

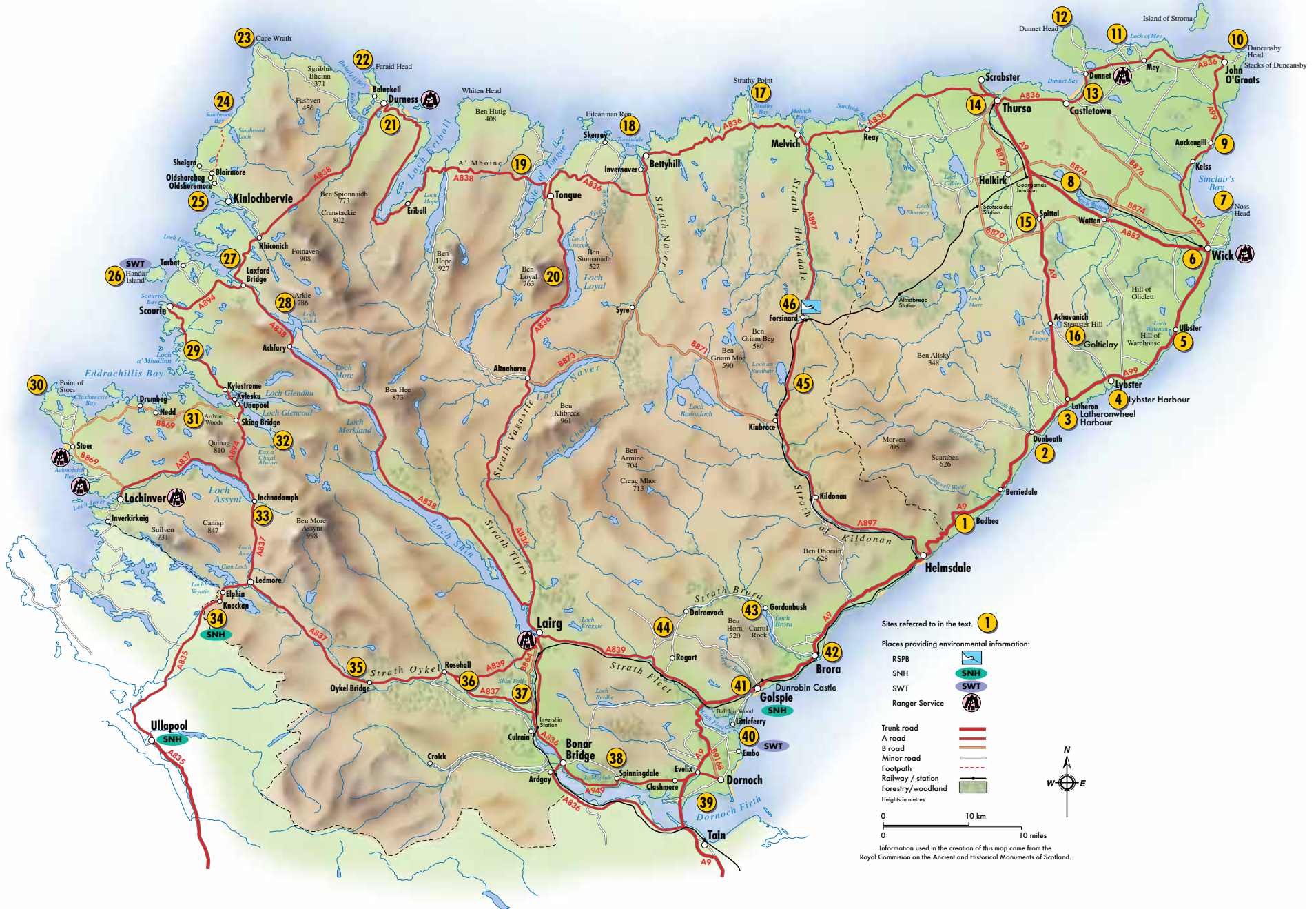
Scottish Natural Heritage

# Caithness and Sutherland

Places to visit for wildlife and landscape



# Caithness and Sutherland





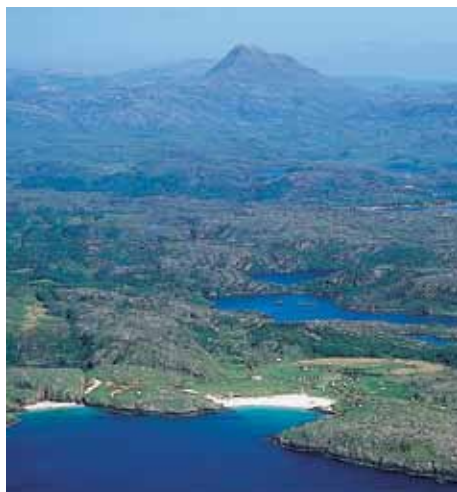
# Geology



Quinag / Iain Sarjeant

Caithness and Sutherland contain rock formations of outstanding geological interest, which span over 2,800 million years and include some of the oldest surface rocks in Britain.

Along the west coast, the oldest rock in the region, Lewisian gneiss, creates a landscape of low hills and scattered lochans. Rising from this gneiss landscape are huge masses of Torridonian sandstone, capped by quartzite, which form the distinctive mountains of Cul Mor, Suilven, Canisp and Quinag.

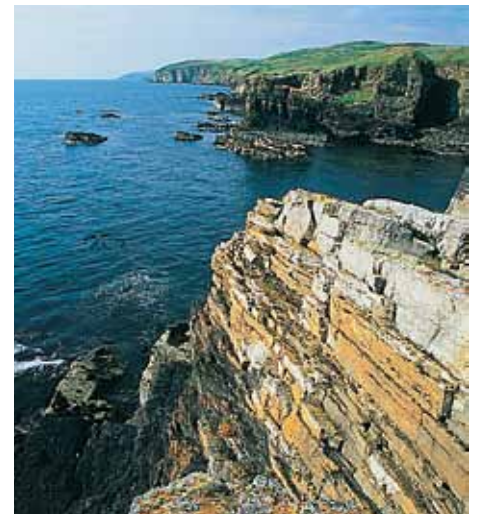


Canisp and Suilven from Achmelvich / Patricia & Angus Macdonald

Much of Sutherland is composed of schists and granulites of the Moine series, named after A'Mhoine near Tongue where they were first described. The softer schists of this series have weathered to produce the level landscape of the peatlands, from which rise the more resistant rock masses of Ben Hope and Ben Klibreck. The Moine Thrust zone, which lies east of the gneiss and sandstone area, crosses the region from north to south. This zone provides evidence of immense disturbance of the earth's crust some 400 million years ago and has long been an area of study for geologists from all over the world.

The limestone of west Sutherland forms the steep slopes of Stronchrubie and Knockan, as well as the limestone pavements, underground water systems and caves at Inchnadamph National Nature Reserve.

