

A TRIP AROUND MACKAY COUNTRY



'Scotland's best kept secret'.

This is wild country, beautiful, but wild don't rush it.

This is the land of the midnight sun and of glorious sunsets when the entire western horizon is bathed in glory as the sun dips and is quenched in the waters of the Atlantic.

"We value and respect our past as much as we strive to make our present and future secure and vibrant."

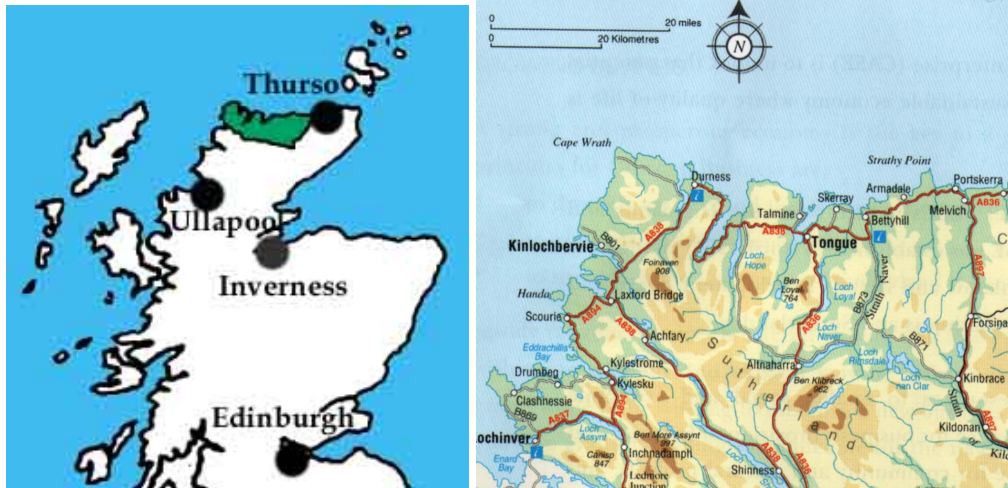
"We are on the edge, and what a beautiful edge we are on!"



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A summary of the Environment of Mackay Country

Mackay Country is the north west mainland of the Highland of Scotland.



Mackay Country has three coastlines - north, east and west which provide a stunning coastal landscape of towering cliffs and golden beaches, backed by rugged mountains and barren moorlands. The scenery around here is magnificent and for those accustomed to city dwelling the sheer scale of the landscape is awe-inspiring

This is surely one of the most beautiful areas of Europe with sparkling rivers, scattered lochs, shimmering beaches, rugged mountains and vast expanses of open moorland, here visitors and residents find peace and quietness; an absolute abundance of wildlife, clean, uncrowded beaches; some of the world's best fishing; and space in which to enjoy the clear invigorating air.

Most of the area is above 200m in height. Much of the land is only capable of use as rough grazing and only a limited proportion of ground can be used for production of anything more than a narrow range of agricultural products. Peatland accounts for a good percentage and most of the remainder is under crofting tenure. Forestry accounts for a very small portion. The area of Mackay Country has outstanding Natural Heritage. There are many sites of scientific interest SSSI and National Scenic Areas. There are numerous scheduled ancient monuments identified by Historic Scotland including forts, chambered cairns, brochs, castles, hut circles, and deserted townships. It is the wilderness experience of the far north and its all but empty grandeur which will leave the strongest impression.

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The spectacular coastal scenes in Mackay Country, interspersed by incredible moors, lochs and lochans, rivers and burns backed by the distant hills and mountains are breathtaking.



Skies that are forever changing are in step with the weather that is constantly varying. Rainbows appear and colour a black sky. Early in the year ferocious storms can lash the coast and the skies can be even more dramatic. There is always something to see with a constantly altering light. The winter skies produce some amazing displays of the northern lights, as lights flicker and dance in the sky. On the misty days the dreich damp, typical Scottish weather the mountains peak through the mist silhouetted as line shapes, the sky overcast grey black clouds an impression of a

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heavy lost land. As the clouds change and move showing and hiding shapes of the large mountainous structures the landscapes appears dynamic.



The weather is very unpredictable can change very quickly and shows a wide range of variability. Rain can be heavy and prolonged likely to be pleasant 60 with light fresh winds low cloud cover very local. Pale grey seas and skies seem to role into one Daylight is short in winter as the dawn and dusk merge and the days can be dark bleak and bracing and when the wind and rain come together from every direction the climate may seem merciless. Spring brings bright clear days and by the middle of June it is still at midnight. This is a place both wild and rugged. Here, identification with the land has always run strong. The cool and drizzly weather creates a perpetual sense of "in-betweenness," an atmosphere of twilight, between dark and light, and dew, between rain and river. The vocabulary of the winds, breeze, gust, gale, is something all Highlanders know, something they can define by individual force and pitch, from whisper to scream.



