

Address: Silvan House, 3rd Floor East, 231 Corstorphine Road, Edinburgh, EH12 7AT

Tel: 0131 316 2600

Email: forth@snh.gov.uk

Purpose



John Molloy

This is a public statement prepared by SNH for owners and occupiers of the SSSI. It outlines the reasons it is designated as a 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

The Slamannan Plateau is a mosaic of agricultural land, bog, wetland, lochs and woodland. It lies approximately 5km southwest of Falkirk and 4km east of Cumbernauld at about 170m above sea level. The Slamannan Plateau is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) because of the nationally important population of taiga bean geese which visits the site in winter.

Two races of bean geese are found in Europe. Taiga bean geese (*Anser fabalis fabalis*) breed in the boreal forests of Sweden, northern Norway, Finland and western Russia. Most birds winter in southern Sweden, Poland and along the North Sea coast in Denmark, Germany, Netherlands and in Britain. Tundra bean geese (*Anser fabalis rossicus*) breed in the tundra areas of northern Russia and Siberia and winter right across Europe from Portugal and Spain to Greece. Occasional birds reach Britain, mostly in the south.

During the latter half of the 19th Century bean geese appear to have been the commonest of the 'grey geese' (greylag, pink-footed, white-fronted and bean) in Scotland. For unknown reasons the population declined dramatically until they were uncommon visitors by the 1930s. A surviving population in the south-west of Scotland declined throughout the 20th Century until it disappeared in the 1980s. Around that time a small flock was found to be wintering in the Carron Valley, continuing to visit this area until the early 1990s. During the mid-1980s bean geese started to visit the Slamannan Plateau and since then numbers have steadily increased. In recent years over 50% of the total UK population have wintered on the Slamannan plateau. The Slamannan flock is the only regular wintering flock in Scotland and one of only two in the UK, with the remainder of the UK population wintering in Norfolk.

The geese feed on agricultural fields mostly by day eating mainly grasses but they also use wetlands and bogs as safe areas to loaf and rest. In the early evening they fly to their roost sites on bogs and areas of open water. The birds visit the area between October and the end of February each winter.

Slamannan Plateau also supports small numbers of pink-footed geese (*Anser brachyrhynchus*) and greylag geese (*Anser anser*) during winter.

Agricultural land within the site is mainly improved grassland pasture with some rougher unimproved areas. The latter often include areas of wetter land dominated by rushes, particularly in low lying hollows. Wetland habitats present on the plateau include bogs at Fannyside Muir and Darnrig Moss. Fannyside Muir is an area of peatland, including blanket, raised and intermediate bog types. Although some drainage and peat cutting has occurred in the past the damaged areas have mostly refilled with bog moss (*Sphagnum*). Also within Fannyside Muir are two shallow nutrient poor (oligotrophic) lochs with some emergent vegetation at the fringes.



Natural features of Slamannan Plateau SSSI	Condition of feature (date monitored)	Other relevant designations
Taiga bean goose <i>Anser fabalis fabalis</i> , non-breeding	Favourable maintained (February 2011)	Special Protection Area (SPA)

The current condition of the SSSI

The five year peak average count between 2011/12 – 2015/16 was 240 birds.

The last five years counts are as follows:

YEAR	2011/2012	2012/2013	2013/2014	2014/2015	2015/2016	Average over 5 winters
Peak winter count	238	233	237	231	263	240

Past and present management

Agriculture and Forestry

Bean geese feed mostly on improved grasslands. These fields are grazed by cattle and sheep, although cattle are often housed inside during the winter. Sheep share fields with geese during the winter. Some fields within the SSSI boundary are re-seeded and the bean geese favour these fields for feeding for part of the time during the winter.

Changes do take place in the type of farming undertaken within the Slamannan Plateau. In the past farming consisted of dairy cattle and some arable. Currently sheep, cattle and silage production are now the usual practice. This change in farming practice has reduced the extent of suitable feeding areas for bean geese to utilise in the winter. Further changes in agriculture support mechanisms are expected within the years to come and it is important to recognise that these changes may also affect the areas available for bean geese to feed, rest and roost.

Forestry has also played a major role in defining remaining areas for wintering bean geese. Bean geese like clear sight lines to enable them to see any predators from their feeding, resting and roosting areas. Forestry can reduce these sight lines. The changes in financial support for farming and improved grants for forestry have resulted in several areas of forestry being planted which have reduced the area available to the bean geese for feeding. In more recent years applications to plant new forests have decreased.