In contrast to Sutherland, Old Red Sandstone rocks dominate the generally flat landscape of Caithness. These horizontal beds of mudstone and sandstone were formed from sediments laid down in an ancient freshwater lake which once extended from Shetland to Inverness and across to Norway. There are well-preserved fossils in some of these rocks and the flagstones (mudstones) have been extensively



Coast at Latheronwheel / Iain Sarjeant

quarried in the past, forming an important industry in areas of Caithness.

There are several extensive masses of granite in the region, and rocks of the Jurassic age (135-205 million years ago) with abundant fossils outcrop along the east coast of Sutherland, north of Golspie. Coal seams in these rocks were worked at Brora between 1929 and the 1970s when mining finally ceased. Oil-forming hydrocarbons are also associated with rocks of Jurassic age. These rocks occur beneath the sea in this area and the Beatrice Oil Field, off the east coast, is an important part of the North Sea oil industry.



# Animals

The counties of Caithness and Sutherland are outstanding for their birdlife during all seasons of the year.

Many resident Highland species such as golden eagle, ptarmigan, crossbill and crested tit are found here. The two counties are particularly important for their large populations of migratory species that visit either during the breeding season or to overwinter.



Golden eagle (c) / Niall Benvie

From April until July the expanses of open peatlands are home to greenshank, golden plover, dunlin and many other species of wading bird, that raise their broods on the teeming insect life of the blanket bogs. The complex network of dark shallow pools and larger lochs provides nesting areas for several species of wildfowl, including common scoter, wigeon, red-throated and black-throated divers.

