

Durness Walking Network

Produced by:-
The Highland Council's Planning and Development Service
with the assistance of the Highland Access Project
in association with Durness Community Council and
Durness Development Group.

Explore a wide range of routes
in & around
Durness

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The Caithness Biodiversity Collection
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The Highland Access Project



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The Highland Council
Comhairle na Gaidhealtachd
SERVING The Highland Community



Highlands & Islands
ENTERPRISE

Lìonradh Coiseachd Dhiùirnis

The Durness Path Network

The area covered by the Durness path network may seem largely wild and remote in character but it remains a working landscape that is also highly important for wildlife and plants. Most of the routes pass through extensively grazed areas, including open hill and heath, where dogs should be kept under close control particularly before and during the lambing season and through the breeding season for birds - most of which are ground nesting in this area. Common sense with regards to young livestock is necessary and areas with calves and lambs should be avoided. Please keep to the routes as described in the booklet and respect the areas life and work.



Burragaig

The routes as described in this booklet are largely traditional routes and tracks, many of which have not been 'improved' to make a surfaced path. In many cases, such as the Kyle and Aodann routes, there is merely rudimentary waymarking to guide people at certain points. This approach has been agreed locally to limit the impact of the path network on the landscape, people and wildlife and it is hoped that this approach is understood and appreciated by visitors.

The Community hopes that you enjoy your time in the area.

The distances noted throughout this booklet relate to the distance of the actual routes as drawn on the maps and on the signposts for the routes on the ground. Please keep this in mind when calculating your journey times and routes from given start points around Durness e.g. if you are starting your walk from the main car park by the tourist information centre and you are heading for the Faraid Head route, you will have an additional distance to travel before you can get to the start/finish of the route. All distances noted in this booklet and on the signposts are approximate.



Clach Bheag and Clach Mhor na

Please be responsible and follow the Scottish Outdoor Access Code when using the Durness Path Network. A quick guide to this Code can be found on Page 15 of this booklet.

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Please take particular care in the more remote parts of the path network - if in doubt go prepared for a hill walk rather than a country stroll, and keep in mind that mobile phone coverage is 'limited'.

Enjoy the Durness Path Network and respect its life and work.....

- ❖ Leave gates as you find them
- ❖ Keep dogs under close control
- ❖ Keep to promoted routes through fields
- ❖ Use gates and stiles to cross fences and walls
- ❖ Respect the privacy of buildings, farm and croft steadings
- ❖ Respect farm livestock, crops and machinery
- ❖ Take your litter home with you
- ❖ Protect wildlife and plants
- ❖ Guard against risk of fire
- ❖ Make no unnecessary noise



