

Exploring the Lives and Legacies of Scotland's Wildlife
Expedition Report, Des Rubens and Bill Wallace Grant, John Muir Trust
Ben Parker, 2023

Expedition Context & Overview

This expedition to explore the fascinating lives and legacies of some of Scotland's most iconic wildlife can trace its roots back to, of all places, Madrid, and, of all things, homesickness. I had been living out of country for the best part of two years, and, one day, I found myself watching, well, re-watching, *Highlands: Wild Heart of Scotland*. This time it stirred something within me – I wanted to delve deeper. So, I, feverishly, refreshed my knowledge of Scotland's wildlife and wild places, and, then, dove into their wider impacts; for instance, tales they've inspired, like those of selkies, otter kings and the salmon of wisdom; their various uses, such as those of golden eagle feathers in clan chief bonnets and badger fur for sporrans; and the plethora of famous literature. It was all so exciting! I couldn't stop; so, I wrote a book.

I wanted to produce a book that focussed on both the wildlife themselves and their wider impacts. Thus, going species by species, I outlined their lives, before delving into the information surrounding them. This blend of more traditional wildlife-focussed content with the array of other information, like about tales, literature, and practices, in the same book certainly felt like a rather novel and engaging approach, at least to me. What's more, each of the contacts with whom I shared the drafts had feedback to this effect, especially the person who eventually became my teammate for the expedition, Teresa. In all, the process of drafting this book was such an enriching experience that I knew that an expedition focussed on its various ideas would be both incredibly enjoyable and immensely

valuable for refining and augmenting its content. It was therefore wonderful to receive the support via the *Des Rubens and Bill Wallace Grant* from the *John Muir Trust*, without which the expedition may never have come to fruition.

The expedition itself, as illuded towards, had the main aim of enabling me to deepen and diversify my understanding of Scottish wildlife, especially of their impacts on people (e.g., cultural impacts like folklore, songs, dances, artwork, and literature; economic impacts, like tourism or fishing; etc) and vice versa (e.g., threats and conservation initiatives). The decision was therefore made for the expedition to target sites across Scotland where research to that point had indicated that there would be particularly interesting and relevant information. It was somewhat of a balancing act between allowing enough time to develop a rigorous understanding of certain things in certain places, versus covering a lot of sites in order to encounter a greater range of information. Ultimately, the expedition spanned three weeks, and many sites across



Suited and booted for adventure.

the *mainland*, in the Cairngorms and beyond; the *Hebrides*, in Skye, and, briefly, on the Isle of Lewis; and in the *Northern Isles* of Orkney and Shetland. Although a car and ferries were used at times out of necessity, there was always a firm onus on the hiking and the camping.

What's more, given the book-oriented nature of the expedition, I was very pleased that Teresa accepted my invitation to be my teammate. Teresa, with her knowledge and love of both books and Scotland, as well as limitless enthusiasm, proved invaluable; for instance, she had a keen eye for information to include, or to not include, in the book, and how to best articulate ideas. Eager to make use of her skills and time, we spent many evenings reading, and re-reading, the draft and discussing how to improve it. Also, it would be remiss of me not to mention her truly remarkable ability at spotting wildlife.

All in all, the expedition proved very valuable for refining my knowledge of Scottish wildlife and their various impacts on people, as well as their relevant threats and management. But, perhaps even more notably is the fact that it poured even more fuel on the fire for my love of Scottish wildlife and wild places

(and, now, I suppose, my keen interest in their many intriguing impacts on people). Particularly in this latter regard, I daresay it was life changing.

The following three sections, *The Mainland*, *The Hebrides*, and *The Northern Isles*, provide some insights into the array of interesting information we encountered. The final section, *Outcomes*, provides an update on the current status of the book.

The Mainland

The sites on the mainland provided a wealth of fascinating information. In the Cairngorms, for instance, we hiked and camped around Abernethy forest. One particular highlight of this period was the Loch Garten Nature Centre, where we had the pleasure of talking with various personnel about the ospreys, and, of course, relished the chance to take in the view of the nesting ospreys and their young. Plus, it was a great opportunity to learn about the array of other wildlife in the area, like the capercaillie and red squirrels. Another highlight of the Cairngorms was the Highland Wildlife Park, where we learnt a lot about the ongoing efforts to bolster the numbers, or, perhaps more accurately, the

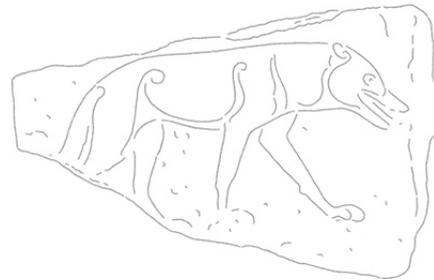


Learning about the ospreys at the Loch Garten Nature Centre in Abernethy forest and the wildcats at the Highland Wildlife Park, and taking a short moment to rest.

genetic purity, of Scottish wildcats through captive breeding and releases. In fact, this experience was all the more exciting as our visit was very soon after the twenty or so wildcats were released into the Cairngorms.

