



Wild pansy with bird's-foot-trefoil on Ferry Links

Loch Fleet forms the final estuary on mainland Scotland's northeastern rim. This large tidal basin and its bordering coastlands sustain a wealth of wildlife throughout the year – eider and tern, otter and seal, twinflower and gentian, are all to be found here. It's a location worth visiting at any time, any season.



Loch Fleet NNR lies 5 miles (8 kms) north of Dornoch and is easily accessible from the A9.

Scottish Natural Heritage is a government agency that works to conserve and enhance Scotland's natural heritage of wildlife, habitats and landscapes. It aims to help people enjoy this natural heritage responsibly, understand it more fully and use it wisely so that it can be sustained for the future.



For more information please contact:

Scottish Natural Heritage
Main Street
Golspie
Sutherland KW19 6TG
Tel: 01408 633602

In partnership with:



Scottish Wildlife Trust
Cramond House
Gramond Glebe Road
Edinburgh
EH4 6NS
Tel: 0131 312 7765



Sutherland Estates
Duke Street
Golspie
Sutherland
KW10 6RP
Tel: 01408 633268



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bar-tailed godwit, one-flowered wintergreen and aerial photo of Loch Fleet.

Photography by Steve Austin, Niall Benvie, Laurie Campbell, Sidney Clarke (RBGE), Lorne Gill (SNH) and P.A. Macdonald

Text by Kenny Taylor • Maps by Wendy Price • Illustrations by John Tasker

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Loch Fleet

National Nature Reserve



'Moving With The Tides'





To the north of the estuary mouth is Ferry Links, where carpets of delicate lichens weave intricate patterns with crowberry.



Narrow bands of saltmarsh fringe part of the loch's shores. These are home to plants and animals that can cope with regular flooding by sea water.



One square metre of Loch Fleet's mudflats can support tens of thousands of tiny snails and shrimps-like creatures, together with larger shellfish and marine worms – choice pickings for the birds.



Moving with the tides

Loch Fleet was once a wide-open bay, embracing a sea loch that reached as far inland as Rogart. Southward-sweeping currents gradually dragged shingle across the loch entrance, and reduced the mouth to a narrow channel through which tidal currents race in and out twice every 24 hours.

These tides led the Vikings to name the loch 'fljótr', the Old Norse word for 'flood' (in Gaelic it is still known as Loch Fleòid). Each rising tide scatters fine particles from sea and river across the shallows, carrying food for small plants and animals that live there. Each ebb pulls back the covers from the loch bed, exposing rich pickings for other wildlife.

The loch's north-western boundary represents a historic piece of civil engineering. The Mound Causeway was built by Thomas Telford in 1816 and has provided a secure foundation for a road crossing of the estuary ever since. Large sluice gates at its northern end allow salmon and sea trout to migrate past the Mound to and from spawning areas upriver.

Common seals haul out on the estuary sandbanks



Coastal pioneers

Wind and waves have shaped the sand dunes and coastal lands that fringe Loch Fleet to north and south. These seaward defences are home to plants and creatures that can cope with sandblasting, salt-spray dousing and extremes of heat and cold.

Marram and lyme grasses bind the dunes with their roots and runners. Hollows or 'slacks' behind the foredunes are damper and cooler, giving prime sites for small pioneers such as sea-milkwort, purple milk-vech and bird's-foot-trefoil.

On Ferry Links, nectar from heather and other flowers in the coastal heathland fuels butterflies and day-flying moths. Green hairstreak, grayling and dark green fritillary are some of the fair-weather fliers here.

Green hairstreak butterfly on bird's-foot trefoil



Enjoy your visit

It's easy to find good views of Loch Fleet. A small parking place at Skelbo, by the minor road along the southern shore, looks out over the loch basin and across to the houses at Littleferry. A larger car park off the A9 overlooks the River Fleet where it flows under the Mound Causeway.

For walks in the reserve, the best access is off the Golspie to Littleferry road. A pull-in at Balblair Bay is a good lochside stop and is only a couple of minutes' walk from the entrance to Balblair Wood. The car park at Littleferry gives ready access to the coastal heathland, dunes and beaches on this side of the loch.