Away from the peatlands, impressive



Otter (c) / Niall Benvie



Curlew / Ken Crossan

sea cliffs contain some of the most spectacular colonies of seabirds in Britain, with huge numbers of guillemot and kittiwake crowding the cliff ledges.

At the end of the breeding season the intertidal flats in sheltered lochs and bays and offshore waters of east Sutherland become the focus of attention, when many thousands of migratory wildfowl and waders arrive for food and shelter over the winter months. Particularly impressive are the late autumn gatherings of wigeon and greylag geese on the mudflats and salt marshes.

Much of the countryside within the two counties is remote and little disturbed, so visitors to the area stand a good chance of seeing our native animals in their natural surroundings.

Red deer are numerous and widespread throughout the moors, while roe deer

and the introduced sika deer are more commonly found in woodland. Pine marten and red squirrel, which are present in small numbers, also favour woodland habitat. More secretive animals which might be encountered, especially at dawn and dusk, are wildcat and otter. The wildcat is a shy animal, seldom glimpsed other than by the lights of cars at night. Otters can frequently be seen during the day, usually not far from water, either by the sea or by one of the many burns and rivers. In the burns salmon, trout, eels and sticklebacks are abundant.



Brown hare / Steve Austin

Both the blue and brown hare occur, although their numbers have declined in recent years. The brown hare is found mainly on lowland agricultural ground, while the blue or mountain hare inhabits the moors and mountains.



Adder / Laurie Campbell

The adder is the only snake of the area, but other reptiles include the common lizard and the slow worm which, despite its appearance, is neither a worm nor a snake, but a legless lizard. Frogs, toads and palmate newts are also widespread and are particularly obvious during the spawning period in early spring.



# Plants



Mountain avens / Lorne Gill (SNH)

A major interest of these northernmost districts of mainland Britain lies in arctic and alpine plant species.

Plants such as mountain avens, moss campion and purple saxifrage, usually found on the high hills, occur here almost down to sea level because of the suitable bedrock and severity of the weather. The coastline also supports other rare northern species such as the oyster plant. The tops of some sea cliffs have developed a coastal heath dotted with spring squill and the Scottish primrose, a plant found only here and in Orkney.

The widespread blanket peat influences much of the plant life inland. Bog asphodel and bogbean are two of the more colourful species, while the sundews and butterwort which trap insects to boost the poor supply of nutrients are of particular interest. Where the less acidic influence from Old Red Sandstone rock affects the groundwater, marshy ground supporting ragged-robin, marsh marigold and meadowsweet is found. Birchwoods and heaths with heather, blaeberry and chickweed wintergreen are widespread in the hills and glens. Here the sharp-eyed might also find the tiny lesser twayblade orchid.



Scottish primrose / Lorne Gill (SNH)

## Access



Coastal birdwatching / Lorne Gill (SNH)

Visitors to the countryside are welcomed throughout Caithness and Sutherland. While much of the land may look wild, a range of land management uses contribute to the rich variety of wildlife present, and to sustaining jobs in these sparsely populated areas. Walkers should be aware of these uses and ensure that they enjoy Scotland's outdoors responsibly and follow the Scottish Outdoor Access Code. This is particularly true when stalking is taking place, between 1 July and 20 October (stags) and 21 October and 15 February (hinds), and also during lambing in April and early May.

For information on the Scottish Outdoor Access Code visit the website [www.outdooraccess-scotland.com](http://www.outdooraccess-scotland.com)



# Caithness

## 1 Badbea

Below the former crofting community of Badbea are fine examples of coastal plant communities. Grassy slopes and ledges support a variety of flowering plants including valerian, angelica, meadowsweet, sneezewort and primrose, together with patches of heath and bracken. The cliffs of east Caithness are internationally important for the large number of breeding seabirds which nest there. Kittiwake, fulmar, guillemot and razorbill can all be seen, and at low tide grey and common seals haul themselves out onto exposed rocks and beaches.

## 2 Dunbeath

Information on the wildlife and walks of this area is available from the Dunbeath Preservation Trust at their visitor centre in the village. Various routes are mapped, including coastal walks north and south of Dunbeath Harbour and a fine walk up Dunbeath Strath through one of the few native woods of Caithness. Yellowhammer, greenfinch, heron, kestrel, hen harrier, short-eared and tawny owls, merlin, buzzard and raven can all be seen here.



