

SCOTTISH NATURAL HERITAGE



RENFREWSHIRE HEIGHTS
SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC
INTEREST

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site Ref: 8666

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Purpose



This is a public statement prepared by SNH for owners and occupiers of SSSIs. It outlines the reasons Renfrewshire Heights 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.

Description of the site

Renfrewshire Heights is of national and international importance for its population of breeding **hen harrier** *Circus cyaneus*. The area regularly supports 10 breeding pairs of hen harriers, which represents approximately 2% of the breeding population of Great Britain. The hen harrier, amongst other bird species that are considered vulnerable or rare, is listed on Annex I to Directive 79/409/EEC on the Conservation of Wild Birds (the Birds Directive). As such, the Government is required to take special conservation measures to ensure the hen harrier's survival and reproduction. Due to the numbers of hen harrier breeding on the SSSI, the site qualifies as a Special Protection Area under Article 4 of the Birds Directive.

Besides breeding hen harriers, the site has other animals and plant communities that add to its natural heritage interest but do not qualify as protected natural features of the SSSI.

These include a wide variety of upland breeding birds, with others listed on Annex I to the Birds Directive such as short-eared owl *Asio flammeus*, merlin *Falco columbarius*, peregrine *Falco peregrinus* and golden plover *Pluvialis apricaria*. Numerous other birds – such as red grouse, lapwing, curlew and snipe – breed on the high ground, while black grouse are known to inhabit the moorland fringe. Otters are known to use watercourses within the site.

The hen harriers need a mixture of habitats to provide them with suitable nesting sites and to support large numbers of the small birds and mammals upon which they prey. These habitats include blanket bog, wet and dry heath, and rough grasslands. Because of its altitude and geographical position in western Scotland, Renfrewshire Heights receives relatively high rainfall, and this is reflected in approximately 70% of the SSSI comprising blanket bog.

Small areas of closely-grazed grassland are known to support an interesting variety of fungi, including numerous species of waxcap (*Hygrocybe spp.*) and fairy club (*Clavaria spp.*). The dark club *Clavaria greletii* is particularly notable, being classified as endangered in the British Red Data Book for fungi.

Natural features of Renfrewshire Heights SSSI	
Name of natural feature	Other Relevant Designations
Aggregations of breeding birds - hen harrier	pSPA

Current condition of the SSSI (SSSI natural features)

Monitoring results from 2004 indicated that the breeding hen harrier population is in favourable condition. More recent monitoring, in 2005 and 2006, observed a decline in the breeding population and productivity of hen harriers within the site, with an estimate of six breeding females in each of the two years. This is likely to represent, at least in part, natural variation related to variation in the abundance of key prey species, but continued monitoring will be required to determine whether the site is maintained in favourable condition over the longer term.

Past and present management

The SSSI is currently managed largely for agricultural and sporting purposes and for recreation and conservation.

Agricultural use is mainly hill sheep grazing with some cattle grazing during the summer months. Grazing intensity varies throughout the site. It is more intense on the lower slopes and towards the periphery of the site and differs notably between management units.

Some areas around the periphery of the site have been agriculturally improved by liming and fertilising. These areas generally attract increased grazing pressure resulting in areas of nutrient enrichment and a predominance of grasses over heathers. Through past government funded agricultural policies, large upland areas were subjected to extensive drainage. Many of these have however not been maintained to the present day and are no longer functional.

More than half of the land within the SSSI has been managed for grouse shooting in the past. As in many other parts of Scotland, grouse numbers have fallen substantially over the last few decades. Cyclical burning of moorland is carried out to varying degrees across the site. As a

result heather formations vary in form from pioneer to mature and degenerate bushes. Some areas have suffered from extensive burning and this, combined with heavy grazing, has led to the reduction of heather in some parts. Forestry plantations next to the site have limited the scope for burning in the north west of the site, while elsewhere high levels of rainfall make opportunities to carry out muirburn scarce in some years.

Afforestation, agricultural improvement, drainage, inappropriate muirburn and overgrazing, alone or in combination, can all lead to significant changes in the plant cover of the area. Plans for any such activity will need to be carefully assessed for their impact on hen harriers.

A former barytes mine exists towards the centre of the site at Queenside Muir. This was worked by both opencast and underground excavation methods until the late 1960s. The shafts were subsequently sealed and landscaped by the then District Council. A track still exists between the visitor centre at Clyde Muirshiel and the disused mine site. In addition to the Muirshiel mine there are also small copper and barytes prospects elsewhere within the pSPA.

Two lines of electricity pylons, both originating in Wemyss Bay, cross the SSSI. Maintenance and up-grade of these pylons will be a necessity.

The altitude and open character of land within the SSSI suggests that much of it is likely to be attractive to windfarm developers, although there are currently no wind farms within the SSSI boundary. Any windfarm applications will need to be assessed for any potential impacts to the hen harrier population.

There are four artificially dammed water bodies of significant size (>5ha) within the open moorland (although these are excluded from the SSSI). These are Queenside Loch and the Daff, Crawhin and Kelly Reservoirs. During the 1840s the Kelly Cut was constructed to move water between Kelly Reservoir and the compensation reservoir at Loch Thom. The cut is no longer in use however a popular walking track exists alongside it, within the SSSI.

The site is located within the northern section of the Clyde Muirshiel Regional Park and as such recreation is actively encouraged. Several tracks cross the site providing access into the area for walkers and mountain bikers. The most heavily used tracks are of limited extent and next to visitor centres on the edge of the SSSI, such that users may observe hen harriers but are not likely to approach sufficiently close to established nesting areas as to cause any significant disturbance. Recreational use of remoter areas within the SSSI is more limited; the countryside ranger service of the Regional Park has a role in promoting responsible access and so ameliorating the effects of informal recreation on sensitive areas.

The site's location within the Regional Park presents a valuable opportunity to promote public awareness and understanding of the site's natural features. As a notable recent example, the Regional Park, RSPB and SNH have collaborated in a successful and popular project to provide live nest-camera coverage of nesting hen harriers at the Muirshiel Visitor Centre near Lochwinnoch.

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

We wish to work with the owners and occupiers to protect the site and to maintain and where

necessary enhance its natural features. 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 the management agreement.

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 these operations against these Natura conservation objectives (which are listed on our website through the SiteLink facility):

To avoid deterioration of the habitats of the hen harrier or significant disturbance to the hen harrier, thus ensuring that the integrity of the site is maintained. Specifically:

To ensure for the hen harrier that the following are maintained in the long term:

- *its population as a viable component of the site*
- *its distribution within the site*
- *the distribution and extent of its supporting habitats*
- *the structure, function and supporting processes of these habitats*
- *no significant disturbance of the birds*

In order to maintain and enhance the natural features and thereby assist Government in meeting its obligations under the EC Directives, SNH will work with site managers to maintain the variety of habitats (bogs, heaths, grassland and flushes) in suitable condition for nesting and foraging hen harriers and the small mammals and birds on which they depend. This will be achieved through a range of positive measures including careful management of grazing by sheep and cattle, the cyclical burning of small (up to one hectare) areas of heather, and the control of bracken. We will consider what might be needed and done to improve or expand certain habitats to better support the hen harriers and their prey populations, for example by blocking peatland drains or creating small scrub areas.

SNH will assist owners and occupiers in managing the site appropriately through promotion of the Renfrewshire Heights Moorland Management Scheme which, as part of SNH's Natural Care programme, will offer targeted payments to support positive management.

Date last reviewed: