

Northern Isles

Though they're lumped together for convenience as the Northern Isles, the island groups of Orkney and Shetland proudly maintain their distinctive identities. Orkney is very green, with lush fields cropped by sheep and cattle. Across 60 miles of turbulent Atlantic Ocean, Shetland's colours are browns and blues rather than green, it's more rugged, has a real edge-of-the-world feel and relates at least as much to the Nordic world as it does to Scotland. The islands do share superb coastal scenery, with seemingly endless miles of cliffs, inlets, stacks, offshore islets and the finest coastal walking in the entire country (and in Britain). Both island groups are crowded with archaeological sites, many of exceptional significance, and home to huge sea-bird populations. Add the occasional display of the aurora borealis (the northern lights), endless summer daylight hours and exceptionally friendly and welcoming locals, and you have two inspirational walking destinations.

In Orkney, it's almost obligatory to visit Hoy, the largest Orkney isle, and to walk out to the spectacular northwest coast to see the iconic sea stack, the Old Man of Hoy. Orkney Mainland's west coast offers outstandingly scenic walking, with some of the finest sea stacks, deep inlets and secluded coves found here. The island of Westray not only has spectacular coast walking but is also home to vast sea-bird colonies. On Shetland's northernmost island, Unst, Hermaness National Nature Reserve is a bird-watchers' delight and a coast-walking destination *par excellence*. On the Muckle Roe and Eshaness peninsulas you will find what we believe is the finest coast walking anywhere in Scotland – completely unspoiled and incomparably beautiful.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Saying hello to the famous **Old Man of Hoy** (p275)
- Exploring **Yesnaby's** (p278) awesome geos, stacks and cliffs, which are among Scotland's finest
- Peering at puffins and gazing at gannets in their thousands at **Hermaness** (p286)
- Marvelling at remnants of ancient volcanoes along the magnificently rugged **Eshaness** (p289) coast

