



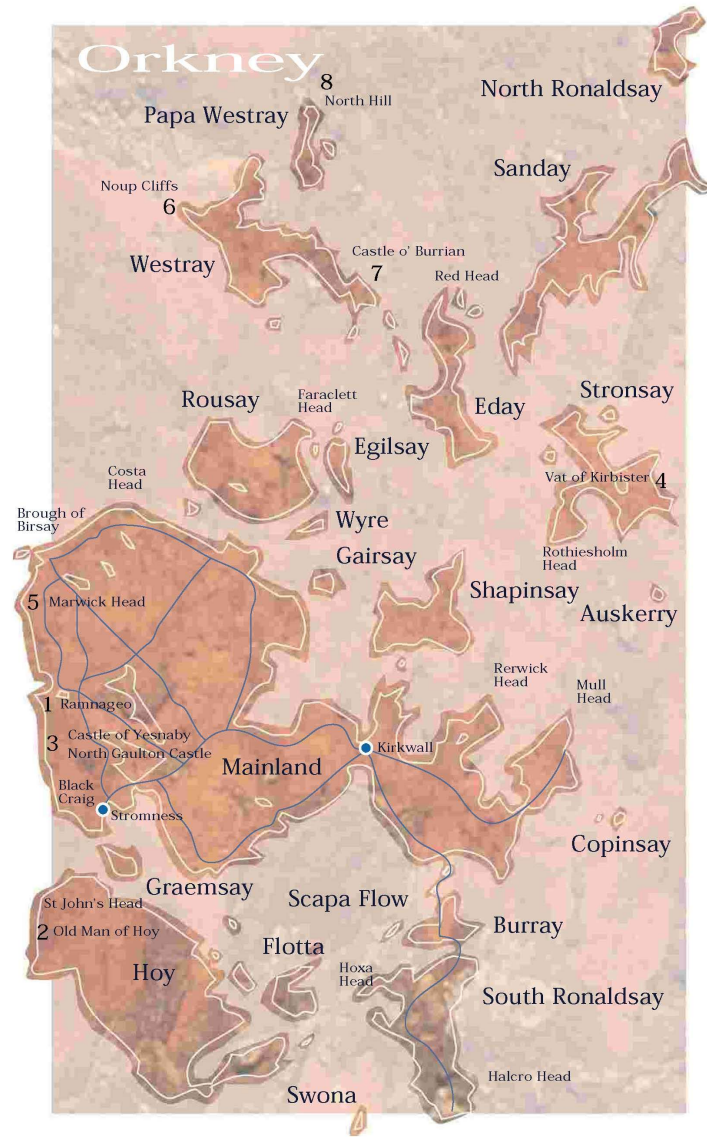
stack, Stronsay



thrift



cliffs, Yesnaby



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 Cliffs

Orkney's
Natural Heritage



design and illustration: Iain Ashman
photographs: SNH, RSPB, Richard Walsby
bottom Yesnaby
cover images: top razorbills and gulllemons

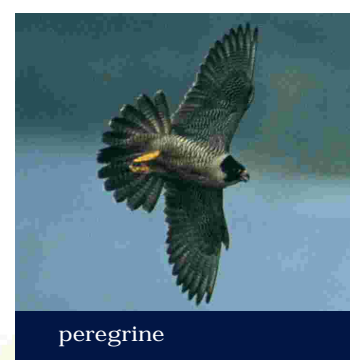
find out more about our
rich and varied islands

seabird cities



black guillemot

Black Guillemot (*tystie*)
Tysties nest in nooks or crannies in the rock-face or under boulders at the foot of the cliff, avoiding the precarious perches of their guillemot cousins. They eat a wide variety of sea creatures including butterfish, rockling and crustaceans.



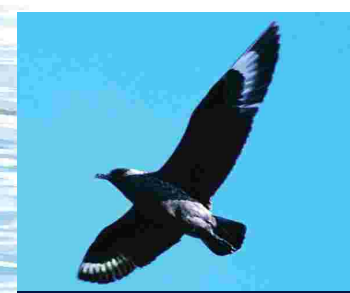
peregrine

Peregrine
There is plenty of prey on the sea cliffs for this powerful falcon, which takes its prey on the wing, stooping steeply with closed wings and at great speed. On impact it knocks out its prey with its feet.

Arctic Skua (*scottie allen*)
These agile, graceful birds are the pirates of the seas, feeding by stealing fish from other birds, especially terns and kittiwakes. Like arctic terns these birds winter in the southern hemisphere, returning to Orkney in mid-April to breed on the maritime heath.



