



Scottish Rural
Development
Programme



The European Agricultural Fund
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The Scottish Government
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JOHN O' GROATS TRAIL

Coastal walking route from
Inverness to John o' Groats



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The Caithness Coast – Scotland's 'Hidden Jewel'

A week of walking along the John o'Groats Trail

27th July – 3rd August

£750 incl. meals and accommodation



Read about the John o'Groats Trail in WalkHighlands: <https://www.walkhighlands.co.uk/news/the-john-o-groats-trail-filling-the-gap-north-of-inverness/0019636/>



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Friends of the John o' Groats Trail are offering a week of walking along the Caithness section of the John o' Groats Trail:

Including 8 nights' accommodation with full board and 7 days guided walking along one of the most impressive cliff top walks of the British Coast.

Cost: £750 including Bed, Breakfast, Packed Lunch and Dinner*(*on nights where accommodation is provided).

Accommodation will be provided at Thrumster House or the Cottages in the grounds depending on availability, just outside Wick, and walkers will be transported each day to the start and finish of the stages. In seven days of walking, you will be guided from Helmsdale to John o' Groats by our Ranger, Jim Bunting, who will walk and talk you through the natural, geological and human history of the Caithness Coast.

Caithness is a hidden jewel situated at the far north of mainland Scotland. The walk will take you from the border with Sutherland to the very corner of Scotland at Duncansby Head and on to the end of the road at John o' Groats.

The Caithness Coast has a lot to offer: the twisted strata of the sandstone cliffs with their natural sea arches, stacks and caves are home to guillemots, cormorants, puffins, kittiwake, fulmar and other sea birds. Grey and Harbour seals play in the waves and geos with their hidden beaches, while the settlements along the trail tell a history of ancient to modern habitation, brochs, castles and fortifications litter the coastline amongst the many hidden and occasionally abandoned harbours.

The coastal trail is not for the faint-hearted: Although walkable by any fit and capable walker, the stages range from 12 – 22km, and take you up and down steep slopes and along cliff-tops most of the route. The rewards are fantastic as many of the views available to you from the trail can be seen ONLY from the cliff walk.

Whilst most of the route is way-marked, some sections are not, and there are some fences to climb. It is not an easy route; while there is nothing that would cause a problem for a fit walker, there are sections that require either a guide or a good knowledge of the route.

Itinerary:

Day 1 – Saturday 27th July; 10am: Meet at Helmsdale Station, luggage to accommodation: Guided walk to Berriedale: 16km

Day 2 – 28th July: Transfer to Berriedale: Walk to Dunbeath: 11km

Day 3 – 29th July: Transfer to Dunbeath: Walk to Lybster: 14km

Day 4 – 30th July: Transfer to Lybster: Walk to Whaligoe: 13km

Day 5 – 31st July: Transfer to Whaligoe: Walk to Wick: 19km (visit Wick Heritage Centre if time allows)

Day 6 – 1st August: Transfer to Wick: Walk to Keiss (or Reiss depending on tides): 20km

Day 7 – 2nd August: Transfer to Keiss: Walk to John o' Groats: 22km

Day 8 – 3rd August: Mey Games at John o' Groats*

Day 9 – Sunday 4th August: Depart: **Transport provided to Station in Wick or Helmsdale**

*For a price without the Mey Games, please contact us

Owing to landowners' permissions, no dogs please. Over 18s only

Further Details: Contact the Ranger, Jim: johnogroatsranger1@outlook.com

BOOKING: Contact Catherine MacLeod: cat.macleod@btinternet.com



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The Schedule:

Day 1: Helmsdale to Berriedale: 16km: Climbing steadily from the shore through a wooded sea-front to moorland, the route takes you up to the highest point on the trail at Ord of Caithness, past the best preserved Broch in Caithness, up to the clearance village at Badbea before a gentle hill-top walk over moorland with views to the Cairngorms and the Moray coast before descending to the beautiful village of Berriedale.

Meals provided: Evening Dinner

Day 2: Berriedale to Dunbeath: 11km: Returning to Berriedale, walkers will undertake the stage to Dunbeath. Although a short stage, this takes in some incredible sights including the stacks at The Clett and the first of the natural arches. The joy of the Caithness Coast begins to be apparent through this stage, although there will be much more to come.

Meals provided: Breakfast; Packed Lunch; Evening Dinner

Day 3: Dunbeath to Lybster: 14km: Dunbeath to Lybster takes in one of the finest little harbours on the trail at Latheronwheel. Cliff-top walking throughout, this stage offers ancient brochs, medieval castles, harbours, sea arches, stacks, caves and the first of the famous Caithness geos: an amazing stage with so much to offer.