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Northwest Sutherland is the emptiest county in the UK and you do not have to go far from the main road to find large tracts of uninhabited spaces. This is a huge land with a small population. This area has a population density of less than 1 person per km² and second to the people it's the unspoilt nature and diversity, the wealth of flora and fauna in the area; the natural environment, that is one of the Mackay Country's greatest strengths. Our distinctive landscape is very valuable. In our landscape we see that cultural and environmental values go hand in hand. Sheep have grazed much of the land for nearly two hundred years and this has had an impact of what you now see in the way of vegetation. There is no one way to examine the living organisms but individuals do not occur in isolation and distribution depends upon a combination of environmental factors. The relationship of geology, landscape, climate and vegetation cannot be totally separated except for ease of investigation.



Wind is a factor of notable variability and of extreme. The topography enters greatly into exposure of wind and in many places is a prominent factor that prevents healthy tree growth. There are small sections where sheep cannot reach and single or small clusters have managed to survive.

Rowan, willow, hazel and birch are the most common in situations usually close to rivers. Small dwarf variety cling to rock faces at a few locations. The single examples of solitary species, which are represented, struggle against extreme exposure without any intervention and protection. In recent years in a few isolated remote parts of the straths where fencing has prevented grazing of deer and sheep, regeneration of natural growth has started mainly showing Mountain Ash and Birch.

Soil is a major multiple factor with a close correlation between rock type and soil character. The elements of climate, vegetation and relief are determinant in soil formation. Soil is of vital importance to countless living organisms and its nature depends on respective diverse processes interacting over a long period. Soils are identified and classified according to the features and arrangement of the horizons that make up the soil profile.

Most of Mackay Country is remote with a rugged beauty unspoilt by modern development with many using the area as an escape to the spectacular tranquility, a perfect respite from the stresses of modern living. With scenery formed by glacial erosion and the passage of time the area has representation of a unique mixture of mountains, glens and moorland dotted with countless lochans and lochs, beautiful landscapes and a rich cultural heritage. Internationally important habitats and wildlife, the areas of the open countryside offers a wide range of walking for all abilities from a gentle stroll to challenging mountaineering. Many beautiful beaches found along the coast on the many small and secluded inlets.

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Archaeology

In many parts of the Mackay Country there have been archaeological digs uncovering remains from different periods of time. As an example the archaeological dig at Sangobeg has discovered a significant find. A pre Christian burial site, amongst a midden layer, has been revealed. On a bed of white pebbles lying in a north south direction the skeletal remains of what is suspected to be an ancient Pictish inhabitant has been uncovered. The fragile bones were easily seen but in an advanced state of decomposition.

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The team of archaeologists, 2 dig directors, 3 supervisors and 7 students carefully revealed the delicate structure lying in a foetal position under a cairn. The discovery was made at the beginning of the second week of a four-week dig after clearing several areas of the midden.

The vicinity has obviously been inhabited by diverse peoples over the centuries unaware that this grave was present from about the 6 or 7 century as early signs indicate. There have also been a lot of artefacts found including pottery from the late medieval period. The site at Sangobeg was identified in 1997 during a survey and was believed to accommodate possible Viking remnants. As the area is in a dynamic state of flux with the high tide water mark having moved considerably more inland over the years there is every possibility the area could reveal further sites worthy of investigation. This is true and can be applied to many sites in the area. With local knowledge the project will record the known sites.

At Balnakeil on the sand dunes at Faraid Head in 1991 a richly equipped Viking boy's grave was uncovered. The grave was discovered by chance. A sand dune had eroded, exposing a shallow pit in which the boy's body was discovered. He was buried on a bedding of feathers and straw, with the boy was buried with various adult iron weapons including a sword in its scabbard and a shield boss. Also found was a range of other grave goods including a brooch pin, comb, beads and gaming pieces. sometime between 850 and 900. Fortunately this was noticed in the sandy coastal area at Balnakeil Durness, in time for Highland Regional Council to mount a rescue-excavation, which recovered most of the remains. The skull and torso uncovered were accompanied by grave-goods that included a possible spear, a sword, various objects of bronze and iron, an antler comb, and 14 bone gaming-pieces. Viking burials of the pagan kind, with weapons and other grave-goods, are few in number, and most were discovered a long time ago when standards of recording were poor. From the skeleton, scientists were able to tell that the boy buried at Balnakeil was probably

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between 12 and 13 years old. He was around 150.4 cm tall. A modern discovery like this one therefore is important

Geology

For the interested amateur the shapes, colours and situations of some of the rocks can only attract curiosity and fascination.