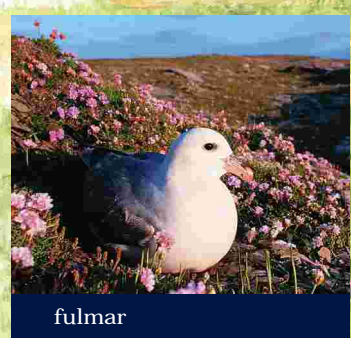
arctic skua



great skua

Great Skua (*bonxie*)
The bonxie is a more powerful but less agile version of the arctic skua. It has the same thieving habit of stealing fish from other birds, even from birds as big as gannets, but it will also kill other seabirds and steal eggs and chicks.

Fulmar (*mallimack*)
These very long-lived birds usually nest near the top of the cliff, laying a single white egg, which hatches into an attractive fluffy grey chick. It is never a good idea to get too close to fulmar chicks, or their parents, as they spit a foul-smelling oil as a form of defence!



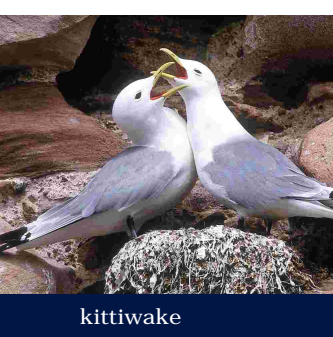
fulmar

Arctic Tern (*pickie terno*)
These slender, swallow-like birds nest in colonies on the heath and are fiercely protective of their chicks, attacking any intruders with their sharp pointed bills. They feed their chicks exclusively on sand eels and the availability of this fish is crucial to their breeding success.



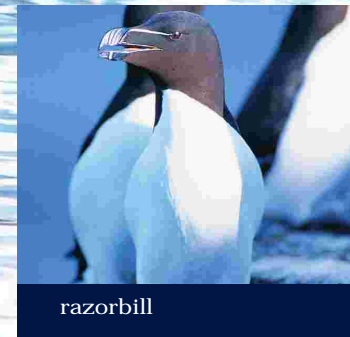
arctic tern

Kittiwake (*kittick*)
Kittiwakes, like guillemots, nest on precarious ledges in vast colonies, building a small nest for their 2 spotted eggs. In April and May they can be seen collecting nest materials from lochs and grassy cliff tops.



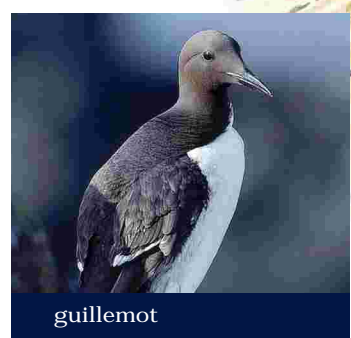
kittiwake

Razorbill (*aak*)
At first glance razorbills look quite similar to guillemots, until you look at their bills. Razorbills have a much heavier, deeper bill with conspicuous white lines.



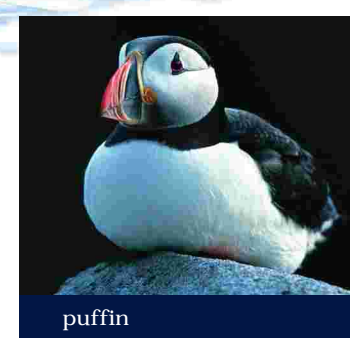
razorbill

Guillemot (*aak*)
Guillemots nest in densely packed colonies on inaccessible cliff ledges and lay a single pear-shaped egg directly on to the bare rock. They feed their chicks on sand eels, diving down as deep as 140m to catch their prey and using their wings for swimming and their tails as rudders.



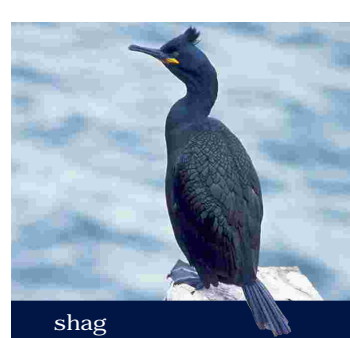
guillemot

Puffin (*tammie norie*)
Puffins like to nest in burrows, digging them with their sharp claws or using old rabbit burrows. They usually mate for life and return to the same burrow each year.



