



**Scottish Natural Heritage**  
**Dualchas Nàdair na h-Alba**

All of nature for all of Scotland  
Nàdair air fad airson Alba air fad

## HANDA ISLAND Site of Special Scientific Interest

### SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 762

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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 Handa Island SSSI	Condition of feature (and date monitored)	Other relevant designations
Maritime cliff (vegetation)	Favourable, maintained (June 2007)	
Seabird colony, breeding	Favourable, maintained (July 2001)	Special Protection Area (SPA)
Arctic skua, breeding	Favourable, maintained (June 2001)	
Guillemot, breeding	Unfavourable, declining (July 2007)	SPA
Kittiwake, breeding	Unfavourable, declining (July 2009)	SPA
Razorbill, breeding	Favourable, declining (June 2006)	SPA

Features of overlapping Natura sites that are not notified as SSSI natural features	Feature condition (date monitored)	Designation
Fulmar, breeding	Unfavourable, declining (June 2008)	SPA
Great skua, breeding	Favourable, maintained (June 2000)	SPA

### **Description of the site**

Handa Island Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is located 4km northwest of Scourie. In summer, the island can be reached by passenger ferry from Tarbet. The site is designated for the nationally important maritime vegetation and the internationally important breeding seabirds.

### **Maritime cliff (vegetation)**

Handa has a range of coastal vegetation, including maritime grassland, maritime heath and vegetation that specialises in growing on cliff ledges. A short, fine-leaved grassland, made up mainly of short grasses, thrift and plantains, grows in the east of the island near the sandy beaches. Maritime heaths, some of which have their growth stunted by exposure to wind and salt spray, are dominated by heather and crowberry, and include species such as juniper and bird's-foot-trefoil. In less exposed areas, there are herb-rich grasslands dominated by grasses including Yorkshire fog, as well as taller plants such as bluebell. Chaffweed, an unusual plant, grows in cracks in rocks near sea. Chickweed, sorrel and common scurvy grass grow in parts of the island where the vegetation is strongly influenced by guano from nesting seabirds.

The maritime cliff vegetation was monitored in June 2007. It was found to be in favourable condition. Natural processes such as exposure to wind and salt spray, as well as some rabbit grazing, were keeping the vegetation short enough to prevent more vigorous plants such as long grasses from crowding out the smaller species in the east of the island, and near the cliff tops. Rabbit grazing was light enough to allow plants to flower and set seed.

### **Seabird colony**

Handa is famous for its very large colonies of breeding seabirds. The cliffs here are formed from Torridonian sandstone which erodes to form tiers of narrow ledges that make ideal nests sites for seabirds. Since Handa is an island, it is inaccessible to land-based predators such as foxes. The large numbers of wheeling seabirds and the densely packed ledges of birds defending their nests make it difficult for black-backed gulls or skuas to attack eggs or chicks. Handa is also close to suitable feeding grounds for seabirds. This is important for maintaining breeding success since seabirds need to find food relatively close to their nests so that they can bring plentiful and frequent supplies of fish to their chicks.

Approximately 200,000 seabirds breed on Handa. Large colonies of kittiwake, guillemot and razorbill breed on the cliffs, together with smaller numbers of shag, common gull and great black-backed gull. Handa has the largest colony in Britain of both guillemot and razorbill. The island is also the fourth largest kittiwake colony in Britain. Puffins nest in burrows at Great Stack and around the boulders at Puffin Bay. Both Arctic skua and great skua breed in the interior of the island, whilst common and Arctic terns breed on the beaches and offshore islets.

The seabird colony was monitored in July 2001 and was assessed as being in favourable condition. The overall population consisted of an estimated 196,400 individuals. This was an increase from an estimated 183,400 individuals recorded in 1985-1987. Seabird numbers appear to have declined more recently and this is discussed below.

### **Arctic skua, guillemot, kittiwake, razorbill**

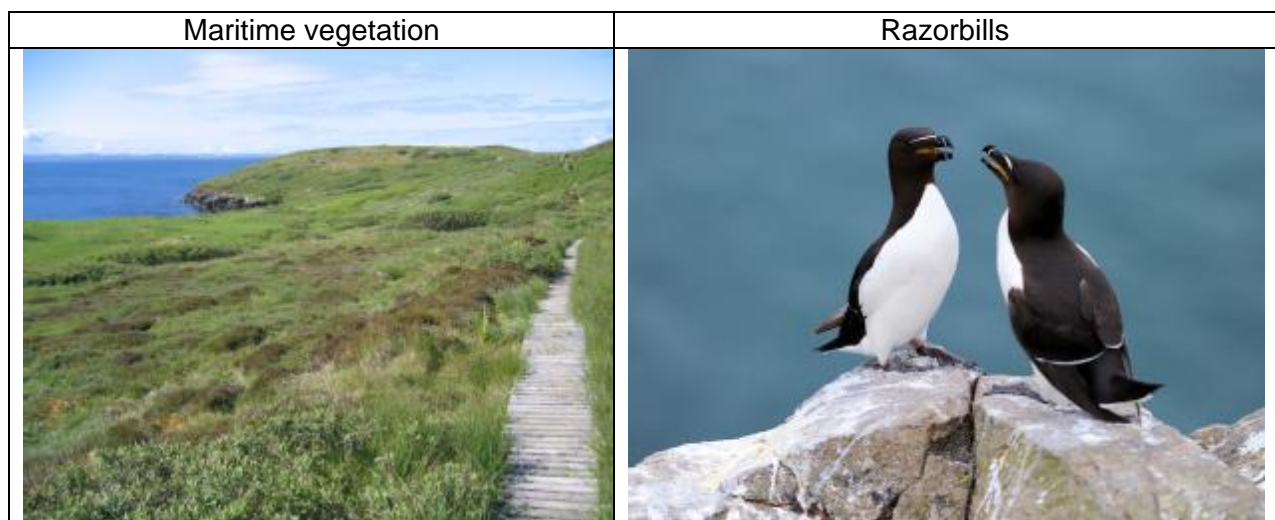
More than 1% of the British population of Arctic skua breed on Handa. There are large colonies of kittiwake (more than 2% of the British population). The guillemot and razorbill colonies are the largest in the country with more than 9% and 11% of the British population respectively. Given the significant proportions of the British population of these four species, each species is recognised as being of national importance in its own right, as well as being part of the seabird colony.

