

# FOULA HERITAGE

## *Ranger service*

## *Airstrip to South Ness*



The Bankwell Mill

## Guided Walk No. 2

Distance **4km**  
Difficulty **Easy**

Check there are no planes or helicopters coming in to land or taking off and walk across the airstrip and up the fire engine road.

Look for Arctic Skuas and Arctic Terns, also Mat Grass, Heath Rush, Buckshorn Plantain and Tormental.

Walk out to **the old rubbish tip (1)** and look over. To the south are Shags on nests on ledges near the foot of the cliffs and Guillemots on the flat rock at the bottom. Look north to the Gloor. This part of the coast is all Old Red Sandstone. Here, there is a seam of softer mudstone and the sea has eroded it away to make a cave.

Look for Kittiwakes flying by. The Gloor used to have a Kittiwake colony before the decrease in sandeel. There is still a small colony further south out of sight.

Walk south along the coast. Look at the heather growing in a very short carpet due to the exposure and small plants of Crowberry, which has small edible black berries in July and August.

Look at **the Run Hoevdi. (2)** This rock used to be joined to the shore with an arch that boats could go through. It fell between the Wars.

Walk to the small pools and look for Shoreweed, sphagnum moss, Heath Spotted Orchids, Milkwort, Field Woodrush, Common Sedge and Deer Grass..

An alternative route is to walk down to the end of the airstrip. Near the end, out from the right hand edge, there are sometimes several eiders on their nests. They pluck down from their breasts to line their nests and when they leave to feed, they carefully cover up their eggs. Do not go too close, or they will get up suddenly, leaving their eggs exposed, and Arctic Skuas or Bonxies may eat them. They incubate for four weeks and take their chicks down to the sea at night. Later in the summer, after they have gone, you can examine the fine down.

Walk to the **Lang Hoevdi (3)** Be careful, there is a sudden indentation in the coastline. Go to the mouth of the Geo. In May and June look at the flowers on the north side, out of reach of the sheep, Sea Pinks, Sea Campions and Scurvy Grass.

Look for Wheatears, Rock Pipits and Fulmars nesting in the cliff opposite. Walk out along the south side and look at the little colony of Guillemots in the crack at the foot of the cliff. This colony is very vulnerable to being washed away by the sea, so they are often late, the early layers having lost their eggs. In May and June, look for birds incubating their eggs, sitting close together in huddles. Notice birds coming ashore and walking up the rocks like penguins. They often walk up but fly down. They lay one egg, a pretty turquoise with brown squiggles, and they incubate for about a month. Look for birds coming ashore with sandeel, which they carry lengthways in their beaks with the tail

sticking out. In July and even August, look for Guillemots with chicks. They go to sea when they are only about three weeks old, jumping off the ledges on fine nights. They are accompanied by the male adults, who continue to stay with them until they can fend for themselves. Listen for the chicks calling to keep contact with the parent bird.

Check the maritime sward for Sea Pinks, Sea Plantain and Buckshorn Plantain. Look for the scalped areas and see the remains of mooldie kuses (heaps of dry peat mould scraped up in summer and used on the byre floor in winter to keep the cows' beds dry. It was mixed with manure and spread on the land in spring. Look at the round stone plantie crub where kale seedlings were grown, and the shelter used in the past for shooting Shags.

Notice the Foula sheep with their rich variety of colours and markings.

Walk south along the coast. Do not go too close to the rocks because of nesting birds. Watch for Arctic Terns and for Arctic Skuas chasing them to force them to drop their fish. Arctic Terns are only in Foula from May until July. They nest on rocky coastlines and on wet moorland and feed mainly on sandeel and also small fish. If conditions are bad, the whole colony will desert. There used to be several thousand terns here in the past but in recent years there have only been one or two hundred. At the end of June, immature birds arrive. They like to sit on the airstrip and they have white foreheads and short tails. The fledgling chicks look similar but have more patterned wings and are slightly brownish at first. They fledge in July.

You may see nesting Common Gulls but please do not disturb them because Arctic Skuas will eat their eggs. Also look for Herring Gulls which sometimes nest here. They are bigger with a red spot on their bill. Gulls are called Maas in Shetland. Kittiwakes often roost on these rocks and bathe in the fresh water at the mouth of the burn. They were known as Rippack Maas and they do not have the red spot. Also, Common Gulls have yellowish green legs, Herring Gulls have pink legs and Kittiwakes have blackish legs. Immature gulls are mottled with brown. Immature Kittiwakes have black markings on their heads.

Look for Tysties swimming offshore, or sitting up on the heap of stones and listen for them whistling. (It is not known what this heap of stones was for.) Tysties stay here all year round, but in the winter they turn grey and white. There are usually about 150 Tysties nesting round Foula, in cracks in the rocks and under boulders. They feed mainly on butterfish and other small fish. Their chicks do not fledge until August and are grey and white, quite similar to the winter adults. .

