Scottish Natural Heritage

HERMANESS

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 776

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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.

Natural features of Hermaness SSSI	**Condition of feature (date monitored)**	**Other relevant designations**
Mineralogy of Scotland	Favourable, maintained (June 2007)	
Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*), breeding	Not yet assessed	Special Protection Area (SPA)
Gannet (*Morus bassanus*), breeding	Favourable, maintained (July 2008)	SPA
Great skua (*Stercorarius skua*), breeding	Favourable, maintained (June 2007)	SPA
Guillemot (*Uria aalge*), breeding	Unfavourable, declining (June 2009)	SPA
Puffin (*Fratercula arctica*), breeding	Favourable, maintained (June 2002)	SPA
Seabird colony, breeding	Unfavourable, declining (June 2000)	SPA

Description of the site

Hermaness SSSI lies at the north west corner of Unst; Britain's most northerly island. The site comprises the headland of Herma Ness, together with a number of stacks lying to the west and north, including Muckle Flugga and Out Stack.

The headland is bounded on the north and west by exposed, near-vertical cliffs reaching a height of 170m at the Neap. The lower, eastern side is more sheltered with cliffs rising to 100m in the north but reaching only 20m towards the head of Burrafirth. Hermaness Hill is the highest point at 200m.

The underlying rocks are entirely metamorphic (i.e. altered by intense heat and pressure deep in the earth) comprising gneisses and schists with frequent granite veins. Excellent examples of crystals of the aluminium silicate, *kyanite* and the iron-aluminium silicate, *staurolite* occur in the cliffs and ravine to the south of Tonga.

Blanket bog covers most of the interior of Herma Ness, with a broad fringe of acid grassland around the coast and small areas of heathland in the south east on shallow peat and mineral soils. The bog vegetation is relatively intact and the peat is saturated with water for most of the year, although drains cut across Hermaness Hill in the 19th century are still functioning, resulting in drier conditions which have modified the vegetation to some extent. Sphagnum-moss hollows and bog pools are frequent and there are a few larger peaty lochans on Sothers Brecks. It is amongst this habitat that great skuas breed. The colony here numbers about 750 pairs and is the third largest in the world.

Over 100,000 seabirds of 15 species breed on Herma Ness, making it one of the largest and most diverse colonies in the British Isles. The gannetry, which is increasing at the rate of about 6% a year, now holds over 24,000 pairs and is the fifth largest in Britain. The breeding populations of fulmar, puffin and guillemot are also of national importance, although guillemot and fulmar numbers have declined in recent years, principally due to changing food availability. The amount of the decline in fulmars still has to be assessed.

Other species which make up the seabird colony include shag, razorbill, black guillemot, kittiwake, herring gull and great black-backed gull. The population of kittiwakes has declined in recent years from nearly 4,000 pairs in 1981 to only 416 pairs in 2009. Reduced recruitment of young birds to the population after years of poor breeding success during the 'sandeel crash' in the mid-1980's and predation by great skuas are thought to be implicated in this demise. The shag population has also fallen. In this case the reasons are less clear but predation of nesting birds by feral cats is a possible cause.

Other interests

Hermaness supports a range of breeding birds in addition to the seabirds. In particular the moorland pools and lochans are used by red-throated divers. Dunlin, golden plover, snipe, skylark and large numbers of meadow pipit frequent the blanket bog. Arctic skuas used to nest in moderate numbers amongst the great skuas but were displaced as the great skua population expanded and today only a few birds remain.

Unst has long been famous in entomological circles for dark local races of moths, many of which are found on the SSSI. Herma Ness also hosts 2 species of hawkweeds which are endemic to Shetland (i.e. found nowhere else in the world). One of these occurs at only 3 other sites in the Islands.

Features of overlapping Natura sites that are not notified as SSSI natural features	Condition of feature (date monitored)	Designation (SPA or SAC)
Red-throated diver (*Gavia stellata*), breeding	Favourable, maintained (August 2000)	SPA
Shag (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*), breeding	Unfavourable, declining (June 2002)	SPA
Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*), breeding	Not yet assessed	SPA

Gannets

Staurolite (dark crystals)

Kyanite

Past and present management

It is likely that the Herma Ness has been grazed for many centuries but in common with many parts of Shetland, stock numbers increased during the mid 19th century when better communications with mainland Scotland stimulated commercial sheep farming. At this time the land was part of a large farm and a pattern of drains was cut across Hermaness Hill and the Neap to improve the grazing. These have now mostly vegetated over but many are still working. By 1880 Hermaness Hill had been fenced off from the area to the south and fences had been erected around most of the coastline.