Wood anemone / Neil McIntyre

## 3 Latheronwheel harbour and woodland walk

The small harbour at Latheronwheel is a picturesque spot from which to view the coast. A sea stack can be seen just to the south of the harbour. Over a long period, the constant pounding by the sea has eroded the softer parts of the cliff and this rock pillar is all that remains of what was once part of the mainland.

From the harbour there is an easy walk up the strath through a mixture of natural

and planted woodland which - like many of the Caithness woods - includes species not native to Scotland, such as beech and sycamore. It is possible to see roe deer, sparrowhawk, tawny owl and, on summer evenings, pipistrelle bats hunting insects. Woodland plants include wood anemone, wood spurge, lords and ladies, herb-robert, dog rose, burnet rose and the salmonberry, a relative of the raspberry, which has been introduced from Canada and is now naturalised in many parts of Britain.



Sea stack near Noss Head / Iain Sarjeant

## 4 Lybster harbour and Reisgill burn

Cliffs and steep banks which become carpeted with primroses in spring surround Lybster Harbour. The Lybster Heritage Trust visitor centre has information about the area's history and rich coastal wildlife. TV cameras and videos here provide views of the cliffs and nesting seabirds. From the bridge over the Reisgill Burn there are views of the deeply incised coastal gorge which contains one of the few native broadleaf woodlands in Caithness. Birch, hazel, rowan, bird cherry, aspen, willow and juniper are all present, together with ferns, great wood rush and other plants which make this one of the richest gorge sites in the north.

## 5 Loch Watenan and the Hill of Warehouse

This area, rich in archaeological remains, is also a fine area for wildlife. Little grebe, tufted duck, pochard and wigeon can



Wigeon / David Whitaker

all be seen on Loch Watenan. Around the Hill of Warehouse a variety of small lochans, bogs and wet patches are influenced by the lime-rich rocks in the surrounding escarpment. These contain plants like carnation sedge and purging flax which only grow in ground with a high lime content.

## 6 Wick river

The lower stretches of the Wick River are bordered by both tidal and freshwater marshes. Large areas of sedges, reeds, club-rush and wet meadow vegetation have developed which attract a great variety of waders and wildfowl. Some of the regular species include redshank, turnstone, dunlin, snipe, goldeneye and teal. During autumn or spring migration, little stint and greenshank may also be seen.

## 7 Noss Head

This small headland north of Wick is easily accessible and has sites of both wildlife and historical interest. Puffins and other seabirds can be found near the lighthouse and by the ancient Sinclair and Girnigoe Castles. There are also sea cliffs and other coastal features of interest such as caves and 'geos' which are steep-sided inlets formed when a sea cave or tunnel collapses. On misty autumnal days this site attracts birdwatchers looking for rare migrants.



Puffins / Lorne Gill (SNH)

## 8 Loch Watten

Loch Watten is one of the largest lochs in Caithness. It has bordering fens, swamps and wet meadow grasslands and a varied range of aquatic plants which in turn attract large numbers of birds to feed. Large numbers of ducks, geese and swans arrive during autumn migration and many over winter here. The population of breeding wildfowl is also high and includes mute swan, mallard and teal.

## 9 Auckengill harbour

Auckengill is a few miles north of Keiss where a road, signposted to the harbour, leads to a car park just above the small burn and harbour. A path and steps lead to the shingle beach and pier which are surrounded by impressive sandstone cliffs. To the north of the bay coastal features, including geos, are clearly visible. Behind and above the cliffs are steep grassy banks which in summer are rich in wild flowers such as primrose, hogweed, red campion and ragged-robin. Similar vegetation is seen on the cliff-top path that runs southwards to the ruined broch. A variety of coastal birds can be seen here throughout the year, including ringed plover, oystercatcher, shag, fulmar and eider duck.

## 10 Duncansby Head

The Duncansby Head area shows some spectacular examples of coastal landforms. The Old Red Sandstone cliffs reach a height here of some 70 metres (250 feet) and the action

of the sea has carved an impressive variety of sea arches, caves, geos and stacks, including the famous Stacks of Duncansby. The cliffs support large seabird colonies - guillemot, kittiwake, fulmar, razorbill, shag, gulls and puffin can all be seen regularly in this area during the breeding season. The Geo of Sclaites is a particularly good point from which to view the bird life and plants that grow on the cliffs.