The country is a Geologists playground, with rocks displaying 3 billion years of geological time. Major fault and thrust lines, running from northeast to southwest, define the main geological zones. The U-shaped valleys are a legacy of the last Ice Age. The weight and movements of glaciers broke off spurs, deepening and rounding out the existing river valleys. The area contains rock formations of outstanding geological interest, which span over 2,800 million years and include some of the oldest surface rocks in Britain. Along the west coast, the oldest rock in the region, Lewisian gneiss, creates a landscape of low hills and scattered lochans. Rising from this gneiss landscape are huge masses of Torridonian sandstone, capped by quartzite.

Much is comprised of schists and granulites of the Moine series named after A' Mhoine near Tongue where they were first described. The softer schists of the series have weathered to produce the level landscape of the peatlands, from which the more resistant rock masses of Ben Hope and Ben Klibreck. The Moine Thrust zone, which lies east of the gneiss and sandstone area, crosses the region from north to south. This zone provides evidence of immense disturbance of the earth's crust some 400 million years ago and has long been an area of study for geologists from all over the world.

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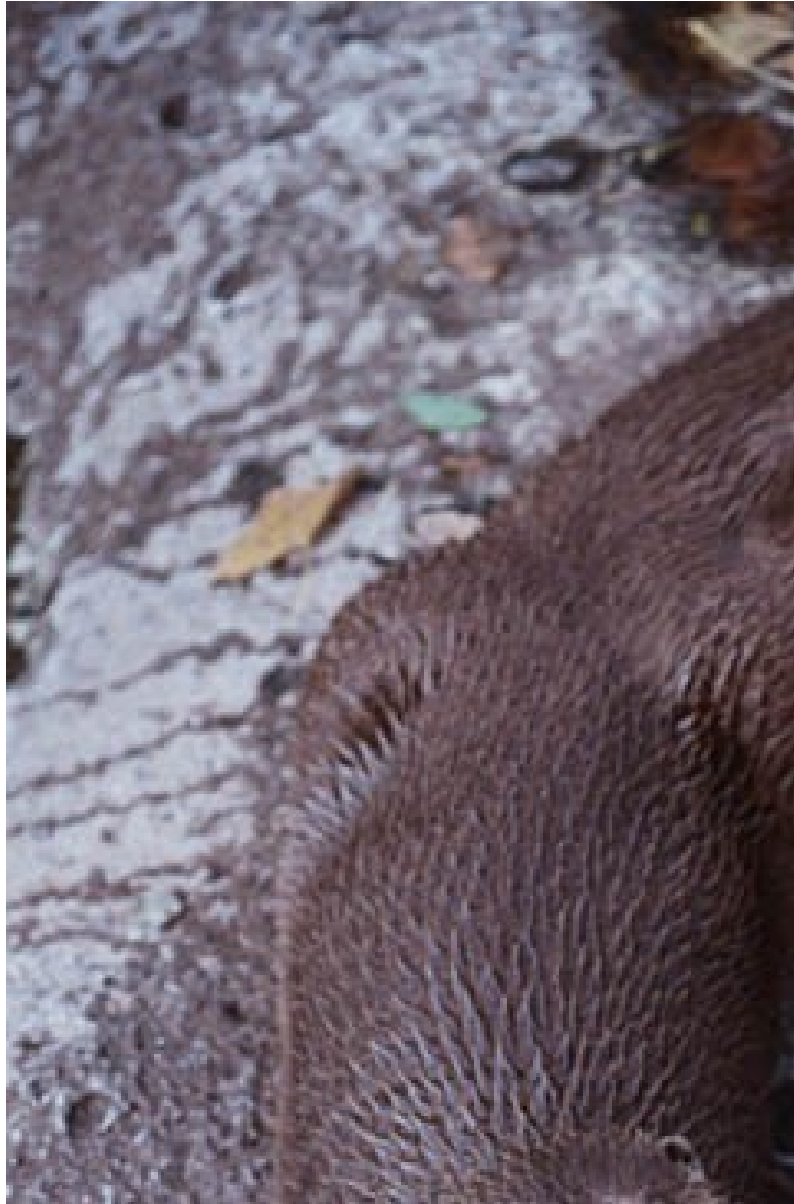
The Ecological processes of the area can be easily superficially perceived and referred to as they might appear at a single point in time but the interconnections between the marine and terrestrial processes are not readily obvious and explained. Many animals and plants have a patchy distribution and populations are rarely isolated and distinct. Disparate ecosystems; segments of nature, including all the animals and plants, species network plus the inorganic environment in which they live; can be readily detected and the manifestations of the human activities are closely interrelated. There has been perpetual change, natural and man induced, ever since the ice disappeared ten thousand years ago. Some sites are designated areas of scientific interest and areas of outstanding natural beauty. Opposing groups may perceive the landscape in different ways yet people respond emotionally to the scenery representing a freedom. For the amateur and professional naturalist, the territory abounds with interest. Ornithologists are treated to a myriad of colonies of seabirds and the flora and fauna is abundant.

