



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.

Description of the site

Gruinart Flats Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is the area around and including Loch Gruinart, a sea loch in the northern part of Islay. It is partly contiguous with the Rinns of Islay SSSI. The site includes a variety of habitats, including saltmarsh, intertidal sand and mudflats, unimproved pasture, dune grassland, peatland, heathland, woodlands and improved grassland.

The area supports internationally important numbers of barnacle, Greenland white-fronted and light-bellied brent geese which feed and roost within the site. The site also supports around 5 breeding pairs of chough, with the dune areas at Ardnave and Killinallan particularly important in the winter as foraging areas for chough. These species are listed on Annex I of the EC Birds Directive and the size of the populations found here qualify the site as a Special Protection Area and a Ramsar site. These designations signify the site's European and global importance respectively.

The coastal and intertidal habitats, marsh and low level blanket bog are of national importance due to the rarity of the habitats and the relatively undisturbed nature of these habitats within the SSSI. The woodland at Coill a Chorra Ghoirtein is also nationally important for its rich assemblages of oceanic lichens.

The saltmarsh around the loch is of national geomorphological importance again due to the rarity and relatively undisturbed nature of the site. Bun-an-Uillt on the eastern side of the loch is a Geological Conservation Review site important for the Dalradian rock formations, providing the only known exposure through the 'Loch Skerrols Thrust'. This is a fault in the crust between the Maol an Fhithich Quartzite of the Lochaber Subgroup (of the Dalradian Supergroup), and the Bowmore Sandstone.

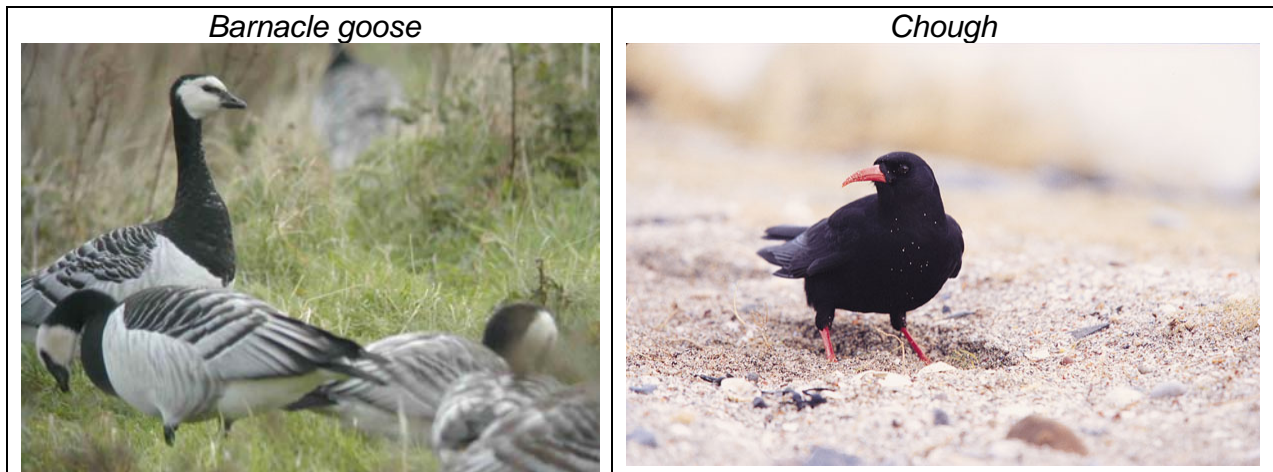
While not notified features, the site also supports a diverse range of bird, insect, plant and mammal species some of which are listed on EC Directives. Bird species include hen harrier, corncrake, little tern and arctic tern, whooper swan and an assemblage of ducks and waders. Marsh fritillary butterfly are present on areas of unimproved grassland. Marsh helleborine, Ray's knotgrass, maidenhair spleenwort and Irish ladies tresses are nationally scarce plants which have been recorded on the site. The dunes at Killinallan contain the most diverse assemblage of dune plants on Islay.

Nave Island and Loch Gruinart support a large colony of grey seals along with a small number of common seals.

The site is of national importance for a range of coastal and intertidal habitats, marsh and low level blanket bog. The saltmarshes not only form an integral part of the assemblage of coastal forms on Islay, but are nationally important for studies of saltmarsh geomorphology. They demonstrate particularly well the geomorphological characteristics of loch-head and fringing saltmarshes, a type confined mainly to Scotland and Norway. They are also unusual in Great Britain in that they have developed, and continue to develop, on an emerging coast.

The dunes at Killinallan and Ardnave form a relatively undisturbed loch mouth system rarely found in Britain. Coastal vegetated shingle is a rare habitat and most examples in the UK qualify for notification.

The low level blanket bog is a good example of recovering bog which has an abundance of typical bog species across the site. It also has a system of pools which support roosting geese.



