

WEST SUTHERLAND DEER
MANAGEMENT GROUP
West/ Assynt Peninsula Sub area

DESIGNATED SITES

Appendix 3

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DESIGNATED SITES IN THE ASSYNT PENINSULA DMG AREA

Within the DMG area there are four different types of designation:

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)

Special Area of Conservation (SAC)

Special Protection Area (SPA)

National Scenic Area (NSA)

There are no National Nature Reserves or Ramsar wetland sites.

Together these protected Areas cover about 6% of the DMG area, with one third of this area being taken up by the Assynt Lochs SSSI/ SPA (excluding Loch Assynt). The entire area falls within the Assynt - Coigach National Scenic Area which encompasses the Quinag Wild Land Area the latter of which covers 59% of the DMG.

Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) represent the best of Scotland's natural heritage. They are 'special' for their plants, animals or habitats, their rocks or landforms, or a combination of such natural features. Together, they form a network of the best examples of natural features throughout Scotland, and support a wider network across Great Britain and the European Union.

Scottish Natural Heritage chooses sites after detailed survey and evaluation against published scientific criteria. SSSIs can include freshwater, and sea water down to the mean low water mark of spring tides, as well as land. At 1st January 2011, there were 1,437 SSSIs, covering over 1,020,000 hectares or 12.7% of Scotland.

SNH designates SSSIs to protect the best of our natural heritage by making sure that decision-makers, managers of land and their advisors, as well as the planning authorities and other public bodies, are aware of them when considering changes in land-use or other activities which might affect them. It is the obligation of landowner /occupiers to maintain, enhance or, where necessary, restore SSSIs on their property. The Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 provides the legislative framework around which all SSSI sites are administered. <http://www.snh.org.uk/pdfs/publications/designatedareas/ssi.pdf>.

Special Area of Conservation (SAC)

Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) are areas designated under the European Directive commonly known as the 'Habitats' Directive. Together with Special Protection Areas, which are designated under the Wild Birds Directive for wild birds and their habitats, SACs form the Natura 2000 network of sites. Most SACs on land or freshwater in Scotland are also underpinned by notification as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). The additional SAC designation is recognition that some or all of the wildlife and habitats are particularly valued in a European context.

Special Protection Area (SPA)

A Special Protection Area (SPA) is an area of land, water or sea which has been identified as being of international importance for the breeding, feeding, wintering or the migration of rare and vulnerable species of birds found within the European Union. Special Protection

Areas are designated under the European Wild Birds Directive and, together with SACs, form the Natura 2000 network of sites. A number of SPAs include areas notified as SSSIs and the additional SPA designation affords these areas enhanced protection.

National Scenic Area (NSA)

National Scenic Areas are Scotland's only national landscape designation. They are those areas of land considered of national significance on the basis of their outstanding scenic interest which must be conserved as part of the country's natural heritage. They have been selected for their characteristic features of scenery comprising a mixture of richly diverse landscapes including prominent landforms, coastline, sea and freshwater lochs, rivers, woodlands and moorlands.

There are currently 40 NSAs in Scotland, covering a total land area of 1,020,500 ha and a marine area of 357,900 ha.

All the conservation designations within the DMG area can be located on [6. APDMG Designated sites](#) and [7. APDMG SPA designated sites map](#). The wild land areas and national scenic area can be seen at [8. APDMG Landscape Interest map](#).

A full account of all protected areas, their current status and what properties are involved is given in [Appendix 3. APDMG Designated Sites](#). In addition, [Appendix 6. Monitoring of Designated Features](#) summarises the likely contribution of deer to these sites, and details when they were last monitored.

Within the Assynt Peninsula Deer Management Group area there are only 3 X SSSIs, designated for a total of 3 X features. Of these, all three are biological as opposed to geological features and of the biological features present, one relates to birds, and the other two relate to upland birch woodland. In total they cover 1126 ha. Approx two thirds of this area is covered by the Ardvar Woodlands SSSI which is deemed to be in Unfavourable condition.