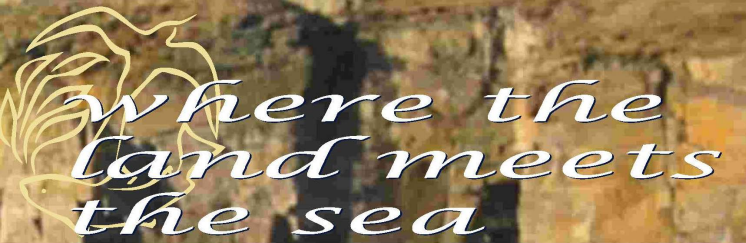
puffin

Shag (*skarfie*)
Look out for skarxies standing on rocks with their wings held out to dry. Their feathers have been modified to allow air to escape and water to penetrate the plumage, which makes for more efficient underwater swimming. However it also means the feathers become waterlogged and must be spread out to dry.



shag





The wind and the sea have shaped the coasts of Orkney over millennia, giving us some of our most spectacular scenery in the form of sheer cliffs and craggy headlands.

A clifftop walk is special at any time of year, with rough seas and huge waves breaking on the cliffs in winter and thousands of seabirds nesting in the summer.

cliff scenery

The Old Red Sandstone rocks of Orkney have been sculpted by the sea and carved into an impressive array of sheer cliffs, geos, arches, stacks and caves. The layers of rock vary in hardness and composition and these differences have been shaped by the sea to give us our dramatic cliff scenery. Some of the horizontal layers have been tilted and twisted, but where they remain level erosion has created ledges, which make perfect nesting sites for seabirds.

Ravine-like geos, like Ramnageo **1** near Yesnaby, can be so steep and narrow that sunlight hardly reaches the bottom. Stacks and arches abound along Orkney's coasts, the most famous being the Old Man of Hoy **2**, which stands 137m high on its hard basalt base. The Castle of Yesnaby, and North Gaulton Castle **3** are two impressive stacks on the mainland. For a truly spectacular arch you should visit the Vat of Korbister on Stronsay **4**.

Vat of Korbister, Stronsay



cliff vocabulary

Local words have developed to describe cliff scenery. A 'geo' is a narrow inlet, while 'nev', or 'nevi', is an old Norse word for nose and means a headland. 'Noup' is also a headland, usually a very steep one. 'Taing' and 'ness' both refer to a point of land, while a 'gloop' is a dramatic opening in the cliffs.

guillemots and kittiwakes



seabird cities

In summer, Orkney's cliffs are like natural skyscrapers in a huge seabird city. Narrow ledges on otherwise vertical cliff faces attract thousands of breeding seabirds. Two of the largest colonies are at Marwick Head **5** and Noup Head on Westray **6**, where every available ledge and crevice is occupied by nesting birds from May onwards. At Marwick Head, more than 25,000 guillemots and almost 5,000 pairs of kittiwakes are crowded into less than a mile of coastline. The high cliffs of Noup Head support up to 40,000 guillemots and both seabird cities also contain a variety of other species.

Almost every Orkney island has its seabird cliffs with a mixture of guillemots, razorbills, kittiwakes, fulmars, shags and black guillemots. Puffin enthusiasts should visit the Castle o' Burrian on Westray **7** for a close-up view of this attractive bird.

Amongst the hoards of seabirds on the cliffs there may be a few 'land' birds, such as peregrine falcon, jackdaw, raven and rock pipit.



cliff top maritime heathland

maritime heath and grassland

Exposure to Atlantic gales, huge waves and salt spray make clifftops a difficult place for plants to grow. A special type of habitat, called maritime heath and grassland, can withstand these harsh conditions. The heather is very low-growing and mixed with grasses, sedges and wild flowers. *Primula scotica*, a tiny member of the primrose family, is especially associated with maritime grassland. It flowers in May and again in late July and is only found in Orkney and along the north coast of Scotland.

Close to the cliff edge it is too salty for heather to grow and here you get salt-tolerant plants such as thrift and buckshorn plantain, which have thick fleshy leaves to reduce water loss.

Birds of the maritime heath

Many seabirds nest on the maritime heath close to the cliffs. Arctic terns arrive here in the first week of May, after a 20,000 mile round trip to Antarctica and back. There are especially large tern colonies at North Hill in Papa Westray **8** and Noup Head on Westray **6**. Watch out also for the dive bombing great and arctic skuas, which breed on the heath and defend their nests by trying to hit human intruders on the head with their feet! A walk up to the Old Man of Hoy **2** gives visitors a good opportunity to see these birds, but be prepared for some highly aggressive nest defence!

Old Man of Hoy

