

POLLY'S PLACES

The Far North's Autumnal Secrets

Polly Pullar finds a mingling
of summer remnants and
heralds of winter in the
wilds of the Highlands





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FROM the mouth of a cave high above a limestone glen the primitive roaring of rutting stags reverberates, primeval echoes in silence to the accompaniment of the harsh “kraak” of raven.

A russet quilt sprawls below as the Allt nan Uamh – Gaelic for burn of the caves – makes unexpected appearances, bubbling forth suddenly in exuberant effervescent froth from deep below the earth where it journeys through a maze of curvaceous fissures.

Beneath a crag on the opposite hillside there lies a stag's body. Closer study through binoculars reveals fresh wounds, perhaps a fatal puncture inflicted in combat with another stag. Nature's undertakers, eagle, buzzard, raven and hooded crow are in the waiting room; the next repast will be easily won.

This ancient landscape has witnessed many such incidents over thousands and thousands of years. I daydream of bear, wolf, lynx, reindeer, Arctic fox and other beautiful lost creatures that ranged here, for their remains have been discovered within the caves' secret labyrinths; bones including those of humans unveiling a wealth of information of the last two glacial

*“Views stretch
from the Summer
Isles to Torridon”*



The Bone Caves, Assynt



Dewy cobwebs encircle a bracken stem



Mountains, loch
and perfect peace

periods. The Bone Caves of Inchnadamph, Sutherland, are among the most important in the country. Bones of polar bear were also discovered here.

Sutherland is another region I love wholeheartedly: Assynt and Coigach especially, isolated areas governed by mountains standing sentinel; girt rock-hewn bastions with castellated turrets, vertiginous needle-sharp ridges and profound gullies. They rise from auburn-gold of bog and moor, alone, independent – solitaires in a watery panorama of reed-fringed lochs.

Stac Pollaidh (Polly), a little hill with a volatile personality not to be taken lightly, was the first major mountain that I climbed when I was eight. It being my namesake probably had something to do with it. Even though it falls short of Munro status, its extraordinary shape, accessibility and capricious scrambles have made it popular. Erosion and time have gouged its flanks with pale scars exacerbated by thousands of pairs of human boots every year.

Famous, distinctive Suilven looms, its great buttress an elephant's forehead grey and grizzled, a puckered pachyderm of wrinkled rock dominating the scene – Scotland's Sugarloaf Mountain ruminates over the pretty fishing village of Lochinver.

This is a land of reflections and reflection, where the wind and the cowering woodland that skirts jagged bays, brings solace to an overworked soul. It is a land of light and shade, dark and moody, furious and fickle, or gentle and meek – blue and turquoise, azure and emerald, amid vibrant palette of ochre.

The ire of the Minch bends and hones ceaselessly. Its salt coats the last vestiges of summer, as autumnal hues filter through its contorted sylvan surroundings. Views stretch from the Summer Isles and Lewis and Harris in the west to the mountain ranges of Torridon and Dundonnell in the south.

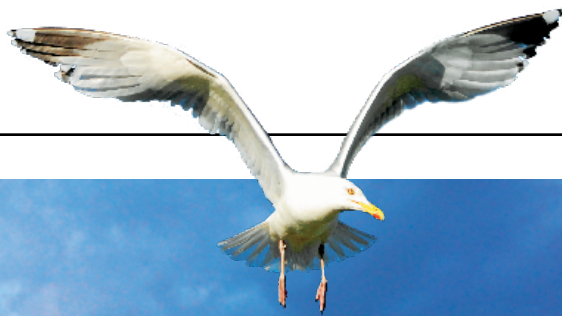
Stoer peninsula with its compact beaches, and lonely Stoer Head lighthouse, where »

Stonechat



Wild carrot and an
adventurous snail





Stoer Lighthouse

herring gulls hang in the gales above guano-spattered ledges filling racing skies with their fretful calls. By autumn seabirds have vanished far out to sea. Rock pipit and bonny little stonechat become the main attraction, and sheep keep the sward billiard-table barren.

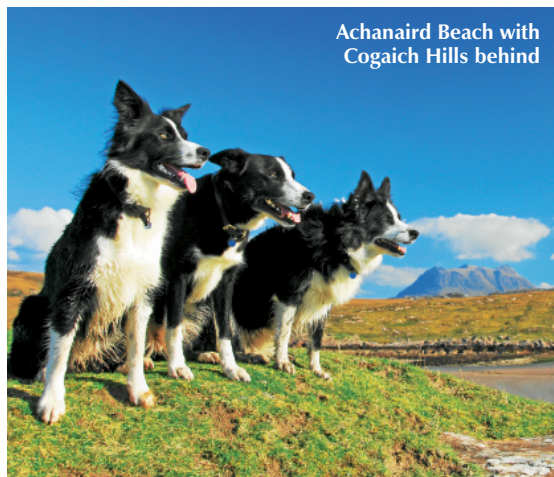
At the end of an airy cliff top walk the Old Man of Stoer, a 60-metre (197ft) sea stack appears. First climbed in 1966, its Torridonian sandstone seems to have a precarious toehold, yet it has stood firm in the midst of the Minch's malevolent maelstrom for generations, serenaded by the plaintive Pibrochs of the Selkies hauled out onto nearby skerries.

On the shore after rain, light filters through clouds of pewter to illuminate wetly glistening oil-black rock, while the tide backs and advances, smoothing shelves of

pebbles speckled with vibrancy. A curlew calls. There are otter tracks in wet sand soon to be erased by the sea. Sheep wander on the headland, and a skein of chatty geese passes high overhead.

Autumn in Assynt; the weather is warm one minute and bites with a northerly blast the next. Heavy dews fall etching a previously unseen world in silver. Amid withering late blooms, heather has a final Highland fling with bog ashphodel and scabious. The maritime woodland glints with a thousand cobwebs. They stretch out endless on every bush, veiling bog myrtle and gorse in swathes of glory each sprinkled with droplets the size of pinheads.

The sun, slower and slower to awaken, raises her head idly. This is golden hour and her embrace paints the perfect webs with pearly bronze. ☐



Achanaird Beach with
Cogaich Hills behind

Pictures: POLLY PULLAR

FASCINATING FACTS

While only 14m (46ft) high, the Stoer lighthouse is situated 54m (177ft) above sea level. Its automated light is still in operation.

A 2000-year-old walrus ivory pin has been found in one of the Inchnadamph bone caves.

A Tyrolean traverse is required to reach the foot of the Old Man of Stoer. There are a number of routes up the stack, varying in difficulty.

Check out next month's *Scots Magazine* for our in-depth Focus On the North West.