



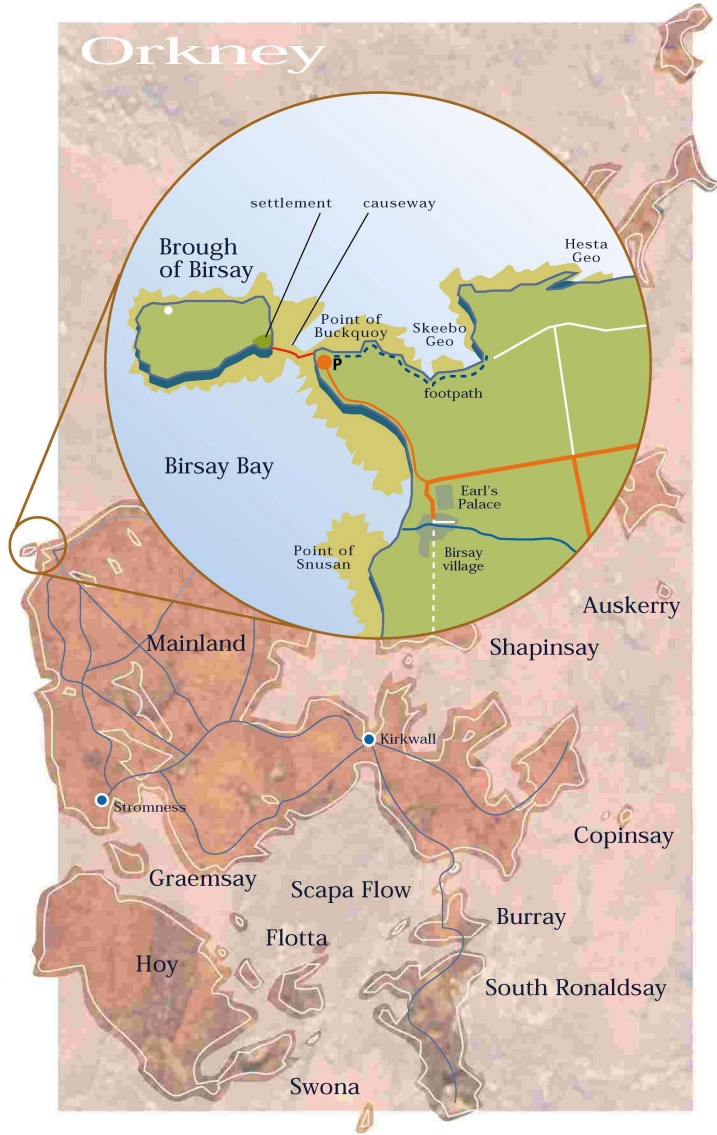
grey seals



whalebones, Skeebo Geo



anemone and mussels



guidance for visitors

Please remember:

- To take care on the cliffs as they can be dangerous
- To avoid disturbing nesting birds
- To keep dogs under control at all times
- To take your litter home with you
- To not pick wild flowers
- To respect private property



Orkney's Brough of Birsay

cover images: top shells bottom Birsay and Earl's Palace from the Brough photographs: SNH, RSPB, Laurie Campbell, Aquatera.co.uk design and illustration: Iain Ashman



find out more about our rich and varied wildlife

on the Brough

The island that is the Brough of Birsay must once have been joined to the mainland. However, continuous erosion by the sea has gradually worn away the land between the Point of Buckquoy on the mainland and the island itself. It is likely that it became an island long before the first settlers, the Picts, arrived. The rocks of the Brough slope gently upwards from the southeastern shore by the causeway and the grass covered island ends precipitously at 45m high cliffs on the northwestern side, where seabirds nest in the summer.

the Brough



early settlers

The word brough is used in Orkney to refer to naturally defensible headlands and the Picts must have been pleased with this easily protected sisland when they settled here in the 6th and 7th centuries. Little remains of the Pictish settlement but many artefacts have been found, including a Pictish symbol stone, a replica of which can be seen on the Brough.

