

OTTERS INSTALLED AT ARDMHOR

Visitors to the new Sound of Barra vehicle ferry get a warm welcome from two fish-chasing otters when they disembark at Ardmhor.

The mammals are the subject of a sculpture by well known Lewis artist Iain Brady and are positioned by the waiting room in Ardmhor. The commission and unveiling of the work marked the successful completion of the ferry terminal and the efforts to protect the local otter population.

When SNH was consulted at the planning stage for the ferry terminal and its proposed infrastructure in 2000, it drew attention to the area's local otter population.

As an attractive moorland pasture area on the rocky and indented east coast of Barra, it was clearly well used by otters, which were feeding round the shore, crossing the peninsula at various points, and using freshwater pools for washing. There were also indications of holts in several places, including a disused one right beside the location identified for the ferry waiting room. The plans took these established residents into consideration. And under licence, a substitute holt was constructed at a suitable point away from the terminal. Culverts under the road also provide 'otter underpasses' close to their regular routes.

Northbay Community Council's landscaping project at the terminal included plans for the otter sculpture along with information about them at the site. SNH contributed a proportion of the cost through grant, and were involved in providing some background information. Robert Stubbington, landscape architect for Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, managed and oversaw the project on behalf of the Community Council. Iain Brady produced a fine study of

the two otters which is full of movement and gives a real sense of effort. On Tuesday 5th April, Iain, assisted by his wife Jennifer, attached the sculpture to the rock base beside the waiting room. Once in place at Ardmhor and seen against the Sound of Barra and the wide sky, the otters were perfectly in keeping. They were admired by the landscapers, Hugh Douglas of Northbay Community Council, Robert Stubbington, Mary Harman of SNH and Eoin MacNeil, reporting for 'Guth Bharraidh'. No doubt they will be much admired by ferry passengers and visitors for years to come.

In the next few weeks it is expected that an interpretive board, prepared by FergusonIDEAS, will be erected nearby, providing background information on otters. Otters are shy animals and not often seen, but it's well worth looking out for them, especially near rocky shores and islets such as at Ardmhor. You might be lucky enough to be able to compare the sculpture with the living animals!



Mary Harman, Hugh Douglas and Iain Brady at the sculpture unveiling

CROFTING CULTURAL LANDSCAPES

With SNH support, The National Trust for Scotland is poised to initiate an exciting project to protect and enhance the traditional crofting landscapes of the Balmacara Estate.

The Traditional Croft Management Scheme is a pilot project and will be delivered in three of the most active townships on the Balmacara Estate. The project aims to encourage crofters to continue, and in some cases increase

traditional crofting agricultural practices.

These include rearing cattle and rotational cropping through a system of management agreements and payments. It is based on the requirements and potential of each crofting unit and the desires and aspirations of the crofter. The Scheme works on the basis that if

the key elements of the crofting system

are carried out, then other environmental benefits will flow naturally. It will be operated for an initial two-year period in the 2006 and 2007 seasons.

For further information please contact Iain Turnbull on 01599 566325 or email

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'MUSSELING' IN ON ANOTHER RELOCATION

by Mark Macdonald and Roddy MacMinn

With many SNH staff getting on with the relocation of its headquarters from Edinburgh to Inverness, some were called in recently to help with a relocation of a different kind in the Western Isles.

The move involved around 200 freshwater pearl mussels of varying sizes that had been uprooted during a particularly heavy spate in their home river in Harris. The victims represented a significant proportion of the overall freshwater pearl mussel population in the river.

The rare shellfish were deposited downstream along with large quantities of gravel and if it hadn't been for the quick thinking of local estate staff, the mussels could have dried out or become buried in gravel and peat.

Whilst it would have been possible to dig out the gravel plug that was isolating the mussels, the same thing might have happened in the future following the next bout of heavy rain. With help from pearl mussel experts from Edinburgh, it was decided to move the mussels to more stable parts of the river. The refugees were

gathered up using a glass bottomed bucket, torch and neoprene gloves and relocated in batches of 20 or 30 to other sites where mussel communities were thriving and would continue to do so unthreatened.

As they were placed 'foot' down amongst the gravel, their size was recorded with the largest measuring an impressive 13cm long. The average was 8.5cm.

A check a few days later revealed the mussels had remained where they had been re-homed and seemed to be thriving.



Freshwater pearl mussel from Harris river

THE FACTS: MUSSELS

Freshwater Pearl Mussels - or to give them their scientific name *Margaritifera margaritifera* - resemble their better-known marine cousins but are larger molluscs that prefer standing vertically in fast flowing rivers.

Their ability to occasionally produce pearls has meant countless mussels being needlessly and ruthlessly broken open and discarded by river banks. They are a seriously endangered species across northern Europe and it is now illegal to damage or kill freshwater pearl mussels in Scotland.

KINTAIL OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES IN 2006

With coastal nature walks, high-level mountain ridges and spectacular waterfalls, there's something for everyone in the Kintail summer outdoor activities programme for 2006 which has been published by The National Trust for Scotland at Kintail.

There's also an opportunity to see landscapes from a totally different perspective - from a

sea kayak! The west coast of Scotland offers some of the best coastline for sea kayaking, not just in Scotland, but also the world.