Watch for Eiders. The males are black and white, the females brown. The in-between plumage of immature males can be confusing if you are not used to them.

You may also see Oystercatchers, Dunlin and Lapwings, (known in Foula as

Tieves Nackets (thieves' nuisances) because of their warning calls.

There are remains of an enclosure near the coast where Nellie o Guttren lived for a short time, about a hundred years ago, before she moved to Nellie's Toon in the Brae, but it looks like there was something much older here before this.

Further along the coast you will come to the remains of **the old boat noosts (4)** where the boats were hauled up to the top of the rocks during the winter and bad weather. Fishing was a very important part of the economy during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, when fish was dried for export to Spain and for use at home through the winter. Fish heads, small Saithe, known as piltaks, and fish livers, along with potatoes, were the main diet throughout the summer.

Go to the track before it crosses the mouth of the burn. Look at the ruins of **the old mill (5)** that was demolished by the sea in a big storm in 1900 and see the broken mill stone and the water race. There is an even more ruinous second mill, which can be identified by its channel for water. The stones from this mill were removed to build **Davie o Niggard's Grave**, which is the small enclosure with the gate. Davie went for a walk along the shore one afternoon in April 1933 and was never seen alive again. His body came ashore six weeks later. Because it was thought he might have committed suicide, he was not buried in the church graveyard, as was the custom then. He was only 22 years old.

Look at the best mill. These mills are known as horizontal mills or click mills, because of the noise they made when running. The millstones, lying inside the mill, are made of mica schist, which occurs along the north east coast of Foula. It was called millgrit and the Foula men used to make millstones and export them to Orkney, sailing there in their small open boats. See the tirl below, which turned the millstones and look at the water race and the remains of the sluice. All the mills on the burns were worked in sequence off the same head of water. Each mill was owned by several houses.

Nearby you may see Marsh Marigolds, Marsh Pennywort, Lesser Spearwort and Yellow Irises, known as segs, which the old folk believed would make you stammer if you ate the roots.

Go back up to the crubs below the Bankwell dyke. One is still being worked. The net is for keeping Fulmars out. If they get in, they cannot fly up enough to get out again.

Look at the **old Bankwell house. (6)** Note the drystone walls, small rooms and small windows. The last person to live there was Jessie Henry who left at the beginning of the last century.

Look at the Bankwell dyke and point out the big thin stones set up on their edges and the coping stones, a different style from the old Foula style. This wall was built by men brought in to the island by the landlord, after the population

decreased drastically as a result of the smallpox epidemics in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was said that there were only six people left to bury the dead.

The boathouse was roofed with a boat, more recently in the 1960's for a hen house. During the spring when the crops were sown, the hens used to be banished to out of the way places to stop them scratching up seed.

Go across to the **Aald Skeos(7)**. Skeos were small stone buildings used for drying fish, particularly before the days when salt was readily available. The fish was hung up inside and the wind blew through the gaps left in the walls. These skeos are probably old, 18<sup>th</sup> century or earlier because nothing is known about who built them nor are there any stories or anecdotes mentioning them.

Point out **the Tooers o da Ness(8)**. These cairns were used in meads for fishing. They were lined up against landscape features to enable the boats to find good fishing spots. They have been built on the remains of something else, probably another skeo.

Walk to **the Little Sur Peidels(9)**. Approach carefully in case there is a Tystie outside its nest site opposite, just below the top of the cliff.

Go to **the burial cairn(10)**. This dates back 4000 - 3000 years to the Bronze Age. There are two stone slabs set up on their edges to form part of a stone cist in the middle. Pottery urns, filled with cremated ashes, were placed in the cist.

Look for Steven's hoose on the edge of the cliff, (called after Steven Smith who found it). Its age is unknown, but it may be Iron Age, because it looks like it may have been rectangular. Look for signs of the old walls.

Go to **Sur Peidel(11)** and look for Shags, Fulmars, possibly Razorbills, Puffins, Tysties and Grey Seals. Notice the old driftwood. Wood was very scarce and expensive in the past, so driftwood was a valuable resource. There is still a lesnin at the edge of **Suderakeeden(12)**. This was used for attaching a rope to, when fetching up driftwood.

Go to the **Head o da Hurd(13)**, out at the north point. Look for Razorbills and Shags and Sea Pinks flowering on the top of the flat rock. Puffins sometimes sit up here. Look south at the Guillemots on a ledge near the foot of the cliff opposite. The stack is called the Rippack Stack after the kittiwakes that used to nest there.

Go to **the windmill(14)**. It is part of the Foula electricity scheme and was erected in 1989. The scheme was installed, as a research project, by an English company, using EEC funds. It was originally comprised of the windmill, a small hydro scheme and a generator, all controlled by a computer. Solar panels were added to the scheme a few years ago and it is planned to replace old windmill with three smaller ones in 2011

Look at the old dykes crossing the Ness. It is not known how old they are, but

they may date back to the Neolithic (New Stone Age).

