

Handa Island Newsletter - 2017



Welcome to Handa Island!

Handa Island is a nature reserve owned by the Scourie Estate and managed by the Scottish Wildlife Trust. Since 1961, Handa has been open to visitors who have been attracted by the island's stunning coastal views and vast colony of seabirds. In this edition, we will tell you about the ups and downs of the season so far, the top stories from 2016, and share a few of the secrets to life on the island. Enjoy!

Meet the Team

Tom Ovenden is this year's Ranger, returning from a successful 2016 season. Lending a hand is Danni Thompson, who has also returned this summer to help with the seabird monitoring.

Helping Tom this year are the Assistant Rangers; Linnea Hindriks will be doing practical work around the reserve as well as monitoring the seabirds, helped by Alice Brooke who will also be monitoring the skuas this year. The Information Assistant is Michelle Branson, who will answer visitor's questions at the cliffs, and finally, Alex Cropper, will be helping with practical work from the second half of the season onwards.

Highlights from 2016

2016 was a busy season with over 7,000 visitors enjoying the island! They enjoyed the good weather and wildlife including orca, Risso's dolphins, golden eagles and of course, the island's thousands of breeding sea birds.

The ranger team spent an intense couple of days counting every guillemot on the island in June, with a total of 54,664 birds counted!



Puffins were also counted, with 333 seen in mid-May. Kittiwakes and fulmars had a brilliant breeding year last year, with an increase in their productivity compared with the last few years.

At the end of the season a helicopter brought in tonnes of supplies for building a new section of boardwalk up on the cliffs, giving the team a rare chance to view the island from above.

Life in the Handa Bothy

While the island is open to visitors, volunteers and the rangers live on the island. The bothy has solar panels for electricity, wood burning stoves and we even treat our own water that comes from the loch behind the building, so we have as small an impact on the environment as possible.

Evenings in the bothy are spent chatting, cooking and playing games. We are lucky enough to

have Linnea this year who often plays her guitar too!

The 2017 story so far...

Weather Conditions

After having a slow start to the season due to weather conditions the sun has started shining! We had all weather imaginable in April, including many windy days, snow showers and lots of rain, hopefully not a sign of what's to come!

All-Island Count

An early all-island puffin count in late April revealed 177 individuals, though this number is expected to grow throughout May as puffins take up residence in their breeding burrows. On a good weather day in June, we will be counting the island's population of fulmars from both land and boat. The last fulmar count was in 2012 and found 1870 birds.



Please help to conserve Handa Island by making a donation today. Text **"HAND45 £5"** to 70070 to donate now. All texts are free and 100% of your donation goes towards helping protect and preserve this magnificent island.

Schools

In May pupils from George Watson School in Edinburgh paid Handa a day visit as part of the John Muir Award programme. Students were given a guided tour by our team and given the chance to record the wildlife they saw along the way. Local schools from Scourie and Durness will be visiting the island with Donald Mitchell from the Highland Council Ranger Service, in June.

Volunteers

Every week between 2 and 4 new volunteers join us to help out with the boats and visitor engagement. Their work is very important to the running of the island; we couldn't do it without them!

A very hard working team carried out a beach clean in April, collecting an entire boat load of rubbish from our shores. Amongst the washed up plastic were two garden chairs and

several hundred meters of rope. Thanks to all the volunteers that helped us and to Roger and John, the ferry team, for taking it off the island.

Handa Skua Project

The Handa Skua Project is back this season after a break last year. Alice will be monitoring both the great and arctic skuas between June and August. The project involves days spent walking out in the heathland looking for nests, and then checking them nearly every day to count the eggs and chicks as they hatch.

What's next in 2017?

We plan to continue to build the footpath on the north west of the island, after a helicopter dropped materials off for us at the end of last year. This is going to be constructed by our footpath contractors, as well as the Ranger and Assistant Rangers

who will be building a large section of boardwalk.



The Ranger team and many of our volunteers are keen naturalists so will spend a lot of free time recording and monitoring many species and habitats on the island to build a better picture of the biodiversity of this special island. We will carry out plant, rocky shore and breeding bird surveys, as well as use the moth trap and go pond dipping in the lochans.

A SeaWatch event was held in July last year as part of National Whale and Dolphin Week, and we intend to do the same again this season.



Arctic skua chick

Special sightings in 2017 so far include...

- Risso's dolphins
- Snow bunting
- Short-eared owl
- Golden eagle
- Minke whale
- 1000's of migrating pink-footed geese
- Three sets of otter footprints on the beach

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