## 11 Loch of Mey

This shallow loch is superb for seeing wintering, migrating and breeding birds. Greenland white-fronted geese roost in winter, along with a range of other wildfowl. In the summer the loch margin is good for breeding waders. A public hide for birdwatching is located at the eastern edge of the loch.

## 12 Dunnet Head

This is the most northerly point on the British mainland and provides clear views across to nearby Orkney. The islands of Hoy, South Ronaldsay and Swona are all clearly visible and large numbers of seabirds nest on the cliffs near the lighthouse.

## 13 Dunnet Bay

A dune ridge covered by marram grass fringes the wide sandy beach of Dunnet Bay. There are boardwalks leading to the beach but, because the dunes are subject to erosion, some sections are fenced to encourage the marram to recolonise. Behind the dunes, Dunnet

Forest has sheltered walks and in clearings it is possible to see many of the plants which grow on sandy links, including the Scottish primrose, mountain-everlasting and Baltic rush. In winter the foreshore of Dunnet Bay is an excellent spot for watching waders and divers. During the summer season skuas, which 'pirate' fish caught by other seabirds, can often be seen chasing terns and kittiwakes to make them disgorge their food. The Ranger Service for the area is based at the north end of the beach and has a visitor centre and display which is open all year round.

## 14 Thurso river

The tidal stretches of the River Thurso, which pass through the centre of the town, are good places to watch wildfowl and wading birds. Tall sedge and reed beds fringe the river, and salmon may be seen jumping. There are public footpaths along both banks. Caithness Horizons in the centre of Thurso is open all year and has a collection of fossil fish discovered nearby as well as a display about the famous local botanist Robert Dick.

## 15 Spittal (Achanarras Quarry)

Quarries around the village of Spittal have revealed numerous fossil fish. These fossils are the remains of fish that have been preserved in the sedimentary rocks formed by the sand, silt and mud layers deposited at the bottom of an ancient lake. Fossils from sites, including Achanarras Quarry, can be seen at Caithness Horizons in Thurso. Achanarras Quarry is owned and managed by Scottish Natural Heritage and is open all year. On site there are information panels about the fossils found here, a geological time-line and visitor shelter.

## 16 Golticlay

At Golticlay, just north of Rumster Forest on the Lybster to Achavanich road, it is possible to view the open peatlands of central Caithness. To the west, beyond Loch Rangag, the ancient peatlands have remained virtually unchanged for thousands of years and form part of the largest single expanse of actively growing blanket bog remaining in Britain. As well as being important in their own right these peatlands, with their extraordinary surface patterns of pools and ridges, are an important habitat for breeding birds such as dunlin, greenshank and golden plover.



Duncansby stacks / Iain Sarjeant



# Sutherland

## 17 Strathy Bay and Strathy Point

The steep grassy slopes and dune grasslands that surround Strathy Bay are rich in wild flowers and a number of uncommon plants can be found here. Purple oxytropis, spring squill, kidney vetch, Scottish primrose and some rare eyebright species flourish here. From Strathy Point there are extensive views of the northern coastline and, on a clear day, it is possible to see Cape Wrath, Dunnet Head and Orkney. The impressive cliffs of Strathy Point, the cliff-top vegetation with the rare Scottish primrose, the variety of seabirds, whales and dolphins are all features to look for here.



Invernaver / David Duncan (SNH)

## 18 Invernaver and Torrisdale Bay

The headland between the Rivers Naver and Borgie is an important wildlife area where, due to the severe exposure, uncommon mountain plants grow almost down to sea level. The unique raised beach contains a number of archaeological sites which, along with the beautiful and impressive sand dunes of Torrisdale Bay, are best seen from the public roads near Bettyhill and Skerray.

## 19 Kyle of Tongue

Before the causeway was built in 1971, the only route to the west from the village of Tongue was by the road around the Kyle. From the causeway some of the most beautiful scenery in northern Scotland can be seen - Ben Loyal, the 'Queen of Scottish Mountains', to the south, with Tongue Bay and the Rabbit Islands to the north. The islands take their name from the fact that rabbits were first introduced there in the 1790s as a source of meat for the local laird. At low tides, seals, waders and seabirds can be seen from the causeway car parks. Oystercatcher, dunlin, redshank and heron are commonly seen species.



