

# Watch Our Wildlife



*Wildlife you might see throughout Caithness and Sutherland in Spring.*

## Caithness

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You are spoilt for choice as to where to go for wildlife viewing this season but probably the essence of wild Caithness in springtime is in the cliffs and headlands. Blue **Spring Squill** tints the cliff top heaths interspersed with flashes of bright yellow banks of **Primrose**.

By early May, seabirds are back on the ledges watched by **Great Skuas** and **Arctic Skuas** back from Africa. **Guillemots** and **Razorbills** have been declining, so it will be interesting to see what numbers are like. For seabird colonies why not go to Sandside, Holborn, Dunnet and Duncansby Heads and the cliff south of Wick.

Most of the rocky shores and riverbanks of Wick and Thurso rivers are good for wading birds from **Redshank**, **Ring Plover**, **Dunlin**, **Turnstone** and **Curlew**. Meanwhile **Skylark** and **Lapwing** are displaying over farmland and moorland.

In contrast try the sheltered woody straths of the east coast (Latheron and Dunbeath and Berriedale) for the return of **Warblers** plus the striking **Early Purple Orchid** and **Pyramidal Bugle**.

Most out-of-the-way harbours (Harrow, Brough, Sarclet) have **Grey** and **Common Seals** and you might also catch a glimpse of an **Otter** there, or even in the rivers in the middle of town.

## West Sutherland / Assynt

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**Wheatears** are one of the first migrants to arrive and can be seen around the crofts at Stoer and Drumbeg from early April. **Greenshanks** are also early to arrive selecting a territory on the boggy areas, often in the vicinity of small lochans. **Ring Ouzels** take up positions from mid April onwards. They can be found on the slopes of Canisp and at the caves at Inchnadamph.

**Black-throated Divers** breed on many of the larger lochs in Assynt including Loch Assynt. They arrive on site in early March. The smaller **Red-throated Divers** do not arrive until late April choosing the smaller hill lochans. Wintering **Great Northern Divers** will hang around until May in sheltered bays like Clashnessie or Achmelvich.

On calm days in April and May it is worth spending a while sea watching with binoculars. **Harbour Porpoises** and **Minke Whales** are commonly seen from headlands such as Stoer lighthouse and the natural sea arch at Culkein Stoer.

During February and March **Golden Eagles** will be doing their amazing sky-dancing displays over their territories. The females, which are larger than males, will have laid their eggs by mid March and may even be feeding youngsters by early May. It is worth scanning the hilltops around Inchnadamph or Kylesku for this magnificent bird.

## Mid and East Sutherland

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Mid/East Sutherland hosts an impressive **Osprey** population and these will have returned to their nest sites by early April. Loch Migdale, Mound car park and Loch Fleet are three good places to watch their incredible fishing skills. Morning and evening visits can be rewarded with an unforgettable **Osprey** experience.

**Black Grouse** will be indulging in their spectacular mating displays at leks throughout this period. Searching out such sites is discouraged because of the risk of disturbing the birds, but please keep in contact with the Highland Council Countryside Rangers, who often organise visits. Details in their annual events programme.

A good view of a pair of **Hen Harriers** in aerobatic display is a very exciting spectacle. Try looking for the birds on the high point of the Lairg - Rosehall road or around the young plantations between Lairg and the Crask Inn. Sound of the month belongs to the **Grasshopper Warbler**. Its song resembles a very prolonged grasshopper stridulation! This increasingly common summer visitor can often be heard in Ferrycroft Woods, Lairg or in the marshes which border the narrow stretches of the Kyle of Sutherland around Invershin.

## North Sutherland

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Visit the section of fenced-off rough grazing directly behind the Strathnaver Museum at Bettyhill to see high numbers of **Bumblebees** foraging amongst the **Knapweed** and **Scabious** on this wonderful site. From May onwards this small patch of ground offers the opportunity to see the rare **Great Yellow Bumblebee** plus several other bee species.

Walk the clifftop sections of the coast around Strathy in April to see early plants such as **Spring Squill** and the first flowering of **Scottish Primrose** in May. Sit amongst the early flowers on the headlands for a while and use your binoculars to scan for cetaceans (**Whales, Dolphins and Porpoises**).

Visit Borgie Forest early morning or late evening and try to catch a glimpse of the tree top acrobat the **Pine Marten**. There are plenty in there but tricky to view. Early morning or late evening may also offer the chance of a glimpse one or more of the three species of deer present in the forest – **Red, Roe and Sika Deer**. The rivers Borgie and Naver are excellent sites for **Otters** but again patience and luck - the wildlife watcher's best friends – are needed to be successful. Check for spraints (droppings) around bases of bridges and obvious marker points such as large boulders.

April means the departure of the winter **Barnacle Geese** from Eilean-nan-Ron (Island Roan) and summer migrant birds are beginning to arrive. Look for **Wheatear** along the coastal sites - a sure sign of spring arriving. Keep your eyes open for the first **Swallows** in April or early May: Summer's just around the corner!

## North West Sutherland

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Migrant birds are naturally later in the north and it is worth heading to the coast for first sights of some species; **Fulmars** come in early – already in Durness by mid-January and **Rock Pipits** seem to be ever present. **Shags** too will be settling in around the breeding areas such as Faraid Head. Whilst out on the cliffs look carefully for some gems of early flowers such as **Moss Campion** and **Purple Saxifrage**. These plants are more commonly found at high levels, but can be found at some special sites near Scourie, Fanagmore and Sandwood bay.

April sees the departure from Durness of overwintering **Barnacle Geese**. Up to 800 birds flit between Eilean Hoan and the fields of Balnakeil. **Greylag Geese, Mallard, Curlew, Golden Plover** and early arriving **Lapwing** also feed in the fields here. In late April the ever popular **Puffin** returns to Faraid Head and Handa Island.

Birds of prey are regularly seen along the north coasts: **Peregrines** are early nesters and **Buzzards** display to their mates becoming uncharacteristically aerobatic. Look in the deep dark dubh lochans for signs of stirring **Frogs** and in the warmer days for the **Palmate Newts**, often be found in remarkably small pools.

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

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