For modern-day visitors, most of what can be seen on the Brough is Viking, the remains of a settlement spanning several hundred years, including a variety of houses and a church.

There is also a much more recent building on the Brough - the lighthouse - which was built in 1925 and was converted to solar power in 2001.

remains of the 11th century church



guillemot

oystercatcher

eider duck

fulmar



fishermen's huts Skeebo Geo

Birsay cliff top walk

This walk takes you from the Point of Buckquoy along the coast to the narrow inlet of Skeebo Geo, where fulmars nest on the cliffs and fishermen have brought in their boats for centuries. The old stone fisherman's hut with its turf roof still stands and has been carefully restored. Nearby are traces of 'nousts' where boats were stored in the winter.

On your way to the geo look out for eider duck swimming close to the shore, especially in the summer when adults with ducklings are a common sight. Attractive wild flowers line the shore, including scurry grass, sea pinks, bird's-foot trefoil, red campion and sea campion.

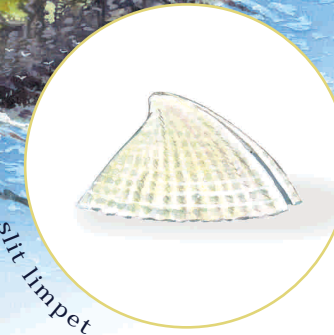
Beyond the geo on a headland, is a whalebone, erected in 1876, from the remains of a beached whale.



grey seal



scurry grass



slit limpet

seashore code

- Life on the shore is fascinating to look at, but we also need to treat it with respect.
- Watch shorelife without disturbing it
- If you really want a closer look, collect one animal carefully and place in a bucket of seawater for a short time only
- Return sea creatures to the spot where you found them
- Don't pull shells like limpets off the rocks
- Protect animal's homes. If you lift rocks or move seaweeds, replace them carefully the way you found them
- Don't pull seaweeds off the rocks, there is usually loose weed around
- Don't take creatures home in a bucket, they won't live long
- Only take home empty shells



cowrie



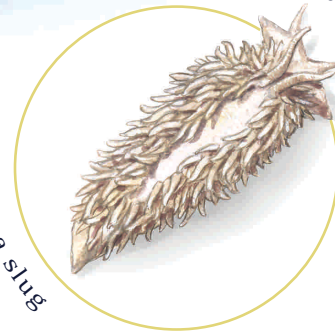
blue-rayed limpet



thick-lipped dog whelk



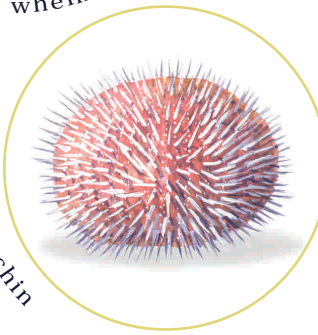
poached egg shell



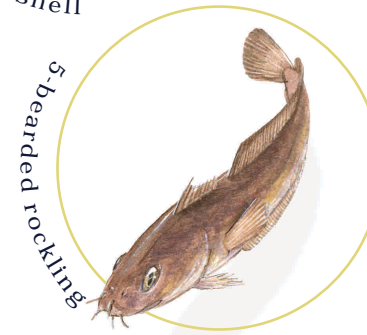
sea slug



starfish



sea urchin



5-bearded rockling



The Brough of Birsay has a long history of visitors, beginning with the Picts and the Vikings, right up until today when it is visited by people from all over the world. Its unique natural setting, its history and its wildlife make it a very special place.



the causeway at low tide

The first thing you need to know about the Brough of Birsay is that you can only visit when the sea allows you to do so! It is a tidal island, joined to the mainland by a zig-zagging causeway and is only accessible for a couple of hours on either side of the low tide. At high tide the Brough becomes a real island, with the sea running strongly between it and the mainland. So remember to check the tides before you visit, by asking at tourist information centres or by looking in the local newspaper.

following the causeway

Walking across the causeway to the Brough is an experience in itself. The causeway wends its way through rocky outcrops, channels and pools, which are fascinating to explore. On the far side, below the slopes of the Brough there is a shell collector's paradise.

