



Scottish Natural Heritage
Dualchas Nàdair na h-Alba

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FLANNAN ISLES
Site of Special Scientific Interest

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 642

Scottish Natural Heritage
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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.

This Statement is available in Gaelic on request.

Natural features of Flannan Isles SSSI	Condition of feature (and date monitored)	Other relevant designations
Seabird colony	Favourable, maintained July 1999	SPA
Fulmar <i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	Unfavourable, declining June 2008	SPA
Guillemot <i>Uria aalge</i>	Unfavourable, declining June 2008	SPA
Kittiwake <i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	Unfavourable, declining June 2008	SPA
Leach's petrel <i>Oceanodroma leucorhoa</i>	Favourable, maintained July 2001	SPA
Puffin <i>Fratercula arctica</i>	Favourable, maintained July 1999	SPA
Razorbill <i>Alca torda</i>	Unfavourable, declining June 2008	SPA

Description of the site

The Flannan Isles are located off the west coast of Lewis. They support large colonies of breeding seabirds including puffin, razorbill, guillemot, storm petrel, Leach's petrel, fulmar, gannet, shag and kittiwake.

As well as its importance for the large colonies of individual species, the Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is also of national importance for its seabird assemblage (the number of different species of seabirds which breed there).

The seabird interest of the Flannan Isles was also designated as a Special Protection Area under the European Union Birds Directive for its internationally important numbers of Leach's petrel, storm petrel, kittiwake, fulmar, guillemot, razorbill and puffin.

A number of seabird species on the Flannan Isles have suffered population declines in the recent past, namely razorbill, guillemot, fulmar and kittiwake. These birds have suffered declines at sites throughout the British Isles and although the reasons are unclear, it is thought that there is a correlation with the declining sand eel populations. These particular birds are largely dependent on strong sand eel populations.

Past and present management

Historically, the Flannans were used for sheep grazing and birds were harvested for their oil, meat, eggs and feathers. Sheep grazing ceased during the 1980s and the last remaining sheep was observed on Eilean Mor in 1988.

The lighthouse on Eilean Mor was occupied by keepers in the past, and they introduced rabbits as a source of food for when the weather was too rough to allow supplies to be landed.

The lighthouse is now automated and Northern Lighthouse Board employees visit occasionally to carry out maintenance. They have a helipad near the lighthouse, which they use outwith the bird breeding season.

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

The SPA designation obliges the government to maintain the breeding seabird populations in favourable condition.

The islands provide important habitats for breeding seabirds (cliff ledges, stone walls, grassy slopes).

The proximity of the Flannans to the shipping lane that runs to the west of the Hebrides increases the risk of oil pollution from shipping accidents. Although the risk may be small, the consequences of a large scale oil spill would be severe. Booms are likely to be ineffective in the sea conditions found in this area, and chemical dispersants can also cause problems for the marine ecosystem, particularly the fish stocks that the birds feed on.

Seabirds are especially vulnerable to oil pollution during the breeding season, as they spend a lot of time resting on the surface of the water or diving for prey. They also congregate in large rafts around the islands before going ashore in the spring, and again in late summer when the young are first fledged and the adults are moulting.

Mammalian predators, such as mink, feral cats and rats, could cause significant damage to the breeding seabird populations on the Flannans by preying on eggs and chicks. Mink would be a particular problem due to their habit of killing more than they need and storing excess (surplus killing). The likelihood of these animals reaching the Flannans may not be as remote as it first seems. It is not difficult for either mink or rats to get aboard boats that are berthed at piers overnight. These animals have been known to remain hidden for some time after the boat has set sail. Boats travelling out to offshore islands could easily be carrying these animals, and if the boat runs aground or they are discovered and scared off the boat, they would swim ashore. Visitors have been known to take pet cats ashore with them whilst staying on other offshore islands. Cats have been known to escape from their owners and can be left behind.

The grassy slopes and central areas used by puffins and Leach's petrels are subject to active processes as the burrowing activity causes erosion and then soil and bird droppings build up and revegetate. Rabbits were introduced c1920 and may be exacerbating erosion in combination with the burrowing action of the puffins. At the moment the erosion does not appear to be restricting the available habitat for puffins, but the situation needs to be kept under review.

The old buildings, MacPhail's bothies and the chapel, provide nesting habitat for storm petrels which prefer to nest in stone buildings or storm beaches. Alterations or reinstatement works to historic buildings during the breeding season could damage or expose eggs or young, so this period would need to be avoided.

Visitor pressure is thought to be fairly low at the moment. The Flannans are accessible by private boat or charter boat, but bad weather limits access to the islands, even during summer. Yachts and charter boats are usually limited to less than 12 people, and only stay for a short time, which minimises disturbance. Larger cruise ships could potentially land large numbers of people and could cause more of a problem for accessible breeding birds, such as the large puffin colony on Eilean Mor. However, as long as people take reasonable care whilst ashore, disturbance should be minimised.

Another particularly sensitive area is the landing spot at Roareim, where the ledges are packed with gannets and auks. Disturbance can be minimised by avoiding walking through these areas, by keeping a reasonable distance in boats and by minimising the time spent close by.

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 carry out site survey, monitoring and research as appropriate to increase our knowledge and understanding of the site and its natural features.

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, [where](#) 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. Maintain the breeding seabird populations in favourable condition, including the population size of individual species and the number of different breeding species.
2. Raise awareness of the damage that could be caused by alien predators such as rats, cats and mink colonising the island.
3. Explore ways to minimise the risk of oil pollution.
4. Maintain the condition of the marine habitats and fish stocks.
5. Minimise disturbance during the bird and seal breeding seasons.

Date last reviewed: 11 June 2010