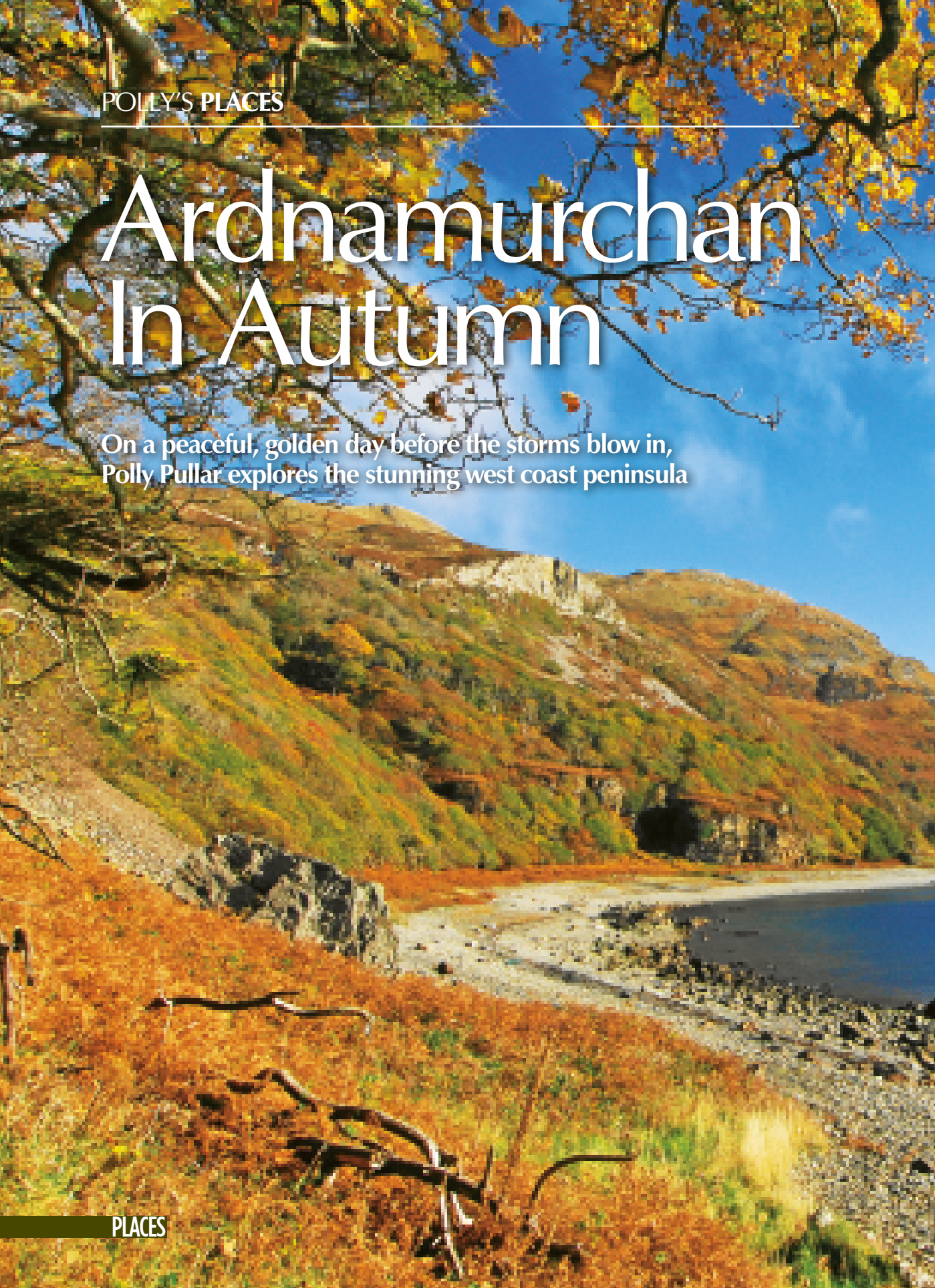
Ardnamurchan In Autumn

On a peaceful, golden day before the storms blow in, Polly Pullar explores the stunning west coast peninsula



Oakwoods overlooking the Sound of Mull

IT'S early, the ground is soaked with dew, and beaded droplets clutch onto tawny grasses as every bog seems decorated for a celebration. A lone white cloud at a loose end drifts idly over Eigg and Muck, but Rum's familiar peaks Hallival, Askival and Sgurr nan Gillean peep through. There is promise of a balmy day.

