



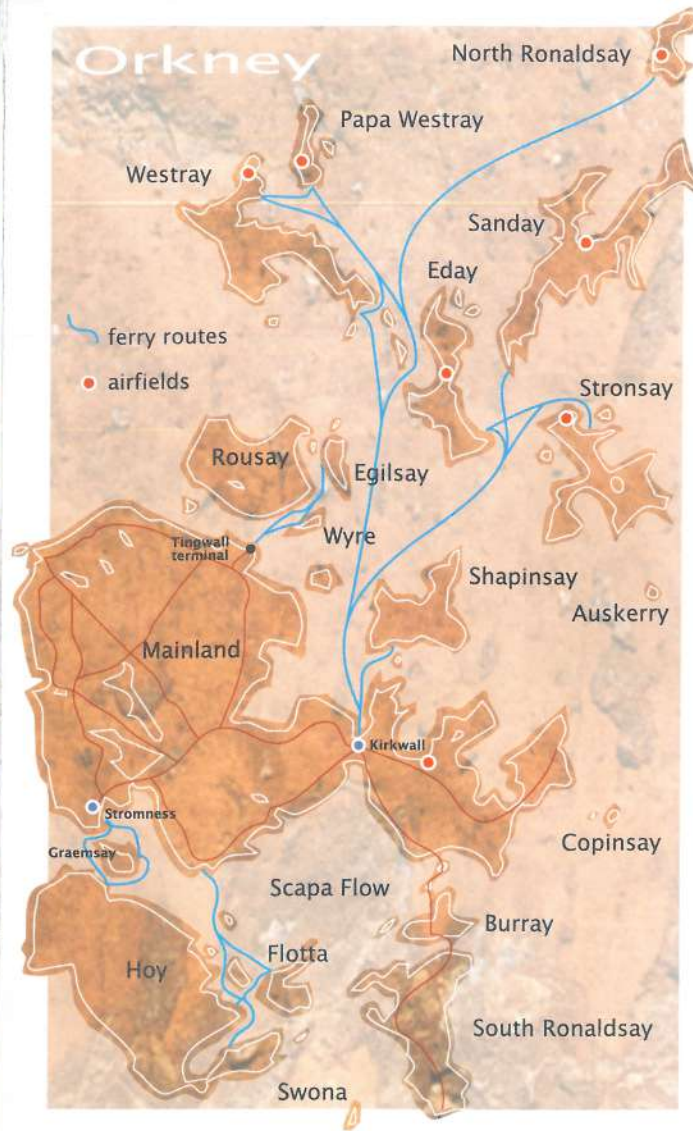
grey seal pup



Sealskerry bay, Eday



hen harrier feeding chick



guidance for visitors

Please remember:

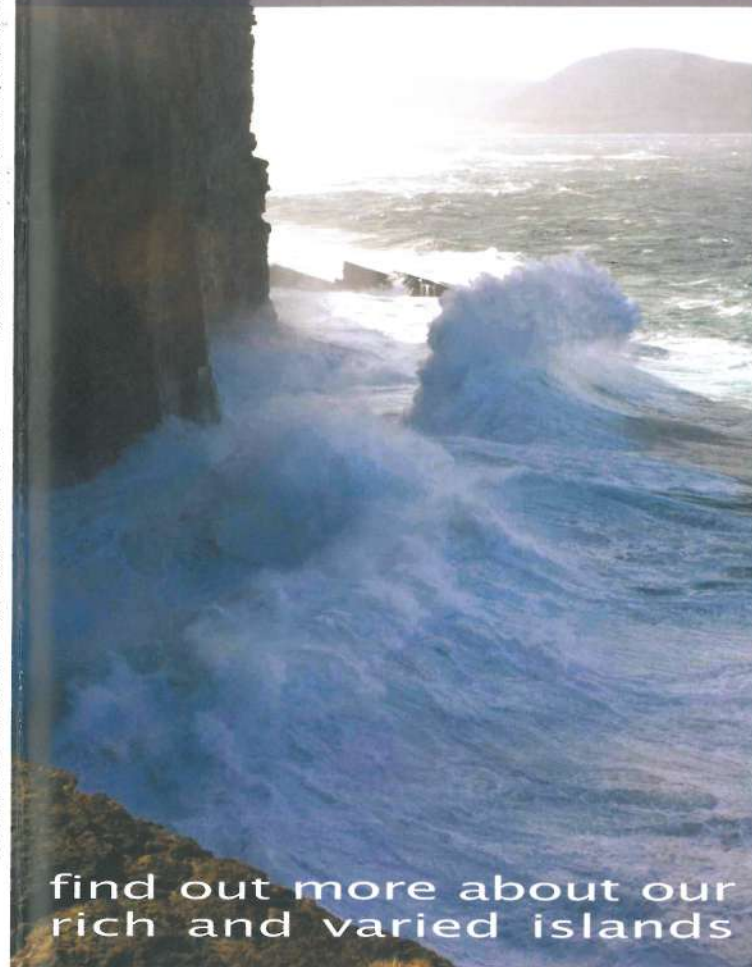
- To take care on the cliffs as they can be dangerous
- To avoid disturbing nesting birds
- To keep dogs under control at all times
- To take your litter home with you
- To not pick wild flowers
- To respect private property