Red deer stag / Laurie Campbell

## 20 Loch Loyal and Ben Loyal

A few miles north of Altnaharra the A836 passes between Loch Loyal and the slopes of Ben Loyal to the west. It is often possible to see a variety of wildlife around the loch. In spring and summer waterfowl, including greylag geese, breed here. In autumn and winter large numbers of red deer can be seen on the slopes of Ben Loyal. These typical upland areas are also the breeding and hunting grounds for one of our rarest birds of prey, the golden eagle.



Sandwood Bay / John Macpherson

## 21 Smoo Cave

This impressive limestone cave has formed at the head of a narrow coastal inlet. With its entrance at least 30 metres (100 feet) wide this is arguably one of the largest cave entrances in Britain. A wooden pathway extends into the cave and allows viewing of the second inner chamber, where the Allt Smoo falls from an opening in the roof above. Hart's-tongue fern and other limestone plants are found in the outer cave, as is an ancient midden which indicates that Stone Age man once lived here.

## 22 Faraid Head and Balnakeil

The Balnakeil area is of outstanding nature conservation interest for its outcrops of Durness limestone and the associated plant communities. Faraid Head, behind the beautiful Balnakeil beach, is a narrow headland with dunes, coastal grasslands and steep cliffs. A Ranger Service operates from Durness Tourist Information Centre, and advice on guided walks and areas of wildlife interest can be obtained. Please note that these are important sheep farming areas and dogs must be kept under close control. Follow the Scottish Outdoor Access Code and avoid taking your dog into fields where there are lambs, calves or other young animals.



## 23 Cape Wrath

A range of coastal plant communities are displayed on this the north-west tip of mainland Britain. Clo Mor, which in Gaelic means 'Great Web' or 'Great Cloth', is the highest vertical sea cliff in mainland Britain and has immense seabird breeding colonies. The Clo Mor cliff is in an area used by the Ministry of Defence as a bombardment range. Access to the Cape Wrath peninsula and lighthouse is via a passenger ferry from Keoldale and a mini-bus service which operates only during the summer months and when the bombardment range is closed. Range operating hours and ferry times can be obtained from the Durness Tourist Information Centre. Full information on the likelihood of restrictions operating may also be obtained from the Durness Post Office. Please note that walkers with dogs should follow the Scottish Outdoor Access Code.

## 24 Sandwood Bay

This site is only accessible by foot, but the isolation and beauty of Sandwood Bay are ample reward for the four mile walk each way. A relatively undisturbed sand dune and machair bar impounds Sandwood Loch and the peaty surrounding soils are influenced by blown sand. Uncommon plants such as royal fern and mountain avens flourish. The footpath to Sandwood leaves the public road at Blairmore and crosses peatlands where it is possible to see moorland plants and animals.

## 25 Oldshoremore, Oldshorebeg and Sheigra

The 'machairs' or dune grasslands of these bays are among the richest dune areas in Britain, with over 200 different species of flowering plant growing there. These plant communities co-exist with the traditional low intensity farming methods of the local crofters. The machairs are especially colourful in early summer.

## 26 Handa

This island belongs to Scourie Estate and is a reserve by agreement with the Scottish Wildlife Trust. It is possible to visit the island and see the seabird colonies and some of the 30 or so bird species that breed there. Razorbill, guillemot, kittiwake, fulmar, puffin, arctic and great skua are all present and visible



Razorbill / Laurie Campbell

from the well-maintained paths. Access is via small boat from Tarbet during spring and summer (not on Sundays).

## 27 Laxford Braes

Road improvements in this area have exposed folded patterns in the ancient Lewisian gneiss rocks. These rocks, originally laid down billions of years ago in horizontal layers, have become twisted, broken and folded through the intense pressure and movements of the earth's crust.

## 28 Loch Stack and Arkle

The impressive quartzite massif of Arkle lies to the north of Loch Stack. Unlike some of the neighbouring mountains to the south and west, formed from Lewisian gneiss, Arkle is largely composed of very much younger Cambrian quartzite. It is these rocks which give it its distinct appearance. Birds such as the black-throated diver, greenshank, dipper, curlew and snipe may all be seen on or close to, Loch Stack.

