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Frequently Asked Questions

VOLUNTEER ROLE

I don't know a lot about birds; can I still apply?

Whilst it is helpful to have prior knowledge of birds, particularly seabirds, it is not essential as you will learn a great deal when you are on the island. Visitors always want to know about the seabirds on Handa however, so you will find it beneficial to learn as much as you can about Handa's wonderful colonies before you arrive.

Why do I need a good level of health and fitness?

One of your two main duties is to help visitors from the boat, which involves holding a heavy boat steady (in a variety of sea-states) and moving the wooden jetty up and down the beach all day. There is also a lot of walking to and from the shelter during beach duties and it's a long way uphill to the bothy!

Can I apply with my partner/friend/family member?

For weekly volunteers, as long as you both fit the essential criteria for the role then you are more than welcome to apply with someone you know. Be sure to specify that you are applying together on your application forms so that we can pair you up.

I don't have a car; is this a problem?

There is no public transport to Handa or Tarbet so having your own car is extremely useful. However, it may be possible to organise lift shares with other arriving/departing volunteers. Please tell the Handa Volunteer Coordinator and Ranger as early as possible so that we can try and help.

For Assistant Rangers, not having your own transport may be more of a limitation as you will be reliant on other people to take you shopping and you may be unable to leave the island on your days off.

Who will I be living/working with?

The bothy is often a thriving place of activity! You will live alongside the Ranger(s), between three and five Assistant Rangers, one or two other weekly volunteers, and occasionally contractors or Scottish Wildlife Trust work parties.

Do I need insurance to volunteer?

You will be covered under the Scottish Wildlife Trust's insurance policies. However, you must sign our Code of Conduct, the relevant risk assessments and abide by the health and safety procedures on the island.

BOTHY

What facilities are there?

The Handa bothy has two flush toilets for use by volunteers and bothy staff. There is a compost toilet near the beach by the visitor shelter for use by day-visitors.

What cooking facilities are there?

You should be able to cook on Handa in the same way that you cook at home. The shared kitchen consists of a four-ring gas hob, a grill and oven. All we ask is that you are mindful and considerate when using the cooker as you'll be sharing this space with up to five other volunteers and so as not to waste the gas. In the past we have cooked curries, pizzas and even baked bread and cakes. Crockery, cutlery and utensils are all provided.

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Frequently Asked Questions

Why do we have to save gas?

We try to conserve everything on Handa; gas bottles are expensive and heavy to carry up the hill to the bothy.

How do you get electricity?

Solar panels provide all of our electricity. With long daylight hours in summer this usually meets all of our needs. Occasionally in periods of gloomy weather at the start/end of the season we may have to use a small petrol generator to ensure that essential items such as mobile phones and radios remain charged. Mobile phones can be charged, and it is important that they remain so in case they are needed in an emergency on the island. If there is sufficient battery power then other devices may be charged, but this is not guaranteed!

What about heating?

There are wood burning stoves in the communal bothy and in the ranger's room. The wood supply mostly comes from old boardwalk and occasionally the non-native pine trees in the plantation by the bothy.

Can I drink the water? Where does the tap water come from?

Water in the bothy taps comes from a loch behind the bothy. The water is twice filtered and treated so it is fine to drink. Rangers and Assistant Rangers check the filters weekly. The shower water comes from the same source. In the summer the water level in the loch can get lower so we ask you to be considerate with your water usage.

Hot showers are limited to save both filtered water and gas.

There's no fridge?! Won't my food go off?

You'll be surprised at how long food can last outside of a fridge. Fruits and vegetables can easily last for the duration of your week on Handa, however there is limited storage space in the 'cool area'. To limit food waste, plan ahead and eat the most perishable items at the start of your stay.

Please note that the 'fridge' system in the burn shown in the video is no longer an option.

What about recycling?

We endeavour to keep our impact on the environment to a minimum.

We recycle glass, plastic, paper and cardboard, and ask all departing volunteers to take this away with them.

We have a compost bin for food waste which is then used in our small veggie garden.

Why do I need to bring a mobile phone?

Due to the nature of the island (precipitous cliffs, coast and vast rugged heathland), having a working mobile phone is an essential health and safety requirement.

Is there Wi-Fi?

