

Watch Our Wildlife



Wildlife you might see throughout Caithness and Sutherland in Autumn.

Caithness

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One of the marvels of time of year must be the congregation of wintering wildfowl and waders. Loch of May, Loch Calder, Loch Heilen, Loch Scarmclate, Loch Watten, Loch of Wester and Broubster Leans are all good places to watch for populations of **whooper swan, Greenland white-fronted goose and greylag goose** during the autumn migration. During this time there is also a build up of wading birds such as **oystercatcher, curlew sandpiper, little stint, dunlin, ringed plover and redshank**, which can be seen feeding in large, sometimes mixed flocks at Dunnet bay, Sinclair's bay and many other locations. The best time to watch for these birds is at low tide. Also watch out for **long-tailed duck, red-throated, black-throated and great northern diver**.

Grey seals come ashore to pup around October. It is worth sea watching with binoculars from the cliff tops to see this annual spectacle. Look for white fur of the newly born pups along east coast beaches such as Berriedale cliffs and Duncansby Head and north at Sannick Bay. Please leave them undisturbed.

A woodland walk at Castletown, Achvarisdal wood, Dunbeath and Latheronwheel can be very pleasant at this time of year with golden autumn colours and wonderful shapes and colours of **fungi**. Look out for **moths and pipistrelle bats** in the evening.

Keep checking offshore from headlands for **cetaceans** and migrating birds such as **great, arctic and pomarine skuas** as well as **manx and sooty shearwaters**.

West Sutherland / Assynt

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Autumn is the time of the year that **red deer** rut and stags are heard roaring in the hills. By September the stag's antlers are hard, ready for battle with other stags, which is best seen during the peak of the rut in October. In general, the bigger and stronger stags are able to hold on to hinds for longer. You do not have to go far into the hills at Inchnadamph to witness this spectacle but beware this is stalking season and if you plan to leave the recognised paths you should phone the appropriate estate office.

Chanterelles, ceps, hedgehog and oyster mushrooms are all deliciously edible mushrooms that can be found growing in the Culag Woods and along the River Inver. Look out too for **speckled wood butterflies**. They are increasing their range and are now a common sight in woods around West Sutherland right into November.

Salmon can be seen leaping at the Falls of Kirkaig just now but are unlikely ever to get past this natural obstruction.

The best place to see migrant waders is at Culkein, Stoer. Look out for **purple sandpipers, dunlin, and sanderling**. Meanwhile big flocks of 100 or more **twite** descend on the flower rich meadows at Clachtoll and Clashmore. The **rowan** trees should be bursting with berries and will attract passing **redwings and fieldfares**. But look out along some of the paths at Drumbeg, Inverkirkaig and Nedd to see **pine marten** droppings stuffed full of rowan berry seeds.

Mid and East Sutherland

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Seabirds can be starting to pass in large numbers at places such as Brora. East winds are especially good for sea watching. Look out for rarer species such as **pomarine skua** and **sooty shearwater** or even **long-tailed skua** and **great shearwater**.

October is a good month for returning **wigeon** with large numbers expected on the Dornoch Firth (up to 15,000 some years). The first **geese** from Iceland should be arriving back before flying down the straths. The fields between the Mound and Golspie can be good for **geese** during the autumn.

Minke whales may be present off Brora or StrathSteven. Large congregations of feeding kittiwakes often give their presence away.

Shorebirds will be building up in number on migration south. Look out for uncommon species such as **little stint** or **ruff**. The shore just west of the mouth of the River Brora is a good place to search.

North West Sutherland

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Highland mists and mellow fruitfulness; a beautiful time to be in the hills of the northwest, in the serene mysterious atmosphere of wispy misty peat bogs or around haar shrouded sea inlets. The cooler air and end of season light inspires much of our wildlife to be on the move. Look out for birds of prey such as **peregrine falcons** and **buzzards**. Other migrant species are gathering to head south or alternatively beginning to arrive from further north like our **Greenland barnacle geese** that over winter near Durness. Autumnal colours can be seen in a rich array of brightly coloured mosses and grasses across wide tracts of the hills. The mauve of the **ling** still lingers too, as does the blue **scabious** and along the northern fringe it may still be possible to find a second flowering of **Scottish primrose** on Balnakeil and Faraid head.

Keep your eyes on the coastal fringes too, for sightings of **seals, whales, dolphins** and **porpoises** and to the shore itself for **otters** - as the year's young are less shy, more mobile and can be quite noisily playful. The beaches and estuaries are fine places to see many common species of **waders** and perhaps less common **greenshank** and **whimbrel** on the Kyle of Durness. Out in the bays of Scourie, Oldshoremore or Loch Eriboll it is quite possible to view groups of rare **black** or **red-throated divers** and the larger more solitary **great northern diver**.

North Sutherland

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The fields of the straths should be filling up with wintering **fieldfare, redwing,** and flocks of **lapwing** and **curlew**. Look into fields of fodder for flocks of **yellowhammers, twite** and **greenfinches** feeding on seed.

Check out the rivers for **Atlantic salmon**. They can be seen splashing in the spawning beds of the rivers and the tributary burns. It is here that the salmon will lay their eggs before migrating to their feeding grounds at sea.

Strathy point is probably the best place in the north for sea watching. Look out for passing **Minke Whales** and **Dolphins** as well as migrating **skuas, gannets, shearwaters** and **petrels**.

Look for the return of the **barnacle geese** to the offshore islands. Post breeding flocks of **herons** and wintering **sea ducks** can be found at the Kyle of Tongue.

This is a quarterly production so look out for the next edition for winter.

*Watch how you watch our wildlife;
their welfare comes first!*

- Wear muted colours and blend into your surroundings.
- Use binoculars to get clear views while still distant enough
- Use hides when possible (your car is a good hide).
- Be particularly careful during the breeding season.
- Dogs and wildlife don't mix.