■ www.visitororkney.com

■ www.visitshetland.com

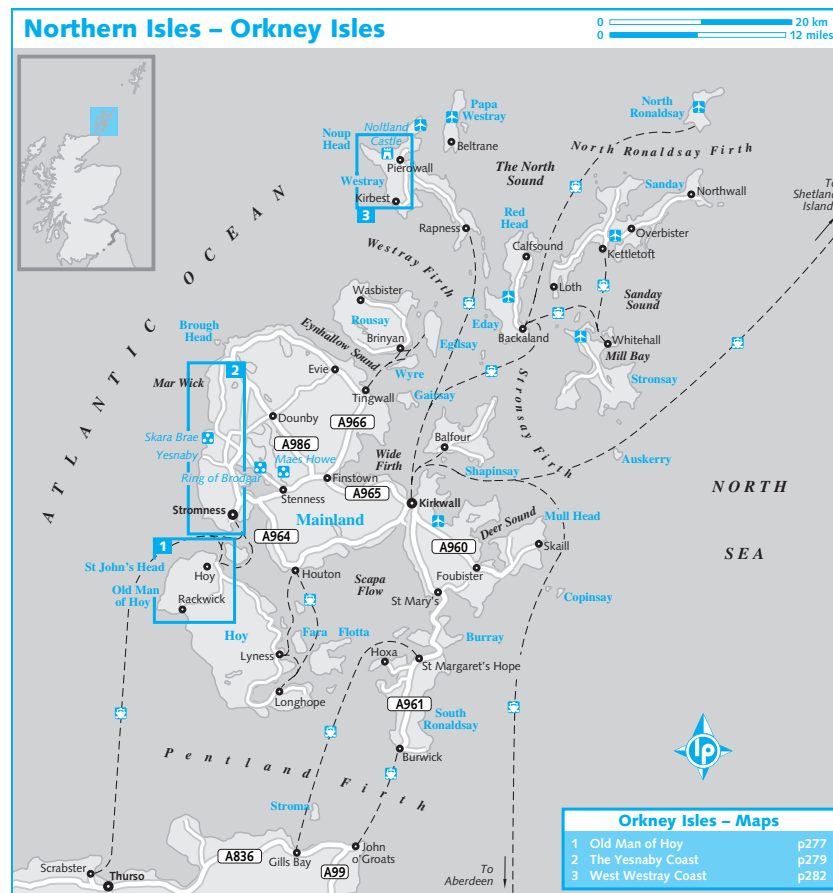
INFORMATION Maps

For a topographic overview of the islands, OS Travel – Road 1:250,000 map No 2 *Northern Scotland* is ideal. Red Books' 1:160,000 *Orkney & Shetland Islands Leisure & Tourist Map* is better for overall trip planning.

ORKNEY

There is something almost mystical about the wild and beautiful Atlantic archipelago of Orkney. Beginning just 6 miles north of mainland Scotland, 68 islands, of which 19 are inhabited, stretch northeast for around

50 miles towards Shetland. Many of the islands are flat, or have low, gently sloping hills, patchworked with heather and grass moorland and green cultivated fields dotted with sheep and cattle (the ratio of humans to cattle is 1:5). Hoy is the exception; its steep-sided hills include Ward Hill (479m, p277), the highest in all Orkney. Here you'll also find some of the highest vertical sea cliffs in Scotland (and Britain) and the famous sea stack, the Old Man of Hoy (p275). The islands are endowed with the richest concentration of prehistoric archaeological sites in Europe and it's rare not to pass a few such sites on any walk you undertake. Sea cliffs in their infinite variety and scenic beauty are ever-present on every walk, and



vast numbers of sea birds are constant companions, especially on Westray walks.

Considering its northerly latitude, Orkney experiences a surprisingly temperate climate, with mild winters and cool, damp summers. Wind is its most predictable feature, with fronts regularly sweeping in from the west or southwest, bringing wet and windy weather. This is typically followed by cold northwesterlies driving the odd squally shower of rain or hail. Showery days can make for exhilarating walking, with stormy seas sparkling under crystalline blue skies.

PLANNING

Books

Handy pocket-sized *Walks – Orkney* by Felicity Martin succinctly describes 40 outings, from short strolls to full-day walks. *Orkney on Foot* by Kate Barrett takes you on a good collection of walks, mostly on Mainland; written in a lively, engaging style, the sketch maps are the book's weak point. *Orkney – 8 Environment Walks and Orkney – 8 Heritage Walks*, published by Orkney Islands Council, feature topographic maps and concise descriptions.

An excellent set of beautifully illustrated free leaflets, including *Hidden Orkney – Wildlife, Orkney's Birds, Orkney's Cliffs* and *Orkney's Flora*, introduce their topics informatively; they're available at local TICs.

Information Sources

For preliminary planning contact **VisitOrkney** (☎ 01856 875056, www.visitorkney.com). Its guide to the islands, available online, includes accommodation listings where you can also make reservations. Its booklet *The Islands of Orkney* is another invaluable source of practical and background information.

For recommended walks, go to the **Walk Orkney** (www.walkorkney.com) website. It has a section for each island with notes and a map for mostly short walks; these should also be available on paper from TICs.

Orkney Islands Council publishes a public transport timetable covering buses and inter-island and external ferries and flights; it's available free from local TICs.

Guided Walks

OCEAN (Orkney Community Environment Awareness Network) is a diverse group of community and official organisa-

tions that stages a program of guided walks and tours to natural and cultural heritage sites throughout Orkney. Groups include the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and Historic Scotland. For more information contact **Scottish Natural Heritage** (SNH; ☎ 01856 875302; 54 Junction Rd, Kirkwall) or pick up a copy of the program at local TICs.

ACCESS TOWN

Kirkwall

☎ 01856 / pop 6210

The capital of Orkney, Kirkwall is a rather prosaic commercial centre (apart from the area around magnificent St Magnus Cathedral), though it does have a wide range of services and good transport connections.