Meals provided: Breakfast; Packed Lunch; Evening Dinner

Day 4: Lybster to Whaligoe: 13km: Another harbour to harbour walk, with Geos and cliff formations all the way as well as the forgotten Clyth Harbour nestling in a geo about halfway along. This section of coast forms the northern part of the East Caithness Cliffs Protected Area, set aside as the breeding ground for the Black Guillemot; although breeding will be mostly over by this date, there will still be many in residence. The stage ends at Whaligoe where we will be able to descend the legendary steps to Whaligoe Harbour, hundreds of feet below the cliffs tops.

Meals provided: Breakfast; Packed Lunch; Evening Dinner

Day 5: Whaligoe to Wick: 19km: This stage of the walk will take us to Wick along the heath and cliff tops of Ulbster and Sarclet. This stage is home to breeding grey seals, and there are almost always seals on the beaches of Sarclet Harbour and north on the hidden beaches below us in the geos. The final section descends past Castle of Old Wick into Wick itself, where we will take a stroll along the route set out by the Wick Paths Group taking in Telford's design for this historic centre of the herring fishing world. Hopefully we will be here in time to visit the Wick Heritage Centre, described as "Scotland's best local museum" by the Radio Times.

Meals provided: Breakfast; Packed Lunch; Evening Dinner

Day 6: Wick to Keiss: 20km: This is the second to longest stage of the walk, but is relatively gentle. The steady climb north takes us first to Noss Head, where we pass the lighthouse and turn west along the southern arm of Sinclair's Bay which opens out before us guarded on this side by the incredible Sinclair Girnigoe Castle, home of the Earls of Caithness. The route then follows the bay down past Ackergill Tower and to Reiss Links where the tracks of otters should be possible to see in the dunes. Depending on tides, we will wade the River of Wester and finish up at Keiss.

Meals provided: Breakfast; Packed Lunch; Evening Dinner

Day 7: Keiss to John o'Groats: 22km: The longest stage of the walk is saved for the last. Climbing steadily (but not steeply) this stage takes us past brochs aplenty: with castles ancient and modern, this stage tells the history of Caithness from early settlement through Norse invaders to the age of the Pentland Pilots, passing the home of the last of these past master mariners. The stage culminates in the legendary Stacks of Duncansby before descending to John o'Groats with the views of the Orkneys opening out before us. At John o'Groats we will see the stage being set for the Mey Games, a highland games usually attended by members of the Royal Family, which will take place on Saturday

Meals provided: Breakfast; Packed Lunch; Evening Dinner

Day 8: The Mey Games

Entry is provided with transport to and from the Games.

Meals provided: Breakfast (for all); Packed Lunch; Evening Dinner (for those staying for the Games)



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The walk is on cliff tops throughout and over rough ground, so please note the following points.

Walk cancellation

This is a cliff-top walk; the largest part of this walk is hazardous in high winds and bad weather, and therefore in the unlikely event of such winds and weather we reserve the right to cancel or abandon any day at the discretion of the walk leader, the Ranger, Jim Bunting, who is a qualified Mountain Leader with experience walking in all mountain areas of the UK.

In the event of a cancellation, an alternative inland walk will be offered and we will return to the schedule as and when the weather improves. This may mean that sections of the coast line and stages of the Trail are not undertaken. While this is unfortunate, the safety and comfort of our walkers is paramount.

Kit list

Walkers will not need to carry much on the walks. As the guide I will be carrying a full first aid kit and safety equipment. However, there are some things that everyone will need each day:

Good boots: The terrain varies and will include a lot of rough walking. By my estimation the distance of 'made path' over the whole seven days amounts to about 3 or 4 km, with approximately 3 km of road. Aside from these sections the walk includes heather moorland, rough grass, boggy sections and heath. Good boots with ankle protection are essential.

Full waterproofs: Although late July, this is northern Scotland, and weather can change rapidly.

Spare clothing: It can get cold up on the cliff-tops and while we wouldn't undertake the stage if the wind is due to be too high, a gentle breeze can be chill.

Drink and Lunch: Packed lunch will be available each morning at the accommodation. Plenty of liquids are advisable.

Long trousers and sleeves: Unfortunately we will be walking at the height of the tick season. For this reason it is strongly advised to wear long trousers and, on the first two stages at least, long sleeves as well where bracken is high.

Insect repellent: As above, and in the event of still air midges can be a problem. Insect repellent will deter most ticks and midges.

Walking poles: If you are used to walking with poles these can certainly be advantageous on steeper stages; for leaning on to engage in philosophical debate and enjoy the view; or to point out interesting flora and fauna (this is mainly what I use them for). Not essential, however.

Binoculars: A small pair of binoculars is a very useful item. I do carry some myself, but these may not suit everyone and people generally find that their own are the best. There's a lot to see.

Camera: You will only kick yourself if you forget it! See above.