cover images: top cotton grass design and illustration: Iain Ashman photographs: RSPB, SNH, Laurie Campbell, David Whitaker, Darren Fox, Aquaterra.co.uk bottom Black Craig, Stromness



Orkney's Wild Islands



find out more about our rich and varied islands



Orkney's north islands



Eday

From April to September, the island's verges are decked with flowers such as celandine, cuckoo-flower, bird's-foot trefoil, orchid and scabious. Dancing common blue and meadow brown butterflies can be found on windless days and the lowland bogs ripple with nodding white cotton grass flowers.

Mill Loch is home to red-throated divers (*rain geese*). In May, the spectacular courtship displays of up to seven pairs can be observed from the birdwatchers' hide.

During summer, the purple heather-clad hills are home to great and Arctic skuas, merlins, short-eared owls, curlews (*whaup*), Arctic terns and wheatears, and a cousin of the *whaup*, the rare whimbrel.

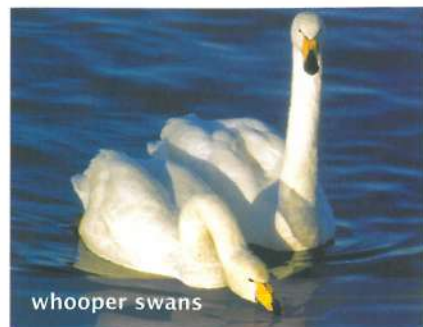
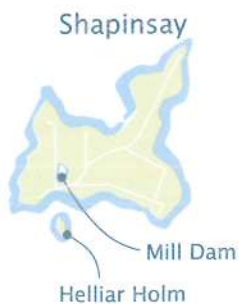
The cliffs of the Red and Grey Heads are nesting sites for large numbers of fulmars, guillemots, razorbills, puffins and kittiwakes and both common and grey seals can be found hauled out along Calf Sound.



red-throated diver

Shapinsay

One of the best places for observing Shapinsay's wildlife is at the RSPB bird hide, situated by the Mill Dam reserve on the west side of the island. From here, you can watch many breeding birds such as shovelers, pintails, redshanks and lapwings. The reserve is also home to winter migrants, such as greylag geese and whooper swans. Seated in the hide, you can enjoy the lovely views over this wetland reserve.



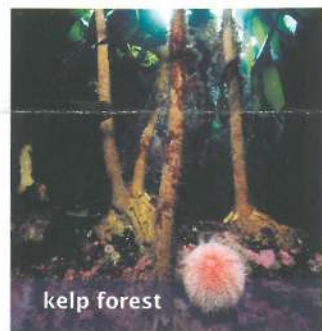
whooper swans

Sanday

Sanday, as the name suggests, is an island rich in beautiful sweeping sandy beaches and sand dunes.