## 29 Loch A'Mhuilinn

This site lies to the south of Scourie village and contains the northernmost remnant of native oak woodland in the British Isles. The woodland is dominated by birch but has rowan, hazel, aspen and willow, as well as a rich plant and animal life. Access is by foot from the main road.

## 30 Point of Stoer

The Torridonian sandstone cliffs of Stoer are markedly different from the surrounding Lewisian gneiss coastline. Tall cliffs with stacks, caves and arches are common and the many cliff ledges and crevices are used by a variety of breeding seabirds. The lighthouse car park makes a good place to stop and look south over the rugged coastline of Wester Ross. This is the most westerly point of Sutherland and on a clear day it is possible to see the Hebridean island of Lewis. Whales, dolphins and porpoises are regularly seen from the lighthouse.

## 31 Ardvvar Woods

Beside the road from Kylesku to Drumbeg, near the village of Nedd are sheltered birchwoods, remnants of the once extensive northwestern forests. The birch is mixed with rowan, hazel, aspen, wych elm and oak, with the humid valleys and gorges providing ideal conditions for many moss and lichen species. The scenery here, dominated by the mountain Quinag, illustrates the typical 'Lewisian' scenery of undulating hills, rocky ridges and numerous lochans. Further along this road towards Lochinver are what many consider some of the best views in the north west Highlands.



Rowan berries / Lorne Gill (SNH)

### 32 Loch Glencoul and Eas a'Chual Aluinn

From the village of Kylesku it is possible to take boat trips along Loch Glencoul to view Britain's highest waterfall at Eas a'Chual Aluinn (200 metres, 650 feet). Seals and the occasional otter may be seen on the loch. The complex geology of the Stack of Glencoul shows that older rock layers have come to rest on top of younger rocks. The point at which the older and younger rock layers meet is called a thrust plane. The Moine Thrust Plane that separates Moine rocks from younger basal quartzites can be seen where it passes right through the Stack of Glencoul.

### 33 Inchnadamph and the Bone Caves

This limestone area is of great botanical, geological and landform interest. Caves above the Allt Nan Uamh (Burn of the Caves) are among the most interesting in Scotland. Excavations have revealed bones of the animals that inhabited this part of Scotland around the time of the last ice age, some 11,000 years ago, and include brown bear, arctic fox, reindeer, lynx and lemming. Inchnadamph is also well known for its rich and varied plant life. The more interesting plants include mountain avens, globeflower, holly fern and serrated wintergreen.

### 34 Knockan Crag National Nature Reserve

To geologists this is one of the most important sites in the UK for understanding how the landscape of northern Britain was formed. The cliff shows an unusual situation where older Moine rocks have come to lie over much younger Durness limestones. There is a car park, visitor centre with information on the landscape and geology of the area, and circular trails for different abilities.

### 35 Oykel bridge

This is a world-famous geological site and displays a rock structure known as 'mullions' formed by movements in the earth folding the rock upon itself. These features resemble corrugations on the rock surface and can be seen down by the riverbanks on either side of the old Oykel Bridge.



Woodland ferns / Iain Sarjeant

### 36 Raven's Rock forest walk (Rosehall)

This walk meanders through mixed coniferous woodland beside the Allt Mor (Big Burn). The shady damp conditions along the burnbanks are ideal for mosses and ferns. The drier slopes and woods are rich in dwarf shrub heath species including blaeberry. It is possible to see the tracks of otter or pine marten here, but the animals themselves are very elusive. The local community have developed a number of other interesting woodland walks nearby.

### 37 Shin Falls

These waterfalls lie within a beautiful wooded section of the Achany Glen and are popular for watching salmon leaping as they migrate upstream. Riverside plants such as globeflower, water avens, yellow iris and meadowsweet are widespread, while pied and grey wagtails, dippers and many woodland birds can be readily seen. Forest trails lead up through the woodland and are good sheltered places to see spring flowers and autumn fungi.

