



Landscape

Landscape character and setting

The forests of Caithness have a significant presence within their wider landscape setting. It is important to understand their current setting and potential long term effects of differing management prescriptions and proposals upon it.

Landscapes are not fixed. They alter both incrementally or more rapidly as a result of management actions and changes in policy and approach. For example the recent shift towards wind farm development on the sparsely populated open areas of Caithness has had a significant effect on the skyline in recent years, creating tall vertical features that draw the eye and alter the relative scale of other features on the skyline, such as plantation forest. This landscape section looks at the landscape setting (landscape character) of the FLS estate in Caithness and considers how management proposals will affect the special qualities of the landscape, providing a steer to inform the future spread, make up and management prescriptions of the land and woodlands.

The forests of Caithness are spread across a wide area on three differing landscape character areas. Their setting is shown on map 17. The majority are situated on the periphery of Landscape Character Areas (LCA) of Sweeping Moorland, as identified by Nature Scot, (1998, 2019), where it meets with Coastal Crofts and Small Farms Landscape Character Area. There are also establishing woodlands in a number of sites across the Farmed Lowland Plain LCA

Although delineated by lines on the maps, in Caithness landscape shifts subtly from one character to another as they blend together over great distances within wide open spaces and vast skies.

Relevant Key Characteristics of Sweeping Moorland and Flows

(as described by Nature Scot 2019)

- Gently sloping or undulating landform which lies generally below 350 metres.
- Occasional isolated hills of limited height form local landmark features.
- Very distinct flora, dominated by sphagnum mosses, produced by the wetness and infertility of the flows.

- Pockets of improved grazing, mainly within the outer fringes of sweeping moorland. • Coniferous forest forming a dominant characteristic within some parts of this landscape character type.
- Very sparsely settled with dispersed crofts, farms and estate buildings largely found on the outer edges of this landscape or near a strath.
- Vehicular tracks within parts of the landscape.
- Wind farms, transmission lines, the A9 and a network of minor roads are key features within the more modified outer fringes within Caithness.
- The lack of vertical features add importance to the forest edges, masts, wind turbines, buildings and sculptural broadleaves trees.
- Long, low and largely uninterrupted skylines offering extensive views across this landscape and result in a feeling of huge space.
- Consistent views to the distant Lone Mountains and Rugged Mountain Massif of Caithness & Sutherland.
- Great sense of exposure on areas of flat peatland on upland plateau.
- A strong sense of remoteness is associated within the largely uninhabited, inaccessible core flows and moorlands. More settled and modified outer fringes
- Weather rushes past with dramatic displays of dark stormy skies, racing clouds, bright blue sky generating a perception of continual change.
- Peatland; open sea of rough vegetation below wide changing skies. Monotonous at first site, but full of colour and fine grained diversity.
- Distinct areas- coastal and inland

FLS forests within the Sweeping Moorland and Flows

Furthest north, Stroupster is an expansive block found to the south west of John O'Groats. Its landscape context shares the characteristics of the forests to the south – Achairn, Toftgun, and Rumster. They are located on the higher ground just back from the coast, their straight planted edges cutting geometrically across the gentle curves of the moorland, which merges into the Coastal Crofts and small farms LCA.

Due to the lack of elevation and openness, the forests are visible for considerable distances as features on the horizon. Their dark colour accentuates their visibility, as seen in the photograph of Achairn from A99 (below). The rides and open spaces create notches on the horizon and highlights the visual significance of the edges of the forest blocks.



- Photo 1: Achairn southern edge as seen from A99, on the skyline extending down towards the edge of the enclosed fields of the Coastal Crofts LCA.

The landscape has wide open and sweeping panoramas with a focus on the horizontal. The eye is drawn to verticals and any other contrasts, such as the dark forest on the horizon against the bright sky.

The sky has a dominant presence, particularly along the coastal areas including the areas around Rumster, Toftgun, Newton and Achairn.



- Photo 2: Achairn from Minor road to East, near Grudgehouse, illustrates the characteristic features of the landscape on the margin between the sweeping moor and the enclosed coastal crofts and farms. In sunny conditions it is a colourful, diverse scene. The forests form dark blocks on or near the skyline, Wind turbines rise above the horizon contrasting with grey clouds. Wide open skies dwarf the scale of the trees and turbines

In order to take account of and strengthen landscape character in the **Sweeping Moorland and Flows** the plan recommends applying the following principles to land management proposals and prescriptions in these areas:

- Reinststate moorland and bog on a landscape scale,
- Remove and withdraw forest cover where forest margins cross hill tops and summits,
- Reshape at restocking planted edges so they harmonize with the curves and sweeps of the terrain.
- Soften and diversify edges, breaking them up with mixed broadleaves where site conditions allow.
- Diversify the forest species through increased use of broadleaves where site conditions allow

- Avoid rides which cut the skyline when seen from key viewpoints, roads and historical features.
- Remove natural regen of conifer species from reinstated open ground and bog. Prioritise their removal from areas most visible from public roads, railway, settlements and historical features.

