

Scottish Natural Heritage

Explore for a day

# Caithness & Sutherland



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The wide expanses of the north Highlands offer a sense of space and tranquillity unlike that found anywhere else. The area includes three National Scenic Areas - Scotland's finest landscapes. Refresh your senses among the spectacular mountains, experience the power of the elements on dramatic headlands and wander along beautiful deserted beaches to really reconnect with nature.

Three dramatically different coasts await you. The east coast entices with glittering estuaries, salmon rivers, ancient brochs, historical fishing villages and lovely woodlands. The rugged splendour of north west Sutherland inspires with world class geology, breath-taking mountains and a rich natural environment. As you travel across the top coast, the landscape becomes gentler and gives way to fertile farmlands and the rich archaeological heritage of Caithness, where you will find the most northerly point on the British mainland and stunning sea views.

Come in spring or early summer - the best time for nesting seabirds and abundant wildflowers. Summer brings a chance to see ospreys fishing and seal pups sunning themselves on sand banks. Stags in the rut and spectacular colours of woodlands and hillside are a treat for the autumn, while crisp beautiful sunny days and impressive crashing storms make a visit in the winter a real pleasure to be savoured round the fire at night.

## Symbol Key

- |  |              |  |                    |
|--|--------------|--|--------------------|
|  | Parking      |  | Information Centre |
|  | Paths        |  | Disabled Access    |
|  | Toilets      |  | Wildlife watching  |
|  | Refreshments |  | Picnic Area        |

Admission free unless otherwise stated.

## 1 Dunrobin Castle

The most northerly of Scotland's great houses, Dunrobin Castle rises above the North Sea like an illustration from a storybook. It is one of the oldest inhabited houses in Scotland, dating back in parts to the early 1300s. Home to the Earls and later the Dukes of Sutherland, the castle, with its fairytale spires and turrets is perched on a high terrace above walled gardens. Daily falconry displays take place on the Castle lawns.

### Admission charge.

Open April – October from 10.30am – 4.30pm Mon – Sat and from 12 noon on Sun. Open Sun from 10.30am in June, July and August. Tel. 01408 633177. [www.dunrobincastle.co.uk](http://www.dunrobincastle.co.uk)



## 2 Carn Liath

The Iron Age Broch of Carn Liath is less than a mile's walk along the shore from Dunrobin or a similar distance north on the A9. This impressive structure survives to first floor level and is surrounded by signs of a small settlement.

[www.historic-scotland.gov.uk](http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk)



## 3 Big Burn

The Big Burn is a hidden gem; a sheltered woodland tucked into a steep gorge whose walls are carpeted with mosses and ferns. A spectacular walk to a waterfall starts in the sunny woodland, full of wild garlic and bluebells in spring, before heading into gorge, which hangs with icicles in winter. Park by the Sutherland Stoneworks at the north end of Golspie.



## 4 Loch Fleet National Nature Reserve

The estuary, coastline and spectacular pine woodland at Loch Fleet is a National Nature Reserve. You can see wildlife here whatever the season. Fast-flowing currents empty the tidal basin of water on every tide leaving sandbanks exposed. Here you can spot seals and their pups, hauled out on the banks, or watch the intense feeding activity of hungry wading birds. Keep your eyes peeled for the elusive osprey diving for fish. Enjoy a wander on the coastal dunes on a carpet of wild flowers or through the freshly scented pine woodlands. There are a range of easy walks around the Reserve. A bird hide sits on the shore around half a mile through the woods from the Balblair Woods car park, situated just inside the woods past the golf course. Littleferry at the end of the road is a great place for a picnic and is a tranquil spot with an old pier, grain store and icehouse nestling among a cluster of houses. Looking back from the pier you get a clear view of the 'Mannie', the monument to the first Duke of Sutherland, sitting prominently on top of Ben Bhraggie above the village of Golspie. A lovely, peaceful place and a must see for wildlife enthusiasts. Leaflets are available locally and information panels are located at a number of locations within the Reserve.