Although the Cairngorms was the main focus for the mainland, we stopped at a number of other sites that we passed, and many of them yielded fascinating information. One example is our stop at Eilean Donan Castle before entering Skye. There, we were greeted with a wealth of information; some of which was already in the book, like the legends of boobries and otter kings, and the raven tale of the castle's origin, whereas others were new, such as the curious facts about oystercatchers and the tale of the three brothers and the three selkies. Furthermore, there were the couple of sites that we chose to target whilst en route from the Hebrides to the northern tip of the mainland to catch the ferry to Orkney. First, there was the, truly wonderful, Dundreggan Rewilding Centre. The centre itself was crammed with information on Scottish wildlife, both in terms of their impacts on people, and vice versa. For example, there were details on various Gaelic placenames, sayings, and tales, such as the nearby places of *Creag an Tuirc*, or *crag of the wild boar*, *Fasadh an Fhithich*, or *place of the raven*, and *Creag an Fhir-eoin*, or *crag of the golden eagles*, and the quip to describe an especially nimble person of *cho subailte ri feòrag*, or *as flexible as a squirrel*. Plus, there was an abundance of information on the work being done in the area to revitalise it, and the centre's personnel were very happy to chat and provide even more information, including on the future plans for the site, which, interestingly enough, seem to involve lynx and an auroch-proxy. Second, there was the Inverness Museum and Art Gallery, which provided a lot of useful information about Scottish wildlife and wild places, both past and

present, but whose most memorable part was the magnificent Wolf Stone. This renowned 6th century Pictish carving not only bears a wolf, but manages to adeptly portray its power and movement with just a few simple lines.



Sketch of the famous Wolf Stone.

The Hebrides

The time in the Hebrides was heavily dominated by hiking and camping on the stunning Isle of Skye. The most notable content from this period concerned fishing, and, perhaps most relevantly to the expedition, were the many surrounding superstitions. Examples include the supposed bad luck of encountering a woman, red-headed person, or, worse still, a minister whilst en route to a boat; mentioning the word *salmon* whilst at sea rather than as the *red fish*; and wearing a garment of sealskin. Plus, even the people back on the shore were bound by superstitions; for instance, the belief that one should never blow excess flour from their bread lest a storm arise and endanger their partner out at sea. As was often the case, I had already encountered some of these things, whereas others were new. Furthermore, keeping with the fishing focus, whilst on the Isle of Lewis, we learnt more about the value of lobster fishing, and the clever tactic of building lobster pools to keep the catch alive and fresh for longer. Additionally, on a broadly related note, the time on the Isle of Lewis enabled us to

develop a better understanding of a practice that has long fascinated me: the men of Ness and their annual trip to Sulasgeir to collect young gannets, or *gugas*.

What's more, the time on the Isle of Lewis provided a stark insight into the history of whaling in the region, as well as the history of men from the area heading further afield for whaling. The many pieces of *scrimshaw*, carved whalebone, certainly brought it all to life. We also learnt about the whaling station at Bunavoneader down on the Isle of Harris, the best preserved example of a shore-based whaling station in the northern hemisphere. Plus, on a loosely related note, we saw, and learnt even more about, the famed Lewis chessmen. They were, of course, produced from walrus ivory and whale teeth in Norway, but are nonetheless an interesting case of wildlife being used in a cultural sense.

The Hebrides, especially Skye, also yielded several special wildlife encounters. Amongst the most memorable were a white-tailed eagle plunging into the water and a golden eagle swooping less than five metres away. These experiences, and more, made the whole expedition that much more magical.

The Northern Isles

The Northern Isles, as expected, proved to be a real bounty of information on wildlife, and their impacts on people and vice versa. Even the ferry to Orkney was fruitful, as we met and chatted extensively with a professional wildlife photographer who was travelling to Shetland to photograph puffins and gannets. Perhaps most striking from both Orkney and Shetland was the amount of information about the use of whale parts, and about whaling. In Orkney, for instance, we learnt about how whale parts had been used in the deep Neolithic, like whalebone for pendants, vessels, and bars to hold doors shut, and whale oil for fuel. One particularly interesting item we encountered was *Buddo*, a carved whalebone figurine from Skara Brae that dates back to around 2,900-2,400 BC; a period from which it is exceptionally rare to find human representations. Another, more recent, item of note was the whalebone *Scar Dragon Plaque* from the Scar boat burial of the late 9th to mid-10th century. According to close examination of the whole enclosure, though, this item likely came from Norway. Regarding whaling, we learnt about the substantial numbers of people from Orkney and Shetland who went whaling in both the Arctic and Antarctic. In all, the presence of whales in the



Marvelling at the dramatic mountains and coastline of Skye, and scoping for wildlife.

