

Handa Island Newsletter-2019

Hello, and welcome to Handa!

Handa Island is a seabird colony and wildlife reserve which is owned by Scourie Estate and has been managed in partnership with- the Scottish Wildlife Trust since 1992. The island's bustling seabird colonies and stunning views attract thousands of visitors each year from across Europe and beyond. In this newsletter you will hear about the 2018 season and some of the highlights from the 2019 season so far.

The Handa Team this year

Each year the team is made up of a diverse group of rangers and volunteers, with Linnea Hindriks (a long-term volunteer on Handa in 2017) stepping up to the role of Ranger and Jake Taylor-Bruce taking the position of Assistant Ranger. Erika Poltz Faggiani and Heather Bodie join the team as the Skua and Seabird Fieldworkers respectively. Johnny Rolt will be arriving in July as the Summer Practical Assistant while Zachery Brown will be carrying out visitor engagement up on the cliffs as the Information Assistant. Life in the bothy is busy and we cook, chat and play cards together. Despite the remote nature of the island the constantly changing weekly volunteers means there is always a new person to get to know and new stories to be told.

An overview of 2018

2018 saw the busiest year for visitor numbers to date. With a total of 8839 visitors to the island, a jump by just over one thousand compared to 2017.

In 2018 the team carried out the all island kittiwake surveys, with 3749 birds being counted, continuing a downwards trend since 1995 when records began. Fledging success was good however, with 420 nests successfully fledging 430 chicks, giving a breeding productivity above the Handa Island average for this species.

2018 proved to be an excellent year for guillemots, with breeding productivity at its highest since records began, showing a steep increase from 2017. Numbers of individual guillemots were still well below the highs seen in 2001 but appear to be increasing, with numbers at their highest since 2005.

Rat monitoring has been carried out since the return of rats to Handa following their eradication in the late nineties. The 2018 season showed a major increase to rat activity. With rat activity on chew stations being up to 14 times higher than 2015, and up by 10% from 2017. The return of rats to the island has had a major impact on the ground nesting arctic terns, and in 2018, after a promising start of 60 pairs, the colony was abandoned for the second year in a row.



Kittiwakes were the focus of 2018's seabird counts.



The graceful arctic terns are at home in the sky, but their nests are vulnerable to ground predators.

Handa in 2019

Weather

The season on Handa got off to a somewhat wild start, with the unpredictable Scottish weather delaying our arrival to the island by a couple of days, and strong waves pushing the boat against the landing jetty were actually capable of breaking some of the wooden slats that make up the jetty surface. Since this however the team have enjoyed largely sunny days and gentle winds, fine conditions somewhat soured by the recent emergence of the infamous Scottish midge.

Monitoring

Monitoring this year has already begun with the first whole island puffin count carried out in early May yielding a total of 205 birds. The team have also begun monitoring of the islands fulmar and kittiwake populations, and are looking forward to undertaking the whole island razorbill count this year.

The Skua monitoring project is underway with the first eggs being discovered on the 12 May, with skua fieldworker Erika mapping out all the known territories and nests of both the great and arctic skua across two monitoring plots. Numerous colour rings have also been re-sighted. These large colourful leg rings allow us to identify individuals from a distance, and build up a history of returning skuas to the island.



A great skua bearing the yellow E6 ring.

Repair work

Keeping Handa Islands paths and drainage ditches in good condition is a truly never-ending task. With each section of boardwalk repaired another is found that needs to be replaced. Nevertheless, the team have taken to clearing out cross drains around the island to prevent paths from being flooded and undertake regular boardwalk maintenance to ensure that visitors and rangers alike don't put a foot wrong.

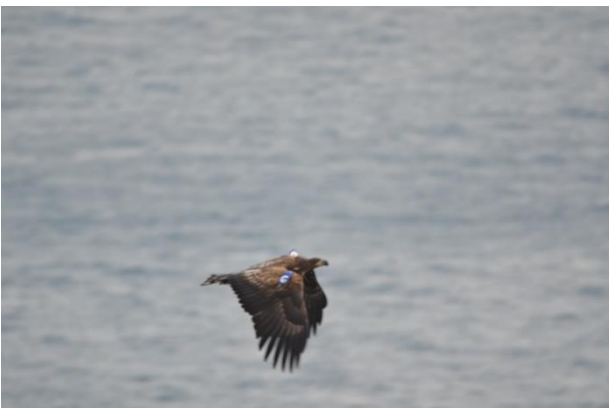


A new section of boardwalk under construction.

Beach cleaning

The Handa Island beach clean is a large undertaking each year carried out by rangers and volunteers, and with assistance from Roger and Danny Tebay and John Ross who help us with their ferry RIB to move huge amounts of rubbish. This year also saw the return of Andy Dinsdale to continue a marine litter survey on Handa he began last year following Marine Conservation Society methodology. With his help the team were able to identify plastic from as far afield as Canada and the USA. We were also joined by three extra beach cleaning volunteers who arrived at the last moment to give us all a hand in collecting two full boatloads of rubbish. Huge thanks go out to all involved.

Exciting sightings in 2019



Blue C, a juvenile white-tailed eagle that fledged from Orkney in 2018 and was recorded on Handa at the start of the 2019 season.

2019 has been excellent so far for spotting white tailed eagles, with 25 records of these huge raptors since the season began. A particularly special sighting with four of them flying together, happened on 7 April, one of which was photographed with a wing tag that was then traced back to Orkney where it had fledged the previous year.

The team were also lucky enough to have excellent views of a pod of orca on 19 May. Sightings of dolphins have also been good with several pods of Risso's dolphins around the island, with great views of one group traveling through Handa Sound. Other species of note include merlin, short eared owl, a barnacle goose and rare sightings of otter.