INFORMATION

The **TIC** (☎ 872856; www.visitorkney.com; 6 Broad St; ☎ daily May-Sep, Mon-Sat Oct-Apr) is very helpful and welcoming. It stocks maps, a modest range of books and can provide a town map and public transport guide.

EG Kemp (☎ 872137; 31 Bridge St; ☎ Mon-Sat) sells the full range of camping fuels, and outdoor equipment.

SLEEPING & EATING

Pickaquooy Caravan and Camping Site (☎ 879900; Pickaquooy Rd; unpowered/powerd sites for 2 £7/10) is next to the large Pickaquooy Centre. The fenced, grassy and slightly sheltered site isn't exactly peaceful, but is convenient. Enter from Peerie Sea Loan.

Kirkwall SYHA Hostel (☎ 0870 004 1133; www.syha.org.uk; Old Scapa Rd; dm/d £13/26) is a fair step from the harbour. Unusually, it has several single and double rooms.

Lerona B&B (☎ 874538; Cromwell Cres; s/d £30/50), in a quiet street seven minutes' walk east of the harbour, is a comfortable place where you can browse the large collection of books about Orkney; breakfast is excellent.

Kirkwall Hotel (☎ 872232; Harbour St; mains £9-14; ☎ lunch & dinner) dominates the central harbour front. Great pride is taken in using fresh local produce, especially seafood; the restaurant has won several awards.

Dil Se (☎ 875242; 7 Bridge St; mains £9-16; ☎ lunch & dinner) is a stylish, popular restaurant dedicated to North Indian and Bangladeshi cuisine. Go for one of the middle-of-the-road, subtly flavoured dishes; hot really means hot on this menu!

For groceries, **Somerfield** (Pickaquooy Rd) and **Co-op** (Pickaquooy Rd) supermarkets are close together.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

British Airways/Loganair (☎ 0870 850 9850; www.britishairways.com) flies daily to Kirkwall from Aberdeen (50 minutes), Edinburgh (1½ hours), Glasgow (1½ hours), Inverness (45 minutes) and Sumburgh on Shetland (35 minutes). Fares fluctuate widely according to date and time of departure. Kirkwall airport is 2.5 miles from the town centre; Orkney Coaches operates a connecting bus service to the town centre (£1, 15 minutes, Monday to Saturday).

NorthLink Ferries (☎ 0845 600 0449; www.northlinkferries.co.uk) operates the service between Aberdeen and Kirkwall (passenger/car/two-berth cabin £24/85/106, six hours, Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday), and on to Lerwick in Shetland. For its Scrabster–Stromness service see p279.

Pentland Ferries (☎ 831226; www.pentlandferries.co.uk) runs a small car ferry from Gills Bay, east of Thurso, to St Margaret's Hope on South Ronaldsay (passenger/car £12/28, one hour, four daily), across what the company claims is the calmest stretch of the notorious Pentland Firth. Booking is essential.

John O'Groats Ferry (☎ 01955 611353; www.jogferry.co.uk) provides a passenger-only service between John O'Groats and Burwick on South Ronaldsay (£16, 40 minutes, up to four daily May to September). A connecting bus service takes you to Kirkwall.

OLD MAN OF HOY

Duration	5½–6 hours
Distance	13.6 miles (22.1km)
Difficulty	moderate
Start/Finish	Moaness pier, Hoy (p276)
Transport	ferry

Summary A close encounter with Orkney's famous landmark, impressively high sea cliffs and the chance to climb Hoy's highest hill.

Hoy, the second-largest Orkney isle, is by far the most rugged. Long, steep-sided, broad-backed ridges dominate the island, rising from deep, wide valleys. Ward Hill (479m), the highest point in all of Orkney, rises sharply from the northeastern coastal fringe, and gives superb views across the isles and south to the mainland. The Old Man, all 137m of him, is the tallest sea stack in Europe. Consisting of thin slabs of sandstone, it stands close to colourful, near-vertical cliffs, 200m or more high.