There is no Wi-Fi on Handa; use it as an opportunity to instead connect with your fellow volunteers or the nature around you. There is a modem in the Ranger's room but this relies on a good amount of solar power, so it is only for work use or emergencies. A new phone mast at Scourie means you may be able to get internet connection on your phone in places.

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Frequently Asked Questions

ISLAND

How big is the island?

363 hectares (about a square mile).

What is the weather like?

When visiting Handa it is best to be prepared for all weathers. It is not unusual to have sun, wind and rain within the space of a few hours.

Is there a shop on the island?

No. The only infrastructure on the island is the bothy, a compost toilet and small visitor shelter. There is a restaurant in Tarbet, and in Scourie you will find a couple of places to eat, a campsite, petrol station and a village shop.

Who visits the island?

Visitors to Handa come from all over the world and from a range of backgrounds. We have had visitors from at least 33 different countries, and they can range from tourists, naturalists, families, academics, birders, MSPs, runners, rambles, and local people enjoying their nearest reserve.

Can I swim?

On a sunny day the bays on Handa can look temptingly tropical. You are welcome to swim but we ask that you use a 'buddy system' and tell someone your plans so that you can stay safe. The tides outside of the bays are strong so we please ask you to remain within the sheltered bays for your own safety.

Is the island open all year round?

The island is generally open from April – early September; the dates vary each season and will be posted on the website once they have been confirmed for the year.

WILDLIFE

When is the best time to see seabirds?

May – June is the peak season for seabirds. Most species are on eggs by mid-May and chicks fledge in late June-early July. Fulmars and great skuas will often be on the island until the end of the season.

What wildlife is there other than seabirds?

Handa is a great place to spot all kinds of wildlife. There are frequent sightings of cetaceans (bottlenose and Risso's dolphins, porpoise, minke whale and even orca!); grey seals are common around the coast; moths; pygmy shrews; palmate newts; common lizards; plentiful marine species in rock pools when the tide is low, and loads of other bird species, including red grouse, snipe and white-tailed sea eagles. Basking sharks have also been recorded, but not within the last few years. There are many exciting plants too including orchids, ferns and carnivorous sundews.

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Frequently Asked Questions

What wildlife surveying takes place?

As part of the nationwide Seabird Monitoring Programme, the Rangers and Assistant Rangers carry out population and productivity monitoring of four species of cliff nesting seabird: kittiwakes, guillemots, razorbills and fulmars. The Handa Skua Project monitors the population and productivity of great and Arctic skuas.

Rangers and volunteers also carry out ad hoc surveys of the island's plants, moths, birds, coastal wildlife...anything that takes their fancy!

Seawatches are carried out throughout the season to record sightings of cetaceans.

Are there rats on the island?

There are brown rats (*Rattus norvegicus*) on the island. An eradication took place in 1997 but rats have since returned; the nearest distance to the mainland is only about 300 m and rats are capable of swimming up to 1 km. There are non-toxic chew stations around the island which are checked by the Ranger team every month and enable us to determine presence/absence of rats, however we do not currently control the rat population. Decisions to determine the best method of management on the island are currently underway.

How did the rabbits get there? Do they cause a problem?

The island was inhabited in the 1800's so the rabbits were most likely brought to the island by people as a food source.

The rabbits on Handa are not controlled; they cause a bit of erosion by digging burrows but this is mainly away from the path. In the early part of the season they provide an important source of prey for otters, skuas and raptors.

SURROUNDING AREA

What else can I see/do in the area?

Sutherland is an incredible part of the country, with hills, coastline, peat bogs and fascinating geology.

Handa falls within the North West Highlands Geopark; a UNESCO initiative covering this vast area of fascinating geology and culture.

Heading south from Handa you could visit the loch-side ruins of Ardvreck Castle or take a trip through [Ben Mor Coigach](#), the Scottish Wildlife Trust's largest reserve. The Old Man of Stoer and the nearby lighthouse is a great place for spotting cetaceans. Heading north you can visit the secluded Sandwood Bay or take a trip through time at Smoo Cave in Durness.

If the weather is on your side, you might like to climb one of the many stunning peaks in the area. Local hills include Suilven, Foinhaven, Arkle, Stac Polaidh, Quinag and Ben Stack.

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