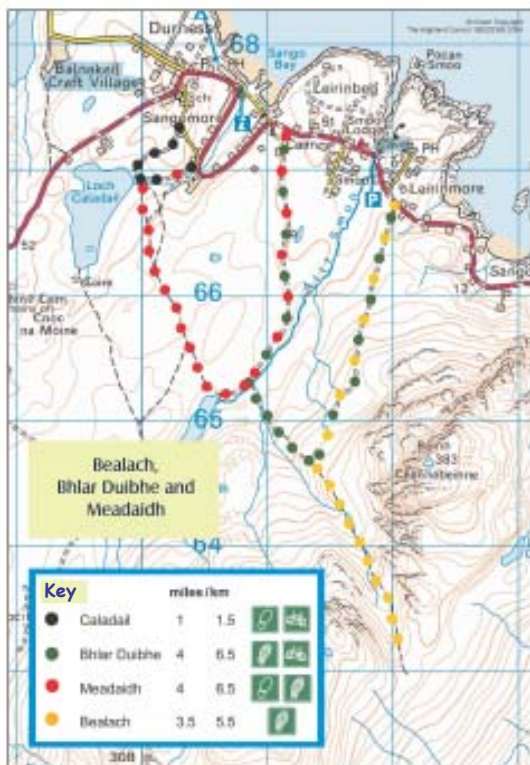
Puffins

1. Bealach/Ceannabeinne 5.5km



The hillwalk

This route follows a well-defined gravelled hill track to an impressive viewpoint. The route starts on the right hand side of the road as you are leaving Durness at Leirinmore just past the Smoo Cave Hotel sign and is clearly sign posted. Alternatively a longer route can be chosen by following the **Meadaidh route**, taking the turning towards the hills across the Allt Smoo burn just before reaching Loch Meadaidh. The track makes for easy walking, if a little arduous, as it is all uphill! If going beyond the track to tackle Beinn Ceannabeinne or even to hike across to the settlement of Laid, full hill walking gear and map reading skills are required. Spectacular views from the ridge over Loch Eriboll and Laid are not to be missed on a clear day. This route is an ancient link road through the parish and is still used by crofters and shepherds today, which may mean that quad bikes and 4x4s may be encountered!



Faraid Head

2. Bhlar Duibhe 6.5km



Up, across and down.

The route starts on the right hand side of the road as you are leaving Durness at Leirinmore just past the Smoo Cave Hotel sign and is clearly sign-posted. Follow the track along the side of Ceannabeinne until it comes to the junction with the Bealach track. This is the area known as Bhlar Duibhe. Turn right and head downhill, fording the Smoo burn at the junction with the Meadaidh track. Turn right and head back towards the village. Vehicles used by local crofters also take this route, as does the occasional mountain biker.

Flora

The lower levels of this walk provide an enjoyable moorland experience with typical Scottish heathland flowers. All three common types of heathers can be found; the earlier flowering purple Bell heather, not as widespread as the lilac coloured Ling which flowers in late summer and, on the wetter boggy ground, the more delicate looking pink Cross-leaved heath. Amongst the heather look for the many coloured variations of Heath Spotted Orchid and the brilliant blue of the tiny Milkwort contrasting with the tiny sunspot yellow of the ubiquitous Tormentil.



Cross leaved heath

Across the richly coloured moss covered boggy ground, dotted white by the bobbing heads of Bog Cotton, examine the plants closely to find the carnivores! Beautiful red and yellow Sundews glistening with fatal attraction for insects beside the pale green star-like spread leaves of the blue flowering Butterwort, another plant we need more of to help tackle the midges.



Sundew

Desiccation - many plants in exposed, windy situations develop ways of retaining moisture to prevent drying out.

On the higher more exposed ground the plant life changes. Look amongst the hard quartzite rocks and ancient Juniper trees for very low ground hugging shrubs.

Also look between the lichen decorated rocks and you will find Stonecrop with an attractive little white flower and succulent, fleshy leaves which prevent desiccation.

These are just a few gems amongst many on Ceannabeinne, take your time to study what is at your feet when not taking in the fine views!

3. Caladail 1.5km



Out to the Loch and back

The Caladail walk is a wee walk within the bounds of Durness. It follows mainly gravel tracks, is around 2km long and can be strolled in under an hour. Turn right toward the village square on leaving the Tourist Information car park and walk up to Mackays Rooms and Restaurant and turn left. Follow the main road and turn left on School Road between the Health Centre and the School. Follow the road past the playing field, past the houses to the hut of the volunteer fire brigade. Leave the road and take a right along the track toward Loch Caladail. At the foot of the hill follow the fence and the track by the Sango Burn back to Sangomore. Follow the road towards the sea and the TIC. For those wishing a shorter circular route remain on the road at the fire station and continue along School Road to Sangomore.

Points of Interest

The stone buildings beside the Mace Shop were the stables for the Durness Hotel which stood in The Square until it was burnt down in 1908. The Primary School dates from the 1840s and the adjoining Schoolhouse has unusual chimneys typical of Sutherland Estate buildings of the 1860s. The new fire station was built in 2005 to replace the Nissan Hut that dated from the Radar Station built in Durness during the Second World War. Loch Calladale was dammed in 1906 to provide a water supply for the village and is a limestone loch, rich in aquatic life, notably trout.