Animals

Mackay Country is outstanding for birdlife during all seasons of the year. Many resident Highland species such as golden eagle, ptarmigan, crossbill and crested tit are found here. The area is particularly important for large populations of migratory species that visit either during the breeding season or to over winter. From April until July the expanses of open peatlands are home to greenshank, golden plover, dunlin and many other species of wading bird, that raise their broods on the teeming insect life of the blanket bogs. The complex network of dark shallow pools contain some of the most spectacular colonies of seabirds in Britain, with huge numbers of guillemot and kittiwake crowding the cliff ledges. At the end of the breeding season the intertidal flats in sheltered lochs and bays and offshore waters become the focus of attention, when many thousands of migratory wildfowl and waders arrive for food and shelter over the winter months. Particularly impressive are the late autumn gatherings. Birds are well documented with species recognised between water and land.

Red deer are numerous and widespread throughout the moors, while roe deer and the introduced sika deer are more commonly found in woodland. Pine marten and red squirrel, which are present in small numbers, also favour woodland habitat. More secretive animals, which might be encountered, especially at dawn and dusk, are wildcat and otter. The wildcat is a shy animal, seldom glimpsed other than by the lights of cars at night. Otters can frequently be seen during the day, usually not far from water, either by the sea or by one of the many burns and rivers.

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In the burns salmon, trout, eels and sticklebacks are abundant. Both the blue and brown hare occur, although their numbers have declined in recent years. The brown hare is found mainly on lowland agricultural ground, while the blue or mountain hare inhabits higher ground. The adder is the only snake of the area, but other reptiles include the common lizard and the slow worm which, despite its appearance, is neither a worm nor a snake, but a legless lizard. Frogs, toads and palmate newts are also widespread and are particularly obvious during the spawning period in early spring.

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The mammal numbers and diversity, which have been present in the past and those present now, are an indication of the human influences. Free-living small rodents and insectivores are the main faunal components of the terrestrial ecosystems. The spatial distribution of the situations they occupy is not readily defined with further complication by the animals not uniformly restricting themselves to clear cut and regular distribution. Foxes, even if frequently shot, badgers, otters and wild cats have been identified lately.



Plants

The plants and animals have to be adapted behavioural as well as structural to their environment, unique to itself and encompassing all those abiotic and biotic factors, which impinge upon it and frame its way of life. To survive therefore, the organisms are adapted to perform a particular role in a community occupying a certain position in the total framework; the individual organisms ecological niche. The plants are

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easier to locate if looked for at the appropriate time of year. A major interest in this district is in arctic and alpine plant species.



Plants such as Mountain Avens, moss campion and purple saxifrage usually occur on high hills are found here almost down to sea level because of the suitable bedrock and severity of the weather.

The coastline also supports other rare northern species such as the Oyster plant. The tops of some sea cliffs have developed a coastal heath dotted with spring squill and the Scottish primrose, a plant found only here and in Orkney

The widespread blanket peat influences much of the plant life inland. Bog asphodel and bogbean are two of the more colourful species, while the sundews and butterwort which trap insects to boost the poor supply of nutrients are of particular interest.



Particular heath and moorland plants show adaptations that meet the difficulties resulting from water and nutrient shortages. Little true humus is formed because of either the dryness or the cold waterlogged conditions. This results in a shortage of nutrients inhibiting bacteria. This tends to limit the flora to those whose requirements are small (mosses, lichens) and those, which can obtain nutrients through mycorrhizal associations with soil fungi. Generally, except where there is shelter, only the stronger flying insects such as bees and wasps are common. Ground living insects are found in shelter together with beetles and spiders and a variety of birds, which prey on them. Some escape notice because of cryptic colouring, which merges with the background, or disruptive colouring that distracts the eye and hinders recognition. In birds, this camouflage usually extends to the eggs as well. Predatory birds and mammals are found wherever there are seed and fruit eating birds and mammals. The peaty waters of moorland pools and streams support a very limited flora and fauna.