Tel. 01408 634063

[www.nnr-scotland.org.uk](http://www.nnr-scotland.org.uk)



## 5 Ledmore and Migdale Woods, Spinningdale

Once owned by Andrew Carnegie and now the property of the Woodland Trust, this lovely spot boasts the largest remnant ancient oak wood in Sutherland. A walk through this woodland reveals a rugged and varied landscape with ancient burial chambers and traces of vanished industries. Among many trails of varying length, there is a way-marked trail of about 4 miles through the woodland which starts at the lay-by, less than a mile up the Spinningdale - Migdale road. Contact the Community Woodsman on 01862 881343, [spinningdalewoodsman@woodlandtrust.org.uk](mailto:spinningdalewoodsman@woodlandtrust.org.uk) for information about guided walks and events.

Informal car parking only. [www.woodlandtrust.org.uk](http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk)

## 6 Falls of Shin

The River Shin is known for its famous waterfalls where salmon leap on their migratory route to the spawning beds further upstream. It's also known as an excellent river for fishing. Using the main car park as a base, you can enjoy a number of tranquil woodland walks suitable for all ages and abilities.

Contact Forestry Commission Recreation Forester on 01408 634063. [www.forestry.gov.uk](http://www.forestry.gov.uk)



## 7 Knockan Crag National Nature Reserve

Knockan Crag holds the key to an amazing story of colliding continents and scientific discovery. The crag is a globally important geological site and was formed by the Moine Thrust - the force of two continents crashing together. The unmanned visitor centre at Knockan Crag has excellent information and displays on the landscape and geology of the area. Trails offer the visitor a chance to get out into this exceptional landscape. Find out more about the amazing rocks and landscape of the area on the Rock Route - a leaflet is available at Knockan Crag or local Visitor Information Centres.

Tel. 01854 613418

[www.nnr-scotland.org.uk](http://www.nnr-scotland.org.uk)





## 8 Falls of Kirkaig

A rewarding walk into the heart of this amazing landscape starts at Inverkirkaig. The path starts at the car park by the river and leads 2 miles up a beautiful wooded glen to the Falls of Kirkaig. The path winds through ancient woodland full of birch, rowan and hazel, before climbing out of the glen, onto open moorland. A short path down to the river offers the most spectacular view of the falls. This path is the start of one of the routes to Suilven, the iconic 'sugarloaf' mountain that rises spectacularly behind Lochinver. A memorial to poet Norman MacCaig in the car park by the river is inscribed with verses from his poem 'Climbing Suilven': "I nod and nod to my own shadow and thrust a mountain down and down. Between my feet a loch shines in the brown, It's silver paper crinkled and edged with rust."

[www.assynt.info](http://www.assynt.info)



## 9 Assynt Visitor Centre

The acclaimed Assynt Visitor Centre in the fishing port of Lochinver serves as a combination of tourist information and base for the Highland Council Ranger service as well as a visitor resource base. It has exhibitions on the geology and wildlife of the area, in addition to a bookshop and museum of social history.

Open Easter - October, 10am-5pm, Monday - Saturday.  
Tel. 01571 844194

[www.assynt.info](http://www.assynt.info)



## 10 Stoer Head

The lighthouse is the starting point for a spectacular two mile walk along sandstone cliff tops to a 200ft high sea stack, the Old Man of Stoer. Look out for whales, dolphins and porpoises which are regularly seen round the headland below the lighthouse. On a clear day there are fantastic views of the Outer Hebrides.



## 11 Inchnadamph

The Inchnadamph Bone Caves - famed for discoveries of lynx, reindeer and polar bear bones - are one mile from the road up a good path. The caves give us a unique glimpse back in time revealing what animals have lived here in the last 45,000 years. Bones of four humans found here in ancestral burials have been dated to around 4500 years old. Two of the caves are connected by a narrow passage through which children can crawl. Park at the fish hatchery a few minutes drive east of Inchnadamph. The path can be steep in places and good footwear is recommended.

[www.snh.org.uk](http://www.snh.org.uk) Part of the Rock Route.