What may be seen?

Central to this fine short walk are the crofts of the village. Some are well grazed, some ploughed and some deliberately left fallow for long periods. The fields are sectioned off to permit wild flower and rich herb growth with a view to protecting the habitat of the rare Corncrake. The crofters are working with the RSPB to encourage the return of this special bird.

Whilst passing the primary school note the tree planting efforts by the pupils. Native trees such as hazel, birch, oak and willow have been grown from seed and carefully planted out.

Look out for Tufted duck and Common terns on Loch Caladil, another fine fishing loch. The white flashing rump of Wheatears will draw your attention to these ground nesters that are common here. Stonechats may accompany you down this track, escorting you around with loud 'chats', like stone on stone.

There are also a wealth of wild flowers along the trackside and in the wetter patches. Orchids, Marsh Marigolds, Ragged Robin and Meadowsweet, bobbing white Bog Cotton and starry Yellow Asphodel, just to name a few, each season brings different delights. Otters are known to frequent the loch and use the burn to pass to the sea. - an early morning jaunt may provide a fortunate sighting. Go silently!



Stonechat

4. Aodann (Edens) 4.0km



Beaches and Cliffs

From the Tourist Information Centre walk through the village heading towards Balnakeil. The start of the Aodann walk is on your right just past the large white former church, now the joiner's workshop. Follow the track through the fields and across two open fields separated by a drystone dyke. On the skyline are the remains of two old military buildings that mark the highest part of the route. From there follow the cliff top back towards the fields, go through the gate and follow the track towards the house and farm steading at Balnakeil. This will take you to the car park at the ruined Balnakeil church. The minor road can then be followed back into Durness.

What may be seen?

Aodann Mhor (The Edens)

There was a farming township here until the early 17th century. It was swept away by the third Lord Reay, chief of Clan Mackay, when he remodelled his lands at Balnakeil. Along the wall separating the headland from the fields can be seen the traces of runrigs, the long narrow cultivation strips which were created at this time.

Seanachaisteal (The Old Castle)

This is the remains of a promontory fort, probably of iron age date and reputedly destroyed by Vikings in 1265. Led by King Hakon, the Vikings were on their way to defeat by the Scots at the Battle of Largs, bringing to an end Norse domination of the Western Isles. While they were here they burnt twenty townships in the immediate area. The most obvious feature of the fort is the defence ditch. On a small, precarious headland to the right of the fort the faint traces of a monastic cell can be seen. This was associated with the 8th century monastery at Balnakeil. The flat roofed buildings date from the early 1950s and were the site of a radar mast and equipment for detecting aeroplanes flying at very low levels. Burragaig. This is an unusual beach for Durness as it is composed of large pebbles, rather than sand. Seaweed was gathered here by crofters in the past to be used as fertilizer in their fields.

Plants and wildlife you may see:

White Field Gentian, Primrose, Meadowsweet, Monkey Flower, Grass of Parnassus, Wild Thyme, Red Bartsia, Mayweed, Eyebright, Orchids, Violets, Roseroot, Sea Champion, Scots Lovage Ragwort, Rockrose, Wild Angelica, Burdock, Ragged Robin, Harebell, Bards Foot Trefoil, Violets, Dune Pansies, Yellow, Saxifaras, Forgetmenot, Marsh marigold, Thrift Terns, Fulmars, Great Black backs, Herring Gulls, Buzzard, Corncrake, Lapwing, Curlew, Mallard, Eider, Starlings, Gannets, Meadow Pipits, Pied Wagtail, Rock Pipit, Sedge warbler, Reed Bunting, Black Headed Gull, Guillemot, Shag, Hooded Crow, Raven, Rabbits, Fox, Badger, Seals, Whales, Voles, Otter, Polecat and Feral Cats.