The headland glows russet, the sea is navy blue and Dougie's sheep cud peacefully in a stand of gale-battered birch. The bracken, through which we have cursed and waded all summer, is now having its only moment of glory and it, too, is turning a rich gold before it withers.

The little oakwood that contours the Ockle burn down to the sea at Inverockle is a patchwork, its birches purple and their tangle of witch's brooms, more akin to huge nests, now conspicuous. On the tawny headland, heather is laced with dewy backlit cobwebs.

A sparrowhawk dashes between gnarled trunks jinking and stalling, emerging to soar high over the sea, circling and disappearing into the vortex.

In the blonde grasses, where bog myrtle scents the air, is a roe doe with twins. The fawns, almost as big as their mother, have had a lush summer; low sun etches their outlines with ginger. There is not a whisper of a breeze; midges have been noticeably absent for some weeks.

Rum begins to emerge, its cloud cover diminishing. Muck and Eigg are making their morning debut too. I stand on the headland with the collies and listen to the silence.

Flocks of fieldfares and redwings are arriving from Scandinavia. The sparrowhawk cruises effortlessly into their midst and lazily plucks one from mid-air. Feathers float to earth, the rest of the flock disperses to find rowan and other berries; the woods are drowsy.

Pictures: POLLY PULLAR

"The sparrowhawk plucks a redwing lazily from mid-air"

Pine marten and fox scats are filled with rowanberries. They feast gluttonously and many pass largely undigested; the winter thrushes are not the only ones taking advantage.

While the summer migrants have long departed, the skies are a thoroughfare for geese. Skeins add patterns and staccato music to scudding clouds, but when the world is lost in dense mist, a plaintive wistful call can occasionally be picked out through the chatter of burn and sea.

Now the rut is in full swing, the hills electrified with the roaring of stags mustering their harems of hinds, engaging in battles, the clashing of their antlers echoing in the glens. They grunt and bellow, fighting off competitors while running themselves ragged. I have come to one of my most cherished haunts to lie and watch them.

From Camus Nan Geall, a winding shore path skirts between spectacular rocks shaped like prehistoric beasts, amid otter holts and raven roosts, where buzzards mew and cry. The shore is rocky, with raised pebble beaches. The stones are rounded, sucked and pulled incessantly, massaged by centuries of tides.

I follow the small burn that falls off Ben Hiant's slopes. Vestiges of summer on a last fling – oxeye daisies, goat's beard and gorse that bears flowers in every month of the year. A bleached ash tree has already dropped most of its leaves. It stands skeletal, an old hoodie's nest in its fork.

I am going to Bourblaige, a lonely spot overlooking the Sound of Mull. It was here that some 26 families eked out a meagre existence dependent on fishing, battered by unforgiving gales sweeping in from the west.

There is not only fascination, but melancholy too. I imagine the sound of voices, the cries of children and the clink of a bucket, bleating of goats and lowing of cattle.

When I was a child, the late crofter Malcolm

An abandoned croft house at Plocaig

MacMillan of Grigadale told me that Bourblaige suffered the same fate as hundreds of other small townships all over the Highlands. The landlord responsible for the clearance of this village was one Sir James Riddell.

Malcolm said that the end came during the winter, when life would have been hardest; their small Highland cattle were driven off the hill, their dogs and goats shot. The lazy beds were ploughed up and finally the houses set afire. The people fled to the nearby crofting townships on the north side until they had to relocate elsewhere. In his book *The Highland Clearances*, Alexander MacKenzie writes that the events here took place in 1828.

