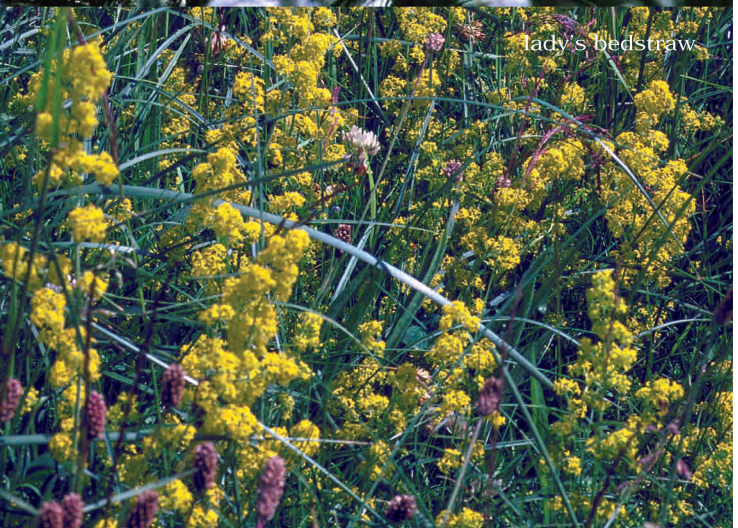
bell heather

cottongrass



lady's bedstraw

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

design and illustration: Iain Ashman

photographs: SNH, Derren Fox, John Crossley

cover images: top thrift bottom tufted vetch and bird's-foot trefoil

Orkney's natural heritage Flora

find out more about our rich and varied islands

Orkney's flora

wetland plants

Many of Orkney's wetland areas have been drained over the past centuries as agriculture intensified in the islands. There are, however, many areas where good quality wetlands remain and hold a wide diversity of both flora and fauna.

The plants of these wetland areas have to cope with seasonal inundation for part of the year. During the summer, some areas may dry out as the water level drops below the surface.

In places with peaty/organic soils, wonderful displays of orchids can appear, such as the northern marsh and early marsh orchids. These marshy areas can hold substantial reed beds and large areas of the mat forming bogbean, which produces spectacular white flowers.

In locations with a more calcareous soil the distinctive glaucous foliage of black bog rush can be found. These areas provide the ideal habitat for many species such as grass-of-parnassus and the insectivorous butterwort.

Stands of yellow flag add a welcome splash of early summer colour to the wetter fields and marsh edges. Another burst of colour in the wetlands is the marsh marigold or kingcup, a plant of burns, lochsides and ditches.

woodland plants

Although many visitors perceive Orkney to be a treeless group of islands before they come, there are in fact many areas of trees of all shapes and sizes. From small areas of native willow scrub (such as the burn of Vam at Hobbister and along the Wideford Burn, near Kirkwall) and trees in the gardens; to the larger native woodland of Berriedale 7 on Hoy and non-native plantations of both deciduous and coniferous trees such as Binscarth 8, near Finstown and Balfour Castle 9 on Shapinsay. In recent years, many new areas of trees have been planted throughout the county.

This variety of woodland types provides an assortment of habitats for the other flora and fauna of the area. There is a rich variety of bird life in the woodlands although many of the commoner species found on mainland Scotland are absent from Orkney, such as many of the tit and finch species. There are however many other bird species including the sparrowhawk, a woodland specialist bird of prey that thrive here. The smaller areas of scrub provide nesting and display perches for birds such as reed buntings and stonechats, whilst some of the plantations contain large rookeries.

Flora within the woodlands varies with soil types but stands of bluebells can be found amongst the sycamores and pines in the woodlands at Binscarth, whilst indicative species such as woodrush can be found amongst the areas of native scrub willows and the woodland at Berriedale.

other areas

Other areas to search for plants of interest include the roadside verges. Nearly all of Orkney's verges have been surveyed for their botanical interest and those of particular interest are left uncut to allow the native flora to thrive. Species to look out for include the beautiful grass-of-parnassus (not a grass but a member of the saxifrage family), several species of orchids, butterwort, and tufted, kidney and several other vetch species such as the bird's-foot trefoil.