A fair proportion of the island is protected in the Hoy Nature Reserve, owned and managed by the RSPB. The upland moors provide ideal nesting sites for several hundred pairs of great skua (bonxie), while fulmars, puffins, guillemots, razor-bills and kittiwakes jostle for space on the cliffs. Another inhabitant of the moorlands that you'll undoubtedly meet if you climb Ward Hill is the mountain hare. In spring it's grey-white, in transition from its winter coat to the brown summer garb.

BEWARE OF THE BONXIE

The great skua, known as a bonxie in the Orkneys, is one of the most formidable and aggressive sea birds in the world. Surpassed in size and power only by the great black-backed gull, the great skua commonly attacks other birds in flight to force them to drop their catch. They even attack and kill gannets, hanging on to a tail or wingtip until the gannet has to ditch. Until the early 20th century the great skua's only breeding colonies in the British Isles were on Unst and Foula in Shetland. They have since spread across Orkney and into northern mainland Scotland.

If you find yourself too close to a skua nest (on the ground in moorland) you may be dive-bombed. The huge birds approach out of a dive at speeds of up to 50mph but rarely make direct contact. Still, it can be an unnerving experience and the best defence is to wave a walking pole above your head to ward off sharp beaks. If you happen to stray into a colony you could find yourself under attack on all fronts!

In Hermaness Nature Reserve (p286) in Shetland, skua have become accustomed to humans so will rarely attack. Of the other sea birds you're likely to encounter in the Northern Isles, only terns are as aggressive in defending their nests, often pecking with their small, very sharp beaks. The best strategy is to steer well clear of all ground-nesting bird colonies. You have been warned!

The walk is described as an out-and-back jaunt from Moaness pier, used by the ferry from Stromness; an ascent of Ward Hill is suggested as a side trip. Should you prefer a shorter walk, you can start and finish at Rackwick, a settlement on Hoy's south coast, directly accessible by car, or by minibus from Moaness. Allow 2½ to three hours for this 5-mile (8km) walk. If you're prepared to arrive at Rackwick with enough food and gear to stay overnight, you can patronise the SYHA hostel there; it's possible to camp nearby and use hostel facilities.

PLANNING Maps

Use either OS Explorer 1:25,000 map No 462 *Hoy* or OS Landranger 1:50,000 map No 7 *Orkney – Southern Isles*.

NEAREST TOWN Hoy

☎ 01856

Hoy is the general name for the thin scattering of cottages and farms on the hillsides above Moaness pier. There are no shops on Hoy so bring all the supplies you'll need.

Hoy Outdoor Centre (☎ 873535; www.syha.org.uk; dm £12) is 15 minutes' walk uphill from the pier, near the prominent church. Run by the Orkney Islands Council Education Dept, it has small en suite rooms and excellent facilities.

WATCH YOUR STEP!

During all the walks in this chapter you'll inevitably be going along, or close to, the edge of high sea cliffs, which are generally unfenced and, in places, loose and crumbling. This sort of walking is potentially hazardous, especially where nesting sea birds invite a closer look from the cliff edge. Be careful and err on the side of caution, especially when the wind is strong. Accidents have occurred when people wearing waterproof outer gear have slipped on steep slopes above the cliffs – the combination of shiny fabric and wet grass can be lethal.

Another, less obvious, hazard is rabbit burrows, found anywhere in sandy ground; they're far from obvious and could easily cause a sprained ankle.

Quoydale B&B (☎ 791315; quoydale@supanet.com; s/d £25/46, dinner £10) is a working farm all by itself overlooking Burra Sound; the bedrooms are a bit of a tight fit and you share a bathroom.

Rackwick SYHA (☎ 873535; www.syha.org.uk; dm £8) is a small hostel in a great location, at the start of the path to the Old Man.

