



Scottish Natural Heritage

ARDLAIR - LETTEREWE
Site of Special Scientific Interest

Anancaun
Kinlochewe
Ross-shire
IV22 2PA

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 73

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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.

We welcome your views on this statement.

This statement is available in Gaelic on request.

Description of the site

Ardlair – Letterewe SSSI is a large upland site that extends north and east from the northern shore of Loch Maree taking in the Letterewe Forest and part of the Fisherfield Forest. It is a mosaic of upland, woodland and freshwater habitats and is notified for its upland oak woodland, upland birch woodland and its assemblage of upland habitats.

The woodland which occurs along the south facing slopes immediately above Loch Maree covers approximately 218 hectares and is the most northerly example of a substantial semi natural oakwood in the UK. Oak is dominant but areas with flushed soils also support ash, hazel and alder. Small numbers of pine occur on crags and on more acid soils whilst woodland dominated by birch has developed to the west of the site by Ardlair.

Ground flora is typical of upland oak-birchwoods and is generally species poor. Crags and areas dominated by pine have a dwarf shrub heath ground layer. The richest herb layer occurs under ash-hazel and ash-alder, especially where there has been protection from grazing. Species associated with the birch woodland type also include guelder rose, wych elm, aspen, holly and sessile oak. The ground flora here is exceptionally species rich and has abundant false brome grass. The woodland also supports a diverse range of mosses, liverworts and lichens which have developed in the damp, temperate conditions.

The site supports a diverse mosaic of upland habitats which together make up the upland assemblage including subalpine wet heath, subalpine dry heath, alpine heath, alpine moss heath, calcareous grasslands, snowbed, tall herb ledge, blanket bog and rocky slopes. The upland area of the site is dominated by a rugged group of mountains which include A' Mhaighdean and Mullach Coire Mhic Fhearchair. Although

predominantly comprised of Lewisian Gneiss these tend to be strongly calcareous in places and there are exposures of Serpulite Grits and Furoid Beds as well as a small outcrop of Durness Limestone. This gives rise to a rich and varied flora with over 272 species having been recorded.

The lower ground is mainly dominated by wet heath and blanket mire. Exposed middle slopes support prostrate dwarf shrub heath. To the east of Sgurr Ban where quartzite occurs this is dominated by dwarf juniper. Where there are calcareous exposures in the Beinn Airigh Charr - Beinn Lair area, extensive areas of calcareous grassland and flushes occur with species such as mountain sorrel, globe flower and alpine cinquefoil. The upper slopes and summits are varied but moss heath is dominant with cushion herbs such as moss campion, mossy saxifrage and three flowered rush. There is good development of North Atlantic liverworts on some north facing slopes and, in areas where snow persists late, snow bed communities occur with matt grass, tufted hair grass, parsley fern and trailing azalea. Many of the crags support tall herb communities including least cinquefoil and mountain avens.

Monitoring of the oak and birch woodland habitats has shown them both to be in unfavourable condition. The woodlands are dominated by mature trees of a single age class, most of which are estimated to be approximately 200 years old. Young trees and saplings are sparse on ground accessible to large herbivores. Grazing and trampling pressure is also generally too high to allow for regeneration.



Plantations of non-native trees are present and rhododendron occurs around Letterewe Lodge and at Ardlair. There is little evidence of these spreading into adjacent native woodland but their presence does pose a risk to the structure of the woodlands. Dense bracken also dominates many open areas around the woodland and in places may be hampering the growth of tree seedlings and the field layer

When monitored in 2006, the upland assemblage was recorded as favourable, however the assessment focused primarily on assessing whether the extent of the individual habitat types exceeded minimum target areas, and no assessment of the actual condition of the individual habitat types was included. The surveyor recorded that individual habitats showed signs of localised over grazing and trampling and there was some localised invasion of dry heath by bracken.

The oakwoods of Ardlair – Letterewe SSSI are part of the western acidic oakwood feature of the Loch Maree Complex Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and are therefore of European importance. Not all of the other habitats associated with Loch Maree Complex SAC are found within this SSSI but otter are present and their population is considered to be in favourable condition.

Part of Ardlair - Letterewe SSSI is also part of Little Gruinard River SAC designated for the Atlantic salmon. An initial assessment in September 2004 indicated that most aspects (including the spring component of the salmon population) were in favourable condition. However, the total average rod catch relating to the adult population, was lower than the reference catch (the number recorded when the site was designated). Overall therefore the Atlantic salmon feature is considered to be in unfavourable, but recovering condition.

Part of Ardlair – Letterewe SSSI is also part of Wester Ross Lochs Special Protection Area (SPA) designated for breeding black-throated divers. When monitored during 2005, the population was found to be in favourable condition.

