



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.

This statement is available in Gaelic on request

Description of the site

Strath Carnaig and Strath Fleet Moors is of national and international importance for its population of breeding **hen harrier** *Circus cyaneus*. The area regularly supports 12 breeding pairs of hen harriers, which represents approximately 2.5% 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.

The SSSI consists of two large areas of upland between Dornoch and Lairg. The predominant habitat types are heather moorland and blanket bog which together account for about 75% of the area. Two large conifer plantations are included within the SSSI accounting for 15% of the area and the remainder of the area is mostly rough acid grassland. There are a number of freshwater lochs in the SSSI, two of which (Loch Craggie and Loch Dola) also form part of the Lairg and Strath Brora Lochs SSSI and SPA. Small areas of broadleaved woodland (part of Torboll Woods SSSI is included) and willow scrub add to the diversity of the site and provide habitat for a variety of small birds which are potential prey for hen harrier. The upper part of the River Evelix SAC designated for freshwater pearl mussel is also included within the site.

Natural features of Strath Carnaig and Strath Fleet Moors SSSI	Relevant designations
Hen harrier (breeding population)	SSSI & SPA

Current condition of the natural features

Monitoring results from 2004 indicate that the breeding hen harrier population is in favourable condition.

Past and present management

The SSSI is currently managed largely for agricultural, forestry and sporting purposes. Agricultural use is mainly limited to hill sheep grazing and there is no arable croft or farmland within the SSSI. There are two substantial forestry plantations within the site, one in both the southern and northern sections of the SSSI. The southern plantation, Achormlarie, belongs to the Forestry Commission and was mostly planted in 1986 and 1987. The northern plantation, Craggie, is managed by Fountain Forestry for a number of clients. Both plantations offer open woodland glades supporting mature heather stands which offer good harrier nesting habitat.

Muirburn has been traditionally carried out in the past and some areas have suffered from extensive burning leading to accidental loss of some known hen harrier nest sites. Dense afforestation, agricultural improvement, drainage, inappropriate muirburn and overgrazing, alone or in combination, can all lead to significant changes in the vegetation cover of the area. Future plans for any such activity will need to consider the needs of breeding hen harriers.

Two lines of electricity pylons cross the SSSI. Access to these pylons and ongoing maintenance will be a necessity.

Recreational use of the SSSI is limited. Some of the freshwater lochs are used for fishing and there is occasional use of footpaths around the periphery of the site.

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

We wish to work with 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 monitor the effectiveness of ongoing management.

The EU Habitats and Birds Directives oblige Government to avoid deterioration of the habitats of the qualifying species (hen harrier) or significant disturbance to hen harriers on the Strath Carnaig and Strath Fleet SPA which also occur within this 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 condition and extent of the upland habitats, including heather moorland, blanket bog and acid grassland

- Maintain stock at a level at which there is no obvious damage to the vegetation from over-grazing or trampling.
- Identify mature heather stands for retention on appropriate ground to support nesting hen harrier.
- Any muirburn should be planned and controlled, in full accordance with “The

- Muirburn Code” (Scottish Executive).
- Maintain open woodland glades with mature heather.
- 2. To avoid significant disturbance of the breeding hen harrier population.**
- To minimise disturbance to breeding hen harriers
- 3. To maintain the population and distribution of the hen harrier population within the site.**
- Mature heather stands (harrier nesting habitat) to be present at key locations throughout the site.
 - Maintaining a mosaic of moorland structure will aid presence of small moorland birds (e.g. meadow pipit, skylark and stonechat) and small mammals as prey for nesting harriers and enhance biodiversity of upland habitats.
 - Proposed expansion of woodland and scrub with suitable open habitats to support nesting and foraging hen harriers.
 - Management of plantations to ensure a good mix of ages with adequate open ground in glades and rides.