The history of conservation management at Herma Ness dates back to 1831 when the Edmondston family began to protect the breeding great skuas. At this time the skuas nested in Britain only on Herma Ness and Foula, and eggs and stuffed birds were in demand from collectors. Despite some setbacks, the population began to increase and in 1891 the family were awarded a Silver medal by the Zoological Society of London for their efforts. In the late 1890's Laurence Edmondston began to employ keepers to protect the skuas. In 1906 this role was taken over by the RSPB who built a hut on the southern slopes of the hill to accommodate their watchers. The northern part of Herma Ness and the stacks became a National Nature Reserve (NNR) in 1955 under agreements with both of the owners. The NNR was extended to include the area south of Winnaswarta Dale in 1958.

Muckle Flugga is the site of Britain's most northerly lighthouse, which was continuously occupied from 1857 until it was automated in 1995. It is now serviced by helicopter once or twice a year.

Following the Small Landholders (Scotland) Act, 1911, grazing rights on Herma Ness were transferred from the Buness Estate farm to the crofting tenants of the estate. The area became a regulated scattald - the Burrafirth Common Grazings - with 31 shares each with a right to graze 30 breeding ewes year round and 6 gimmers and one cow during the summer. Around 1920 the fence on Hermaness Hill was removed and used to fence in an area known to this day as 'The Cattle Parks'. The cliff top fences were also removed or became derelict about this time.

The souming of the common grazings allows 930 breeding ewes and 186 gimmers on the scattald and 31 cattle in the cattle parks during the summer. The cattle rights have not been used for many years and since 1999 sheep numbers have been reduced under the ESA scheme and now SRDP Rural Priorities. At present a maximum of 775 ewes are run on the hill. The ewes are removed from the hill for lambing to allow easier management and minimise problems with predatory great skuas.

All shareholders and other tenants of the Buness Estate have the right to cut peat on the common grazings. There are extensive peat workings to the south of the Milldale Burn and a few banks elsewhere on the SSSI but few, if any are cut nowadays.

The National Nature Reserve is a popular tourist attraction with several thousand visitors each year, and is important to the economy of Unst. Since 1985 a seasonal Warden (Site Manager) has been employed annually during the summer months to monitor the reserve and assist visitors. From 1988 wooden boardwalks were built over eroding sections of the Hermaness Hill path and also, after 1995, on a new route along the north side of Winnaswarta Dale which was created to form a circular walk. In 2008-09 recycled plastic boardwalks were laid over most of the new route to prevent further erosion.

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

We wish to work with the owner and occupiers 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 its 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, 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 the cliff nesting populations of gannets, fulmars and puffins in

favourable condition by:

- Minimising disturbance of nesting birds, particularly through visitor or recreational activity.
- Controlling the population of feral cats.

2. To maintain the inland breeding population of great skuas in favourable condition by:

- Maintaining the bog and heath habitat through retention of a grazing regime which avoids overgrazing or poaching.
- Safeguarding against damage from fire on peatland habitat.
- Maintaining a high water table within the peatland areas by not opening new drains.
- Avoiding disturbance of breeding birds by visitors or vehicles.

3. To restore the overall seabird colony and the populations of shags, guillemots and kittiwakes to favourable condition.

For most species, no specific actions for site management can be identified as the cause of population decline is not fully understood. Factors in the marine environment such as food supply (especially sand eels) are thought to be the principal issue. No site specific management is thought to be involved. Measures to control the feral cat population may benefit the shag population.

4. To maintain the mineral rich rock outcrops in favourable condition by:

- Preventing, as far as possible, irresponsible specimen collection, especially the use of power tools.
- Preventing the exposures being obscured or access to them restricted by dumping or storing of materials.

Other factors affecting the natural features of the site

Sand eels: Any significant decline of the sand eel population is likely to have a detrimental effect on the breeding success of the seabird colonies. Most species which feed largely on sand eels have undergone recent declines, whereas those with a broader diet, such as gannets, are thriving.

Fisheries discards: Fulmars formerly obtained some of their diet from fish offal discarded at sea. This practice has now stopped and may be partially responsible for a decline in the fulmar population.

Pollution: Oil spills and other pollution incidents at sea would have a damaging effect on the seabird colony. Fulmars are surface feeders and will swallow fragments of floating plastic which lodge in their digestive tracts and may cause them to starve.

Feral cats: Cats are known to be present on the cliff tops and are predating breeding seabirds, particularly puffins and possibly shags. The numbers involved and level of predation is not clear.

Date last reviewed: 23 September 2011