Sanday's beaches are protected from the force of the North sea and Atlantic ocean by forests of kelp - a type of seaweed. These underwater 'forests' absorb the force of the winter storms, allowing sand to build up on the beaches. Kelp forests also form an important habitat for otters. Otters can sometimes be seen by a patient observer playing and feeding amongst the kelp.



kelp forest

Common (harbour) seals and grey seals are also both familiar sights on Sanday. A particularly good place to see common seals is the bay of Otterswick in the north of the island. Grey seals are more shy and can be seen further out to sea bobbing amongst the waves.

Stronsay

Stronsay is a low-lying island with several sandy beaches. Along the south east side of the island you will find attractive cliff scenery and also the Vat of Kirbuster. The Vat of Kirbuster is a gloop, or collapsed cave, and appears as a natural cleft in the rock, with a rock arch at its entrance.

At the south of the island near Holland Farm, there is a seal hide in which you can sit unobserved and watch at close range up to three hundred seals hauled out on the shore below.

There is a bird hide situated on the shores of the Lea Shun loch, also at the southern end of Stronsay. From here you can look out across the loch and watch a variety of breeding wildfowl. The adjacent beach, Sand of the Crook, is home to the rare oysterplant, which has its British stronghold in Orkney.



Vat of Kirbuster

Rousay, Egilsay and Wyre



Rousay is a good place to see both moorland habitats and moorland birds. Patient observation may reward you with sightings of several species including hen harrier, golden plover, merlin and red-throated diver.

Egilsay has a wealth of wetland habitats and, as a consequence, is home to breeding ducks and waders. The wetland areas and more traditionally managed farmland also mean that many species of wild flowers can be found on the island.

Wyre is home to both grey and common seals. The Taing, on the west side of the island, is a good place from which to see both species.



merlin

North Ronaldsay

North Ronaldsay is Orkney's most northerly island and is famous amongst birdwatchers for its large numbers of migrants. These are birds which head north in the summer to breed, and south in the winter to their feeding sites.

The best months for seeing migrants are April/May and September/early October, when visitors can see species such as purple sandpiper and sanderling. However any month can bring surprises, and unusual species such as crossbill have been seen in the middle of summer.

There are also many birds which breed in North Ronaldsay such as teal, shoveler, snipe, oystercatcher and black guillemot.

The variety of breeding birds and large numbers of migrants make North Ronaldsay one of the most interesting places in Orkney and indeed the UK for birdwatching.

North Ronaldsay



whimbrel

Westray and Papa Westray



The cliffs of Westray are one of the best places in Europe to watch for seabirds such as kittiwakes, guillemots and razorbills, with around 20,000 pairs of kittiwakes alone breeding here every year. Other birds that nest on the cliff tops include puffin, Arctic tern and Arctic skua. It is possible to watch the Arctic skua exhibit impressive aerobatics as it tricks the terns into releasing their freshly caught sandeels. Papa Westray (locally known as Papay), a smaller island a short boat ride from Westray, also holds important nesting sites for a similar selection of birds.

However, perhaps more significantly, Papay is one of the last strongholds in Orkney for the elusive corncrake. Mostly heard rather than seen, this shy bird is very rare in Britain and Europe.



puffin



corncrake

Both islands partly owe their abundance of birds to the presence of maritime heath. In Britain this habitat is limited to the Northern Isles and a few places on the Scottish mainland. Here you will find an abundance of dwarf shrubs and wild flowers, including the Scottish primrose, a species found only in northern Scotland and Orkney.

Grey and common seals can also be seen in abundance around the gentler sections of coast, either in the water or 'hauled-out' on the beaches. Grey seal pups take up to six weeks before they learn to swim and can sometimes be seen suckling.



common seal

grey seal

Orkney's wildlife year

	january	february	march	april	may	june	july	august	september	october	november	december
seabirds												
Scottish primrose					first flowering			second flowering				
cetaceans												
wild flowers												
raptors and owls												
seals												

■ best time to see species

Orkney's south islands



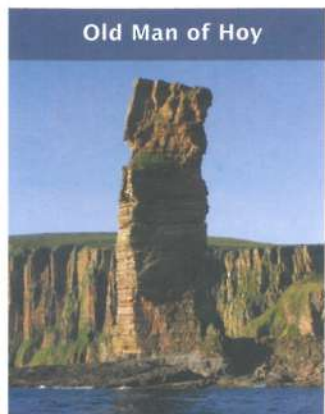
Hoy, Flotta and Graemsay

In the north of the island is Berriedale, Britain's most northerly native woodland, tucked away below the Grut Fea hamars, while in the south of the island is Britain's most northerly colony of bats, under the eaves of Melsetter House. In between and beyond is a trove of wildlife treasures.

