

# Rona and Sula Sgeir



‘In the Lap of Wild Ocean’

**The Atlantic coast of Britain is particularly well-off for islands. Packed with seabirds, Rona and Sula Sgeir are the most northwesterly of all. They cannot match the majesty and scale of St Kilda, but for all who have visited them, they have an appeal far in excess of their size. Together they form the most remote and least-visited National Nature Reserve in Britain.**

## **‘this Ronay’**

Rona lies 65 km (45 miles) out to sea and is only 115m at its highest point. Twenty kilometres (12 miles) to the southwest lies Sula Sgeir, about a kilometre long. It is nowhere more than 150m wide, but its cliffs reach 75m. Nesting gannets ‘paint’ this otherwise bleak little rock white with their guano. Rona is more spacious and green, with lush pasture clothing its southern slopes, and the highest and most densely-populated seabird cliffs on its north side.

‘Towards the north northeist from Lewis . . . lyes ane little ile callit Ronay . . . inhabit and manurit be simple people . . . abundance of corne growes on it by delving onlie, abundance of clover gerse for sheipe.’ Dean Monro 1549

## **‘Inhabit and manurit’**

It is surprising to think that Rona’s 300 isolated acres could ever have been inhabited. However, four families once dwelt here, their houses half underground to withstand the winter storms.

They were the most isolated community in the whole of Britain, finally abandoning their remote home in 1844. Sula Sgeir, without drinkable water or much vegetation, has never been inhabited.

## **Building on the past**

It seems that Rona's first inhabitant was a Celtic monk named St Ronan. Some 1200 years ago he sought solitude in a beehive-shaped cell of stone slabs, covered in turf. In medieval times a small rectangular chapel was added to Ronan's cell. The holed cross has been moved to Ness, Lewis for safe-keeping.

The best-preserved house on Rona is referred to as 'the Manse', but was actually restored to a liveable state by two men from Ness in 1884. Malcolm Macdonald and Murdo Mackay both died during their first winter and are buried beside the chapel.

Sula Sgeir has five bothies, made of overlapping slabs and they are still used by men from Ness during their annual gannet hunt. There is also a small medieval temple, its roof now collapsed.

## **Brushing a wing tip**

Fulmars (and starlings) occupy the ruins in summer, but the deserted buildings really come alive at night, when noisy Leach's and storm petrels return to their nest burrows. Rona and Sula Sgeir are two of only a handful of places along the fringes of Britain where the rare and protected Leach's petrel breeds. They ride out the winter far offshore, yet – like many seabirds – they can live for a remarkable length of time. One Leach's petrel was first ringed on Rona in 1972 and was still nesting there 30 years later! The tiny storm petrel is more widespread in Britain, but on Rona it is only numerous around the storm beach at Fianuis.

## **Full of wild fowl**

Rona is home to a variety of other seabirds, with some – like the auks (razorbills, guillemots and puffins) – in considerable numbers. But perhaps the most obvious of Rona's residents are the great black-backed gulls:

nearly a thousand pairs nest all over the island. Surrounded and totally outnumbered are 20 brave pairs of great skua or bonxie.

Around 10,000 pairs of gannet nest on Sula Sgeir. Despite a licensed annual harvest of 2000 fledglings (called 'gugas') by men from Ness, the breeding numbers have remained stable for many decades. Gugas are a delicacy in Lewis and the hunt has been a local tradition for hundreds of years.

### **Seal appeal**

Up to 100 sheep graze on Ronam, but other than whales and dolphins offshore, the only other mammal is the grey seal. Several hundred remain around the island all year but many more congregate to breed in the autumn. The flat peninsulas of Fianuis and Sceapull see about 1000 pups born each year, nearly half the number being born 25 years ago. The seals have been the subject of an important long-term population study with many animals in the colony individually marked for behavioural research. Some of these return to breed year after year, and at other times have been seen in Orkney, Norway or far out in the Atlantic.

### **Toughing it out**

Plant cover is influenced by wind and salt spray, and by the activities of seals and seabirds. Sula Sgeir is bare of soil and all that can grow are thrift, mayweed, orache, scurvy grass, pineapple weed, sea spurrey, meadow grass and some lichens. On the other hand, some 50 species of flowering plant occur on Rona, including the curious small adder's tongue fern. The rocks are patterned with a lush growth of lichen, especially where bird guano builds up, and no fewer than 87 species have been recorded. Rona also has 51 types of marine algae, 16 of them occurring on Sula Sgeir too.

## **Visiting the islands**

You may be able to charter a boat from Lewis or the mainland, but the islands are too remote for day visits. Good weather is essential, as there are no secure or sheltered anchorages on either island, and landing on the wet, slippery rocks is difficult.

Going ashore on Sula Sgeir can cause huge disturbance to the nesting seabirds. Rona's gulls and skuas will dive-bomb intruders, and seals – even the pups – will bite. Entering the seabird colonies can expose them to gull predation, while puffin burrows might collapse underfoot injuring both people and birds. It is also illegal to dig into the Scheduled Monuments or to disturb the petrels nesting in them.

Please contact SNH in advance if you intend visiting and take a reserve supply of food in case bad weather stops you leaving. High winds are frequent and often violent, whilst the rocks, sheer cliffs and steep slopes can be very dangerous.

**The Reserve lies 45 miles northwest of Cape Wrath in Sutherland (and the same distance northeast of the Butt of Lewis) and is just visible on the horizon on clear days. It can only be reached by private boat charter.**

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