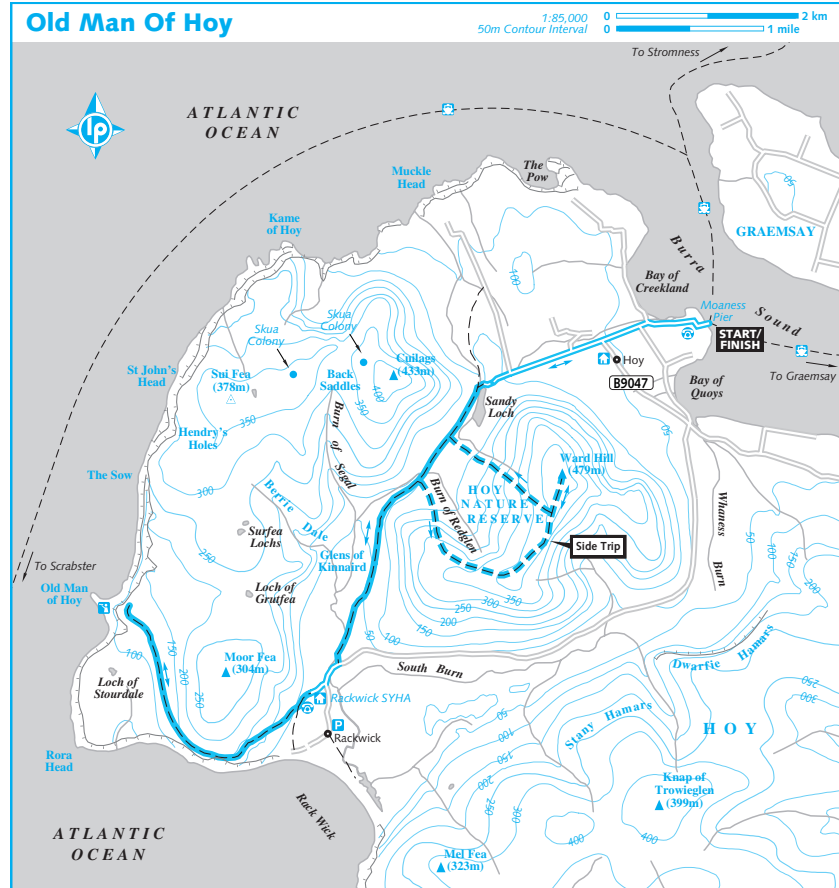
Orkney Ferries (☎ 872044; www.orkneyferries.co.uk) operates a passenger ferry between Stromness and Moaness pier (£7 return, 25 minutes, four services Monday to Friday, two Saturday and Sunday). **Albert Clark** (☎ 791315) meets most ferries in his minibus and plies the road to and from Rackwick (£5).

Alternatively, if you fancy exploring the island yourself, Orkney Ferries vehicle ferry goes from Houton, east of Stromness, to Lyness in southeastern Hoy (passenger/vehicle return £7/20, 45 minutes, six services Monday to Friday, four Saturday, five Sunday).

THE WALK

From Moaness pier walk up the single track road leading generally west. Follow it for 1.5 miles, ignoring left and right turns, climbing gently at first then more steeply past a church. At the top of the hill (40 minutes from the start) the road turns right and a good track continues straight on towards the gap between Cuilags on the right and Ward Hill on the left. Follow the track to **Sandy Loch**, where it deteriorates to a rough, wide path. This gains height steadily through the impressive glen, eventually reaching the watershed, from where it drops purposefully past the small glen known as Berrie Dale to the west, which shelters hardy dwarf birches, the most northerly native woodland in Scotland. The path improves as you descend and there are bridges across the burn. An hour from Sandy Loch turn right at a minor road then shortly right again to reach the youth hostel.

The signposted path starts on its south side; go through a gateway and up past a small cottage on the right. Turn left beside a fence then right briefly. Turn left again to cross a burn, then pass behind a cottage and within 50m bear right uphill. The path angles up the slope, below another cottage, to a gate, going on to moorland. The path, nice and clear now, curves round



the hillside. Turning north, the topmost layers of the Old Man appear above the cliffs – if you didn't know it was there, you'd wonder what on earth this isolated block of rock was. A wide path, rocky in places, leads north across moorland and on to the cliff-top viewpoint for the Old Man and adjacent cliffs.

