



Atlantic Puffin

# ORKNEY

all seasons

**ORKNEY IS HOME TO SOME OF THE RAREST AND MOST SPECTACULAR WILDLIFE IN THE WORLD.**

The islands are alive with the sights, sounds and colours of nature in all seasons. With 600 miles of coastline, dramatic clifftops, crystal-clear waters, lush meadows, wetlands and moorland, Orkney's unique landscape is home to seabird cities, eagles, otters, puffins, seals, orcas and a great deal more.

Spring marks the point when much of this nature comes alive.



Follow this trail and get up close with Orkney's wildest inhabitants and uncover a natural paradise.



Hen Harrier



Grey Seal



## TRAIL OVERVIEW



- 1** BRODGAR  
Modern day natural wonders among ancient historical monuments



- 2** MARWICK HEAD  
Towering cliffs home to a vast seabird colony



- 3** THE LOONS  
Orkney's largest wetland is a haven for waders and wildfowl



- 4** COTTASCARTH  
Hen harriers take part in breathtaking aerial displays



- 5** HOY  
'The high island' is a true wilderness



- 6** NORTH HILL, PAPA WESTRAY  
The wild north coast and stronghold for Primula Scotica

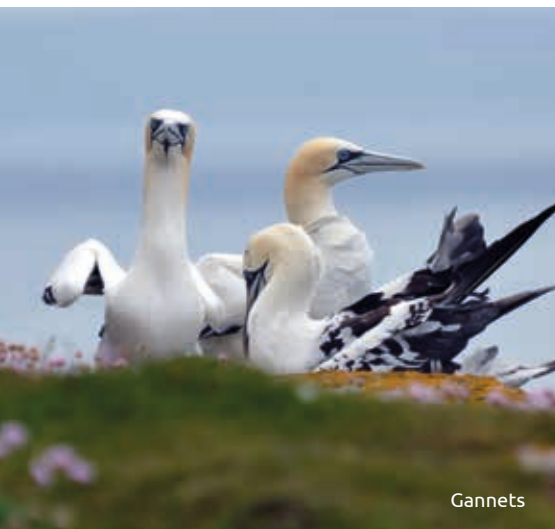
## 1 BRODGAR

Famous for its magnificent Neolithic stone circle, **Brodgar** is also a modern-day haven for wildlife. Spring marks the start of the breeding season, as wading birds carry out their mating displays, producing a magical chorus of birdsong. Most notably, keep your ears open for **curlew** 'bubbling' and **snipe** 'drumming'. The wet grasslands are also the ideal spot for wildfowl, such as **wigeon** and **teal**, to build their nests. Don't forget to look to the skies too, as **skylarks** perform spectacular vertical displays to heights as high as 300m.

Brodgar is sandwiched between the lochs of Stenness and Harray. The salt water of the former is a perfect spot for watching **seals**, basking on the rocks just a few metres from the road. You might even catch a glimpse of an **otter** here too. If you are visiting in March, it's worth keeping your eye out for the last few **goldeneye** or **long-tailed ducks** too, before they begin their journey north for the breeding season.



Ring of Brodgar



Gannets



Inquisitive Seals



Sea Thrift



Otter

Back on land, you can see evidence of the phrase, "**Mad as a March hare**", as these charismatic mammals can often be seen boxing on the grasslands: quite a sight when silhouetted against a spectacular sunset.

The best way to see the whole reserve is by following the trail that begins in the car park (approx. 2km). This allows you to make your way to the **Ring** itself, before it brings you right down to the shore of the **Loch of Stenness**. Please keep to the trail whenever possible, to protect the wildlife that thrives just a few feet away.

## 2 MARWICK HEAD

**Marwick Head, Birsay** is home to one of Orkney's most magnificent seabird cities. After wintering out in the ocean, thousands of **guillemots**, **razorbills** and more return to these cliffs ahead of the breeding season. Look out for a splash of colour, which could very well be the clown-like beak or orange feet of a **puffin**. **Fulmar** soar gracefully between ledges, while **gannets** perform spectacular dives into the water. Late spring offers the most impressive views, as the seabird numbers reach their peak.

Atop these majestic cliffs, you can wander through carpets of **thrift**, **sea campion** and many more colourful flowers. Be careful not to stray too close to the edge though, for your own safety, as well as that of the wildlife.

Down at the water's edge, a low-tide lagoon, known as the Choin, offers shelter for waders and wildfowl. Look for the colourful legs of **redshank**, and listen out for the distinctive call of **eider ducks**. Earlier in the spring, you may also spot **Iceland** and **glaucous gulls**, winter visitors whose white wing-tips stand out against our resident gulls.

The reserve is also a fantastic site for spotting cetaceans: **bottlenose dolphins**, **minke whales** and **porpoises** are all regularly spotted from these shores. If you catch a break in the waves out of the corner of your eye, grab your binoculars as quickly as possible. It may even be an orca.

There are two car parks at Marwick Head, with a trail connecting the two (approx. 2.2km). Winding along the coast of the dramatic North Sea, sturdy footwear and warm clothing is recommended.