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Moss campion



Purple saxifrage

Heathland Lowland heaths are dominated by common heather or ling sometimes accompanied by bell heather and bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*), gorse shrubs (*Ulex europaeus*) are found on the infertile sand soils. In the water logged hollows the term Bog is used, usually dominated by Bog Moss (*sphagnum*). The peaty soil is acid in reaction. There is limited evidence of earlier forest. The heathlands are extensively grazed and kept open from invasion of trees and shrubs - partly controlled by burning. Numerous species of plants and animals are dependent on the balance between natural process of succession and the tendency of mans activity to maintain an open biotic climax community. Cheviot sheep are common and widespread and Red Deer are managed for commercial gain and sport. Moles wherever the soil is neither too acid nor stony especially in permanent grassland. Shrews, common and pigmy, wherever there is low ground cover. Rabbits are plentiful and common. The mountain Hare is in the alpine grassland and dry and rocky hill tops. The Field Vole is very common in the rough ungrazed grassland and preyed upon by birds and mammals. Mice are found, but mainly in limited parts where dwellings are close. Foxes eat voles, wood mice and rabbits, live and dead lambs, and occasionally poultry. Badgers are present in small numbers and there are occasional sightings. They are omnivorous opportunists eating small mammals and bumblebee nests. Lizards, frogs and toads are widespread and common, found almost everywhere.

There are no fixed rules for defining Moorland and Heathland and the terms are often interchanged. They both conjure up images of wide exposed country with vegetation dominated by low shrubs whether dry or wet underfoot. A major characteristic difference between them is the plants having difficulty in obtaining water for their needs. Exposure to sun and wind coupled with a very porous freely drained sand or gravel soil results in a genuine water lack in Heathland. In places, however leaching may produce a hardpan, which restricts drainage and results in wet heath. On moorland, the water shortage is physiological; the wet windswept soil is always cold and this has a restricting effect on water uptake.

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Moorland : Heather moorland is found on the hills usually of altitudes of three hundred to six hundred metres. The plants resemble low land heath being dominated by heather but other shrubs occur, Crowberry (*Emptrum nigrum*) and Bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*). Lichens are abundant. Soils are acid and peaty but vary greatly in depth and dampness. There is seldom a great thickness of peat, Bogmoss and Cottongrass (*Cyperaceae angustifolium*) are constituents of blanket peat communities, their particularly decomposed remains along with fibrous material from Heather making up much of the peat. Sheep and deer extensively graze moorland and blanket bog. There are similarities between the Heathland and Moorland. Moles, Shrews, Rabbits Voles, Mice and Foxes, Lizards frogs and toads, can be identified in this setting but distribution and frequency can be quite different. Pipistrelle Bats are thinly distributed

Mountain: High mountain plants are exposed to strong winds for long periods and experience low temperatures. Snow cover may remain for some months and the growing season is very short. Mosses and lichens resistant to extremes are generally abundant. Dwarf Birch (*Betula nana*) is frequent. A combination of complex geological strata and extremes of climate make mountains an interesting habitat containing the greatest number of rare plants. Most mountain plants come into the category of arctic-alpines. Cushion plants and dwarf shrubs are often characteristic. Wild mountain goats are not unheard of having probably been introduced as escapees. Moles have been known at quite high altitudes and mountain hares. Frogs and toads where there is high altitude ground cover. There are the birds associated with mountains.

Water



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Still, stagnant and near stagnant water bodies are common habitats. Even a very small pool offers variability of environments. Some are temporary some are permanent. The edge is likely to be inhabited by plants rooted in the mud beneath the water but which protrude above it, an important link between terrestrial and aerial environments. Factors influencing the residency of the flora and fauna vary with depth and type of shore material. A whole series of complex food webs are based on the micro-organisms or plankton living in open water. Lochs are diverse in character and vegetation and size range is considerable from large deep lochs to shallow peaty hollows that may occasionally dry up. The chemistry of each loch is different and the substrate has a considerable influence on the aquatic life. Otters feeding almost entirely on fish inhabit shore and sea lochs, widely but thinly spread. The bank vole is abundant in thick cover and shrub.

Running. A strong current prevents the growth of large masses of vegetation and can injure or carry away small animals without structures to attach themselves to stones. Oxygen is much more abundant in running water and weed tends to grow in patches providing shelter for small creatures. The water Shrew can be found at streams.



Estuarine. As rivers near the sea, it becomes tidal and brackish. There is an intermingling of fresh and marine conditions and fewer species are present than in either fresh or salt water but in favorable conditions the biomass may be quite large, as the species present often swarming in immense numbers, making rich feeding grounds for birds. The species present have to meet multiform problems, the most characteristic is the variation in salinity that accompanies each tide cycle.

