

Handa Island Newsletter - 2018

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 2017, and share a few of the secrets to life on the island. Enjoy!



Meet the Team

There's a new team in the Bothy this year, with Craig Nisbet and Francesca Clair sharing ranger duties. Craig has arrived fresh from 4 seasons on Noss NNR in Shetland, while Francesca's varied background is in horticulture, environmental education, community work and volunteer development.

Joining them are the Assistant Rangers: Claire Robertson will be helping out with a wide range of practical work as well as some of the seabird monitoring work; and Lucy Dorman will be kept busy monitoring the skuas across the island's moorland habitat. We also look forward to welcoming our Summer Assistant, Kate Kirkwood who will be joining us in July to assist with more practical work and visitor engagement up at the cliffs.

Highlights from 2017

Tom Ovenden's team saw visitor numbers increasing again last year with 7760 visitors enjoying the island! They enjoyed the good weather and wildlife including a minke whale, an impressive number of Risso's dolphins, golden eagles and of course, the island's thousands of breeding seabirds.

The ranger team spent an intense couple of days counting the fulmars in June, with a total of 1423 birds recorded. This continues the

downward trend observed for this species since the 1990s when the population was more than double its current size.

A decline in puffin numbers was noted last year, from 333 in 2016 to 177.

Breeding productivity of kittiwakes, fulmars and guillemots was also down, after the encouraging increase in 2016.



Guillemots and razorbill

It is a sad reality that the struggle of our seabird colonies globally is reflected in the monitoring work we do at a local level. Here's hoping for an upward movement in these trends as we begin the monitoring programme of 2018.

Life on Handa

The ranger team, along with weekly volunteers, researchers, contractors and work parties from Scottish Wildlife Trust live in the Bothy on the island over the season. We're reliant on a solar power system, cooking on gas and treating our drinking water from the nearby loch. The Bothy Plantation provides a sustainable source of firewood, as well as

excellent habitat for breeding and migrant birds.



Redwing – a welcome bothy visitor in April!

The 2018 story so far...

Weather Conditions

After a changeable start to the season, May has become something of a scorcher, with temperatures rocketing to 25°C by the end of the month. The sunshine has seen visitor numbers remain firmly in triple figures; a true reflection of Handa's growing reputation as one of the North Coast 500's premier attractions.

All-Island Count

In an attempt to record peak numbers of pre-laying puffins this year, two counts were completed on 6 and May, with a total of 232 individuals recorded on the second count. We're looking forward to this year's all-island count of kittiwakes in June, which will involve a trip round the island in the Handa ferry to count those nests not visible from land.

All-island counts will also be conducted this season for bonxies, arctic skuas, terns and gulls as part of the National Seabird Census. This will

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involve a significant amount of effort, particularly monitoring the skua populations, for which we are looking forward to welcoming back to the island Dr Trevor Jones who has been involved in the Handa Island skua project for many years.

Schools

In May pupils from George Watson School in Edinburgh paid Handa a day visit over two consecutive days, with Donald Mitchell from Highland Council Ranger Service joining the second group for a guided walk. Students were given an introduction to life and work on the island before being encouraged to explore for themselves and identify the seabirds for which Handa is famous.

Volunteers

Every week we are joined in the bothy by two short-term volunteers to help out with landing the boats and welcoming visitors. Their work is very important to the running of the island; we couldn't do it without them!



Half of the beach litter collected

In late April we were joined by three extra beach cleaning volunteers, as well as by Andy Dinsdale who was conducting a marine litter survey on Handa using Marine Conservation Society methodology. All our volunteers that week were exceptional, and Andy's efforts to record every item of litter from Port an Eileen were admirable. Among the more interesting items identified were US origin bait pots, Newfoundland lobster pot tags, a Swedish jalapeno bottle and a rubber duck of unknown origin!

Particular thanks goes to Roger, John, Paddy and Danny who assisted with the removal of two full boatloads of litter at the end of the week, as well as to the team which consisted of Rachel, Dickie, Danielle, David and Dave.

Handa Skua Project

The Handa Skua Project is underway again this season with Claire Smith once again assisting this year's Skua Assistant Lucy, setting up monitoring plots for the Great Skuas while searching for Arctic Skuas between June and August. The project aims to establish breeding productivity for both species, and involves days spent walking out in the heathland looking for nests, then checking them nearly every day to count the eggs and chicks as they hatch.

What's next in 2018?

Path construction continues this season after helicopter drops of

boulders and gravel up on the cliffs over the last two winters. Martin McCrorie spends many hours each day during his visits working away at the path and is always happy to chat with passing visitors.



Boardwalk construction underway

As well as keeping busy with reserve maintenance tasks, the ranger team are keen to collect as many biological records from the island as possible in order to contribute their sightings to local and national biological databases managed by multiple organisations. Efforts are being made to map territories for song birds and waders, while the moth trap is being deployed on every possible evening. Botanical surveys are taking place to find and record rare plants like pyramidal bugle, adder's tongue and royal fern.

A Sea Watch Foundation event is due once again in July as part of National Whale and Dolphin Week. With our recent run of cetacean records from Handa, hopes are high for a successful week. Who knows, maybe Wally the Walrus will yet grace our shores, having been seen on a very fortunate afternoon off the island by Craig north of Kinlochbervie!

Special sightings in 2018 so far include...

- Orcas (A great island tick for ex-Ranger Jenny Grant!)
- Risso's dolphins
- 7849 Pink-footed geese migrating north over the island
- Pintail (Only the second Handa record)
- Snow bunting
- Four otters including a mother with two of last year's pups

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