

Watch Our Wildlife

Wildlife you might see throughout Caithness and Sutherland in Summer.



Caithness

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The seabird colonies are in full swing at Holborn head, Dunnet, Duncansby and cliffs south of Wick. July is the best month to watch their young being fed. Visit at dusk to see young **guillemots**, **razorbills** and **puffins** leaving the cliffs to join the adults at sea. Offshore, watch for **gannets** and **skuas**. Take care on unfenced cliffs. Other summer residents are the **arctic**, **common** and **little tern** feeding in the bays. You may also see rafts of **scoters** and **divers**. Although many waders are on breeding territory you may find migrant flocks of **sanderling** and **dunlin** on the shores in late summer.

Moors are best for sites of **hen harrier** and **short eared owl**. On mild, dry nights look out for **pipistrelle bats** feeding along tree/shrub edges and in deciduous woodland.

Look for **Daubenton's bats** over the burns at Latheronwheel and Dunbeath Strath.

Cetaceans are following fish around our coast now. Try headlands such as Holborn, Noss and Dunnet. Swiney head (Lybster) is a good spot for **minke whales**, **risso** and **bottlenose dolphins**. There is always a possibility of **orcas** and **pilot whales**.

Common seals pup in June - try the small harbours.

Coastal grasslands and cliffs are rich in plant life; from **thrift**, **eyebrights**, **grass of parnassus** and numerous **orchids**. The second flowering of **Scottish primrose** is in late June. Look out for this tiny flower at Dunnet Links, Keiss & Holborn Head. The rare **oyster plant** can be seen along the shingle beaches of Keiss & Dunbeath - look out for the small blue flower with silver green leaves.

Meanwhile peatland sites are full of **sundews** and the orange flowered **bog asphodel**.

West Sutherland / Assynt

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June is the calving month for **red deer**. In many of the quiet undisturbed glens young calves are being born. They have to keep a low profile because **golden eagle** chicks will be leaving the nest soon. The young eagles continue to be fed by their parents for several more months. They are easily recognised by their bold white tail feathers and white patches on their wing. Look for them around Kylesku and Ben More Assynt.

Red and **black-throated divers** are congregating in the sheltered bays at Achmelvich and Clashnessie. These will be non-breeding and failed breeders. Meanwhile the headlands such as Stoer Point are a good place to look for **minke whales** and **porpoises** following the summer spawning herring shoals inshore.

Inchnadamph is Scotland's largest area of limestone and is a must for wildflower enthusiasts. **Mountain avens** and **dark red helleborines** are some of the specialties.

Keep a look out for **wildcats** here at dusk and for **pine martens** crossing the around Drumbeig and Nedd.

By July there are more **waders** on the coast especially at Culkein Stoer. For the patient seawatcher, seabirds such as **skuas** and **shearwaters** become more numerous offshore. The rockpools at Clachtoll, Achmelvich, and Stoer are full of **hermit crabs**, **sea slugs** and other wonderful creatures and will provide wonderful entertainment for the family. Activity at the **heron** nest, captured through CCTV in Lochinver, will be at a peak with adults bringing in lots of eels and flounders.

Mid and East Sutherland

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The wildflowers reach their peak during the summer months. Early flowers include the specialist pine wood plants. **One-flowered wintergreen, twinflower and creeping ladies tresses** can all be found in June at Balblair Woods in the Loch Fleet National Nature Reserve. They are easily observed from the path, so please resist the temptation to stray amongst these fragile rarities.

Dornoch Common Good Lands contain a spectacular range of plants. Although they both have subtle greenish flowers, **frog orchid** and **common twayblade** are worth looking out for. Colour is provided by great drifts of **purple milk vetch, ragged robin** and **kidney vetch**. Later, **grass of parnassus** and **seaside centaury** (a plant near to its northern limit in the UK) make their appearance.

Offshore, on the sandbanks near Dornoch Point and Loch Fleet you will see **common seals**. They give birth to their young on these banks during June and July. **Common, arctic, sandwich** and **little terns** might all be seen on a good days birding at Loch Fleet. Spinningdale woods should turn up **tree pipit, redstart** and **wood warbler**. Try scanning Loch Shin and Little Loch Shin for **black throated divers**.

North West Sutherland

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This is a spectacular time to visit the northwest, with wildlife in abundance. Look closely at the grazed swathes of coastal grasses particularly around Durness and along the north coast. You may find the diminutive **Scottish primrose** - a flower unique to Scotland. In the machair it can literally be near impossible to walk without stepping on flowers of dozens of different species including many varieties of **orchids** including **early purple, heath spotted, fragrant, lesser twayblade**. Others - including **eyebrights, grass of parnassus, and trefoil** - create a riot of colour and scents.

The north and west coasts are certainly the place to see the seabirds just now as they breed in vast numbers. Handa island near Scourie is one of the best bird islands in Britain to visit. With more than 200,000 birds it would be a pity to miss this dramatic spectacle. **Guillemots, puffins, razorbills, kittiwakes** and **skuas** are there in abundance. Cape Wrath and the Clo Mor cliffs also have huge breeding colonies and there are more approachable nesting cliff sites at Faraid head by Durness. However the cliffs are naturally collapsing all the time so beware!

Look out for **whales, dolphins** and **porpoises** as well as **otters**. **Otters** are best seen at low tides and in early mornings. Kylestrome and Scourie coasts are good for them but keep your eyes peeled from many coastal viewpoints.

Strathy Point, Melvich Bay and Invernaver are a must for plant lovers. Mountain flowers such as **mountain avens** grow amongst ground hugging **juniper**. **Orchids** abound, as do **eyebrights, bedstraws** and **speedwells**. Catch the second flowering of **Scottish primrose** at Strathy point. And while you are there, look out for cetaceans; **minke, dolphin** and **porpoise**. Off the headlands in late summer you might catch the movement offshore of large numbers of seabirds and migrant waders. Go to the Kyle of Tongue to experience hundreds of **terns** amongst wonderful scenery.

In contrast to the coast the straths and peatlands are the habitat of rarer birds such as **red and black throated divers, dunlin** and **greenshank**. Visit Forsinard RSPB reserve for update on what to see. They should have a video link set up onto a **hen harrier** nest. The flagstone trail here is also the best way to experience the amazing plant and insect life of the 'flow country'.

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

*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.