Minke whale

5. The Faraid Head Walk 4.0km ●●●●

Stunning coastal route

The main starting point to this route is from the shore at Balnakeil Bay. From the car park, walk along the beach to the other end where a road heads up into the dunes. Continue along this road until you reach the MOD property on Faraid Head. Follow the fence to the right, which leads on to a viewpoint marked with a cairn. From here head back through the dunes to link with the road. As a further option at low tide it is possible to walk from the far end of the beach round the rocky headland to the main beach and return to Balnakeil.

What may be seen?

Balnakeil is from the Gaelic meaning village or place of the church. The sandy bay is crescent shaped and facing west where bathing is safe from pollution, unspoilt and quiet. The area offers unparalleled sunsets.

Machair - a Gaelic word meaning an area of grasslands enriched by wind blown shell sand abundant with wild flowers.

The sand dunes are a dramatic feature and are reminiscent of desert scenery. The rear of the dunes form a machair. Balnakeil House was a seat of the Clan Mackay and was, until the late 18th century the home of the Master of Reay, the chief's eldest son. It dates from 1744, although portions, such as the wall facing the church, are older. It was originally a monastic site founded by the Celtic saint, Maelrubha about 720AD. The church dates from 1619, built on the site of the early medieval building. It was extended in 1690 and remodelled in the 1720s. Within the church is the grave of a notorious villain Donald MacMhurchadh or MacLeod, who died in 1623. In the graveyard can be seen several interesting 18th and 19th century gravestones. The most notable monument is that to Rob Donn, who was a great Gaelic poet of the 18th century. The farm was considered to be one of the most productive in the Highlands and was one of the first to be improved in the very early 19th century.

The substantial stone dykes surrounding the fields date from this time. It is a prominent sheep farm today. The mill, used for grinding oats, was built in the early 19th century and last used as such about 1912.

Plants (or Flora) you may see:-

White Field Gentian, Primrose, Meadow Sweet, Monkey Flower, Grass of Parnassus, Wild Thyme, Red Bartsia, May Weed, Eyebright, Orchids, Violets, Roseroot, Sea Campion and Scots Lovage.

Wildlife

Puffins, Terns, Fulmars, Great Black Backs, Herring Gulls, Buzzard, Corncrake, Lapwing, Curlew, Mallard, Eider, Starlings, Rabbits, Fox, Badger, Voles, Seals, Whales, Porpoises and Picture Puffins.