Arctic skua were monitored in June 2001 and with an increasing population, were assessed as being maintained in favourable condition. Guillemot, kittiwake and razorbill have been monitored more recently and the numbers of all three species had declined. Both guillemot (monitored in July 2007) and kittiwake (monitored in July 2009) have declined so much that they were assessed as being in unfavourable condition. The razorbill colony was monitored in June 2006. Numbers in 2006 (12,925) had dropped since the previous count in 2001 (17,042). Although this change in population was within acceptable limits, the downward trend is a concern and the razorbill feature was assessed as favourable - declining. Management activities are reviewed annually and no on-site management measures have been identified that are likely to be affecting productivity or adult survival. Off-site factors such as changes in food supply for seabirds may well be responsible for such declines.

### **Other interests**

Handa is a diverse island and as well as the seabird colonies and maritime vegetation, there are small areas of sand dunes, lochs and willow scrub. Sedge warbler breed in the long vegetation near the patches of willow on the south side of the island. Red-throated diver breed on the lochs in the interior of Handa and red grouse breed on the moorland. Grey seals use the rocks below the cliffs as haul-out sites.

Adder's tongue fern is found near Toll a' Choin and the nationally scarce small adder's-tongue fern grows near Poll Glup. Three nationally scarce plants, pyramidal bugle, hair sedge, and the eyebright *Euphrasia foulaensis*, are found on the island.



## **Past and present management**

Handa was inhabited until 1848 and the remains of a settlement still exist. Agricultural activities prior to 1848 included field drainage, burning and peat cutting. Seabirds and their eggs were also harvested. Sheep were grazed on the island until 1993. A fence was erected in 1998 which allowed sheep to be overwintered on the eastern part of the island. More recently, the island has been ungrazed other than by rabbits.

Handa is owned by Scourie Estate and has been managed as a nature reserve since 1961. The visitors to the island have been managed by the RSPB and then later by the Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT) on behalf of the Estate since 1991. The island is currently managed for wildlife and visitors according to the Handa Island Management Plan 2005 - 2015. Significant activities undertaken include construction and maintenance of a footpath round the island, provision of a bothy for the warden and shelter for visitors and the planting of native trees.

In March - April 1997, a successful rat eradication programme was undertaken. The principal aims were to increase the breeding success of puffins and black guillemots, as rats are not native to the island and can be a significant predator of ground and cliff nesting birds.

The attractions of the island include its wildlife and landscape, with up to 7000 visitors a year visiting the island. Visitor information is provided by the summer warden and disturbance of breeding birds is minimised by encouraging visitors to use a defined route around the island.

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

We wish to work with land managers 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 to monitor the effectiveness of any management.

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).

The list of Operations Requiring Consent, and the discussions on land management involved in the issuing of formal consents, are intended to minimise the threat of any damage to the natural features.

#### **1. To maintain the condition, distribution and extent of the maritime cliff vegetation**

This habitat benefits from the current low levels of grazing by rabbits and low level trampling in a few places by visitors. Together, these maintain a short sward that enables smaller species to flower and set seed, without being overshadowed by taller

or more vigorous plants such as long grasses. Complete lack of grazing is undesirable because it can lead to the loss of smaller, and more unusual species. Lack of grazing can also allow dense stands of bracken to become established. It may be desirable to re-introduce light winter grazing to the island at some point to ensure that more vigorous species do not out-compete the specialised maritime vegetation and to help reduce any spread of bracken. Use of vehicles and muirburn should continue to be avoided.

## **2. To maintain the size and distribution of the populations of breeding seabirds and to avoid significant disturbance during the breeding season**

Seabirds depend on the sea for their food supply and spend most of their time at sea, other than when they come to the cliffs to breed. Changes in the food supply are the most likely cause of the current decline in seabird numbers. The declines in both fish and seabirds are not caused by changes in the management of Handa. The following advice only relates to the management of the land where seabirds nest.

Excessive disturbance can reduce the breeding success of nesting birds. The SWT staff should continue to manage visitors in a way that avoids such disturbance during the breeding season. The most sensitive period is April and May when seabirds are selecting their nest sites and laying or incubating their eggs. Chicks are present during June and early July and most seabirds have left the colonies by the end of July.

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

- Sand eels and other fish: Breeding seabirds feed on the populations of sand eel and other small fish near Handa. Any significant decline of the fish population in this area is likely to reduce the breeding success of the seabird colony.

Date last reviewed: 24 March 2011