Inhabiting the high hills are mountain hares, white in winter, brown in summer. Sharing the heights are great and arctic skuas, dunlins and golden plovers and rare alpine plants. Red-throated divers breed on most lochans and dragonflies hunt the sheltered burnside.

Under the watchful eye of the Old Man of Hoy, the red sandstone cliff ledges are home to thousands of guillemots, kittiwakes, razorbills, puffins, and fulmars. Peregrine, buzzard, merlin, hen harrier and short-eared owl breed annually. One thousand barnacle geese from Greenland are a spectacular winter addition to the fields of South Walls.

Old Man of Hoy



Around Flotta, the waters of the Pentland Firth and Scapa Flow mix twice daily. This meeting of currents provides feeding opportunities for porpoises, dolphins and whales. Flotta provides one of the better opportunities to see some of these creatures in Orkney. In Switha Sound, schools of porpoises are seen throughout the year, and minke whales are seen annually in the Sound of Hoxa. It was through this channel that seven sperm whales were successfully shepherded in 1993, after spending many weeks in the confined waters of Scapa Flow.

Seal haul-outs can be found at many locations along the coast and also can be seen easily from the ferry in the vicinity of the Flotta Pier. Summer on West Hill and the Golta peninsula, sees frenetic activity in the gull and arctic tern colonies and aerobatic piracy from arctic skuas. In winter, long-tailed ducks (*calloo*), eiders (*dunter*), shags (*scarfie*) and great northern divers (*immer goose*) can be found in numbers off-shore.

The Atlantic Ocean meets Scapa Flow in the waters around Graemsay. In winter, Hoy Sound, Burra Sound and Clestrain Sound support important populations of seafoal such as great northern diver, shag, long-tailed duck, eider and black guillemot (*tystie*). In summer, the same area can be used by porpoises, dolphins and whales and there are annual sightings of basking sharks.

During spring, the Graemsay air is alive with the sound of singing skylarks and meadow pipits. Lapwings display and divebomb noisily over every field and in the flushes and wet hollows, redshanks atop fence posts chip and chivvy the passing of every stranger. In rough and tussocky areas, colonies of both common and black-headed gulls squabble ceaselessly in the brief breeding season.

Oystercatchers and ringed plovers nest on the sand and coral beach at Sandside and arctic terns (*pickie terno*), summer visitors from the southern hemisphere, fish the waters for sand eels.

minke whale



Graemsay's roadside verges teem with flowers - orchids, violets, eyebrights, self-heal, cuckoo-flower and scabious.



cuckoo-flower

Burray and South Ronaldsay

Since the Second World War, access to Burray and South Ronaldsay has become much easier. This is due to the construction of the Churchill Barriers, which link the islands.

In Burray, Echna Loch is separated from the sea by a narrow, natural barrier and both the loch and the bay are good places to watch birds at any time of year. One of Orkney's finest beaches has developed at the 4th Barrier between Burray and South Ronaldsay, where many interesting shore plants can be seen. From all of the Barriers there are good views of Scapa Flow. The Barriers are also particularly good locations to see great northern divers and long-tailed ducks during the winter.

South Ronaldsay is a beautiful island, with the picturesque village of St Margaret's Hope, lovely sandy beaches, impressive cliffs and magnificent views across Scapa Flow and the Pentland Firth. The bay at Wind Wick on the east side is a good place to see grey seals with pups in the autumn. The cliffs on the southwest and southeast of the island are prime locations to see seabirds such as guillemot, fulmar and puffin.

long-tailed ducks