## 12 Handa Island

Handa is internationally renowned for its seabird colonies and magnificent sea cliffs. Visitors to this lovely island may also be rewarded with sightings of whales and dolphins. Each May, June and July the cliffs come alive when a big proportion of the UK's razorbills and guillemots gather to breed, alongside thousands of kittiwakes and fulmars and hundreds of puffins. Great skuas and arctic skuas also gather on the island in great numbers. The paths on Handa are steep and rough in places, so sturdy footwear is essential, as are warm clothes as the weather can change quickly. Boat trips go from Tarbet pier (April - September, Monday to Saturday - last departure to Handa at 1400 hours) where public toilets are also located. Ticket price includes a donation to the Scottish Wildlife Trust which manages the island as a reserve together with Scourie Estates.

**Admission charge** - for ferry crossing  
[www.swt.org.uk](http://www.swt.org.uk)



## 13 Smoo Cave

The spectacular Smoo Cave is unique within the UK in that the first chamber has been formed by the action of the sea whereas the inner chambers were created by rainwater. It is sufficiently large to have been used to shelter and repair Viking ships. Archaeological investigations have turned up Norse and Iron Age artefacts, and it is thought that its use may extend back more than 6000 years. The cave name is thought to originate from the Norse 'smjugg' or 'smuga', meaning a hole or hiding-place. The cave is located a mile east of the village of Durness and access to the cave is by stairs and walkways from the car park.

[www.smoo cave.org](http://www.smoo cave.org)





## 14 Torrisdale Bay

The headland behind Torrisdale Bay is home to plants you might expect to see on mountains rather than close to sea level. This is due to the exposure of the site and will give you a clue about the ferocity of the wind and weather here on stormy days. This is a beautiful place for a walk, with impressive sand dunes and stunning views.

## 15 Strathnaver Museum

Strathnaver Museum, which is located in a former church at Bettyhill, is a community-run museum, providing an insight into the domestic and working lives of the people of this coast, through exhibitions, workshops and events. The museum is the starting point for the Strathnaver Trail, linking and interpreting 29 archaeological sites which create a powerful picture of life in Strathnaver through several millennia. You can get a booklet about the trail from the museum.

### Admission charge.

**Museum opening hours** April - Oct 10am - 5pm, Monday - Saturday. Tel. 01641 521418 [www.strathnavermuseum.org.uk](http://www.strathnavermuseum.org.uk)



## 16 The Flows National Nature Reserve

This Reserve is set in the heart of the Flows - the internationally important expanse of blanket bog which covers a large area in the north of Sutherland and Caithness. Thousands of pools stud the spongy bog to make a perfect home for a myriad of insects and the birds that feed on them. Listen for the piping calls of greenshank or the mournful wails of the red-throated diver. In summer, look out for the small but beautiful plants such as the carnivorous sundew. Guided bog walks are run from the visitor centre in the former railway station, which also has games and activities for children. The Dubh Lochan trail is a 1 mile circular route out onto the bog, with a stepping stone-style surface. The Reserve, which is managed by the RSPB, is open at all times; the visitor centre opens between Easter and the end of October.

Tel. 01641 571225 [www.rspb.org.uk](http://www.rspb.org.uk)



## 17 Caithness Horizons

Caithness is an area steeped in outstanding history, wildlife and ecology, with a pioneering industrial past. What better way to get a flavour of this than in Caithness Horizons? This is a new visitor attraction which acts as a hub for the area and houses a Museum, exhibitions & displays, a shop and café.

Open from 10am - 6pm Mon-Sat and 11am-4pm Sun.  
Tel. 01847 896508 [www.caithnesshorizons.co.uk](http://www.caithnesshorizons.co.uk)



## 17 Dunnet Head

Dunnet Head is the most northerly point on the UK mainland. The trip of a few miles from the sweeping sand dunes and beach at Dunnet village to the lighthouse rewards the visitor with magnificent cliff-top views of Orkney and west along the coast to Cape Wrath. In early summer, the cliffs are alive with seabirds such as fulmar and puffins which nest on the steep ledges. A walk along the cliff top through flower-rich heathland gives you a chance to experience the ferocity of the Pentland Firth as it rounds this headland. Dunnet Head is managed by the RSPB.