### 38 The Fairy Glen, Spinningdale

Spinningdale Burn flows through a short valley known locally as the Fairy Glen, part of which is owned and managed by The Woodland Trust. The valley floor contains a marsh derived from a silted-up loch, while birch and remnants of a once extensive pine forest largely cover the valley sides. Various tracks run through the glen, from where there is a good chance of hearing warblers, redstarts and crossbills and seeing wood ants, speckled wood butterflies and golden-ringed dragonflies. The glen is a good place to appreciate the autumn colours.

### 39 Dornoch Firth

This is the northernmost firth on the east coast of Scotland. Its mudflats are of great importance to wintering waders and wildfowl. Large numbers of wigeon, oystercatcher, knot and dunlin may be seen during autumn and winter. Common and grey seals are often visible hauled out on the sand banks at low tide and the common seals give birth to their pups here in June and July. The dunes at Dornoch are rich in flowers, including grass of Parnassus, purple milk-vetch and a variety of orchids.



Dornoch Firth / Iain Sarjeant





Loch Fleet / Patricia & Angus Macdonald

#### 40 Loch Fleet National Nature Reserve

The loch is well known for its wintering populations of waders and wildfowl and these can be viewed, particularly from the road along the south shore. Some birds such as oystercatcher, heron, eider and ringed plover are present throughout the year, while others such as terns and osprey are summer visitors. Summer is also a good time to see wild pansies and bird's-foot trefoil on the dune grassland, and to view the pinewood plants from the track through Balblair Wood.



Big Burn, Golspie / Iain Sarjeant

#### 41 Bigburn Walk, Golspie

This is one of the finest woodland walks in Sutherland. The well-maintained paths cross the burn by a series of bridges and allow access up to a waterfall.

Spring and early summer are especially good times to visit, when there is a profusion of woodland flowers and birds throughout the site. Interesting plants present include moschatel, enchanter's nightshade and opposite-leaved golden saxifrage.

#### 42 Lower Brora

The River Brora reaches the sea at Brora harbour. In late summer the fresh water attracts large numbers of kittiwakes which can be seen bathing at close quarters, or resting on the offshore rocks. There are extensive beaches to both the north and south with ringed plover and turnstone present. The circular car park besides the harbour is an excellent spot to watch a variety of seabirds particularly in spring and autumn.

#### 43 Loch Brora

Approximately three miles from Brora on the road to Gordonbush, the River Brora flows through Loch Brora. Greylag geese breed here regularly and the small islands may also attract common terns. The dry bracken and heather on the slopes extending away from the loch shore are favoured areas for adders. On warm days these can sometimes be seen basking in the sun.

#### 44 Dalreavoch to Rogart

Between Strath Brora and Strath Fleet are the crofting townships of Dalreavoch, Rhilochan, Knockarthur, Langwell, Little Rogart and Rhemusaig. These

areas are farmed and cultivated and are favoured by birds such as lapwing, curlew, oystercatcher and meadow pipit. The traditional low-intensity farming in many crofting areas support a varied wildlife community, unlike the more intense arable farming methods common elsewhere.

#### 45 Kinbrace to Forsinard

The A897 from Helmsdale to Melvich passes along the Strath of Kildonan. Near Kinbrace the valley opens to reveal extensive views across the blanket peatlands. This is the habitat of greenshank, golden plover, dunlin and birds of prey such as hen harrier. The characteristic pool systems or 'dubh lochans' of the peat bog, which are so important for the wetland plants and birds, can be easily viewed from the road near Loch Lucy, south of Forsinard.

#### 46 The Flows National Nature Reserve (Forsinard Flows RSPB Reserve)

The nature reserve lies in the heart of the peatlands and is managed for its birds and other wildlife. Regular guided walks are led over the bogs. In addition, a one-mile flagstone path passes through a cluster of dubh lochans, where colourful bog mosses and dragonflies can be seen. The reserve is open at all times and the visitor centre is open from April to October. Please contact the RSPB visitor centre for further information (telephone 01641 571225). Forsinard may also be visited by train. The train from Inverness travels over salt marshes, behind miles of sandy beaches and through woodlands before finally crossing the bogs to Forsinard. Around Forsinard there are also excellent views of the peatlands where hen harrier, short-eared owls and herds of red deer may be seen.



Sphagnum mosses / Iain Sarjeant

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Front cover photography: Grey seal pup by Ken Crossan

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