

## **Broad Character: Unimproved Grazing**

### **Character Type: Coastal Rough Ground**

#### **Irish Sea Regional Perspective**

##### **Introduction: Defining/Distinguishing Attributes**

There are only small areas of coastal rough ground along England's Irish Sea coast, and all are found in Cumbria, with the largest area around Rockcliffe Marsh on the Solway Estuary. This Character Type is found in areas of sheep grazing or on the brownfield sites of former iron works.

##### **Historical Processes; Components, Features And Variability**

The largest area of unimproved grazing land is Rockcliffe Marsh, on the Solway Estuary close to the Scottish border. This is an area of former salt marsh, which now lies above the mean high water mark. The ground cover is characterised by closely cropped grassland with areas of scrub, cut by meandering water channels. It has long been used as common grazing (<http://cumbriacc.gov.uk/planning-environment/countryside/countryside-landscape/land>). As a result of this history of unintensive land management, together with losses of suitable habitat elsewhere, the marsh, along with other areas around the Solway Estuary is an important wintering area for Whooper Swans, Pink-Footed Geese and Barnacle Geese. Almost all the Solway population of Barnacle Geese gather on Rockcliffe Marsh prior to migration ([www.lakelandwildlife.co.uk/biodiversity](http://www.lakelandwildlife.co.uk/biodiversity)).

Other small areas of unimproved grazing in north Cumbria are at Skinburness and Allonby. The former is at Grune Point, and is a fringe of uncultivated land, marking the interface between cultivated land and the inter-tidal zone (<http://cumbriacc.gov.uk/planning-environment/countryside/countryside-landscape/land>). At Allonby, the unimproved grassland forms a strip between the settlement and the beach and acts as an informal green area. Further south, there are two areas of unimproved grazing: an area of former sand dunes on Walney Island and at Sandscale on the Furness peninsula. The grazing land at Sandscale is known as Wet Meadow and was formed behind coastal sand dunes. The land is now managed by the National Trust for nature conservation purposes.

Near Sandscale is The Lots, the site of part of the former Kirkby in Furness iron works, but now abandoned and forming a wide strip of unimproved land between the enclosed and improved agricultural land and the coastal sand dunes. The site of the Solway iron works at Maryport also forms an area of coastal rough ground on the banks of the River Ellen. It is not grazed and forms an informal area of public access on the edge of the town. Also ungrazed, but open to informal public access are Sheep Island and Chapel Island, both off the Furness Peninsula in Morecambe Bay. Both are difficult to access because of the nature of the shifting sands and mudflats, but the former, just off Walney Island, is used as a picnic spot. The latter was used as a stopping off point on the crossing of the Duddon Estuary and has a folly in the form of a ruined chapel.

##### **Values And Perceptions**

Coastal rough ground is valued for nature conservation, largely in conjunction with the salt marsh and sand dunes habitats with which it is found. The Wet Meadow area of unimproved grassland at Sandscale in southern Cumbria, is valued as a habitat for the rare Natterjack Toad, for example, and is managed by the National Trust. The most highly valued area is Rockcliffe Marsh, which are an internationally important habitat for overwintering birds, particularly Barnacle Geese. Almost the entire population of Barnacle Geese gather on the Marshes before migration. Many people visit coastal rough ground for wildlife watching,

especially bird-watching, its strong ecological qualities arising from its unintensive management.

### **Research, Amenity And Education**

The roles of this Character Type for research, amenity and education are largely in its nature conservation qualities at present. They provide material for study on grazing, roosting and migration patterns of the overwintering birds on the Solway, for example. These areas are generally available for public access, and they are either on, or close, to the Cumbria coastal way, and provide opportunities to the public for wildlife observation, particularly for bird watchers on the Solway. The Lots at Kirkby in Furness and the site of the Solway Iron Works in Maryport, however, also have the potential to provide research material and interpretation on the history of the iron and steel industry in Cumbria, and the role it played in the development of the county's ports. All of these sites currently have some form of public access, and with the development of the coastal access route there is the potential to link them to other iron mining and iron industry sites, such as the iron works and iron mines at Millom. This has the potential to provide a greater understanding of the development of the coal and steel industries of the coast and its maritime links.

### **Condition and Forces For Change**

This Type is largely the outcome of unintensive management, but nonetheless providing an essential economic resource within the local coastal farming regimes. The former salt marsh at Rockcliffe would have been grazed as common waste and used as a source of turf in the past, but is now largely managed for nature conservation purposes. Areas of former industrial land is not actively managed, but is accessed informally by the public, but not in large enough numbers to create visitor erosion. The greatest force for change comes from the dynamic nature of the sands and tidal flows which lie next to these areas of unimproved grazing, and which can cause sudden and rapid erosion.

### **Rarity and Vulnerability**

This Character Type is rare along England's Irish Sea coast, as much of this coastline is developed or has been enclosed. It does, however, occur in areas where there are large expanses of salt marsh or sand dunes and forms part of the mosaic of habitats that they support.

### **Websites**

<http://cumbriacc.gov.uk/planning-environment/countryside/countryside-landscape/land>.

Retrieved February 2011

[www.lakelandwildlife.co.uk/biodiversity](http://www.lakelandwildlife.co.uk/biodiversity). Retrieved February 2011