Industry

In the past there were several opencast mines within the Slamannan Plateau area. A number of opencast mining operations have come to an end and the ground has been reinstated. However there are areas in adjacent land to the SSSI/SPA which have not been restored. However, proposals to restore areas such may come forward in the future.

Some of the resting and roosting areas have been subject to peat milling operations although these have now stopped. Bog habitats are key sites within the SSSI boundary for the bean geese. On occasions the bog habitats have been burnt. This has generally been accidental or due to vandalism.

Recreation

The Slamannan Plateau is used for walking, cycling and horse riding. If the level of use by these activities increases in an unplanned manner then it may result in bean geese being disturbed while feeding, resting or roosting. If disturbed bean geese will fly off to another location. Frequent disturbance of the geese affects their energy balance as they use up more energy in flight and lose feeding time. Frequent disturbance of feeding geese, particularly if the weather is bad, can potentially have a great impact on the survival of the wintering population.

A sailing club operates on West Fannyside Loch between March and October and largely outwith the period that the geese are present. There is also a clay pigeon shooting school at Garbethill Muir adjacent to the SSSI.

The RSPB own some land at Fannyside which is managed primarily for nature conservation and in particular for bean geese. Most of this land is within the SSSI.

The bean geese attract bird watchers and this too has the potential to cause disturbance to the geese. To reduce the instances of the bean geese being disturbed by bird watchers a website gives details of suitable places to see the geese:

<https://scotlandsbeangeese.wikispaces.com/>

Birdwatchers can also cause some problems for land managers at times by blocking roads.

Future Management

What bean geese require for grazing, resting and roosting is not straightforward. Work to answer questions about why they choose particular fields and roosting sites is on-going. Observations so far on the Slamannan Plateau suggest that they favour improved grasslands for feeding, with some feeding also taking place on semi-improved fields. Wetter areas nearby to the feeding areas are used for loafing and boggy areas such as Fannyside Muir and areas of open water for roosting on at night. Appropriate management of these habitats is essential for the long-term survival of the bean goose flock. Wherever possible, SNH will provide financial support and will provide advice to land managers to help them maintain and enhance these habitats.

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 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 the 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).

1. Manage grassland for geese feeding

Grasslands that are improved through re-seeding or fertiliser application are preferred by bean geese. To ensure that the geese have an adequate supply it is thought that an average sward height of around 10-15cm by the start of October in feeding fields will help to provide sufficient food over the wintering period. This length of sward should also ensure that if the field is grazed through the winter by both livestock and geese there will be plenty of food without compromising one or other species.

Semi-improved or unimproved grasslands can provide feeding areas as well as loafing areas. The geese seem to like areas with a light cover of rushes and this may be because of the cover the rushes provide. Where fields become too over-grown with rushes control of rushes may be necessary as they reduce the amount of grass available for them to feed on.

2. Protect geese habitats from opencast mining

Ensure that any future proposals for restoration of old opencast workings or any new operations do not have a detrimental impact on the wintering bean geese or the habitats that they require.

3. Think carefully about new forestry proposals

Bean geese like clear sight lines so it is important that fields used for grazing are not affected by any future forestry proposals that will reduce sight lines or replace feeding areas with woodland. Good liaison with the Forestry Commission on the SSSI/SPA requirements and on any grants scheme applications proposed and received will enable important bean geese areas to be retained.

4. Consider the needs of the geese when developing new paths

Under the Land Reform Act (Scotland) 2003 there is the potential for the development of core path networks and other routes around Slamannan and other local urban areas being routed either across or adjacent to key fields. The use of these footpaths could have an impact on the bean geese during the winter period. Liaison with the Access Officers in Falkirk and North Lanarkshire Councils will be essential to ensure they are aware of the need for a precautionary approach when identifying routes with local communities, some of which may need to be reconsidered as appropriate.

5. Maintain bog habitats in their present condition

The geese need to be undisturbed at their preferred roosting sites on areas of bog. At

present the bog areas may be grazed intermittently. This does not seem to cause any great problems to the wintering bean geese. Ideally the bog areas need to remain in at least their present condition, and be free from further drainage. Intentional muirburn should be carefully managed and they need to be safeguarded from accidental fire.

Date last reviewed: 31 August 2016