

CITATION

LOCH FLEET
SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST
Highland (Sutherland)

Site code: 984

NATIONAL GRID REFERENCE: NH 800960

OS 1:50,000 SHEET NO: Landranger Series 21
1:25,000 SHEET NO: Explorer Series 441

AREA: 1231.77 hectares

NOTIFIED NATURAL FEATURES

Biological

Intertidal marine habitats: Eelgrass beds
Intertidal marine habitats: Sandflats
Coastlands: Saltmarsh
Coastlands: Sand dunes
Woodlands: Native pinewood
Vascular plants: Vascular plant assemblage
Birds: Breeding bird assemblage
Birds: Eider (*Somateria mollissima*), non-breeding

DESCRIPTION

Loch Fleet Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is the most northerly inlet on the east coast of mainland Britain and is located in the Moray Firth basin, about 3km south of Golspie. Extensive intertidal flats support nationally important numbers of wintering birds. The surrounding coastal and woodland habitats and the assemblages of plants and breeding birds they support are also of national importance.

Eelgrass beds, Saltmarsh and Sandflats

Sand and mud flats support beds of narrow-leaved eelgrass *Zostera marina* and dwarf eelgrass *Zostera noltei*, both nationally scarce species, forming an important source of food for waterfowl as well as sheltering a range of juvenile fish.

The sandflats found in the intertidal areas are very productive, supporting a rich marine fauna of marine worms, marine snails, cockles *Cerastoderma edule*, razor shells *Ensis spp.* and mussel beds *Mytilus edulis*. These invertebrates are especially important during the winter months when they provide undisturbed feeding for migratory birds.

Saltmarsh has developed around the sheltered shores of Loch Fleet and is an increasingly rare habitat in the UK. Characteristic saltmarsh plants include saltmarsh grass *Puccinellia maritima*, thrift *Armeria maritima*, sea milkwort *Glaux maritima*,

greater sea purslane *Spergularia media*, saltmarsh rush *Juncus gerardii* and glasswort *Salicornia europaea*.

Sand dunes (vegetation)

Coul Links is an extensive dune system which is unusual in displaying a complete transition from foredune to slacks. Coastal heathland is well developed in drier areas, supporting juniper scrub locally. Flooded slacks and winter lochs contribute to the variety of habitat, with a rich diversity of vascular plants such as variegated horsetail *Equisetum variegatum*, purple milk-vetch *Astragalus danicus*, rue-leaved saxifrage *Saxifraga tridactylites*, moonwort *Botrychium lunaria* and frog orchid *Coeloglossum viride*. Ferry Links is slightly less rich in vascular plants, but has large areas of lichen-rich and moss-rich heathland. A breach in the dune front allows occasional flooding from the sea, creating a large stand of sea milkwort *Glaux maritima*.

Pinewood

A Scots pine plantation has been established on the site of an old native pinewood on Ferry Links, and a number of scarce pinewood flowers have survived, including lesser twayblade *Listera cordata* and common wintergreen *Pyrola minor*. A stand of what appears to be native pinewood survives within the plantation where the rare matt felt lichen *Peltigera malacea* and three species of pine woodland tooth fungi are found.

Vascular plants (flowering plants)

Nationally scarce plants occurring on this site include; creeping ladies' tresses *Goodyera repens*, twinflower *Linnaea borealis*, and one-flowered wintergreen *Moneses uniflora* in the pine woodland and sea centaury *Centaurium littorale* on the sand dunes.

Breeding bird assemblage

Coastal bird species such as; ringed plover *Charadrius hiaticula*, oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*, shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*, eider *Somateria mollissima*, Arctic tern *Sterna paradisaea*, common tern *Sterna hirundo*, and little tern *Sterna albifrons* breed on the foreshore, dune and saltmarsh habitats. Other coastal breeding birds include; wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*, sedge warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus* and reed bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*. Species which breed in the pine woodlands include osprey *Pandion haliaetus*, Scottish crossbill *Loxia scotica*, treecreeper *Certhia familiaris* and great spotted woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*.

Wintering birds - Eider

The site supports nationally important numbers of eider *Somateria mollissima*, approximately 1% of the British wintering population. This species feeds on the rich marine invertebrate fauna, and benefits from the low level of human disturbance.

NOTIFICATION HISTORY

First notified under the 1949 Act: 1975

Re-notified under the 1981 Act: 13 July 1984 with a 45 ha increase in area.

Notification reviewed under the 2004 Act: 24 March 2011

REMARKS

Measured area of site corrected from 1238 ha.

Part of Loch Fleet SSSI is part of the Moray Firth Special Area of Conservation (SAC) designated for the European habitats and species listed below.

Loch Fleet SSSI is also part of Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet Special Protection Area (SPA) designated for the European birds listed below.

Habitats: Subtidal sandbanks

Species: Bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*)

Birds: Bar-tailed godwit (*Limosa lapponica*), non-breeding
Curlew (*Numenius arquata*), non-breeding
Dunlin (*Calidris alpina alpina*), non-breeding
Greylag goose (*Anser anser*), non-breeding
Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*), breeding
Oystercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus*), non-breeding
Teal (*Anas crecca*), non-breeding
Wigeon (*Anas penelope*), non-breeding
Waterfowl assemblage, non-breeding