

CITATION

HANDA ISLAND SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST Highland (Sutherland)

Site code: 762

NATIONAL GRID REFERENCE: NC 138480, NC 139468

OS 1:50,000 SHEET NO: Landranger Series 9
1:25,000 SHEET NO: Explorer Series 445

AREA: 367.51 hectares

NOTIFIED NATURAL FEATURES

Biological:	Coastlands:	Maritime cliff
	Birds:	Seabird colony, breeding
		Arctic skua (<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>), breeding
		Guillemot (<i>Uria aalge</i>), breeding
		Kittiwake (<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>), breeding
		Razorbill (<i>Alca torda</i>), breeding

DESCRIPTION

Handa Island Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is located 4km northwest of Scourie. The site is designated for the nationally important maritime vegetation and seabird populations.

Maritime cliff (vegetation)

A range of maritime grassland and heath vegetation grows on Handa. Much of the vegetation that is closest to sea is kept short by exposure to wind and salt spray. Maritime grassland communities grow on the cliff tops, including grasslands dominated by *Festuca rubra*, thrift *Armeria maritima* and sea plantain *Plantago maritima*. In less exposed areas, there are herb-rich grasslands which include species such as Yorkshire fog *Holcus lanatus*, bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta* and Scots lovage *Ligusticum scoticum*. Other areas are dominated by extensive areas of heather *Calluna vulgaris* and crowberry *Empetrum nigrum* which grow together with sea plantain, buck's-horn plantain *Plantago coronopus* and bird's-foot-trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*.

The cliff ledges are dominated by plants which can tolerate salt but benefit from a long-term lack of grazing. Typical plants that grow here include thrift, sea campion *Silene uniflora* and roseroot *Sedum rosea*. In more sheltered places, ledge vegetation grows quite tall and can include Scots lovage, sea arrowgrass *Triglochin maritimum* and sea spleenwort *Asplenium marinum*.

Some of the coastal vegetation is strongly influenced by guano from nesting seabirds. Plants such as chickweed *Stellaria media*, sorrel *Rumex acetosa* and common scurvy grass *Cochlearia officinalis* grow in these areas.

Seabird colony

The cliffs on the northwest of the island support a large breeding colony of seabirds. The Torridonian sandstone cliffs have tiers of ledges that make suitable nest sites for

seabirds. The overall seabird population reaches approximately 200,000 individuals during the breeding season. There are large colonies of kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla*, guillemot *Uria aalge*, razorbill *Alca torda* and fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*. Smaller colonies of shag *Phalacrocorax aristotelis*, great black-backed gull *Larus marinus* and herring gull *L. argentatus* also nest on the cliffs. A colony of puffin *Fratercula arctica* nests amongst fallen boulders at Puffin Bay and on the Great Stack. Both Arctic skua *Stercorarius parasiticus* and great skua *S. skua* breed in the interior of the island, whilst common tern *Sterna hirundo* and Arctic tern *S. paradisaea* breed on the beaches and offshore islets.

Arctic skua, guillemot, kittiwake and razorbill

Nationally important numbers of four seabird species breed on Handa, including arctic skua (more than 1% of the British population); kittiwake (2% of the British population), razorbill (11% of the British population) and guillemot (9% of the British population). The colonies of razorbills and guillemots on Handa are the largest in the UK. The island is also has the fourth largest kittiwake colony in Britain.

NOTIFICATION HISTORY

First notified under the 1949 Act as Handa Island SSSI: 1963

Re-notified under the 1949 Act as part of Handa - Duartmore SSSI: 1975

Renotified under the 1981 Act as Handa Island SSSI: 26 June 1986

Notification reviewed under the 2004 Act: 24 March 2011

REMARKS

Measured area of site corrected (from 363ha).

Handa Island SSSI is part of Handa Special Protection Area (SPA) which is designated for the birds listed below.

Seabird assemblage, breeding
Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*), breeding
Great skua (*Stercorarius skua*), breeding
Guillemot (*Uria aalge*), breeding
Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*), breeding
Razorbill (*Alca torda*), breeding