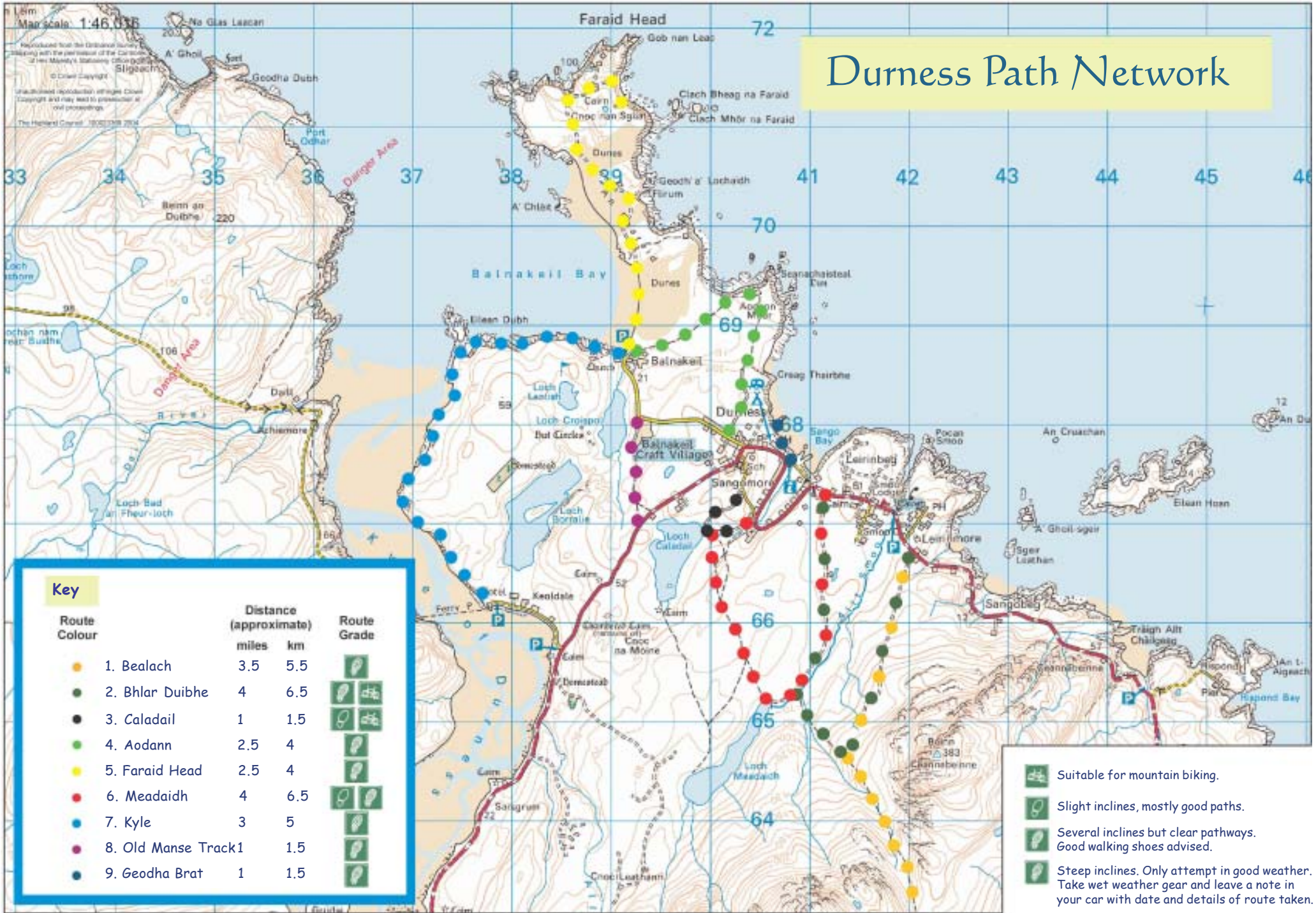
Eyebright

Geodha Brat viewpoint ●●●●

The Geodha Brat route currently provides a short walk out to the viewpoint overlooking Sango Bay, providing a good vantage point for seawatching on calm days. This is a particularly favoured spot for photography of the Bay and general setting of the area. Access for the Geodha Brat route is from the main car park by the Tourist Information Centre.



Durness Path Network



6. The Meadaidh Walk 6.5km



A Route of two Lochs

The Meadaidh walk is a low-level moorland route. The walk follows a well-defined route, much of which is on a gravel track. The section between Loch Meadaidh and Loch Caladail is unsurfaced, necessitating suitable protective footwear as it becomes boggy in wet weather. Tackle this walk by leaving the Tourist Information Centre (TIC) car park and following the main road towards Durness Church. The start of the route is marked with a finger post directing you to follow a track on the right hand side of the road. The first Loch that you pass in this direction is Loch Caladail before you cross the boggy section of link route to Loch Meadaidh and rejoin a gravel track leading back to the village. On rejoining the main road, the little minor road following the coast can be taken as a short cut back to the TIC. The route is way marked with red banded posts on the cross-country section and can be tackled from either direction.

What may be seen?

The moorland between the road and the Loch is composed of peat, the result of thousands of years of slowly decaying plant material in waterlogged conditions - a reflection of the areas rainfall. Peat when dried makes a useful fuel, an important resource in a treeless area although it is a local saying that 'the most heat generated from peat is in the cutting rather than the burning' - a reflection of the hard work in digging and laying out the peats to dry!