Tel. 01463 715000  
[www.rspb.org.uk](http://www.rspb.org.uk)



## 19 Castle of Mey

The 16th century Castle of Mey was originally built by the Earl of Caithness. It was restored by the Queen Mother who visited regularly and who created the beautiful walled gardens. The Castle, which is now run as a 5 star visitor attraction, is complemented by an animal centre. In an initiative to support farmers and food producers in the area around the Castle of Mey, HRH Prince Charles launched, in 2005, the Mey Selections label for local, high quality produce. Look out for the label!

**Admission charge.** Open from May - mid October, 10.20am - 4pm.  
Tel. 01847 851473 [www.castleofmey.org.uk](http://www.castleofmey.org.uk)





## 20 Stacks of Duncansby

Duncansby Head offers a dramatic experience. From the car park at the lighthouse, a short walk takes you down to the spectacular Stacks of Duncansby, some of the most impressive in the British Isles. These imposing pyramidal stacks have been isolated by the retreat of the cliffs. Superb views can be had from the coastal path. It is well worth continuing a short distance along the path to reach the nearest point to the stacks where the best views of the huge seabird colonies on these cliffs can be gained.



## 21 Noss Head and Castle Sinclair Girnigoe

This small headland north of Wick is easily accessible and has sites of both wildlife and historical interest within half a mile of the car park at the end of the road. Puffins and other seabirds can be found near the lighthouse, while Castle Sinclair Girnigoe, a once impregnable medieval stronghold - is now the most spectacular ruin in the North of Scotland and is the subject of a preservation programme by its owner, The Clan Sinclair Trust.

Castle open May - September. [www.sinclairgirnigoe.org](http://www.sinclairgirnigoe.org)



## 22 Wick Heritage Centre

This award-winning and captivating museum documents the history of the town and its importance in the herring fishery. It displays everything from fishing equipment to a complete herring fishing boat - the beautifully restored 19th century fishing boat, Isabella Fortuna, which is normally berthed in Wick Harbour. The centre-piece of the museum is a superb collection of 70,000 photographs taken by 3 generations of one family between 1863 and 1977. The photographs document an era when Wick was the herring capital of Europe and show the herring industry in various stages from setting sail to packing barrels of salt herring for export all over the world. Boat builders, coopers and ropemakers are also documented in this fascinating social history.

Museum open Easter - end October, 10am - 3.45pm, Monday - Saturday. [www.wickheritage.org](http://www.wickheritage.org) Tel. 01955 605393

## 23 Grey Cairns of Camster

Camster Cairns are amongst the best-preserved Neolithic chambered cairns in the British Isles. Known as the Grey Cairns of Camster, they comprise a round cairn, a long cairn and a ruined third cairn lying 200m apart. Built around 3500 BC, the cairns are thought to have been in use as burial chambers and as ritual sites for several hundred years thereafter.

When the cairns were excavated pottery, skeletons, burnt bone and flint tools were recovered from the round cairn. There is one central chamber in the round cairn, which retains its original roof, and two burial chambers in the long cairn. Careful restoration has made the cairns accessible to visitors. The cairn complex is now in the care of Historic Scotland.

Tel. 01667 460232

[www.historic-scotland.gov.uk](http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk)

or [www.caithnessarchaeology.org.uk](http://www.caithnessarchaeology.org.uk)



## 24 Lybster Harbour and Waterlines

The Waterlines Heritage Centre in the working harbour at Lybster tells the story of this planned village, established at the height of the 19th-century herring boom. It was once the third largest herring port after Wick and Fraserburgh, and in the heritage centre you can find out more about the development of Lybster's harbour and fishing industry. You can also learn about Knotty, a game a bit like shinty, played using fishing floats. The World Championships of this (admittedly local!) sport are played annually at Lybster Harbour.