Hen Harrier



Short-eared Owl

### 3 THE LOONS

**The Loons, Birsay** is a feast for the ears as much as the eyes. Sit yourself by the Listening Wall and immerse yourself in a symphony of birdsong. The unique shape of the wall is designed to amplify the sound of the breeding waders, including **curlew** and **lapwing**. Later in the season, keep your ears open for the wickering call of one of our rarest waders, the **black-tailed godwit**. Visit around sunrise to hear the spectacular dawn chorus.

A few hundred yards away, the Loons hide is the perfect place to see wildlife up close. **Gadwall** and **shovelers** are preparing for the breeding season, as are flocks of **pintail** that make up over 10% of the UK's total. With so much on offer in the wetlands, don't be surprised to see a **hen harrier** glide past too.

**Ruff** can sometimes be seen passing over the reserve as they make their way to their breeding sites further north. Keep an eye out for males in their spectacular breeding plumage. With brightly-coloured feathers around their face and neck, they're almost unrecognisable compared to their winter greys.

### 4 COTTASCARTH

The hide at **Cottascarth, Rendall** is named after Eddie Balfour, a local naturalist who conducted years of research into **hen harriers** in Orkney. It comes as no surprise then, that this reserve is one of the best places in the country for viewing these majestic birds of prey.

Spring sees the males take part in their spectacular courting displays, affectionately known as 'skydancing'. With an elegant combination of dips, twists and rolls, they can draw our eyes as easily as those of a female. Follow the track from the car park to the hide (approx. 600m) for the best chance of seeing **hen harriers**, along with other birds of prey such as **merlin** and **short-eared owls**. Visit in the morning or evening for your best chance of seeing skydancing.

There is plenty of other wildlife to enjoy on your walk too. Keep your eye out for **ravens** and **stonechat**, and your ears open for the unmistakable call of a **cuckoo**. Moreover, the track provides a perfect vantage point to look over **Rendall Moss**, home to one of the densest populations of breeding **curlew** in Europe.



Stonechat



Curlew



Lapwing



Old Man of Hoy

5 HOY

A striking back-drop to many views in Orkney, the high hills, sweeping moors and beautiful beaches of **Hoy** make it one of Orkney's most spectacular destinations. Add in the UK's northernmost native woodland, and its highest vertical sea cliff, and you have a nature reserve that has a bit of everything.

The cliffs at **St John's Head** and the spectacular sea stack, the **Old Man of Hoy**, welcome thousands of seabirds from May onwards. **Puffins** build their burrows into the Old Man itself, while **great skuas** patrol the skies. Keep watching and you might see one harrying an unfortunate **kittiwake**, hoping to steal its next meal. The cliffs are normally most active around sunset, when the parents-to-be return from a hard day of fishing.



Atlantic Puffin

Away from the sea, Orkney's two highest peaks offer moorland which is decorated with a stunning array of flowers, including primroses and clovers. The post road between the hills is an excellent way to see the reserve (approx. 4km), passing close to **Berriedale Wood** and **Sandy Loch**. Please dress appropriately, as the trail is rough in places.

High on the cliffs above the **Dwarfie Stone**, a family of **white-tailed eagles** have arrived in recent years. The UK's largest bird of prey is back in Orkney after an absence of over a century. The best place to spot them is from the **Dwarfie Stone** car park, between Linksness and **Rackwick Bay**. From April onwards, RSPB volunteers are on hand to help you spot the **eagles**, daily from 11am – 3pm.

6 NORTH HILL, PAPA WESTRAY

At first glance, **Papa Westray's North Hill reserve** strikes you with its crashing waves and howling winds. However, hidden amongst this wild landscape is one of Orkney's most delicate natural treasures. **Primula Scotica** can only be found in a select few spots around Orkney and the north coast of Scotland. With its purple flower less than 1cm in diameter, you may need to get on your hands and knees to see it properly. Look around the cliffs at Fowl Craig from mid-May.

May also sees the arrival of **arctic terns**, having completed their epic, 60,000-mile migration. Despite numbers dwindling in recent years, the reserve is still one of the best places in the UK to view them.

Speaking of seabirds, spring sees **skuas** claim their nesting sites, while **razorbills** and **guillemots** settle onto the cliffs. On a breezy day, the high winds are perfect for watching the elegant flight of **fulmar**.

Down on the water, the rocky outcrops are perfect for **shags** and **guillemots**. Watch for their characteristic pose, standing with their wings wide to dry them in the wind.

There are two walks that lead you round the reserve: Fowl Craig nature trail (2.5km) and the Coastal Trail (6km). Both are on rough track, but if you'd like something more sedate, the **North Hill hide** is approximately 200m from the reserve entrance and offers spectacular views over Orkney's finest maritime heath.



Gannets



Rackwick Beach



White-tailed Eagle

THE ORKNEY NATIVE WILDLIFE PROJECT

Led by Scottish Natural Heritage and RSPB Scotland, the main aim of the project is to ensure that Orkney's unique native wildlife is safeguarded by managing the invasive non-native predators that threaten the current balance. A major part of this is a stoat eradication programme and we ask that if you see one you let us know on 01856 886 163 or email north@nature.scot



Primula Scotica

Text kindly provided by RSPB Scotland