A coal fuelled fire gives out as much as four times the amount of heat than that produced by the same weight of peat!

The acidic nature of the peat is balanced by the alkaline nature of the underlying limestone as you cross between Loch Meadaidh and Loch Caladail. This change is noted in the change in vegetation, which is both greener and is comprised of different species and ratios of moorland plants. A further effect is in the Lochs themselves as the more alkaline Loch Caladail supports more aquatic life and bigger, pink-fleshed Brown Trout than does the acidic Loch Meadaidh, resulting in Caladail being the favoured Loch for the fishermen.

Plants to see

The flora is common typical heath vegetation and will vary through the season including many lichens and mosses. Ling Heather, Bell Heather, Bog Asphodel, Milkwort, Sundew, Crowberry, Lousewort, Tormentil.

On the Limestone there are changes in the Flora. Look for Daisies, Butterworts, Bedstraw, Mountain Everlasting, Common Orchids, Cotton Grass, Mountain Avens, Yellow Saxifrage and Thyme.



Early purple
Orchid

7. The Kyle of Durness Walk 5.0km



A wild coastal experience

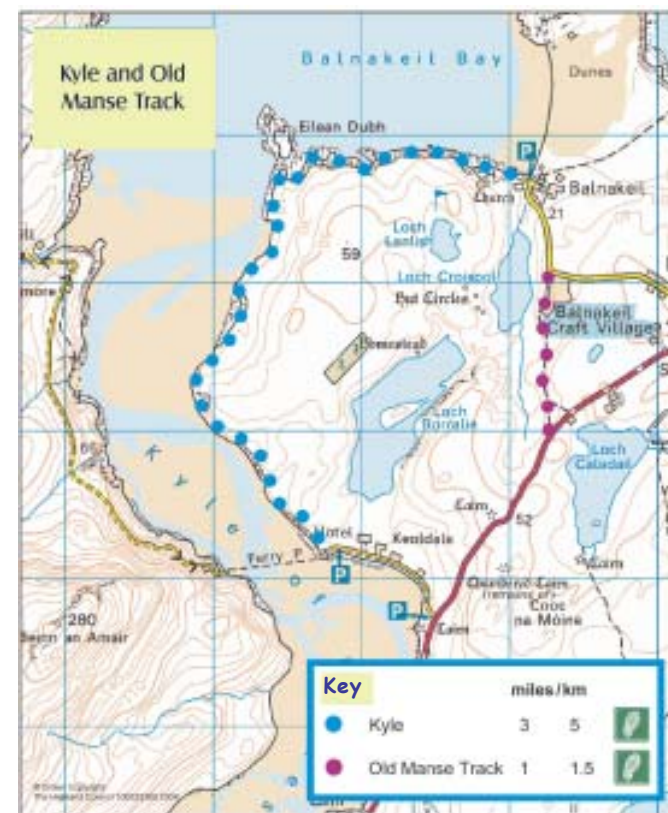
This is a remote coastal route providing dramatic coastal vistas and unspoilt beaches. From the Tourist Information Centre (TIC) walk to the village square and follow the road to Balnakeil.

From the car park at the ruined kirk (church) follow the road round to the Golf Course. Enter through the gate and follow the sign for walkers and the route marked by boulders. The route from this point follows the coastline and care should be taken on the steeper sections as this is a wild route without any path surface. Follow the coast leaving the defined track at the gate exiting the golf course. Extreme caution

is advised if you walk on the sands as the incoming tide covers the sand very quickly. By keeping the sea on your right hand side you can safely walk all the way to the Cape Wrath Ferry pier on the west side of the Kyle of Durness. From the pier follow the road back to the village. If you have left your car at Balnakeil take the track on the left - marked as the Old Manse track, about 1.5km from the Pier and return by the Old Manse and Balnakeil Craft village. Depending on the variation this walk can take between 3-5 hours and is over rough ground.

