



SCOTLAND'S HIDDEN GEM

Eagles, sharks, wildcats and whales – why you'd be mad to ignore Ardnamurchan. By Steve Newman

Ardnamurchan is one of the hidden delights of birdwatching in Scotland. For many years, it has been in the shadow of nearby Mull, and there's a ferry connecting the two, so if you do visit, a day trip to Mull is easily on the cards.

Birdwatchers have tended to ignore this staggeringly beautiful part of the country, with the result that it is seriously underwatched. Fresh seafood, excellent birdwatching plus some of the best holiday accommodation around makes this a place you will remember. Seals, eagles, dolphins, Basking Sharks, whales, Otters, wildcats and magnificent Red Deer can all be seen here.

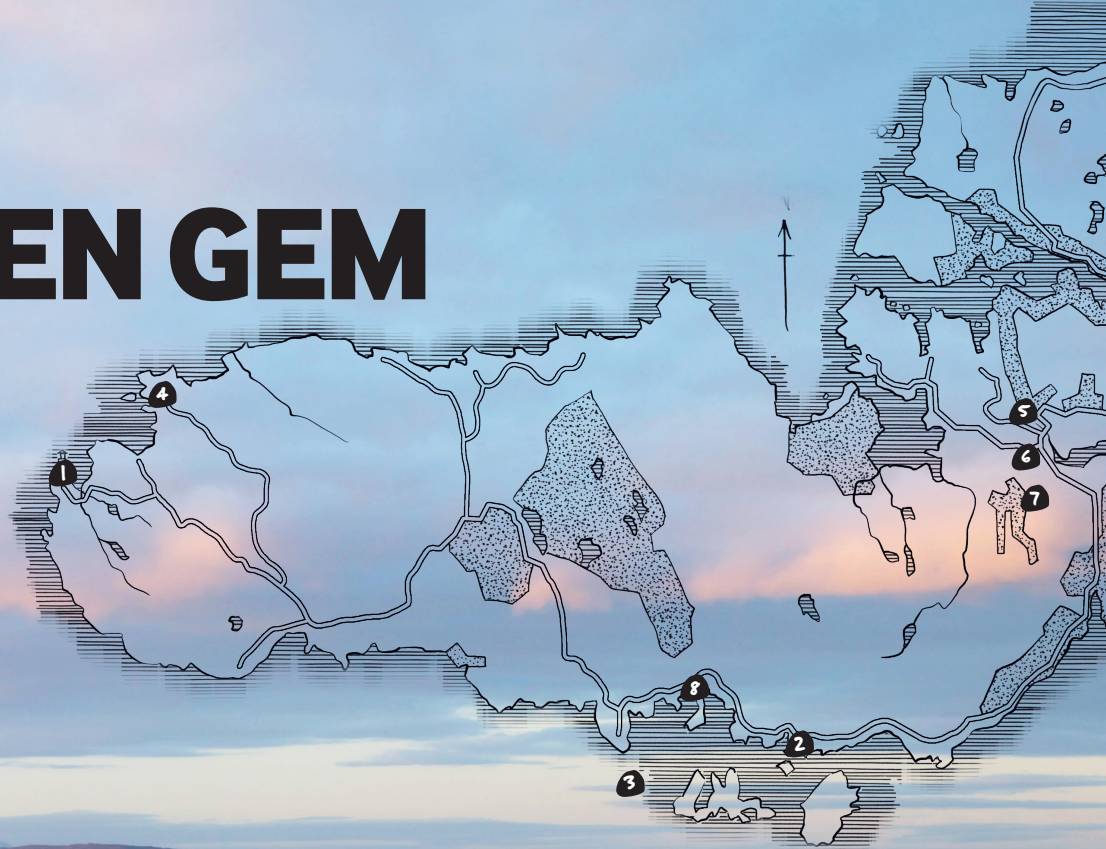
In summer it hardly gets dark, and you

can go birding from four in the morning until 10 at night, but whatever time of year you visit you should see a tremendous amount. The main species birders come to see are White-tailed Eagle, Golden Eagle, Hen Harrier, Peregrine and Corn Crake (the latter around the Kilchoan area). I saw three White-tailed Eagles in 10 minutes at the car park beneath Ben Hiant, where Golden Eagles have also been spotted.

I'd suggest you start your visit by calling in at the Nadurra Visitor Centre, which offers a natural history of the peninsula. They have truly outstanding displays and a walk-through exhibition of the wildlife to give you an excellent start. There is also a

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camera bang in the middle of the heronyr out the back, with the webcam rotating and zooming in and out. The nest-building, courtship and breeding take place at different times with different pairs, so there can be something worth watching throughout the breeding season – it is quite simply fascinating.

There's a café with a sightings board where you can see what's been about for the past few days – Twite, Storm and Leach's Petrel, Raven, Hen Harrier and both eagles are seen here, plus Pine Marten and Long-eared Bats that nest inside the centre buildings!

As well as boat trips to take you out to the Treshnish Isles to see Puffins and other seabirds, inland boat trips are available on Loch Shiel, one of the longest freshwater lochs, where you can watch White-tailed Eagles wafting by, plus Osprey and Black-throated Divers.

You can follow this up with a visit to a different kind of bird nearby, the Blue Parrot. This little café is in the community building in Archaracle, which also houses the Post Office, and as the name suggests the owner is always being given artistic representations of parrots. It has some of the best value for money local food you will find – everything is baked on the premises, which have internet access and wi-fi. There's a large viewing window overlooking Loch Shiel and the mountains, plus a sightings board, and Hen Harriers quite often come and frighten all the woodland species on the bird tables outside the window.

Just north of Archaracle is the road leading to Castle Tioran. It runs beside the River Shiel, and I managed to see Red-breasted Merganser, Goosander, Little Grebe and Goldeneye as I drove slowly along.

