monitored over many years which has provided good long-term sets of data, especially on birds.

Apart from a small area feued to the Fair Isle Bird Observatory Trust, the whole island is owned by the National Trust for Scotland (NTS). Fair Isle has also been awarded a Council of Europe Diploma which is awarded to protected areas of European interest which are reviewed on a five yearly cycle. Conditions attached to the award are featured in the NTS management plan and thus adds authority to the existing suite of designations.

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

We wish to work with the owner 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 and its natural features. SNH encourages applications to relevant schemes such as Rural Development Contracts (Rural Priorities) that aim to deliver positive management consistent with site objectives.

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 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 Natura conservation objectives (which are listed on our website through the SNHi - SiteLink facility).

**1. To maintain the condition and extent of biological habitats and geological features.**

Maintain stocking of sheep at a level at which there is no obvious damage to the notified vegetation from over-grazing or trampling and where possible facilitates recovery of the wider heath. Control of the rabbit population should also be conducted when necessary.

**2. To maintain the populations and distribution of the seabird populations within the site.**

Introduced predators such as rats, ferrets and hedgehogs can have a devastating impact on seabird populations. Measures should therefore be in place to minimise the chances of introducing such predators to the isle.

**3. To avoid significant disturbance of the breeding seabird populations.**

Excessive disturbance can affect the breeding success of nesting birds. The Fair Isle ranger service should continue to encourage responsible visitor access to minimise disturbance of seabirds.

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

Sandeels: The breeding seabirds are largely dependent on the sandeel population for feeding. Any significant decline of the sandeel population is likely to have a detrimental effect on the breeding success of the seabird colonies. The conservation of seabirds is thus partly dependent on the sustainable use of marine resources, including fisheries management, though climate change may have wider implications on prey availability. The Fair Isle Marine Environment and Tourism Initiative (FIMETI) continues to promote and campaign for sustainable marine management.

Date last reviewed: 06 September 2010