



Scottish Natural Heritage
Dualchas Nàdair na h-Alba

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ORONSAY AND SOUTH COLONSAY

Site of Special Scientific Interest

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 9192

SNH, Main Street, Bowmore, Isle of Islay, PA43 7JJ

Tel: 0131 314 4150

Email: argyll_outerhebrides@nature.scot

Purpose

Oronsay coastal habitats



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.

Description of the site

Oronsay and South Colonsay SSSI covers the island of Oronsay, the southern part of the island of Colonsay and the intertidal strand area between the two islands. The islands are situated in the Inner Hebrides to the west of Jura and north of Islay. The site is internationally important for its machair habitat and its chough and corncrake populations and is nationally important for its sand dune habitat and the grey seal colony found on the rocky offshore islands and skerries.

There is a range of habitats within the site, including wet heathland, marshy grassland and improved pasture, but the grasslands found on the wind-blown shell sands and sand dunes are the most significant areas in terms of their nature conservation interest. These dune grasslands include the machair habitat (designated as a Special Area for Conservation) and have a nationally significant collection of plant communities, with species including adder's-tongue fern, moonwort and marsh orchid. The rich flora of these habitats provides feeding opportunities for a good range of birds and insects, with chough, corncrake, marsh fritillary butterfly and the belted beauty moth particularly notable.

In spring and summer, the site supports internationally important numbers of corncrake which use the abundant areas of iris beds as early cover before moving into the hay and silage fields to breed. The site is also used by internationally important numbers of breeding chough. In the winter, chough gather into flocks and feed on the soil and dung invertebrates from the grasslands, as well as on the kelp fly larvae found on some of the site's beaches. They are also known to feed on mining bee larvae found within the dune grassland areas.

The winter also sees the arrival of whooper swans and Greenland barnacle geese. Wetter areas have high numbers of breeding wading birds and a good selection of farmland birds,

including twite, are found here throughout the year.

The islets and skerries scattered around Oronsay's shore provide undisturbed areas used by both grey and harbour seals with the grey seal colony being nationally important as a breeding site. In 2014 the Scottish Government designated two different Seal Haul-out Sites which are within or overlap this SSSI in order to add further protection to these species. These islets and skerries also support breeding arctic terns and high numbers of great northern diver.



Natural features of Oronsay and South Colonsay SSSI	Condition of feature (date monitored)	Other relevant designations
Chough, breeding	Favourable, maintained (January 2013)	SPA
Chough, non-breeding	Favourable, maintained (March 2012)	SPA
Corncrake, breeding	Favourable, maintained (September 2013)	SPA
Sand dunes	Favourable, maintained (July 2013)	
Machair	Favourable, maintained (July 2013)	SAC
Grey seal	Favourable, maintained (November 2014)	

Current condition of the natural features

Chough (breeding & non-breeding)

To maintain the site in favourable condition for breeding chough the population should not drop by more than 25% in the next monitoring period.

Corncrake

To maintain the site in favourable condition for breeding corncrake the population should not drop by more than 25% in the next monitoring period.

Sand dunes

The sand dune feature which includes embryo/mobile dunes, fixed dunes and dune slacks is in favourable condition. Overall 64 targets were met. The only target which failed related to the flowering heads of marram grass (*Ammophila arenaria*,) which may have been due to a poor flowering year for the marram or the grazing pressure on the sand dunes.

Machair

The machair feature which includes embryo/mobile dunes, fixed dunes and dune slacks is in unfavourable condition. Although most of the machair was managed as a hay meadow, where

flowers were able to set seed, there were concerns about the effects of overgrazing in the outlying parts. In these areas the sward height was short (2cm) and flowers were restricted in setting seed. This means that flowering was infrequent and sparse overall across the unfenced part of the dunes. However, it should be noted that areas of short grazed sward are used by feeding chough, therefore, management of the habitats across the site requires careful consideration of the needs of all the notified features

Grey Seal

No monitoring of grey seal has taken place on this site for the purposes of Site Condition Monitoring but recent records (2000-2004) show that numbers of breeding seals recorded on the site remains stable and the site continues to be one of the two best sites, in terms of the number pups produced, in the Hebrides and west mainland coast of Scotland.

Past and present management

Oronsay island is currently leased and managed as a farm by RSPB with a number of nature conservation objectives. The farm's in-bye fields are largely dedicated to management for corncrake. Extensive beds of nettles, cow parsley and iris are sown to act as early spring/late summer cover, stock are removed from the fields in March to allow grass crops to provide cover until the middle of August before they are harvested with 'corncrake-friendly' mowing patterns. These practices also help provide a secure environment for breeding waders (including lapwing, redshank and snipe) which nest in the wetter areas of the in-bye pasture.

Cattle and sheep are grazed over much of the site throughout the year to help provide foraging opportunities for chough. Chough feed on the invertebrates they find in the soil of closely-cropped grassland, in sand dunes, in decomposing seaweed and in animal dung, particularly cattle dung. Maintaining year-round grazing is important for juvenile chough, which are seasonally dependent on dung invertebrates, especially in early summer and in the autumn. Chough can also forage cereal grains from the feed given to cattle on the dunes during the winter, a practice which also benefits farmland birds like twite, linnets and skylark.

The herb-rich grasslands are managed by controlling the timing and levels of grazing they receive. Stock are removed in the summer to allow flowering plants to set seed and are then reintroduced in September to restrict the late season growth of competitive grass species. Rabbits, introduced in the 18th century, have caused a number of problems on the grasslands through overgrazing and erosion of the sandy soils. However, ongoing management has helped to contain the rabbit population and to reduce its impact.

Bracken is controlled by cutting where it signifies a threat to grassland habitats.

Offshore, the small islets and skerries are kept in good condition for breeding arctic tern by controlling vegetation growth with light winter grazing by sheep.

On Colonsay the land is owned by Colonsay Estate and is farmed by two tenant farmers. Machrins Farm has agreements with RSPB to manage the improved grassland for the benefit of corncrake. Baleromindubh has an agreement in place with SNH to manage a small part of the site for the benefit of chough. The remainder of the site is used for mixed livestock grazing with the intensity over the whole site being relatively low but with some areas where animals are hefted (often the better quality ground) subject to higher grazing pressure. These areas of higher grazing intensity are often where chough are found feeding, due to the short sward height.

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 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. To maintain or increase the populations of chough by continuing with current grassland management practices, especially cattle grazing on key areas.
2. To maintain or increase the populations of corncrake by encouraging early and late cover through management of iris, nettle and cow parsley beds. Late cutting of silage and cutting in a corncrake-friendly manner will also help to achieve this.
3. To maintain the extent of the coastal habitats in favourable condition by following the advice set out in the Site Condition Monitoring Programme. Bearing in mind that with the exception of Oronsay SAC, a decline in machair condition is acceptable provided that this decline is in the interests of chough. At Oronsay the SAC status of machair obliges us to consider the interest of both.

Date last reviewed: 24 January 2019