Retrace your steps to Rackwick and on to Moaness pier.

SIDE TRIP: WARD HILL 2 hours, 3.1 miles (5km), 330m ascent

The map suggests a traverse from the junction of the Moaness path and the Rackwick road, but the ridge here is covered with fairly deep heather, and only the uplands

offer relatively easy walking across rocky ground, strewn with flat grey sandstone slabs. The most direct approach is from a large cairn beside the path, just south of the Burn of Redglen. It is simply a matter of climbing steeply to the ridge, then heading east and northeast along the undulating ridge to the summit of **Ward Hill**, which is topped by a cairn and a survey pillar inside a low, circular stone shelter. On a clear day you can see virtually all of Orkney, as well as the mainland in the general vicinity of Duncansby and Dunnet Heads. From the first bump with a cairn south from the summit descent northwest, regaining the path a short distance south of Sandy Loch.

THE YESNABY COAST

Duration	5–5½ hours
Distance	12.5 miles (20km)
Difficulty	moderate
Start	Bay of Skail
Finish	Stromness (right)
Transport	bus (seasonal)

Summary One of Scotland's premier coastal walks, along spectacular cliffs and past sea stacks, with long sea views.

The southern half of Mainland's west coast resembles an awesome geological exhibition, with extensive displays of different features and rock types, and evidence of a variety of processes. The cliffs aren't particularly high, compared with Hoy's west coast, but they're impressively rugged, tilt alarmingly towards the sea, sheer in many places and constantly lashed by waves and spray. Sea birds do nest here but in comparatively small numbers. Landward of the cliff edge the mainly grassy slopes rise quite steeply and make for really easy walking. In the later stages it's necessary to take to the shore, where field fences around Breck Ness run along the edge of the low cliff, and to walk across flat rock slabs. The state of the tide shouldn't matter, though with a heavy sea and high tide, you'd be lucky to escape the occasional wetting.

The walk starts near Orkney's best known archaeological site, Skara Brae, a part of the Neolithic Heartland World Heritage site. As northern Europe's best preserved Neolithic village, it deserves to be on your must-do list in Orkney.

PLANNING MAPS

Use either OS Explorer 1:25,000 map No 463 *Orkney – West Mainland* or OS Landranger 1:50,000 map No 6 *Orkney – Mainland*.

SKARA BRAE – WORLD HERITAGE SITE

For thousands of years Skara Brae was covered by sand until it was exposed by a severe storm in 1850. It is the best-preserved Neolithic village in northern Europe and offers a remarkably detailed insight into the thriving communities that lived in Orkney 5000 years ago. It is part of the Neolithic Heartland World Heritage site.

A visit to **Skara Brae** (☎ 841815; admission £7), managed by Historic Scotland, is a wonderful, thought-provoking start to the Yesnaby walk. The visitor centre there has informative displays and a sizable shop; the official guide to Skara Brae is among the many publications available.

NEAREST TOWN Stromness

☎ 01856 / pop 1610

A small town of narrow streets, steep alleyways and rather dour grey buildings along the western shore of the Bay of Ireland, Stromness has a beguiling, gritty charm.

Stromness Travel Centre (☎ 850716; www.visitororkney.com; NorthLink ferry terminal; ☎ daily May–mid-Sep, Mon–Sat mid-Sep–Apr) stocks maps and books and can provide a useful free map of the town. Two more specialised sources of books are **John Rae** (Victoria St) and **JL Broom** (Victoria St).

SLEEPING & EATING

Ness Point Camping & Caravan Site (☎ 873535; unpowered/powerd sites for 2 £7/10) is perched on a breezy point at the southern end of town, though stone walls provide some shelter and the views of Hoy are superb.

Stromness Hostel (☎ 850589; www.stromnesshostel.co.uk; Hellihole Rd; dm £11, d with bathroom £24) is five minutes from the docks along the main street.

Ferry Bank B&B (☎ 851250; 2 North End Rd; s/d £30/50) overlooks the harbour and is flanked by its own large garden. It's impossible to fault this superb establishment and its breakfast is unsurpassed for variety and presentation.