What may be seen?

Just before entering the golf course along the shore of Balnakeil there are good specimens of stromatolites and the area, including the golf course, is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The interpretative panel at the club house is worth reading. As you leave the golf course the rare Scottish Primrose can be seen in the vicinity of the fence. You are now entering an area rich in archaeology.



What may be seen cont...

The small fenced area is an interesting geological feature, a blow hole—an underground inlet of the sea. The small ruined buildings are the remains of Solmar, a settlement that was inhabited until the 1880s. From this point there is no real defined track but the route is through a stable dune system. The ferry takes you across to the Cape side for the bus to Cape Wrath. The Cape Wrath Hotel is the former estate house of Keoldale and dates from the 1860s. The farm is run by the Durness Sheepstock Club. Durness Youth Club millennium stone stands at the road junction.

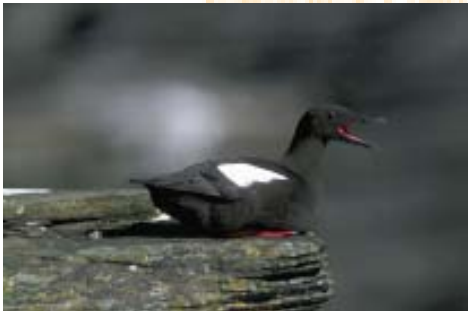
If you follow the Manse route back to Balnakeil an excellent example of a limestone drystone dyke borders the track. The ruins of the old school (1765) on the left below the manse are worth a visit.

The alternative is to continue to walk back to the village square and turn right back to Sangomore and the TIC.

Stromatolite-trace fossils of algae which can be seen on limestones.
One of the earliest fossils to be found.

Plants and Wildlife you may see:

Very variable depending on the season — Bog Asphodel, Scottish Primrose, Grass of Parnassus Twaydude, Scented Orchid, Marsh Orchid, Early Purple Orchid, Burdock, Eyebright, Hellebore, Kidney Vetch, Primrose, Hare Bell, Spring Squill, Butterwort, Yellow Saxifrage, Milkwort, Trefoil, Bedstraw, Ragwort, Thyme, Meadow Pipit, Wheatear, Tystie, Common Gull, Black Headed Gull, Common Tern, Shag, Wagtail, Twite, Starling, Swallow, Eider, Red Throated Diver, Buzzard, Corncrake (calling), oystercatcher, Curlew, Ringed Plover, Heron, Black Guillemots, Common Seal, Rabbits, Porpoises, Otters, Badgers and Foxes.



Black Guillemot



Bog Asphodel

8. The Old Manse Track 1.5km



A wee link track through time

This is a straightforward short walk following roads and an old cart track. Take a right turn from the Tourist Information car park toward the Village Square. Veer right on the road to Balnakeil, pass the craft village and at the corner turn left through the gate onto The Manse track with Loch Croispol on the right. An interesting detour is possible at The Manse by following the path leading to the loch and the ruined school, return by the same route and continue following the track. At the main road turn left to enter Durness from the South taking care of the passing traffic on this single track section of road. At the village square turn right, heading back to Sango.



Old school

What may be seen?

In the Village Square note the stone feature which once housed a clock and now contains an information plaque. The large white building, now a joiners workshop, was Durness Parish Church from 1847 to the 1950s. Balnakeil Craft Village is a collection of unusual buildings built in the late 1950s as an Early Warning Station in the case of nuclear attack. It was never commissioned and in 1964 was turned into a craft centre housing a wide variety of crafts.



Balnakeil church

Loch Croispol is nearly one kilometre long and supplied by subterranean streams through the limestone rocks.

The Old School below the Manse on the shore of Loch Croispol was built in 1765 and is one of the earliest purpose built schools in the Highlands. It closed in 1861. The Manse was the former home of the parish minister. It dates from 1728 with later extensions.

