

# Forsinard Flows RSPB nature reserve

## Summary Management Plan



***View of the Ben Griams from the Flows Lookout at Forsinard.***

The management plan for the reserve is currently being reviewed and the updated plan will guide work on the reserve until 2025. No major changes are proposed for our objectives for the reserve or the type of management we undertake. This information note outlines why the reserve is special, how we manage the reserve and our plans for the next five years. Comments are welcome.

### **Why the reserve is special**

The Forsinard Flows reserve is predominantly blanket bog, a rare type of peatland which forms in cool, wet climates and covers the landscape like a blanket. The reserve has numerous dark pools (known as *dubh-lochain* in Gaelic) in diverse patterns, as well as many lochs and large areas dominated by bog moss hummocks and hollows. There are also other habitats such as heathland and grassland. The reserve covers around 20,000 hectares and is home to important numbers of breeding water birds, waders and raptors, as well as specialist plants and animals.

Forsinard Flows lies at the heart of the Flow Country, the most complete and extensive example of an intact and natural blanket bog ecosystem globally. It is under consideration for nomination as a World Heritage Site. Much of this peatland landscape is designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) because of its importance for nature conservation, and together these SSSI form the Caithness and Sutherland Peatlands Ramsar site, Special Protection Area and Special Area for Conservation. The landscape is also hugely important for carbon sequestration and storage, and other critical ecosystem services. The peatland plants (particularly the Sphagnum bog mosses and cotton grass) do not fully rot down when they die and are stored as carbon in the peat.

### **Where the reserve is**

The reserve stretches from the edge of Strathy South Forest in the west, almost to the A9 in the east. Some of the land in the east is managed under agreement with Strathmore Estate.

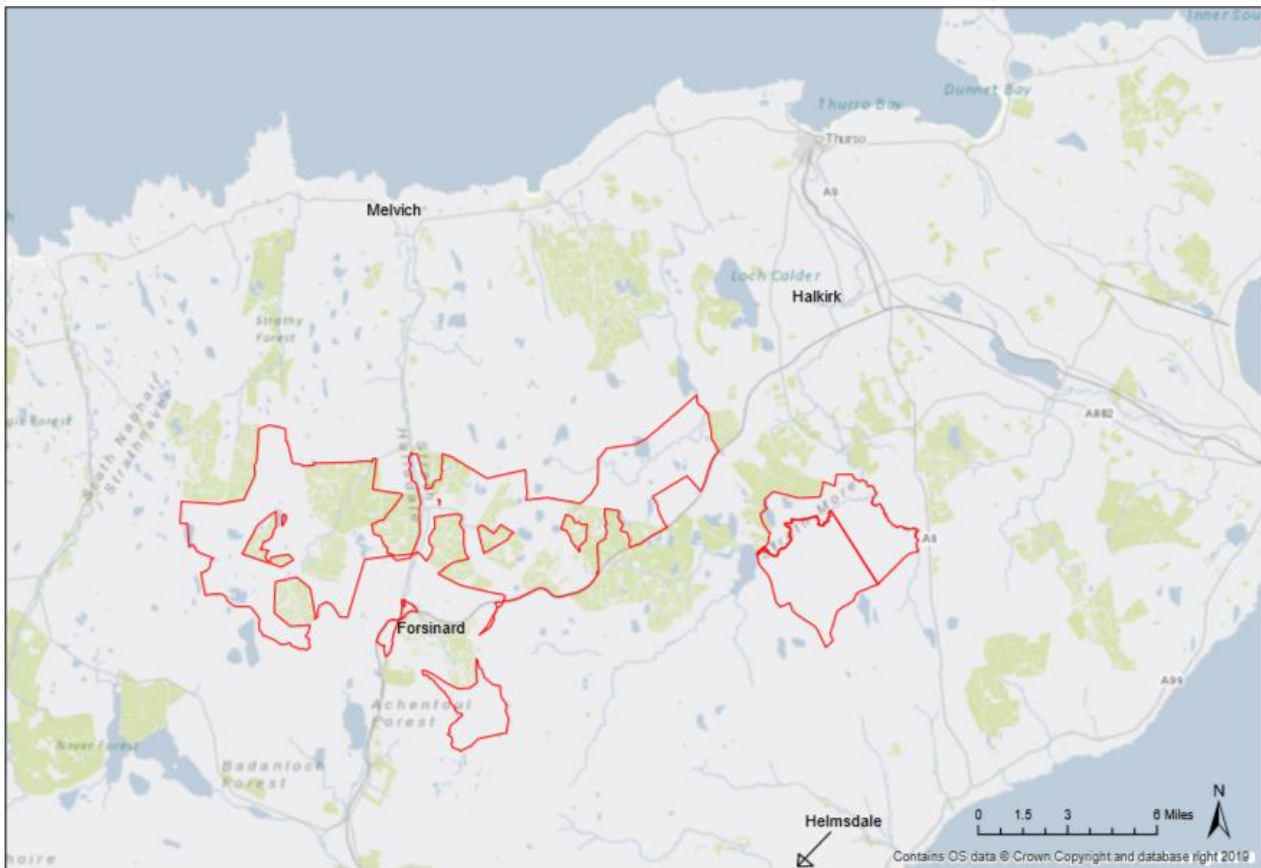


Figure 1: The red line shows the boundary of the RSPB Forsinard Flows reserve.