Archnamurdan is most famous for its large extent of ancient oak forest, remnant of a woodland which once stretched from Portugal to the Arctic. It runs along the southern coast of the peninsula and the road hugs it closely, with the sea on the other sides, giving you the best of both worlds. Juvenile Hen Harrier and a family of five Jays sitting beside the road were among my sightings.

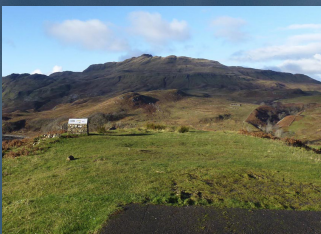
Remote yet easily accessible, Ardnamurchan measures just 25 by 40 miles but contains all of Scotland's scenic variations. Mountains, moors, huge white sandy beaches, forests of ancient oaks and woodland reserves. There's even such specialities as Kentra Moss SSSI, a fine example of a blanket bog, noted for its sightings of Buzzard and Short-eared Owl. Sanna Beach is often quoted as possibly the finest in the world, when you see it you'll understand why, and attracts many waders. The drive across the ancient volcanic crater to get there is fabulous in itself.

Ardnamurchan also includes the areas of

Eagle Hotspot

The main consensus of opinion says that the car park/picnic area below Ben Hiant on the A861 is the place to be. You'll find it on the B8007 two miles west of the Nadurra Nature Centre, immediately after a wind vane. We certainly saw three White-tailed Eagles there in a very short time. It's clearly marked on the OS map at grid ref: NM 563 615.

But it's also a case of keeping your eyes open, as we also saw one on the road to Ardtoe on the north-west coast, flying along the shore.



Steve Newman

You can watch Little Grebe from your car alongside the Shiel



Alain Williams

Set up your scope and search for a White-tailed Eagle



Brian and Sophie Fisher (Arny)

WHERE TO STAY

There is a tremendous range of accommodation on the peninsula, from bunkhouses, campsites and top class hotels to self catering cottages and B&Bs. However this would not be Ardnamurchan if there wasn't something extra in the wind. Some self catering cottages are ecologically special, having been built of recycled materials with a grass roof so that they blend in with the scenery, while you can even stay on your own private 600-acre island with your own small boat to explore the nooks and crannies of Loch Sunart.

■ We stayed at Laga with Ardnarmurchan Charters in a lodge that overlooked Loch Sunart. You also get your own rib so you can potter around the shoreline and view birds from the water and seawatching trips to the outer islands can be arranged. If you want to be really close to nature you can stay on your own private 600-acre island with your own rib. www.west-scotland-marine.com

■ Salen Hose B&B – situated halfway along the peninsula on the shoreline and only 200 yards from the hotel which is also the pub. www.salenhouse.co.uk

■ Steading Holidays have a range of selfcatering cottages based around Kilchoan a short drive from the light house. www.steading.co.uk

■ Garmoran Square has four luxury self catering apartments at Mingarry – www.garmoransquare.com Ecological five-star self-catering at Glen More. www.holidayardnamurchan.co.uk

GETTING THERE

There is a car and foot ferry from Tobermory and from also Corran on the A82 just south of Fort William, you can also watch the Black Guillemots here. Buses run from Fort William on a daily basis and more information is available on the ardnamurchan.com website. Other sites of interest: www.nadurracentre.co.uk www.ardnamurchanlighthouse.com

Listen for Corn Crane around Kilchoan

Nigel Blake





SPEYSIDE

HIGHLANDS

ARDNAMURCHAN

BORDERS

A bit of seawatching could reward you with views of Pomarine Skua

Eirik Gorningsæter (Alamy)



Sunart and Moidart, and it is Sunart which has the largest section of oak forest, including a superb hide which overlooks the coast at Garbh Eilean. The hide is open at the back and sides, so you can scan the water and shore of Loch Sunart for Ringed Plover, Curlew and Red-throated Diver, or just turn round and scan for the Great Spotted Woodpeckers which can be found here.

Other excellent walks in the oak woodland are found at the 'Bay of the Flies' to the south of Archaracle, and to the east of Strontian is the Ariundle Oakwood NNR, where Long-tailed Tits and Buzzards can be seen all year round. In summer it plays host to Redstarts, Wood and Willow Warblers, and and it in this are as well that Golden Eagles are spotted.

Glenborrodale, the RSPB's most westerly mainland reserve, is also found on the southern coast road eight miles west of the Salen turn-off. There is a car park on the road and the reserve has a rugged way-marked trail but parts of it are muddy all year round and it is steep and uneven in places. However half way up the hill on the right is dead tree which was occupied by a Tawny Owl just watching cautiously as I

strolled by. This reserve is noted for its Bullfinches and I also got a Raven on my visit, as far as other corvids go Hooded Crows are definitely not an endangered species on Ardnamurchan.

Whatever you do you have to go to the lighthouse which stands on the UK mainland's most westerly point. I managed to get a Great Northern Diver offshore as well as Manx Shearwaters, Rock Pipits, Fulmars and Gannets. There is a shelter with glass surround here, so if the weather is bad you can take cover, but the old foghorn platform is well worth setting your scope up on. Wheatears, Great, Arctic and Pomarine Skuas are seen here as well as all the common auks, Eiders and Black Guillemots.

Be careful in Ardnamurchan, though, as the roads are nearly all single track, and there are passing places almost every 100 yards. It is the law that you should pull over into one of these if a local is behind you, as they know the roads and travel a bit faster than us visitors. It's nice when you're sitting in the pub at night and a total stranger comes up to you and says "thanks for pulling over and letting me pass this morning". It just adds to the charm of the place. ☺

Ardnamurchan Lighthouse



Stephen Emerson (Alamy)