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Sea Shores Because of the rhythms of the tide and because of the differences in the amount of exposure, sea shore animals and plants that can tolerate the character of the beach greatly influences the organisms found. The fauna of beaches can vary spatially in three basic dimensions; along the shore direction, in a down shore direction and in varying depths. The sea shore or littoral zone is the area between extreme high and low tide marks where most living creatures are present. Most of the inhabitants have come from the sea with only a few from the land. Small-scale succession can be seen in limited areas by either making repeated visits or comparing different sites in changing stages of development.

Rocky Shores are the most variable types with a great diversity of organisms. Abundant rock pools are left by the retreating tide providing a large number of ecological niches.

Sandy Shores may not have the great species diversity but the density of individuals is high. The organisms are often distributed in zones along the foreshore in unstable sand. The inhabitants cope with a wide range of adaptations.

Muddy Shores have the finest particles and are more restricted to specialised species although the population sizes can be considerable.

Sand Dunes The most obvious feature of coastal vegetation and due to their continual state of flux, they represent a large range of habitats. The species richness of a sand dune system depends largely upon the chemical composition of the underlying sand. Splendid examples of sand dunes and the successional stages in dune development into a type of heathland scrub are well marked around Durness. Sand deposited on the shore by the sea, dried and wind blown, forms dunes colonised only by salt tolerant species. Marram Grass (*Ammophila arenaria*) is the main stabilising influence to the less maritime regions where grassland scrub has become established. At Balnakeil Bay, there is a stretch of sand which inland forms a machair; in short, a grassland of calcareous type, consolidating land initially stabilised by Marram. Moderate grazing perpetuates it by adding organic matter. Snails abound in lime rich conditions. Slugs are common. The Blue Butterfly *Lycaena icarus* is in profusion. Sand Couch Grass

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(*Agropyron junceiforme*) often prepares the way for the entry of Marram Grass. Due to high winds in this area, the dune system is clearly in a dynamic state.



A feature of coastal plants is their relatively small size. In dune systems and on exposed cliff tops, numerous plants are reduced to almost unrecognisable forms. Three factors control their size, they are grazed by sheep, the sand has little reserve of nutrients or water and they are found in positions exposed to high winds. The coasts come into their own with sea bird colonies notably on Faraid Head and the Clo Mor on Cape Side. Foxes, rabbits, shrews (pygmy), voles, mice are present in dunes. The invertebrate fauna can be expected to be diverse species of beetles, harvestmen, earthworms, spiders and grasshoppers.

Cliffs: Cliff ecosystems have connections with both terrestrial and marine environments. The rocky surface may be affected by salt spray. Rabbits graze on quite steep cliff ledges often providing burrows for breeding puffins (*Fratercula arctica*). Near large seabird colonies, the droppings stimulate plant growth - too many droppings can 'poison' the soil. Cliffs vary as habitats according to the nature and slope of the rock of which they are composed. Rocks, which weather readily, bare a richer and more varied flora than hard rocks. Plants, which establish are maritime plants showing some degree of salt tolerance and adaptations to conditions of water shortage.

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MACKAY COUNTRY

The northwest corner of British mainland is the classic Scottish Highlands with large areas of coast, inland mountains in the background and rolling rivers, massive lochs and numerous lochans. The rugged grandeur of this area is beautiful with an overwhelming abundance of wildlife all around and is sparsely populated. There is an ever-changing light and a powerful sky, breathtaking expanse with dramatic and diverse changes. During long summer hours of daylight there is a radiance illumination and the other extreme of hours of darkness with vast starry skies in winter.