Oak woodland along the northern shore of Loch Maree	Blanket bog
	

Natural features of Ardlair - Letterewe SSSI	Condition of feature (date monitored)	Other relevant designations
Upland oak woodland	Unfavourable, no change (June 2004)	SAC
Upland birch woodland	Unfavourable, no change (November 2007)	SAC
Upland assemblage	Favourable, maintained (June 2006)	SAC

Features of overlapping Natura sites that are not notified as SSSI natural features	Condition of feature (date monitored)	SPA or SAC
Acidic scree	Favourable, maintained (November 2006)	SAC
Alder woodland on floodplains	Unfavourable, no change (July 2004)	SAC
Alpine and subalpine heaths	Favourable, maintained (November 2006)	SAC
Blanket bog	Favourable, maintained (November 2006)	SAC
Bog woodland	Favourable, maintained (August 2008)	SAC
Caledonian forest	Unfavourable, no change (August 2003)	SAC
Clear-water lakes or lochs with aquatic vegetation and poor to moderate nutrient levels	Favourable, maintained (August 2004)	SAC

Depressions on peat substrates	Favourable, maintained (November 2006)	SAC
Dry heaths	Unfavourable, no change (November 2006)	SAC
Montane acid grasslands	Favourable, maintained (November 2006)	SAC
Otter	Favourable, maintained (July 2004)	SAC
Plants in crevices on acid rocks	Favourable, maintained (November 2006)	SAC
Plants in crevices on base-rich rocks	Favourable, maintained (August 2008)	SAC
Tall herb communities	Favourable, maintained (November 2006)	SAC
Western acidic oak woodland	Unfavourable, no change (July 2004)	SAC
Wet heathland with cross-leaved heath	Unfavourable, no change (November 2006)	SAC
Black-throated diver, breeding	Favourable, maintained (August 2002)	Wester Ross Lochs SPA
Atlantic salmon	Unfavourable, recovering (September 2004)	Little Gruinard River SAC

The list of features of the overlapping Loch Maree Complex SAC includes habitats found in the whole of the Loch Maree Complex SAC. Small patches of these features may be present on Ardlair – Letterewe SSSI but some may not be present at all.

Past and present management

The site has a long recorded history from before the 17th century when the Letterewe Estate supported natural oak-birch-pine forest from the shores of the Loch Maree to the tree limit. However, during the 17th Century there are records of extensive iron smelting operations and it is estimated that 44% of the woodland was felled between 1793 and 1875. Evidence of an old furnace used for iron smelting exists near Letterewe House.

The area has supported low intensity crofting, rough grazing and scattered settlements in the past. A small herd of cattle have been grazed in the recent past but currently there are no livestock on the site.

The site is now managed primarily as a sporting estate. Deer stalking occurs principally during the season September to October with deer being mainly extracted by ponies. Fishing on the lochs and rivers is also an important activity.

The natural heritage value of the woodland has long been recognised and in the 1950's a draft Nature Reserve Agreement was drawn up with the then owner. Although this was not completed, two areas were fenced in 1961 and 1962 with the aim of regenerating the oaks and encouraging the scrub layer to flourish. Although small areas of rowan, holly and ash regenerated in open areas these enclosures were only of

limited success due to the dense oak canopy limiting light penetration. Fencing was subsequently removed but unfortunately the areas of regeneration have suffered from the effects of heavy grazing by deer and goats.

Two other areas of open birch and oak woodland were enclosed by the erection of a fence in 1995 under a 30 year SNH management agreement. Regeneration of birch, rowan, ash and oak is evident throughout these sites. Further action to manage the woodlands is being progressed jointly with the estate and includes additional enclosures across the site totalling 120 hectares, the reduction in the overall number of deer, the cessation of winter feeding of deer and the reduction in the numbers of goats since goats are suspected of having a significant effect on the woodland structure and ground flora.

The area is remote and wild but well frequented by walkers and climbers. In 1993 the owners and major access groups pioneered the promotion of responsible access through the Letterewe Accord in this area. This sought to reconcile the protection of the wildland qualities of the area with the aspirations of the recreational community. Subsequently, footpath repair work was carried out on the Kernsary-Carnmore footpath which runs along the northern boundary of the SSSI and more recently other paths have been upgraded and bridges replaced.

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

We wish to work with the owners, occupiers and other interests 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 and monitor the effectiveness of management.

The EU Habitats and Birds Directives oblige Government to avoid, in SACs and SPAs the deterioration of the 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 the 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 operation against the relevant Natura conservation objectives (which are listed on our website through the SNHi-Site Link facility).

1. To maintain and enhance the extent, condition and diversity of semi-natural woodland habitat by, for example:

- Ensuring there is no reduction in the overall extent of native oak and birch woodlands and encouraging their expansion.
- Ensuring the woodlands do not contain any regenerating, non-native species of tree and shrub species.
- Ensuring the woodland structure is diverse, with a significant proportion of saplings, mature trees and shrubs.
- Ensuring there is no decline in the diversity, structure and abundance of ground flora

- Managing grazing, trampling and burning to achieve the above.

2. To maintain the extent, condition and diversity of the upland habitats by, for example:

- Ensuring there is no reduction in overall extent of the upland communities, including summit moss heaths and grassland and species rich rock communities, except through natural regeneration of native woodlands.
- Ensuring appropriate levels of grazing, trampling and burning
- Ensuring the current diversity of native species is retained or enhanced.

3. To maintain habitats suitable for black-throated divers and Atlantic salmon thus ensuring that the integrity of the European sites is maintained.

4. To avoid disturbance of black-throated divers thus ensuring that the integrity of the European site is maintained

5. To maintain the current status and distribution of the otter population by, for example:

- Maintaining suitable lochside conditions for foraging and shelter.

6. To ensure that other European habitats and species are maintained in favourable condition.

Other factors affecting the natural features of the site

Climate change could affect some of the SSSI and Natura features.

Date last reviewed: 3 November 2010