Changes management proposals will have on the Sweeping Moorland and Flows landscape setting

Coniferous forestry has a strong presence in some areas, particularly the more modified outer fringes, interrupting the continuity of the moorland cover. Removal of forest and restoration of areas of underlying blanket bog is being undertaken across all the mature conifer dominated forests of this LMP.

The sizable restoration schemes are having and will continue to have significant impact on the local landscapes as the dominance of the conifer blocks is reduced, to be replaced by the windfarms which are located adjacent to retained forests.

With the reduction in spread of FLS forests, the retaining blocks may appear more as fragmented elements in the landscape. This fragmentation would be lessened by increasing broadleaf cover around the periphery of the blocks to allow them to merge with the surrounding open moor.

Currently Achairn forest area extends to the edge of the landholding, which runs along the top of a ridge and over a shallow summit. This has accentuated the effect of the woodland being a strip on the horizon and increased the visibility of the rides as notches. The proposals to restore southern part of Achairn to open will remove the unnatural straight forest edge from the hilltop, allowing the skyline to harmonize with the sweep of the slope and appear more natural to the benefit of the local landscape.

The Flows areas merge gradually with surrounding sweeping moorland. Braehour forest is the most inland and most characterised by the Flows, where it merges with the sweeping moorland. Formerly this was a large block with a strong presence.

The reduction in forest cover and restoration to bog and open moor has reduced this dominance on its surroundings. This will be lessened further as the forest area contracts. This is particularly notable in views from the railway.

Retained woodland around roadside through Braehour will continue provide some shelter and diversity in roadside character. The dominance of the forest is minimised by keeping the trees back from the roadside and introducing broadleaves in groups in the open areas.

Rumster's internal road margins are treated in similar ways. The increased use of broadleaves in the shelter generated by the mature forest will increase the diversity of views from the access routes in this forest.



- Photo 3: Achairn, from Rowens. Natural regeneration of conifers on ground restored to open, if left to grow to maturity, would reduce the gains made by the forests' removal. From a landscape perspective priority for their removal should target the removal of naturally regenerated conifers in areas most visible from public roads, railway, settlements and historical features.

Relevant Key Characteristics of Farmed Lowland Plain LCA

(as described by Nature Scot 2019)

The Farmed Lowland Plain Landscape Character Type forms a broad and relatively low-lying plain bounded by the sea and expansive Sweeping Moorland and Flows. Key Characteristics

- A generally open, low-lying plain, gently undulating to form shallow broad valleys, which are often filled with lochs and mosses, and subtle low ridges.
- Occasional smooth hills rise above the more low-lying plain forming local landmarks.
- Agriculture the predominant land cover.
- Sparse woodland, mainly comprising small angular coniferous plantations planted for shelter on farms.
- Larger conifer woodlands located at the transition with the Sweeping Moorland and Flows standing out where they are planted on poorer wetter ground on low ridges.
- Farm buildings and houses forming focal points within the landscape.
- A number of historic environment features, including conspicuous castles, Baronial mansions and tall 'Lairds' houses, usually with broadleaf shelter woods planted around them.
- Roads reinforce the settlement pattern, often following the field and property boundaries, running straight and then swinging around sharp corners.
- Extensive views due to the openness of the landscape, and the clarity of northern air and light.
- Views from the A9 on the western edge of this landscape of the Lone Mountains of Morven and Scaraben seen across the low-lying Sweeping Moorland and Flows.
- Perception: This landscape is vast, exposed and open, generally dominated by a horizontal emphasis. This, as well as the clarity of the air and light, allows for extensive views both within the lowland plain and to the landscapes and seascapes beyond.

FLS forests within the Farmed Lowland Plain LCA

There are a number of establishing mixed woodland blocks covered by this land management plan within the Farmed lowland areas. These generally comprise former farms which have been afforested in the last ten years.

Near the southern boundary with the Sweeping Moorland and Flows LCA the woodland areas of Dale, Achnamoine and Spittal integrate with other forest blocks that are already established in the area. Their composition with a high proportions of broadleaves will increase visual diversity and help to break up the solid edges of the conifer blocks.

Sibster, is located more in the heart of the Farmed Lowland Plain, near Halkirk. Large extents are growing up to create a mixed broadleaf forest, providing shelter and mixed woodland around Georgmas Junction for the benefit of the local community. It links up smaller woodlands and

shelterbelts to form a broader scale forest. Through the use of broadleaves it integrates with the wider farmland character, fitting in with the existing field pattern. On the less productive ground conifer blocks are establishing, broken up and softened by surrounding native broadleaves. Over the period of this plan the woodland will continue to mature. Management proposals are unlikely to alter the landscape character.