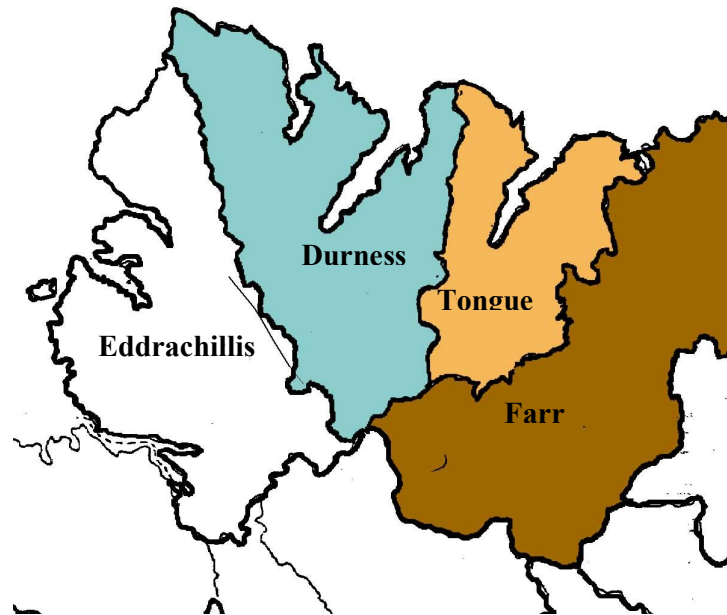
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Mackay Country, has some of Scotland's most beautiful and peaceful white sandy bays and beaches, these sandy beaches are magnificent, clean in quiet bays along this rugged rocky coastline and are scattered along the coast, mostly not to be seen from the main road but never far away. The Mackay Country coastlines are liberally interspersed with steep cliffs, small villages and communities each with a character and charm all of their own. All of these villages and communities are unique and have their own story to relate. They have cultures and traditions that are specific to them with ways of life that have brought about a distinct and individual character. There are threads of similarity that they share, a pride in their heritage, a determination to build on the strengths of local culture, society and economy, and a desire to develop any and all opportunities for sustainable community development. The Mackay Country initiative arose from a consideration of what makes the area as a whole distinctive, and the recognition of the importance of treating heritage as a "living" thing rather than as a dead – albeit interesting – past. Knowing what is established and recognised will provide a basis to develop. The Mackay country is the most remote from the seat of government of any part of the Scottish mainland and has had the majority of its people moved from the area. Mackay Country is intended today to be inclusive, encompassing all the inhabitants of the area and their descendants throughout the world. The people of Mackay Country have a distinctive history and a strong sense of identity and pride.

PARASHES OF MACKAY COUNTRY

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Eddrachillis Parish, 226 square miles, is bounded on the west by the Atlantic Ocean, on the east by Durness, southeast by Lairg and Creich, and south by Assynt. The coast, much indented by fiord-like lochs, consists of precipitous cliffs interspersed by sandy and shingle bays. Inland the land is hilly, dissected by glens, and rises to 2980 ft on Foinaven and 2863 on Ben Hee. The rocks are mainly of gneiss, bare and hummocky, red sandstone hills and some limestone.

Durness Parish, 234 square miles, occupies the northwestern corner of the county. On the northwest and north it is bounded by the Atlantic Ocean, on the east by Tongue and Farr, and on the west by Eddrachillis. It is the most sparsely populated parish in Scotland (2-4 persons per square mile). The coast is mainly of precipitous cliffs. There are two inlets, the shallow Kyle of Durness and the longer deep-water Loch Eriboll. To the west of the Kyle is the undulating plateau the Parph. The rocks here are of Lewisian gneiss and Torridonian sandstone. The surface is covered with deep peat and accordingly the region is bleak moorland and peat bog. Between the Kyle and Loch Eriboll lies a range of hills attaining an elevation of nearly 3000 ft at Foinaven. The western flank of the hills is formed of gneiss and the eastern slopes of Cambrian quartzite, and so their vegetation is scanty. East of Loch Eriboll the rocks are quartzite and schists of the Moine series, resulting in desolate moorland to the south of which stands Ben Hope (3040 ft). Forming a triangular tract round Durness village and a narrow zone on the southwestern shore of Loch Eriboll are limestone rocks giving rise to good pasture land. At Balnakeil Bay there is a stretch of shell sand, which inland forms a machair.

Tongue is bounded on the north by the Atlantic Ocean, on the east and south by Farr, and on the west by Durness. It extends to 136 square miles. The coast consists of precipitous cliffs, some sandy bays and a long shallow inlet, the Kyle of Tongue. To the west of Kyle lies the Moine, an undulating tract of bog and moor in the north of which rises Ben Hutig where *Arctous* descends to some 500 ft. On the shores of the

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Kyle, Tongue woods contain many exotic trees while in the coniferous plantations grow *Listera cordata*, *Good yera repens* and *Pyrola minor*. The chief river is the Borgie from Loch Loyal. *Equisetum telmateja* is found on its banks in its upper reaches, the sole locality in v.c. 108. Above Loch Loyal stands the picturesque Ben Loyal.

Farr, a very large parish of 417 square miles, is bounded on the north by the Atlantic Ocean, on the east by Caithness, on the south by Kildonan, Clyne, Rogart and Lairg, and on the west by Eddrachillis, Durness and Tongue. The coast consists of cliffs and sandy bays. Near the coast there are many bare rocky outcrops. Inland the land is hilly culminating in the south at Ben Klibreck (3154 ft) and in the southwest in Ben Hee (2864 ft). The rocks are mainly schists of the Moine series, granite in Strath Halladale. The parish is for the most part moorland but there is arable land in Strathnaver, Strath Halladale and at Strathy, Kirtomy and Bettyhill.