Go to **Skarvatung**. Look at the Shags, called skarfs in Shetland, which gives it its name. Razorbills often sit up near the top on the south side at the head of the geo.

Walk south past **Bonibrik**. See the large stones along the edge, thrown up by the sea in the winter. Look for Ringed Plovers. They are called Sandy Loos in Shetland and they make a well disguised nest of small stones. They sometimes distract intruders by pretending to have a broken wing. Look for Shags flying past the point of the Ness in small parties. They prefer to feed in the shallow water around the east side of the island.

Look for oystercatchers nesting. In Foula, they mainly feed off limpets, which they prise off rocks with their bill.

Look at the old cruie, or sheep pen. It was designed so that sheep could be driven into it from either side.

**The Automatic Met Station(15)** records wind direction and speed,

precipitation and humidity, and visibility, and sends the data by radio to the mainland. Point out how well the vegetation is growing within the fence where the sheep cannot graze. Look for Squills, Plantains and Sea Pinks.

Walk to the lighthouse, which was erected in 1986. Notice the solar panels which run it.



*The lighthouse*

Go to **the Giants Grave(16)**. The giant who was buried here, came across to Foula by stepping on Vaila and then the Shaalds (a submerged reef about 3 miles offshore). It may be connected with the old prehistoric dyke that runs across from Skarvatung.

Go to **the Yogins(17)** shallow pools or indentations, just south of Jock Ratter's shooting hide (made out of concrete and stones). Here are the very ruinous remains of two or possibly three structures, which are thought to be oval houses dating back to the late Neolithic or early Bronze Age, 5000-4000 years old. Older houses are oval, later ones were round. At this time Shetland had a climate more like the south of England and much of Foula would have grown shrubby trees, such as willows, hazels and birches. The people were farmers,

growing grain, including wheat, and keeping livestock. After this, the climate deteriorated and peat formed over the lowland, making life harder. The bigger house would have had upright stones dividing off partitions. The smaller house may have been a workshop.

Just north of the old dyke is another possible oval house with the entrance pointing towards the windmill.

Just north of the Yogins, in a row, are three burial mounds. The furthest west one has only a few of the kerbing stones left. The middle one is a big circular heap of turf and stones. The third one has some of the stones showing that formed the kist in the centre. These cairns were probably Bronze age, later than the houses, about 4000-3000 years old.

There are also mooldie kuses here (heaps of dry peat dust, covered over with stones and turf, used for drying up the byre floor in winter.).

Go to **the old Nab cruie(18)** at the back of the dyke. It is unusual for a Foula cruie in that it has several compartments. Sheep were driven down off the Noup, through the cruie onto the Ness, then the cruie was closed and they were driven back up into it. Look at the little gate in the cruie. It is made to the traditional design with the bottom of the post rotating on an up turned glass bottle.



*The auld Kirk*

Go through the gate at **Norderhoose**. Be careful to shut it properly. Please keep on the track and do not wander about. Look for Squills, Common Dog Violets, Sorrel, Daisies and Celandines.

Walk past **the auld Kirk(19)** and down to the road. If you want to go into the churchyard, use the small gate at the north side, beside the church. This was a Church of Scotland kirk. We do not know how old it is, but it probably dates back to the early 18<sup>th</sup> century or before and may have been built on the site of an earlier pre-Reformation church. The roof was taken off by the film crew when they made the film 'Edge of the World.'

Go through the big gate and down to the bridge. Swallows sometimes nest under the bridge.

Look at the old Whirly Mill beside the burn. Although it looks very ruinous, it was still in use up to the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War.

Walk up the road and look at the burnt mound known as **the Whirly**

**Knowe(20)**. These are always found beside water. They consist of a heap of burnt stones and within them is a stone cist. They date back to the late Bronze Age and are around 3000 – 2000 years old. Stones were heated up and then dropped into the cist full of water. Archaeologists speculate about what they were used for, possibly cooking, washing or something else quite different.

In May and June, Squills turn on top of the mound blue. You may find Water Horsetails just inside the fence.

Observe the **lynchettes(21)** which mark the edges of cultivation in the past. These were formed by people always cultivating downhill so that a deepness of earth gathers at the foot of the rigs.

You may spot Shetland geese on one of the crofts, a small breed usually grey and white or sometimes plain white, similar to the Faroese geese.

On the west side of the road lies **the old Grind(22)** house site, built at the edge of the old Hametoun boundary dyke. The News house was built outside the old Hametoun dyke and the man who built it was known as Robbie Oot o Dykes. The Dykes was also built at the old dyke and the Punds was built outside it. The dyke was moved to its present position about two hundred years ago.

Look along the roadside for Lady's smock, (called Peppermint Floors), Lesser Stitchwort, Marsh Dandelions and nesting Snipe, called Horse Gok because of the drumming noise they make.

Go over the grid. You are now back onto scalped moorland. Head north along the road and you will get to the airstrip.

North