The Assynt Lochs SSSI is designated for black throated divers and these are deemed to be in favourable condition. Overlapping with one of these lochs is the Loch Beannach Islands SSSI, designated for upland birch woodland, and because this lies on a series of islands, browsing pressure is reduced, and it is deemed to be in Favourable condition.

Overlapping the SSSIs are:

- One Special Area of Conservation (SAC): the Ardvar & Loch a Mhuilinn Woodlands SAC includes all of the Ardvar Woodlands SSSI site above, but also includes an area to the south of Scourie, about three miles to the north. This site is deemed to be in Unfavourable condition. Although it is worth noting that the Loch a Mhuilinn part of this composite site is in favourable condition.
- One Special Protection Areas (SPA): the Assynt Lochs SPA covers a number of smaller lochs as well as Loch Assynt. Like the Assynt Lochs SSSI, this site is designated for black throated divers, and it too is deemed to be in Favourable condition.
- The Assynt and Coigach NSA covers the entire DMG area, as well as extensive tracts of ground outwith its boundaries, and is a major and well recognized designation within the wider area. https://gateway.snh.gov.uk/sitelink/siteinfo.jsp?pa_code=9119

In addition, part of, the Abhainn Clais an Eas & Allt a Mhuilinn SAC falls within the area. It does not overlap with any other designations, and is designated for Freshwater Pearl mussel. It is currently in Unfavourable condition.

Listed below is a summary of the individual designated sites within the area, in alphabetical order. All those sites with an SSSI designation are listed first, followed by sites carrying other designations only. Colour coding denotes the status of designated features from unfavourable condition in red through to favourable condition in green (see Appendix 6 Monitoring of Designated Features).

Ardvar Woodlands SSSI – Unfavourable declining (upland birch woodland)

Deer Management Units: Ardvar Estate, North Assynt Estate, Reintrad, Quinag

https://gateway.snh.gov.uk/sitelink/siteinfo.jsp?pa_code=83

The Ardvar Woodlands SSSI extends to 731 ha, of which approx 60% comprises a range of open ground habitats including dry and wet heath and blanket bog. The woodland area is comprised of a number of discreet woodland blocks, perhaps 6-8 in total, separated by open ground, often by some considerable distance. It is important to our understanding of the site that this is not one continuous woodland area, but a cluster of woodlands within the overall locality. Topography and ground conditions are such that these areas are unlikely to become joined up by regeneration in the foreseeable future. Forestry Commission Scotland have

deemed much of the open ground to be too marginal for tree planting. The woodlands are very dominated by birch, with a very small proportion of minor species.

There is considerable dispute as to whether these woodlands are regenerating at an appropriate level or not. The SSSI Site Management Statement (SMS) suggest there is little or no regeneration across the site and that the woodland risks fragmenting and coming apart.

However, there are some areas of birch regeneration across the site, and a successful grant claim for 12ha of established regeneration was made in 2016. Previous pulses of secured regeneration are also in evidence on the site, going back to the 1980's and beyond. It should be noted that the importance of the woods as an SSSI relates to their wider structure and composition, rather than simply to the area of the canopy.

Overlapping and including all of the above SSSI area is the Ardvar and Loch a Mhuilinn Woodlands SAC https://gateway.snh.gov.uk/sitelink/siteinfo.jsp?pa_code=8192 which is designated as a Western Acidic Oak Woodland, as well as for freshwater pearl mussels and otters. It marks the most northerly natural distribution of oak in the UK. This site includes an area of woodland some miles to the north near Scourie. This latter area currently contains the majority of oak trees within the overall site.. It is a separate SSSI (Loch a' Mhuilinn SSSI) and the woodland feature is in favourable condition. Oak trees within the Ardvar area are limited, with a number of trees in the woodlands at Nedd and Gleann Leireag, where oak seedlings are noticeable, although not yet able to escape from browsing pressure. There are also a few trees in the main Ardvar Glen, and only a few other individuals present elsewhere. It is likely that the Ardvar part of the site has been heavily exploited for timber in the past, and valuable species like oak largely removed.