A TRIP THROUGH MACKAY COUNTRY

North West Sutherland is one of the last great scenic secrets of Europe. It is a vast wilderness of extraordinary mountains set in ancient rock, moorland and heather-clad hill. It is where you will find the highest sea cliffs, the highest waterfalls, and many other extremes of the natural world. A spectacular coast road weaves its way around numerous sea lochs and mountains. It is a wonderful journey - now known as the West Highland Tourist Route - which takes you through a traditional crofting landscape and provides a fantastic insight into the nature of life on the edge of Europe.



Duthaic Mhic Aoidh, The Land of MacKay lies in the area of North Sutherland. The area stretches along the alternately sandy, rocky coast from Kylestrome in the

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Southwest to Cape Wrath and Durness in the northwest to Melvich (Dromholstien) in the east and southwards down the fertile Straths Halladale and Strathnaver to Altnaharra, and west to Merkaland south of Achfary covering approximately 1,200 sq.km. The Mackay land covers some eighty miles in length, by some eighteen to twenty miles in depth. In 1624 the Lands of the Mackay, reached their greatest extent. The people of the Mackay Country, sometimes called Lord Reay's Country, raised sheep, cattle, and goats; selling their surplus in the markets of the south. Their main crops were barley, oats, and rye (potatoes and vegetables were not cultivated until much later). The locality was once the home of great herds of deer. Sea fish were plentiful on the coast. Trout and Salmon, venison and wild game were all, at one time, in great supply. With these natural resources the people of the Lands of Mackay were almost self supporting and independent of out-siders.

In 1829 increased debts forced Eric Mackay, 7th. Lord Reay to sell the Mackay lands to the Sutherlands. The present Chief of the name and Clan of Mackay is Hugh William Mackay, 14th. Lord Reay and Baron Mackay in the Netherlands.

Mackay Country suffered greatly during the clearances and the hundreds of townships and ways of life that were well established disappeared. This highly populated area became the empty lands of people and the foundation of what is present and occurring today. From the beginnings of crofting, the legislative result of the clearances, there has been and continues a slow progression of development compared to the more densely populated centers of Scotland.



Today, at the turn to the 21st Century, Duthaich Mhic Aoidh is home to less than 2000 people, and is therefore one of the most sparsely populated areas in Europe. The spectacular scenery of Mackay Country owes much to the peaks and ranges of the mountains that stand proud over the vast and open landscape, with pockets in sheltered areas that are flat and fertile. The Sutherland evictions, which subjected the

A TRIP AROUND MACKAY COUNTRY

MacKay Country to a brutal transformation in the name of economic progress, have made this locality today predominantly dependent on agriculture, aquaculture crofting, fishing and tourism.

The area is popular with people who want to get away from the hustle and bustle of modern everyday life with the wide open spaces and plethora of flora and fauna and deserted sandy beaches make it the perfect place to relax. The far northwest contains some of the wildest and most beautiful scenery in Scotland. Roads are mainly around the coast, few penetrating into the wild in lands except the main roads into the area through the Straths. There aren't a lot of back roads but those that do exist are particularly beautiful. Most of the roads in Mackay Country are single track roads with passing places. The single track carriageway is often wide enough to let a car and a bike to pass each other without stopping. It's certain that traveling in this area will leave you with the feeling that not everywhere on this planet is a crowded place; traffic is likely to be reasonably light. The roads are mostly hilly; some roads hardly have a flat yard on them. There are B&Bs in most of the population centers, and quite a number of hotels, many of them catering for fishermen. The Youth Hostel network is still mostly intact and there are independent hostels.



The northern coast offers a rich variety of scenery, from tall storm-swept cliffs to gentle sandy bays. The interior offers equally dramatic contrasts between low-lying windswept bogs and dramatic mountain peaks. Fishing boats shelter in the area's many harbors and fish farm cages are tucked into sheltered corners. Numerous nature reserves protect the moorland's rich plant and animal life, with sea birds to the fore. It is also one of the few places in the UK with some remote pockets of the Scottish Highlands yet to be explored.

This is indeed a land of contrasts, from the austere majesty of the mountains to the subtle undulations of the valleys, and from the dramatic cliffs to the tranquillity of the beaches. We explore Mackay Country here from the southwest coastal corner and along the north coast. We will divert to the southern borders from the appropriate junctions as they are encountered.

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