## How we manage the reserve

### Open peatland habitats, heathland, grassland and uplands

The priority for managing the open ground on the reserve is to maintain the special habitats and species. Some of the open ground was drained in the past and we have an ongoing programme of blocking these drains. This raises the water level which benefits the peatland plants and animals. It will also help to reduce the impact of any future wildfires. Deer on the reserve are managed by neighbouring estates under stalking leases and in collaboration with the Northern Deer Management Group. This ensures that we reduce any impact from overgrazing or trampling by deer.

The reserve includes in-bye (enclosed) grassland at Forsinain Farm, and this is grazed by a local grazier under a lease. This ensures the grassland is at the right height for feeding and nesting farmland birds and peatland wading birds.

Some of the lochs on the reserve are fished under agreement with two local fly-fishing clubs.

### Peatland that is afforested or was previously afforested

In the 1970s and 1980s extensive areas of deep peat in the Flow Country were planted with non-native conifers. It is now recognised by Scottish Forestry (the former Forestry Commission Scotland) that these areas should be restored to open peatland. This allows the peatland plants and animals to return, reduces the amount of carbon that is currently being lost through forest drains and allows peat formation to take place again. Although the forests support birds and other wildlife, it is a limited range of more common species than are found on peatland.

Restoration involves removing the forestry plantations and blocking the forestry ditches and furrows to raise the water levels to what they were before the forestry. This restoration is happening at a large scale on the reserve. In the last five years efforts have concentrated on Dyke and Forsinain plantations in Strath Halladale, where over 830 hectares of trees have been cleared. Most of the

timber has been sold, with the income helping to cover some of the costs. Drains and furrows have also been blocked on over 1747 hectares in these former plantations and in areas that were initially cleared of trees in earlier phases of restoration. Progress can already be seen, with the rewetting allowing bog mosses and other vegetation to recover and form new peat, and wading birds like golden plovers, dunlins and greenshanks returning.

There is still some standing forestry in Dyke plantation and some of this will be harvested by the North Sutherland Community Forestry Trust over the next five years, under agreement with RSPB. The rest of the forestry is unlikely to be harvested in the next five years. Our plans for it will be included in a new Forest Plan, on which there will be public consultation. Meanwhile we are planning to remove more of the brash (the bits of trees left after harvesting) from both Dyke and Forsinain, depending on how practical and affordable this is. We also need to block any remaining drainage. This work is primarily done by contractors, both local companies and some from further afield.

Work does not stop once the trees have been cleared as there is usually a problem with young conifers regenerating from seed from the previous forestry or from adjacent forestry. Over the last five years we have cleared regenerating young conifers on over 564 hectares. This is an ongoing job that is done by local contractors and volunteers.

Due to our pioneering work, Forsinard Flows now plays a key role nationally and beyond in demonstrating how peatland restoration can be done. We often host visitors from other peatland areas or who are involved in peatland policy at a national level who want to find out more.



*This photo shows part of the nature reserve where non-native trees have been removed. The straight lines are the ditches and furrows that were put in to drain the ground when the forest was planted. These have now been blocked with dams so that the water levels can return to a more natural state. The pools that are created in this way are now filling with bog mosses and peatland wildlife is returning to these restored areas.*

### **Tree planting**

In the coming year we will be planting 6.4 hectares of native broadleaved woodland in three areas of Upper Strath Halladale. These are areas on mineral soil where trees might be expected to grow if there were not any grazing by stock or deer. We shall be looking over the next five years at whether there are any other areas on the reserve that are appropriate for native planting, but they are likely to be small and in the straths away from the peatland.

## Research and monitoring

An important part of our work on the reserve is to monitor the birds and other species by regular surveys. We are also carefully monitoring our management work, particularly the peatland restoration work. This allows us to fine tune what we do. We are also undertaking research on the reserve, for example on the rare scoter duck, as well as facilitating research by many universities from across the UK. Much of this research relates to the importance of the site as a store of carbon and its current and potential value for mitigating the impacts of climate change with restoration management.

## Visitors



*View of the Flows Lookout tower and boardwalk at Forsinard.*

RSPB welcomes access to the reserve in line with the Scottish Outdoor Access Code. We now have a viewing tower at Forsinard, the Flows Lookout, which is reached by a boardwalk that complements the older flagstone trail. Our visitor centre at Forsinard was completely revamped several years ago and a new car park was created. The reserve is a National Nature Reserve, part of a network of reserves designated by Scottish Natural Heritage because of their importance for visitors.

Our trail at Forsinain (about 5 miles north of Forsinard) is currently partly closed as it passes through forestry areas that are being restored. That work is still underway and will take several years to complete, but a diversion is in place. We will be way marking a short route for dog walkers at Forsinain in the next year.

Over the past five years we have had a very active programme of community events and work with schools. We are keen for this to continue, and we are currently looking for funding for this.

The Flows Field Centre at Forsinard is proving a fantastic asset. There is accommodation for five residential volunteers in a separate “flat” who do practical work across the reserve, alongside a growing band of local volunteers. The volunteers make a key contribution to the management of the reserve, as staffing levels are limited. They also raise awareness of the Flow Country either in the local community or with wider audiences when they return home. We also have bunkhouse type accommodation for other visitors who are working in some way to increase understanding or awareness of the Flow Country, including scientists, students and artists.

The full management plan is available on request. If you have any questions or comments about the management of Forsinard Flows nature reserve or issues you feel we should be addressing in the updated management plan, please contact the Senior Site Manager: Darrell Stevens

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