Going outdoors?

A quick guide to the Scottish Outdoor Access Code

Scotland's outdoors is a great place to enjoy and there are new rights that provide better access opportunities for everyone. These rights come with responsibilities, not only for those enjoying the outdoors but also for landowners, farmers and others who work on the land. This guide tells you about your rights and responsibilities.

You can exercise your access rights, at any time of day or night, over much of Scotland, from urban parks and path networks to our hills and forests, and from farmland to our beaches, lochs and rivers. Remember that access rights don't apply everywhere, such as in buildings or their immediate surroundings (such as houses and gardens), or if you trample crops or cause other damage.

Access rights cover many activities ranging from:

- ❖ walking to mountaineering;
- ❖ picnicking to horse riding;
- ❖ canoeing to hang gliding; and from
- ❖ outdoor education to simply going from one place to another.

Remember that your access rights don't apply to hunting, shooting, fishing or any kind of motorised activity (unless for disabled access).

Know the Code before you go...

You only have access rights if you exercise them responsibly - the Scottish Outdoor Access Code tells you about this. The key thing is to use your common sense.ie

- ❖ Take responsibility for you own actions;
- ❖ Respect people's privacy and peace of mind.

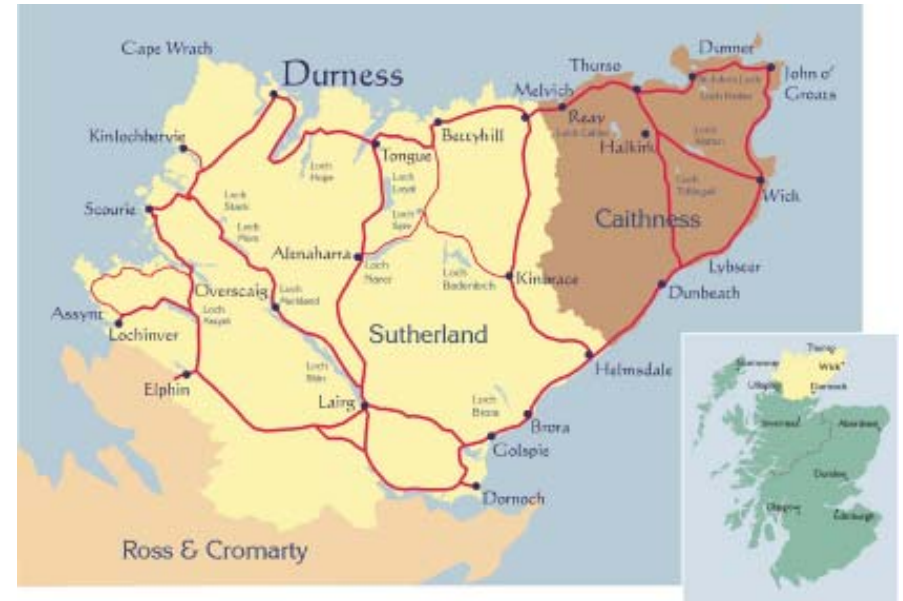
You can also help by:

- ❖ looking for alternative routes before entering a field with animals;
- ❖ not feeding animals;
- ❖ leaving gates as you find them;
- ❖ not damaging fences or walls; and by
- ❖ avoiding damage to crops by using paths and tracks, by using the margins of the field, or by going over ground that hasn't been planted;
- ❖ care for the environment;
- ❖ keep your dog under proper control.

For more details:

Tel: SNH (01738 458545) or www.outdooraccess-scotland.com
or E:mail pubs@SNH.gov.uk

Durness location.....



....and views

The Highland Council Countryside Rangers



The Highland Council Countryside Rangers also provide walks in this area. For further information contact:

Donald Mitchell
Tourist Information Centre
Sangomore
Sutherland
Tel: 01971 511756

or visit www.highland.gov.uk/plintra/environ/rangers/rangers.htm



Notes