The National Trust for Scotland is offering introductory taster days as well as two and three day courses. They are suitable for complete beginners as well as people who have some paddling experience. Kayaking

instruction and hire of all equipment are included in the price.

More information about guided walks, courses, and sea kayaking can be found in the events leaflet, or contact the National Trust for Scotland Ranger Service on 01599 511231 or email kintail@nts.org.uk.

NEW WALKS AND EVENTS BOOKLET LAUNCHED

A new booklet detailing guided walks and events for Skye and Lochalsh and Lochaber has been published by the Highland Council Planning and Development Service.

It includes walks from March to December 2006 and is available from tourist information offices, libraries, council buildings and some retail outlets throughout the area.

From more strenuous walks up into the Skye and Lochalsh hills such as MacLeod's Tables or The Storr, to more family-orientated events like 'Exploring the Shore' at Ashaig or searching for 'Bugs and Beasties' at Armadale, the leaflet has something for everyone. There is even a guided bike ride to Hallaig on Raasay in July.

There are walks to look for specific wildlife or landscape features such as the 'Peatlands and Pavements' walk around Camus Malag on 20th May. Here, the astonishing array of wildflowers between two

neighbouring habitats can be compared. On the other hand,

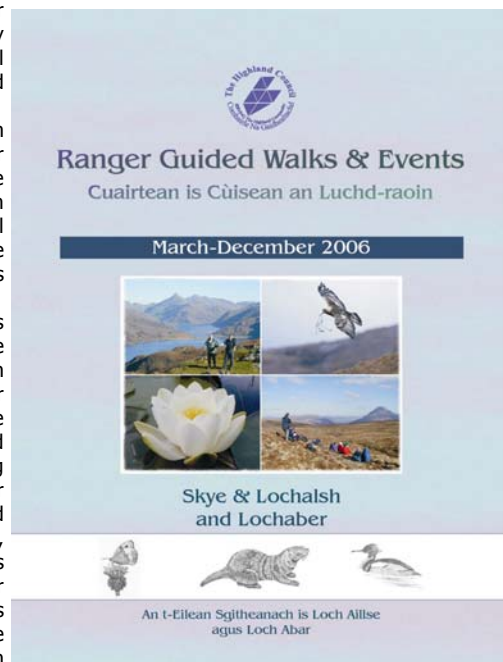
which abounds at dusk. Why not try a late evening walk in Trotternish in June, looking and listening for some of our more elusive and uncommon wildlife? Or in August, come along for a 'Bat Detectives' evening at Armadale Castle.

These areas also offer some superb coastal scenery. Come and join a Ranger guided walk to enjoy these places like exploring Ullinish and Oransay or Point of Sleat; look for fossils dating back to the time of the dinosaurs at Berreraig Bay in Trotternish; or walk out to the spectacular Bìod an Athair, the highest sea cliffs on Skye.

Each event is graded to give an indication of difficulty and most have a distance marked to help choose the right

walks. Contact the organiser detailed in the booklet if you need any information on the walks or events.

Highland Council Countryside Rangers are a partnership between The Highland Council and Scottish Natural Heritage.



A HIDDEN HIGHLAND GEM

Ancient Scottish woodlands probably conjure up images of pine and birch but the uncommon Aspen is a precious tree that a multitude of plants and animals rely on for food and shelter.

Many of these plants and animals have low abilities to disperse further afield. Their long term survival is dependant on continued regeneration of new Aspen trees and the linking up of isolated Aspen woods through woodland conservation schemes.

Aspen occurs in places as diverse as north Africa and Japan. In Britain it is most common in northern Scotland. It does not flower and set seed very often, and most of the new growth takes place through young shoots called suckers. In the Highlands, Aspen grows to an average of 10 metres high

and they have greenish grey and smooth bark. Older trees are often covered with dark lichens which gives the trunk a black appearance. During survey work on Aspen between 2000 and 2004, eight lichen species new to Britain were found.

Aspen leaves are round and have irregular blunt teeth around their edges. When the leaves first open in spring they are a copper colour, before turning green. In autumn the leaves turn a brilliant yellow, or in some cases red. The leaf stalks are flattened and very flexible, causing the characteristic quiver in the wind. Grazing animals like deer and sheep are attracted to Aspen for food. Several different types of fungi, lichens, mosses and liverworts occur only on Aspen.

In the Highlands there are two special insects which need

Aspen. The Dark Bordered Beauty Moth is known from only two small populations in Scotland - its caterpillars feed on fresh young Aspen leaves which grow on young suckers in open spaces.

In contrast, the Aspen Hoverfly grubs live on the fresh dead timber of the oldest Aspen. As the outer layers of wood, under the bark rot down, the grubs feed on this decaying matter.

If you would like more information about Aspen, its flora and fauna, and how you can help to survey for Aspen in your local area, contact Ernest Emmett, Highland Aspen Group, Drumlins, Newtonmore, Inverness-shire PH21 1HD.

This is adapted from an article by Peter Cosgrove et al in the December 2005 issue of British Wildlife.



Aspen flower parasite