Natural features of Gruinart Flats SSSI	
Name of natural feature	Other relevant designations
Barnacle goose (Greenland breeding population) (non-breeding)	SPA
Greenland white-fronted goose (non-breeding)	SPA
Light bellied brent goose (non-breeding)	SPA
Chough (breeding & non breeding)	SPA
Saltmarsh	
Mudflat	
Sand dune	
Shingle	
Blanket bog	
Lichen assemblage	
Dalradian rocks	
Saltmarsh geomorphology	

Current condition of the natural features

Barnacle goose, Greenland white-fronted goose & light bellied brent goose

Monitoring carried out from 2000 – 2003 indicates that these features are maintained in favourable condition. This means that the populations have been maintained at more than 50% of the baseline figure. The white-fronted goose and barnacle goose populations have increased on the site over the monitoring period. The brent goose population has declined but remains above the baseline figure.

Chough

A new feature added to the site in 2006, therefore Site Condition Monitoring has not been carried out. To maintain the site in favourable condition for breeding chough the population should not drop by more than 25% in the next monitoring period.

Saltmarsh

Survey work carried out in 2003/04 indicated that this feature is in a favourable condition from a coastal habitat and geomorphological point of view. The saltmarsh was found to be reasonably extensive at the head of the loch and was also present as some fringing saltmarsh scattered along both shores of the sea loch. Most of the loch-head site consisted of upper saltmarsh, occurring as taller and shorter sward heights. At the upper end, there was taller sward, *Juncus gerardii* and *Festuca rubra* upper saltmarsh. This zoned to shorter sward upper saltmarsh, with *Armeria maritima*, *Plantago maritima* and *Glaux maritima*. There was a fringe of *Puccinellia maritima* mid saltmarsh, at the edge of expansive inter-tidal sand flats. There was no saltmarsh strand, inundation grassland or brackish swamp, probably because the zonation is interrupted by an earth seawall embankment.

Mudflats

No site condition monitoring has been carried out to date therefore no information is available on the condition of this feature. No activities have occurred on the site which would have a detrimental impact on this feature

Sand dune

Survey work carried out in 2003 indicated that this feature is in an unfavourable condition. This is mostly due to historical impacts of agricultural activities and current grazing management.

Although the results of the monitoring suggest a change in the management may be required for the site, this has to be balanced alongside the large numbers of over wintering geese and other bird species like chough and corncrake. The chough benefit from the current farming system of over-wintering cattle in the sand dunes and the short sward height of the dune vegetation.

Shingle

Survey work carried out in 2003 indicated that this feature is in a favourable condition, however there are some concerns about the long term impact of gravel extraction on this feature and the management should be reviewed.

Blanket bog

A review of survey data held by SNH in 2004 indicated that this feature is in a favourable condition. The extent of the feature and its associated components remain intact, vegetation communities present are appropriate to blanket bog habitat and there has been no damage to the

Lichen assemblage

Survey work carried out in 2004 indicated that this feature is in an unfavourable condition and is declining. Work is required to halt the spread of rhododendron within the woodland to ensure the survival of the woodland habitat on which the lichens depend.

Dalradian rocks

No activities have occurred on the site which would have a detrimental impact on this feature.

Past and present management

The SSSI contains 4 agricultural units and is currently used for mixed livestock farming with the more fertile areas used to grow winter keep for cattle and the hill ground used as rough grazing for sheep and deer. One farm is managed by RSPB as a wildlife reserve.

Outwith the RSPB reserve most of the remainder of the SSSI is under SNH management agreements, which support management for geese, chough, corncrake and marsh helleborine.

Other land management activities include the provision of access routes for recreational use at Ardnave, Killinallan and Gruinart Farm

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 and monitor the effectiveness of the management agreements.

The EU Habitats and Birds Directives oblige Government to avoid deterioration of the habitats of the qualifying species or significant disturbance to those birds of the Gruinart Flats SPA which occur on Gruinart Flats SSSI. SNH is required to submit reports on the site condition every six years to Scottish Executive and the European Commission.

1. To maintain the populations of barnacle, Greenland white-fronted and light-bellied brent geese by encouraging grassland management under the Islay Local Goose Management Scheme and ensuring that minimal disturbance occurs on roost areas.
2. To increase the populations of chough by continuing with current grassland management practices, especially cattle grazing on key areas and by developing a scheme with land managers to provide continued support when current management agreements expire.
3. To maintain the extent of the coastland and bog habitats in favourable condition by following the advice set out in the Site Condition Monitoring Programme.
4. To improve the conditions for lichens within the Coill a Chorra Ghoirtein woodland by encouraging appropriate woodland management and exploring the possibilities for removal of invasive rhododendron.
5. To monitor the condition of the sand dune feature and ensure balance between chough interest and dune habitat is maintained by careful management of grazing levels.