Robert Rendall's shore

Orcadian poet and scientist, Robert Rendall, was an avid shell collector and was fascinated by the life on the shore. The Birsay shore was a favourite haunt of his which he explored from boyhood onwards, building up his collection of shells and

gradually becoming a world-acknowledged expert on Orcadian molluscs.

Many of the shells that he identified and studied can be found just below the Brough, washed up there by winter gales and storms. Here you can find the 'grottie buckie' or cowrie, which locally is considered a lucky find. Look closely in amongst the piles of blue mussels to find dainty orange scallops, blue rayed limpets, some rarer limpets such as slit limpets and tiny thick-lipped dog whelks. Lucky collectors may find the rare poached egg shell, which the huge Atlantic swells sweep up from deeper water where it lives.

between the tides

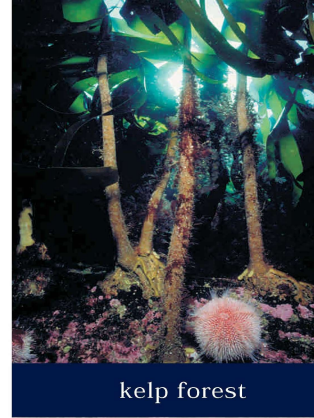
It was not just the shells that fascinated Robert Rendall, but all the abundant shore life that can be found on either side of the causeway. The strong current, which flows between the Brough and the mainland, provides food for many sea creatures and the rocky terrain makes for excellent homes. At low tide, pools form amongst the rocks and here you can find animals such as crabs, starfish, sea anemones, sea urchins, sea slugs and fish. Here also are many of the live molluscs whose empty shells get washed up on the shore. Sitting quietly and looking into the rock pools reveals an intriguing world usually only seen by scuba divers.

Birds also frequent the rocky shore - oystercatchers, ringed plovers, turnstones and purple sandpipers all find food amongst the seaweed and rocks.

forests of the sea

The trees of the sea - the huge kelps that live below the low tide mark - can be seen as you cross the causeway. With their long stems like tree trunks and wide fronds like huge leaves, they form underwater forests. In total contrast small, delicate red and green seaweeds grow in the rock pools.

Seaweeds were probably harvested for food by the Picts and Vikings who lived on the Brough. It seems likely that farmers from those days spread seaweed on the land for fertiliser, as some farmers still do today.



kelp forest

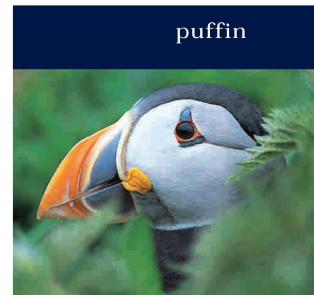
wild flowers and birds

The short, sheep-grazed grassland of the Brough is covered with a carpet of blue and pink flowers in May and June as thrift and spring squill come in to bloom.

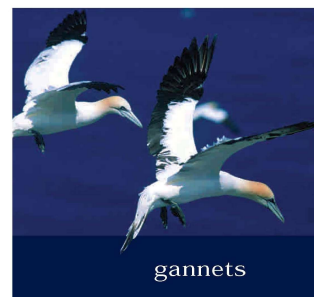
The cliffs provide nesting sites for a variety of seabirds during the summer months. Fulmars, kittiwakes, guillemots, razorbills, black guillemots and shags all breed on the cliffs. The brough is also one of the few sites on the mainland where puffins can be easily seen, although only in small numbers.

out to sea

From the top of the Brough on a clear day you can see north to the island of Westray and even catch a glimpse of the white lighthouse on Noup Head. To the south there are the high cliffs of Marwick Head, with their thousands of noisy seabirds. On a calm day look out for whales, dolphins and porpoises offshore and the ubiquitous seals. Gannets also feed offshore, looking bright white against the sky or plummeting into the sea as they dive for fish.



puffin



gannets