Many agricultural fields that have had low inputs of fertilizers and pesticides or have been newly ploughed may hold many interesting, almost extinct, 'weeds' of cultivation such as fat hen, fumitories, ox-eye daises, dead nettles and many others.

northern marsh orchid

bog asphodel

sphagnum

grass-of-parnasus

bird's-foot trefoil

heath spotted orchid

eyebright

Orkney's wildlife year

	january	february	march	april	may	june	july	august	september	october	november	december
coastal plants						■	■					
moorland plants							■ bog asphodel	■ heather				
wetland plants					■	■						
woodland plants					■	■						
roadside verges						■	■	■				

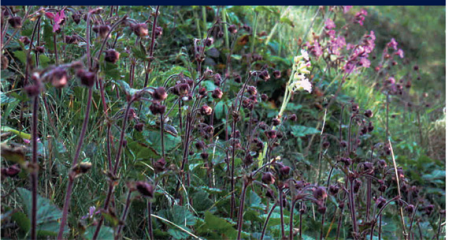
■ best time to explore each habitat

Orkney's flora

Like almost everything on the islands, the flora of Orkney is strongly influenced by the sea and the weather. Whether you are walking along the coastal heaths or across an inland meadow, the colours and variety of the wildflowers, grasses and other plants are a pleasure to behold. Many visitors to the islands are surprised by the diversity of the islands' flora after crossing the apparently bleak landscapes of the north of Scotland. Orkney's rich soils support a high level of agricultural activity and a diversity of habitats, from the low-lying maritime heaths and wetlands to moorlands and the Arctic-type tundra of the high Hoy hills 1 .

Although Orkney supports less than a third of the plant species of mainland Britain, it still holds considerable species and habitat diversity. With over 500 species of native plants and over 200 introduced species, there is much of interest to both the beginner and experienced botanist alike.

The plants in this leaflet are laid out by the different habitats in which they may be found. Due to the large number of plant species, only a few have been selected from each habitat as being of particular interest. Many of these species occupy several different habitats.



water avens and campion

coastal plants

Nearly all the flora of Orkney is influenced to some extent by the ocean. The area of land immediately adjacent to the sea, be it high cliffs, low-lying sand dunes or coastal heath contains an assemblage of species that are particularly well adapted to the high degree of salt spray and exposure. One of the most well-known and typical species of coastal cliffs is sea pink or thrift also known as 'arby' in Orkney. This beautiful pink-flowering plant forms vast mats of lush green along much of the coastline, growing alongside the white flowered sea campion. In spring a burst of violet colour comes from the spring squill. The Brough of Birsay 2 for instance can be a carpet of purple in the early summer, interspersed with the yellow and red of bird's-foot trefoil known in Orkney as 'cocks and hens'.

dune grasses oysterplant

Other coastal plants include grasses such as marram grass and lyme grass, both important plants that stabilise areas of loose sand allowing colonisation by other plants. Another plant found on the strandline of Orkney's coasts is the oysterplant so called because its leaves are said to taste of oysters. This plant is of high arctic origin and needs the long days of northern summers to allow for its rapid growth in the short growing season.

One plant that deserves special mention is the Scottish primrose (*Primula scotica*). It is one of Britain's few endemic species, and is confined to the coastal regions of northern Sutherland, Caithness and Orkney. Even in Orkney, the Scottish primrose is restricted to a handful of sites, such as Yesnaby 3 on Mainland and the maritime heath of Papa Westray 4 . It is unusual in that it flowers twice each year; the most spectacular display is in late May and early June and a second smaller flowering in July.

Scottish primrose

moorland plants

Large areas of West Mainland 5 , Hoy 1 and Rousay 6 are dominated by heather moorland, though smaller areas can be found on many other islands throughout Orkney. Composed primarily of ling and bell heather with stands of cross-leaved heath in wetter areas, these large areas hold an interesting diversity of plant species that can dramatically change the landscape whilst they flower. Large areas of the moorland turn a beautiful shade of purple as the various heather species flower. Downy white patches of cotton grass whiten the moorland; especially after recent muirburning, the red/brown leaves giving a rusty sheen to the hills and valleys later in the season. Large stands of woodrush are a reminder of Orkney's wooded past.

On a smaller scale, wet peat areas hold common and great sundews, both insectivorous plants, trapping unwary insects in the sticky fluid on their leaves, then closing on them and digesting them. Patches of the splendid yellow bog asphodel lighten the wet areas of moorland like fleeting fires.

sundew