Northern Isles, and the historic links of the area with whaling, were felt rather strongly due to the many whale parts that were on display for all to see; for example, the whalebones that adorned the walls of houses in Stromness in Orkney, and the huge whalebone at Sumburgh Head in Shetland.

Turning to another iconic fauna: eagles. Whilst in Orkney we had the pleasure of learning even more about the famed *Tomb of the Eagles*, and seeing the plethora of items that had been discovered within it. Whilst on Shetland we learnt more about the rather sad story of one of the last white-tailed eagles of the nation. We also learnt about a whole host of eagle carvings from the Northern Isles, including the eagle carving from the *Knowe of Burrian*, the carving from the *Brough of Birsay*, and the peculiar *Isleburgh eagle*. Plus, we learnt about stones adorned with other wildlife, like the boar and the bear from *Scat Ness* on Shetland, and the curious creature drawn by the Norse at *Maeshowe*.

What's more, we encountered a lot of local terms and tales. For instance, it was in Orkney that we learnt that *whaup* is an alternative name for curlews, and that, strangely enough, this is also a term for a type of goblin. Another example, this time from Shetland, is the term

brigdi, which stems from Old Norse, for basking sharks. We encountered the familiar legend that the *brigdi*, or basking sharks, would attach themselves to boats and then pull them down, crew and all, into the depths. We did, though, learn that it was believed that these creatures, as well as other sharks and whales, could be deterred by attaching copper to the bottom of vessels, or by throwing copper into the water. Furthermore, we encountered tales of various monsters in the Northern Isles – one of which was the familiar Stronsay Beast, the large globster that washed up in Orkney in the 19th century and was initially declared a sea serpent, but later daubed a decayed basking shark.

Additionally, it was in Shetland that we encountered stories of the so-called *herring lassies*; the group of mainly Scottish women who followed the herring fleets around the nation, and down into England, to gut and salt the catch. This practice lasted for around a century, and peaked in the early 20th century, at which time there were thousands of these herring lassies. Such was the scale of this operation that one of the major sites, Baltasound in Unst, Shetland, was known as *Herringopolis*. It was also in Shetland that we learnt about even more superstitions that surrounded fishing. For context: in the period



Exploring the Northern Isles, investigating ancient sites and finding huge whalebones.

following the formal establishment of Shetland as part of Scotland, the islanders were pressured to adopt the language of the Scots, and many did use this novel tongue whilst on land. However, the old terms and customs persisted at sea. Various wildlife were only discussed by their old names; for instance, fish was *fisk*, seal was *horin*, whale was *fjedin*, otter was *drilla skövi*, puffin was *londi*, and eagle was *kliksi*.

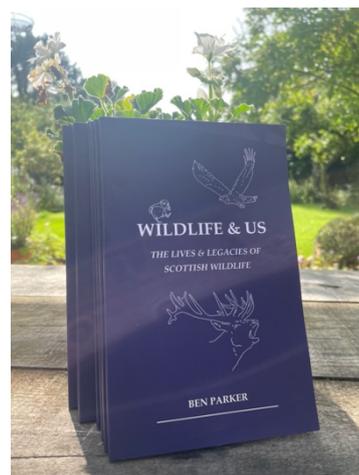
Outcomes

The central aim of this expedition was certainly achieved; I, now, have a far richer understanding of the wildlife and wild places of Scotland, and the ways in which they have influenced us, and vice versa. In fact, I daresay that this expedition went far above and beyond this central aim – it truly bolstered my love of the wildlife and wild places of Scotland, and I already have several future expeditions in mind. Competing to top this *dream list*: Fair Isle and St Kilda!

Regarding the book: once I returned from the expedition, I drew on the notes that I'd made

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whilst out and about, as well as my deeper general understanding of the relevant wildlife and wild places, to refine and augment its content. This certainly made it all the more informative, engaging, and inspirational. I then shared the new draft with an editor, who provided a raft of helpful advice on how to improve the text, design, and general structure. And, finally, I sent the draft to the printers to have a couple of test versions produced. They look great! So, currently, I'm mulling over how best to release it. In any case, at this point I'd like to wholeheartedly thank the *John Muir Trust* once again for so generously supporting the expedition – it was very valuable for this project, and so incredibly enriching and memorable for me.



Book proofs.



One to remember: a beautiful wild camping spot.

Ben Parker