



Scottish Natural Heritage
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GREEN HILL OF STRATHDON Site of Special Scientific Interest

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 742

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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 notified as an SSSI and provides guidance on how its 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.

Description of the site

The Green Hill is located about 4 km north-west of the community of Strathdon, in central Aberdeenshire. The SSSI encompasses a small group of relatively low-lying hills (to 569m), with extensive outcrops of serpentine rock.

Natural features of the Green Hill of Strathdon SSSI	Feature condition (date monitored)	Other relevant designations
Calaminarian grassland and serpentine heath	Favourable Maintained (August 2008)	SAC
Moorland juniper	Favourable Maintained (August 2002)	SAC
Subalpine dry heath	Favourable Maintained (August 2008)	SAC
Subalpine flushes	Not yet monitored	

Serpentine is a highly localised rock formation rich in basic minerals and heavy metals, outcropping in a few places in Britain, in particular in the far south-west of England and in a broken line from the north west of Scotland across to north-east of Scotland. The Green Hill of Strathdon is one of the four main sites for serpentine habitats in Aberdeenshire. The serpentine rocks have a semi-toxic quality, with high levels of one or more heavy metals, and break down into unstable debris, rich in calcium, iron and/or magnesium. These provide the unique geological characteristics for the specialised plant communities which are of national and European importance (sometimes referred to as Calaminarian grasslands after a rare violet *Viola calaminaria* which is found on metal-rich soils on the European continent).

In an international context, Aberdeenshire's serpentine sites and associated habitats are important because they are an intermediate between serpentine sites in the more oceanic parts of Scotland (in the west and in Shetland), and sites in Norway where the climate is less oceanic.

On the Green Hill, the most specialised plant communities occur in the stony flushes and rocky outcrops such as Red Craigs, Craigs of Moniewhitt and on the slopes west of Knapps. These are characterised by the nationally-declining spring sandwort and mossy saxifrage, along with thrift and black spleenwort. Mosses associated with serpentine are also found, including *Grimmia* species.

In addition, serpentine-influenced grassland and heathland habitats occur. The serpentine grassland in the north of the site is relatively species rich, with species such as thrift and smooth oat-grass. Flushes within the grassland areas are dominated by sedges, with some base-loving herbs and mosses.

Elsewhere the site is mainly heath, dominated by dwarf shrubs, particularly heather, with widely scattered diminutive juniper bushes over much of the serpentine-influenced area. The serpentine heath also differs from the equivalent on less base-rich ground in being comparatively more open and richer in grasses and herbs, such as sweet vernal grass and bird's-foot trefoil. An interesting heathland transition from serpentine to less base-rich ground is apparent in the south-east of the site on Breagach Hill (556 m). This hill has a heath with bearberry and petty whin, neither of which are found on the serpentine. This adds diversity to the site, and demonstrates the difference between serpentine-influenced and more typical heaths of less base-rich ground.

Site condition monitoring of the serpentine and dry heath habitats carried out in 2002 and 2008 found these to be in favourable condition.

Juniper occurs throughout most of the serpentine-influenced heath and grassland habitats. In contrast to other sites for juniper, the formations on the Green Hill are intimately associated with heather and other dwarf-shrubs and scarcely form a distinctive scrub or woodland community in their own right. Nonetheless, the Green Hill is considered to be one of the best sites for juniper formations in the United Kingdom. Site condition monitoring of the juniper feature carried out in 2002 found it to be in favourable condition, though little or no juniper regeneration was recorded.

The moorland habitats support a representative upland fauna including red and black grouse, golden plover, curlew and an abundance of mountain hare.

Past and present management

Grouse moor is the principal land use. Muirburn is carried out over much of the moor, in accordance with the muirburn code. Grouse are driven, and shot from butts. Grazing of livestock occurs over the majority of the site, with the exception of small areas in the north. Sheep numbers have been reduced in recent years under the former Cairngorms Straths Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) scheme. One area of semi-improved grassland in the south of the site was formerly managed relatively intensively, by re-seeding and application of fertilisers. However, this area is reverting back to acid grassland with scattered heather, juniper and birch seedlings. Some cattle feeding used to occur in this part of the site. In the past gripping was carried out in one of the larger grassland areas in the south of the site. A number of drains are present on the site and are maintained.

Pine regeneration has occurred on parts of the site, most recently on the slopes of Breagach Hill, but has been removed.

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

We aim to work with owners and occupiers to protect the site and to maintain and where necessary enhance its features of special interest. SNH will 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, 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 habitats associated with the serpentine rock outcrops and debris, and avoid damage to these.

The expanse of bare debris of serpentine rock on the site is being maintained through natural processes such as freeze-thaw action and wind action, in combination with sheep grazing and heather burning. The plant communities on the serpentine rock outcrops and debris habitats could be damaged by rotational muirburn. Muirburn should continue to avoid larger rock outcrops, but the occasional spread of muirburn from adjoining habitats onto scattered rocks or small outcrops is unlikely to be damaging to the serpentine feature as a whole.

2. To maintain the current extent of juniper scrub and heather moorland.

Continue to carry out muirburn on the grouse moor in traditional areas. The burning of dense areas of juniper and some of the juniper regeneration should be avoided, but the aim is not to increase the extent of juniper scrub at the expense of heather, rather to maintain the current overall balance between heather moorland and juniper scrub. Any losses of juniper (including losses of scattered juniper following muirburn), should be compensated for by comparable increases in juniper cover, due to growth or regeneration.

The balance between heathland and grassland is controlled by grazing. In the past, grazing reduced the heather cover in the north and north-east of the site. Any plans to increase stock numbers, should not be at the expense of heather cover.

3. To prevent erosion on steep slopes caused by muirburn, grazing or a combination of the two.

On this site the concern is for the risk of erosion, especially on areas of heathland on steep slopes (between 1 in 2 and 1 in 3) either as a result of burning on its own or in combination with impacts of livestock. Muirburn in these areas (either alone or in combination with livestock impacts) which did not result in erosion would not be damaging to the heathland.

Date last amended: 22 October 2009.