Bar-tailed godwits are winter visitors to Loch Fleet



Visitors are welcome at all times of year, but are asked to respect the wildlife and the people who live and work here. Keeping to the footpath in Balblair Wood, walking (not driving) on the coastal heathland at Ferry Links, controlling dogs, not making loud noise and taking litter home are all simple things. But they can make a big difference to the well-being of Loch Fleet's wildlife and to the enjoyment of other people who are sharing the experience of this special place.



Otter feeding

Living on the loch

Common seals, otters and shore crabs are a few of the animals that live on and around the loch. But it's the birds you can't fail to notice as they make use of the loch-fed dining opportunities in different ways. Oystercatcher probe the mud for cockles, shelduck sieve the water for snails, wigeon nibble seagrass, eider dive to devour crunchy young mussels and red-breasted merganser plunge to chase small fish. Some of these birds will be here on any day of the year; others change with the seasons.

Loch Fleet supports up to 2000 oystercatchers



Eider ducks feed on mussels in the river channel

Greylag geese at sunset



Bar-tailed godwits, dunlin and other waders migrate from their northern breeding grounds to spend the winter in the relative shelter of estuaries like

Loch Fleet. Icelandic greylag and pink-footed geese also migrate south, swelling the ranks of native greylags that overwinter here. Flocks of geese are easily recognised by their loud cackling calls and 'V'-shaped flight formations.

Summer brings common, arctic and little terns up from Africa to their coastal nest sites. Look out for their long white wings and bouncy flight as they patrol the offshore in search of small fish.

Global connections

Farther from the coast, heather mixes with blaeberry and crowberry under stands of Scots pine in Balblair Wood. These trees were planted after a severe storm

flooded a previous pinewood in 1905. A trio of flowering plants provides a living link between this pinewood and the great northern forests that girdle the planet at this latitude: creeping lady's-tresses, twinflower and one-flowered wintergreen are the local blooms with global connections.



Creeping lady's-tresses and lesser twayblade in pinewood

The one-flowered wintergreen's flower is shaped like a candle in an old-fashioned holder, and is also known as St Olaf's candlestick. The peak of its summer flowering is at the time when a Norwegian prince, Olaf, was martyred trying to free his country from control by the famous King Canute. Balblair Wood is the best place in Britain for this notable bloom – more than 90% of the entire UK population grows here.



The delicate twinflower grows under the shade of pine trees

One-flowered wintergreen is found at only 12 places in Britain



Enjoy a tranquil walk in Balblair Wood

Working together for wildlife and people

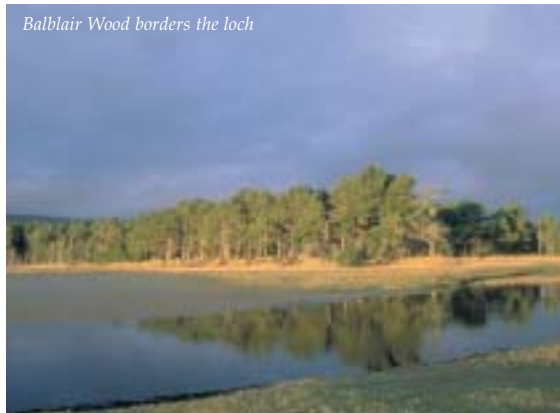
Loch Fleet National Nature Reserve covers over 1000 hectares of estuary and coast. It is owned by Sutherland Estates and managed under a long-term agreement with Scottish Natural Heritage, in partnership with the Scottish Wildlife Trust. The agreement provides the working foundation for the whole reserve, and is already enabling careful re-structuring of the pinewood at Balblair. This will allow young trees to become established, gradually create a more varied range of tree ages in the wood, and help to secure the future of its special plants. Careful study of the vegetation is also providing useful information to assist botanists and woodland managers at other places in the Highlands.



Scots pine seedling



Crested tit on Scots pine



Balblair Wood borders the loch