John MacLachlan wrote of Bourblaige in 1830:

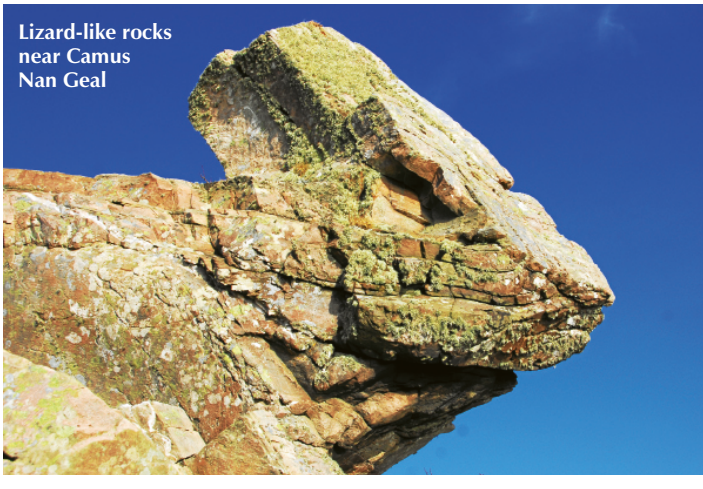
So many poor cottages in disarray,
in green ruins on each side,
and houses without a roof
in heaps beside the water-spring
Where the fire and the children were,
That's where the rushes have grown tallest.

High above a golden eagle soars, like buzzard and raven, it benefits from this time of plenty. During the stalking season, grallochs (deer entrails) left on the open hill are an important part of its diet.

Deer are quite close – three stags of fairly even size, spattered in black peat. Their pungent aroma fills the air. They have been urinating in the hag and then wallowing. It's effective; the blacker stags seem more threatening. Their grunts and roars go on and on, while younger beasts wait in the wings. Perhaps by the end of this fraught period, when the big lads are run-up and exhausted, shadows of their former glory, then there may be a brief chance. In autumn the hinds are all the more beautiful; one is usually on the edge of the group, keeping watch.

A hail-laden shower drives across the Sound of Mull. It passes through and on towards Coll. The weather is »

Pippin and Molly, Loch Sunart



Lizard-like rocks near Camus Nan Geal

A wary hind keeps watch

turning colder, the wind has a sting in its tail.

In the oak woods, autumn has brought its windfall of woodcock. Shy and secretive, they find invertebrates on the woodland floor. They move so fast, there's little chance to see the shades of their immaculate brown plumage.

I have had the privilege of pine marten viewing with friends here who know the individual martens that visit their garden. I have been so close that I can recognise their surprisingly sweet aroma, similar to that of sun-warmed earth. Stunningly beautiful, arboreal and athletic, these agile mustelids have a catholic diet and a penchant for sweet things. Each has a uniquely marked gorgette, a yellow cravat stippled with cocoa-coloured markings.

Reflections on Loch Sunart and glassy Loch Mudle steal my breath as I drive along the tiny road. At Camus Nan Geall, the sun setting over Mull is a blood orange, squeezing out its colour over the steel-grey Sound and turning MacLean's Nose into a silhouette at the foot of Ben Hiant.

Next day, curtains of cloud drive in again; another gale is brewing. By night it has become angry and destructive. Holed-up in the cottage, as it rudely rattles the slates and rain batters down, there is an inexplicable calm. The dogs whine, there is a loud crack, the wind is screaming.

"Pine martens smell surprisingly sweet, like sun-warmed earth"

By morning the beast is abed, the sun is somewhere close sending apologetic rainbows across the sea, and rays of light to melt cloud from distant hills. A male hen harrier quarters the headland. There is a smattering of snow on the peaks of Knoydart, Skye and Rosbhein.

Momentarily brilliant lights are on again; the view is liquid amber. It changes in a flash and as autumn hands over to another protracted winter, there is altercation, benign one minute and fury the next.

A male stonechat with his immaculate chestnut plumage and neat black hood perches on a wizened stem. This tiny bird punctuates the morning with an exclamation mark, and adds his touch of brilliance amid the storms he weathers all year.

● Polly's not our only columnist to visit the gorgeous Ardnamurchan peninsula this month. We sent whisky writer Euan Duguid to Ardnamurchan Distillery, one of the newest in Scotland. Read his excellent article on page 120.