Open 11am - 5pm. Tel 01593 721520



## 25 Timespan

Timespan Museum and Arts Centre is a vibrant meeting place between our past and our future; linking culture, heritage, the arts, people and their ideas. There is an award winning museum, art gallery, story telling room, café, shop and riverside garden of Scottish herbs and flowers. The collection illustrates past ways of life with re-creations of a croft, byre, smithy, and shop. Other displays present the area's archaeology, geology and natural

**Admission charge**, free MP3 tour available.

Open Easter - October, 10am - 5pm. [www.timespan.org.uk](http://www.timespan.org.uk)

Tel. 01431 821327



## Itinerary 1

### Rich Human History

Man has lived a long time on the east coast of Sutherland. This enduring and beautiful landscape is home to ancient brochs and medieval castles, hidden woodland sites where iron ore was made and wide flowing rivers and estuaries used for transportation for centuries. Peaceful crofting townships, farms and villages only hint at the sometimes turbulent political history of land use and human settlement. This itinerary will give you a glimpse into the human history of this area, set against a back drop of rugged natural splendour.

#### Dunrobin Castle (1)

Signposted off the A9 a mile north of Golspie.

#### Loch Fleet National Nature Reserve (4)

Driving south through Golspie, after the children's playpark, turn left onto Ferry Road. The main car park for the Loch Fleet National Nature Reserve is around 3 miles down this road, at Littleferry.

#### Ledmore and Migdale Woods, Spinningdale (5)

At Clashmore, turn off the A9 onto the A949 (signposted as a Tourist Route) along the beautiful Dornoch Firth towards Bonar Bridge. Once you reach Spinningdale turn onto the minor road for Migdale.

#### Falls of Shin (6)

From Bonar Bridge, take the road for Lairg, turning left onto the A837 after Invershin, then right onto the B864.

## Itinerary 2

### The Dramatic North West

Your itinerary today will take you through the Assynt-Coigach National Scenic Area and some of the most spectacular and rugged landscapes in the country, into the heartland of the Clan Mackay - a place famed for its exceptional geology and outstanding scenery and one of the most sparsely populated areas in Europe.

#### Knockan Crag National Nature Reserve (7)

Knockan Crag National Nature Reserve is close to the settlement of Elphin and 4 miles south of the Ledmore Junction on the A835. The car park is on the left hand side of the road.

#### Falls of Kirkaig (8)

Three miles south of Knockan Crag turn off the A835 onto the single track road to Achiltibuie. Rising directly above the road, the crumbling ridge of the magnificent mountain Stac Pollaidh soon comes into view. There's a car park on the left hand side of the road if you want to stop and take photos. Continue along this road for several miles and turn right at the first junction you come to. Follow this through the Inverpolly estate until you arrive at Inverkirkaig.

The coastal road to Inverkirkaig is narrow and unsuitable for larger vehicles such as motorhomes. An alternative route is by Inchnadamph and Loch Assynt on the A837, arriving into Lochinver from the north. On this road, you pass the remains of Ardvreck Castle – stronghold of the MacLeods of Assynt.

#### Stoer Head (10)

From Inverkirkaig, travel north to Lochinver, which, in addition to the Assynt Visitor Centre, has several nice places to get a meal or a snack. Just outside Lochinver as you head north, turn onto the stunning Assynt coastal road (B869) which will lead you through crofting townships and past beautiful beaches. At Stoer, turn left onto the road for the lighthouse and follow this road as it turns left again.

## Itinerary 3

### Across the Top

From Durness to Duncansby, a day on the spectacular north coast will take you through a changing landscape. From the Kyle of Tongue National Scenic Area and beautiful uncrowded beaches, over vast sweeping expanses of moorland and through crofting communities strung along the coast into the fertile farmlands of Caithness where archaeological treasures hint at thousands of years of human habitation.

#### Smoo Cave (13)

One mile east of Durness on the main coast road (A838) you will find the car park for Smoo Cave.

#### Torrisdale Bay (14)

Continue east on the main coast road, which becomes the A836 at Tongue. If you're in no hurry, follow the short trail signposted round the Kyle of Tongue (you'll see an information panel on the causeway). Continue several miles east of Tongue and take the loop coastal road through the crofting township of Skerray to reach the beach at Torrisdale.