Julia's Cafe & Bistro (☎ 850904; 20 Ferry Rd; mains café £5–10, bistro £10–18; ☎) café to 5pm, bistro dinner Thu–Sun) is a cheerful, deservedly popular place beside the harbour. It offers a small but imaginative dinner menu and an extensive wine list.

Stromness Hotel (☎ 850298; Victoria St; mains £7–17; ☎) lunch & dinner) dates from the beginning of the 20th century and has a measure of old-fashioned atmosphere and charm. The menu includes Orkney and Orient dishes served up generously; local beers are available on tap.

Stock up with basic supplies at the **Co-op** (North End Rd) supermarket but for Orkney delicacies head for the **Stromness Deli** (Victoria St) or **Argo's Bakery** (Victoria St).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

NorthLink Ferries (☎ 0845 600 0449; www.northlinkferries.co.uk) operates a car ferry service between Scrabster, near Thurso on the mainland, and Stromness (passenger/car £15/45, 1½ hours, six services Monday to Saturday, four Sunday).

An **Orkney Coaches** (☎ 870555; www.rapsons.co.uk) bus service links Stromness and Kirkwall (£3, 30 minutes, hourly Monday to Saturday, six services Sunday).

GETTING TO/FROM THE WALK

Orkney Coaches (☎ 870555; www.rapsons.co.uk) operates a seasonal service (one service Monday to Friday, three Sunday, May to September) linking Skara Brae with Kirkwall (£3, 1¼ hours) and Stromness (£2, 20 minutes).

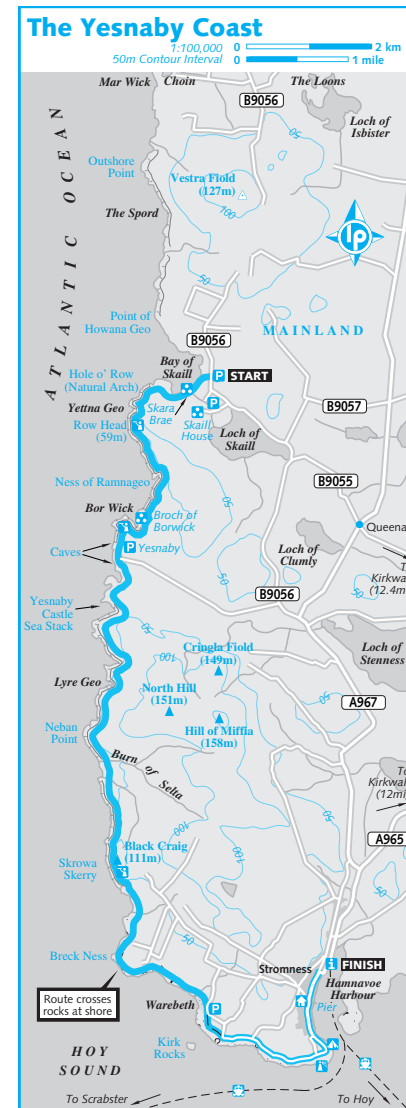
By car, turn off the A967 Kirkwall–Birsay road towards Bay of Skail along the B9057 and follow signs to the bay at subsequent junctions; there's a parking area (with toilets) overlooking the beach.

THE WALK

Walk along Bay of Skail beach, past **Skara Brae**; at the western end of the beach cross the shingle, pass a roofless stone building and follow a path beside a fence. Cross some rocks and scramble up to the open cliff top. Soon you pass Yettina Geo, crowded with birds. Climb to the cairn at **Row Head** (59m), from where the Old Man of Hoy comes into view. Continue southeast; about an hour out, Ness of Rammageo bites deep inland. In places wind has stripped away the grass cover, creating a patchwork of flat rocks and grass, dotted in spring with pink thrift. It's easy enough to follow a narrow path close to the cliff edge for the best views. At an east–west barbed-wire fence, a signpost 'Footpath to Broch of Borwick' is on the far side; fortunately the stile is nearby to the right. The crumbling remains of the Iron Age **broch** sit on a small knoll; the entrance is intact so you can inspect its double-wall construction. Cross Bor Wick; stay above the fence to avoid barbed wire above a yawning drop near the end of the small

headland. Continue the short distance to **Yesnaby** car park, beside the derelict WWII buildings, crossing the fence near its seaward end (35 minutes from Ness of Rammageo). Information boards here describe local geology, history and wildlife.

