

Ardnamurchan In Summer

Polly Pullar leads us on a glorious nature trail
along the remote peninsula she calls home





A SHY, flustered lady at a talk I was giving once, introduced me to the assembled audience as a “naturist from Ardnamurchan”. It certainly broke the ice and got us off to a hilarious start.

While I have viewed the area as one of the finest in the country for natural history, I have yet to be persuaded of the skinny dipping option. However soon after this I was photographing shells and flowers at Sanna, creeping down low to capture the deep pink of thrift against a turquoise backdrop of sea, when I spied a couple standing on a rock who clearly felt differently. The amusing back view vignette was completed by the accompaniment of a particularly vast black dog!

Summers here are erratic with long days of heavy rain that seems to make the bracken grow before your eyes. And then there are the midges that can make early mornings and late evenings a living hell. On the other hand when the sea is the colour of topaz and as clear as gin, and just as emotionally intoxicating, and the sky is fluffed with soft white clouds, it becomes heaven on earth.

The deer, now resplendent in summer coats the hue of burnished conkers, sensibly take to the hills to avoid the vagaries of an ill assortment of insects. By June the first calves have been born brilliantly camouflaged, dappled with pale spots as if to imitate the hill landscape festooned

in wavering bog cotton. In sunlight the palette of bog colour seems even more vibrant; mosses and liverworts a range of acidic green and emerald, red, gold, ochre, orange, yellow, glistening with tiny sundews laden with midges, fringed by swathes of yellow flag iris, and scattered with patches of asphodel, and marsh marigold.

On the grassland and heath amid a soothing hum of bees, delicate marsh and heath-spotted orchids, red and white clover, kidney vetch, and the tiny delicate eyebright, attract a wealth of other insects and butterflies too. A craggy heron attired in drab ministerial grey calls from the shore, and then with long legs incongruously outstretched, returns to the bustling heronry with food for its reptilian-looking youngsters high in a guano-spattered nest.

Most birds are busy with young, reed beds bustling with activity, snipe still drumming, rising high with the skylarks that sing their magnificent arias from dawn to dusk. The calls of oystercatcher and curlew carry on the salt-sea tang as ringed plover race up and down wet sand like clockwork toys, anxious to lure intruders from their eggs hidden amid shells and pebbles, framed by silverweed's yellow flowers.

On still days the wistful Hebridean laments of both grey and common seals hauled onto the skerries at low tide, add to the orchestrations of the wild. There are



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corncrakes in the iris beds rattling away all day and all night, cleverly conspicuous yet inconspicuous. Greylag geese stay here to breed now, though they never used to. They often rear large broods, something that is not always popular for they can damage crops, and frequently come into conflict with crofters.

On bright days in my childhood our teacher, Mary Cameron, who taught at Kilchoan primary school for over 30 years, might suggest a foray to the rock pools at Mingary pier. This, like the trips to the pond to collect frogspawn, fuelled my lifelong love for “guddling”, a word used for catching small trout by hand, something we also did as children. It can equally be used to describe the hours we spent turning over stones in rock pools marvelling at our discoveries.

I took my son to those same places when he was small and know of none better. I still while away hours there in sheer bliss until I realise my boots are leaky, and my hands are numb. Deep red anemones, starfish, brittle stars, cushion stars, prickly purple and green sea urchins, scuttling little fish with clear fins of fine gauze, and squat lobsters. And intriguing hermit crabs; flamboyant one minute, and then overcome with shyness as they pop back into their borrowed shells in a flash. All was absorbed and stored as a vital part of my early psyche, and »



Hermit crab



Starfish and
sea urchin

Red deer calf



Common blue butterfly
on kidney vetch



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has remained there since. Tins and wooden boxes housed the treasures I brought home: a gull’s mottled eggshell, dried sedges, a mermaid’s purse, shells of mother of pearl, and tiny yellow and orange periwinkles, as well as miniscule cowries. Once thoroughly examined, the living treasure was put gently back.

Otters abound all over Ardnamurchan. I once met one close to the top of Ben Hiant. Their signs are everywhere; slides, spore and spraint, and often worn places reveal holt sites beneath overhanging rocks. Sometimes while I am sitting daydreaming eating my piece beside a burn, they may float past almost unnoticed, lithe and sinuous and totally at one with the waltzing of the peaty water.

Long summer evenings when the sun stays up till almost midnight provide beautiful light for otter watching, and even on the wettest days, being absorbed by a pair of otters playing in a forest of bronze oar weed re-emerging



onto nearby rocks to noisily eat their catches makes me oblivious to rain running down my neck. I love to study the interaction between them and the malevolent hoodies, as the crows muscle in, even tweaking the otters' tails to see if it will persuade them to abandon their meals. I love, too, to watch gulls as well as hoodies with large dog whelks carrying them high, and then dropping them onto the rocks to smash. Sometimes it takes many attempts before the shell fractures and the birds gluttonously devour the succulent contents.

It was at Achateny during the 1970s while otter-watching veiled in a drizzle of mist that I had my first sighting of a magnificent sea eagle ripping up something deceased on the shore. At first it had its back to me, as it pulled at the meat with massive bill and talons. When it took to the air and effortlessly drifted in the direction of Rum across a sea the colour of pewter, and I saw its vastness, I was totally overcome. Sea eagles are now a common sight all over Ardnamurchan.

I have seen wildcats here, too. When I was a child I met one in the henhouse early one morning. I shall never forget its ire, and its spitting, hissing snarl as it backed into a corner and took on a defensive threat posture. Its eyes were an extraordinary green. I beat a hasty retreat as it vanished into thin air.

I have seen wildcats too in the oak woods and birches

along burnside. Recently the dogs put one up out of a tumbling shieling. I had a fleeting glimpse as it darted away melting into oblivion, but the aroma of cat lingered on the breeze. Sometimes we saw them in the car headlights as we returned home late travelling the 20-odd circuitous miles on the single-track road from Salen to Kilchoan.

For its size, this peninsula jutting far into the Atlantic, bordered by Loch Sunart and the Sound of Mull, is incredibly diverse. While the woods and hills are rich with flora and fauna, the area is a mecca for geologists. It has the largest, most complex ring dyke system to be found anywhere in the country, so large it can apparently be seen from outer space.

Ardnamurchan is also rich in marine mammals. When the sea is like a millpond, porpoises and dolphins can frequently be spotted from the headlands, and basking sharks, minke whales and orca are seen too. From Ardnamurchan Point, a panorama unfolds, a patchwork of islands in a fickle sea sometimes stormbound and angry, or blanketed in dense sea fog, or meek as a lamb.

On occasions sperm, humpback and fin whale are just some of the passing rarities recorded too. The vagaries of the climate, and the remoteness, mean that you are never sure what you might see. This is another reason why I adore this land and seascape with all my heart. ☐

Pictures: POLLY PULLAR