

/ DORNOCH FIRTH SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST

Sutherland District and Ross and Cromarty District, Highland Region

PLANNING AUTHORITY: Highland Regional Council

File Reference: 708

NATIONAL GRID REFERENCE:

O.S. 1:50,000 Sheet No: 21

1:25,000 Sheet No: NH 78, NH 88

AREA: 3577.4 hectares 8839.65 acres

DESCRIPTION:

Biology

This is the northernmost of the large firths of eastern Scotland and is virtually unaffected by industrial development, in contrast to the neighbouring Cromarty Firth. The flats are of great importance for their wintering birds while the remainder of the site shows a particularly fine series of transitions between habitats, many of which have their own features of interest.

Coastland, Heathland

Extensive flats support a rich marine invertebrate fauna which attracts large numbers of wintering wildfowl and waders. There are sizeable beds of Eelgrass Zostera spp., of the alga Enteromorpha, and of Glasswort Salicornia sp.

Foredune is dominated by Marram Grass Ammophila arenaria and Lyme Grass Leymus maritimus. Dune grassland is species-rich, supporting good populations of Grass of Parnassus Parnassia palustris, Purple Milkvetch Astragalus danicus and Creeping Willow Salix repens.

Fixed dune grades into heathland dominated by Heather Calluna vulgaris and Cross-leaved Heath Erica tetralix, locally passing into heath scrub with Juniper, Broom Cytisus scoparius and Roses. There are heath/lichen hummocks on bare sand at Cuthill Links.

Dornoch Point displays some fine transitions between species-rich damp slacks and saltmarsh, with the latter showing a good creek development.

Birds

Though a range of birds breed on the dunes, saltings and heath, the site is most important for its wintering wildfowl and wader populations. At peak times Wigeon numbers reach 12,000, Velvet Scoter 8,000 and Long-tailed Duck 7,000 all levels of international importance, though seaduck numbers are typically irregular. There are nationally important wintering numbers of Common Scoter, Whooper Swan, and Red-breasted Merganser. At peak times the wader population may surpass 7,500.

Plants

Noteworthy species include Sea Centaury Centaureum littorale, Eelgrasses Zostera angustifolia and Z. noltii, and Baltic Rush Juncus balticus.

REMARKS:

1920.2 ha lie in Sutherland District, 1657.2 ha in Ross and Cromarty District. Amended boundary.

A Nature Conservation Review Site Grade 1.

PREVIOUS NOTIFICATIONS

First notified in 1975 as Lower Dornoch Firth.

Date: August 1985