#### Caithness Horizons (17)

Follow the signs along the coast for Thurso. The museum is in the former Thurso town hall in the pedestrian area, which is on your left as you come into the centre of Thurso. Park in a town centre car park.

#### Stacks of Duncansby (20)

From Thurso take the road signposted for Castletown (A836) and continue east along this road as it follows the coast to John O'Groats. Duncansby Head is a mile or so east of John O'Groats, along a single track road.

## Itinerary 4

### Following the Silver Darlings

A little over a hundred years ago the east coast harbours of Caithness and Sutherland were at the heart of the North Sea herring boom, with Wick one of the principal fishing ports in Scotland. Today's route takes you down this spectacular coastline, through the villages and harbours immortalised in Neil Gunn's classic story, 'The Silver Darlings'.

#### Noss Head and Castle Sinclair Girnigoe (21)

From the centre of Wick, cross the river heading south and take the first exit at the roundabout, leading you alongside the harbour. Cross back over at the next bridge and follow the coast and signposting for Noss. Return to Wick the way you came.

#### Wick Heritage Centre (22)

The Heritage Centre is located in Bank Row, in Lower Pultneytown. On the main road, from the centre of Wick, cross the river and take the second small exit at the roundabout, passing Mackays Hotel. Continue along this road until you reach the museum. If the Heritage Centre has whet your appetite for the fishing heritage of this spectacular coast, the harbours of Lybster, Latheronwheel, Dunbeath and Berriedale are worth a visit as you travel south on the A9.

#### Grey Cairns of Camster (23)

Leaving Wick on the A99, head south for just over 12 miles. Shortly after you have passed the small settlement of Mid Clyth, turn right onto the road signposted to Watten. The Grey Cairns rise from the moorland several miles along this road.

#### Timespan (25)

Return to the main A99 and follow the signs for Inverness. The road becomes the A9 at Latheron. Continue south. Over the Ord of Caithness - the hill that separates the county from Sutherland - lies the picturesque fishing village of Helmsdale. Turn into the village off the A9 and you will find Timespan, just off the main street by the old bridge.



For where to go, what to see and do and where to eat and drink visit: [www.northhighlandsscotland.com](http://www.northhighlandsscotland.com)





### Other visitor information

The main towns and villages of Brora, Golspie, Dornoch, Bonar Bridge, Lairg, Lochinver, Durness, Tongue, Bettyhill, Thurso, Wick and Helmsdale all have facilities for visitors, including shops, toilets and places to find a meal or a snack.

The Far North rail line passes through the area en route from Inverness to Wick and Thurso. Rail timetables and information on national and local bus routes can be found on [www.travelinescotland.com](http://www.travelinescotland.com)

The National Cycle Network Route 1 passes through the area - from John O' Groats via Tongue to Lairg and then further south. Find out more at [www.sustrans.org.uk](http://www.sustrans.org.uk)

There are many other sites to discover in the surrounding area. Find out more at VisitScotland Information Centres in Brora, Dunbeath, Durness, Lochinver, Thurso and Ullapool, or tel. 08452 255121. More information at [www.visitscotland.com](http://www.visitscotland.com).

Interesting information on places in the North West of Sutherland is located at [www.mackaycountry.com](http://www.mackaycountry.com).

### Know the code before you go...

Enjoy Scotland's outdoors responsibly! Find out more at [www.outdooraccess-scotland.com](http://www.outdooraccess-scotland.com)

**National Nature Reserves** are magical places where you can experience the incredible sights and sounds of Scotland's natural world. Located throughout Scotland, National Nature Reserves are open to everyone to visit and enjoy. Find out more at [www.nnr-scotland.org.uk](http://www.nnr-scotland.org.uk).



**Scottish Natural Heritage** is the government agency charged with looking after all of Scotland's nature and landscapes, across all of Scotland, for everyone. Find out more at [www.snh.gov.uk](http://www.snh.gov.uk)



Scotland's Protected Places

Explore and discover some of Scotland's natural and historic protected places.

[www.scotlandprotectedplaces.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandprotectedplaces.gov.uk)

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