Of the other species present, hazel is the most common, with significant patches restricted to a relatively small number of locations. A number of small stands of aspen are present. Willow and rowan are present in small numbers, but are not as common as might be expected. Holly seedlings are present within some of the woodland areas, with some of these becoming established. A number of other species are also mentioned in the site statement, although they are a very minor component of the woods indeed. The oak woodland feature is deemed to be in **Unfavourable Declining** condition. The reasons for this are set out in the Site Management Statement (see link above):

SNH (February 2017) made the following comments: *“This site is a priority for management to allow the woodland feature to be restored to favourable condition. SNH’s Vision for the woodland sets out what the woodland could look like over given timescales and the management to achieve that is included in this plan.”*

Assynt Lochs SSSI – Favourable Maintained (black throated diver)

Deer Management Units: North Assynt Estate, Little Assynt Estate, Lagg & Loch Poll + Loch Assynt Lodge, Quinag Estate, Middle Inver, Brackloch, Lochinver. .

The Assynt Lochs SSSI extends to 1156 ha, which includes Loch Assynt as well as a number of smaller lochs. Approx 350 ha of the site lies within the DMG area. It is not considered that there is any relevance to deer management with this feature.

https://gateway.snh.gov.uk/sitelink/siteinfo.jsp?pa_code=1713

Overlapping with the above site is the Loch Assynt SPA, designated for the same species,

and also being in Favourable condition.

https://gateway.snh.gov.uk/sitelink/siteinfo.jsp?pa_code=8465

SNH (February 2017) made the following comments: *“Maintaining the quality of the freshwater habitat and avoiding changes which might be damaging to the divers are the priorities for this site. Changes which could detrimentally affect them are fluctuating water levels, pollution and excessive release of sediment. The construction of deer fences or establishment of tall trees immediately adjacent to the loch edges can also affect flight lines and would require careful planning. Disturbance to the birds during the breeding season could also have an undesirable effect. Any management which seeks to improve water quality and mitigate the likely impacts of climate change would be welcomed.”*

Loch Beannach Islands SSSI – Favourable (upland birch woodland)

Deer Management Unit: Little Assynt Estate

https://gateway.snh.gov.uk/sitelink/siteinfo.jsp?pa_code=964

Loch Beannach Islands SSSI extends to 31 ha, and overlaps with the Assynt Lochs SSSI/SPA on Loch Bennach. The actual wooded islands only comprise a small proportion of this total, with the largest island being 1.5 ha.

Although dominated by birch and rowan, there are a range of minor trees species on the islands, including willow, alder, juniper, holly, hazel and aspen, and it is believed that there is a single oak tree. There is a good ground flora, suggestive of ancient woodland.

SNH (February 2017) made the following comments: *“The deer range from several of the boundary estates (North Assynt, Middle Inver, Loch Assynt Lodge) as the site is unfenced. There has recently been some tree senescence and windblow, creating open spaces for further regeneration. The current low grazing pressure should be continued and reviewed if deer pressure changes as a result of other land management practices such as woodland creation fencing; otherwise the existing policy of non-intervention is likely to be compatible with the requirements of this woodland feature.”*

Abhainn Clais an Eas & Allt a Mhuillion SAC Unfavourable Declining (Freshwater pearl mussel)

Deer Management Unit: North Assynt Estate

https://gateway.snh.gov.uk/sitelink/siteinfo.jsp?pa_code=8184

This is a small site, extending to just 1.21 ha. Only the Abhainn Clais an Eas part is within the Deer Management Unit. There are five pressures listed, including water flow issues and criminal activity, but over grazing is also noted as a contributing factor to the Unfavourable condition of the site.

SNH (February 2017) made the following comments: *“The establishment of riparian woodland would be of great benefit to the freshwater pearl mussels. The shade provided would help moderate the impact of high summer temperatures while the tree roots would help stabilise the river banks reducing sedimentation, improve water quality and generally help build resilience against the effects of climate change.”*