Cross a small bay and diverge to the headland topped by a cairn for awesome views of



nearby cliffs. Gain height and you soon come to Garthna Geo, sheltering the elegant, grey **Yesnaby Castle** sea stack. Continue up, though a gate and on past deep Lyre Geo. Stick to the lower path to see the next (nameless) castle or sea stack in a shallow inlet close to Neban Point, much larger and more colourful than Yesnaby Castle, its horizontal strata exactly matching those of the point (one hour from Yesnaby). Soon, descend slightly to cross the wide shallow glen of Burn of Selta; beyond the third small stream crossing, go over a fence at a makeshift stone stile and climb steadily to **Black Craig** (40 minutes from Neban Point), with a WWII lookout, for fine views of the islands of Hoy and Graemsey.

Walk down the slope to a path along the edge of a shingle beach, then go up to a low cliff top. About 30 minutes from Black Craig, past a corner at Breck Ness, the space between the fence and the cliff edge disappears, so take to the shore-level rock platform with easy walking across huge flat slabs. Around a shallow point, stay at sea level and shortly you reach an intermittently sandy beach. When the fence is no longer visible above (about 250m from Warebeth beach) go up to a clear path and continue to the Warebeth car park (30 minutes from Breck Ness). A path leads on, around the point at Pulse Skerry, past a large cemetery. Join a bitumen road at the golf course for a few hundred metres, then a hard-surfaced path for the short stretch to the car park beside Ness Point Camping & Caravan Site (or continue along the road into Stromness).

WEST WESTRAY COAST

Duration	3–3½ hours
Distance	5.5 miles (8.8km)
Difficulty	moderate
Start	Kirbest
Finish	Noup Head
Nearest Town	Pierowall (opposite)
Transport	private

Summary A first-class coastal cliff-top walk with countless thousands of sea birds for company and wonderfully wide views.

Often called the ‘Queen of the Orkney Islands’, Westray is blessed with magnificent coastal cliffs, countless sea birds, white sandy beaches, very hospitable residents

and an infectious atmosphere of peace and contentment.

Noup Cliffs Nature Reserve, cared for by the RSPB, is renowned for its wealth of bird life. The horizontal beds of old red sandstone on west Westray’s sea cliffs have been weathered by the elements, creating perfect nesting sites. The numbers are amazing; at the height of the breeding season these cliffs are home to around 60,000 guillemots (known as aaks in Orkney), 30,000 pairs of kittiwake, 3000 pairs of fulmar, several thousand puffins (known as the tammy norrie) and 1700 razorbills. Just inland from the cliffs, on the exposed coastal heath, about 20,000 arctic terns and 1000 pairs of great skua make their nests. In midsummer the combined impact of bird calls and their wheeling and diving, not to mention the smell, makes for a memorable experience.

Five defined walks have been developed on the island, exploring many places of interest, including the walk described here and the Castle O’Burrian (or Puffin) walk (p282). They’re all outlined in free leaflets available from **VisitOrkney** (☎ 01856 875056; www.visitorkney.com) or locally.

Most of the way on this route you’re on short, cropped grass; elsewhere it’s bare or rocky ground underfoot. The route is not waymarked but there’s a more-or-less-continuous path, and several stiles help to define the best route. If you use the alternative car park, Bis Geos, towards the northern end of the walk (see Getting to/from the Walk on p279), you’ll have an extra 2 miles (3km) to walk from Noup Head; alternatively, you could follow the short waymarked path north from the coast near Bis Geos up to the car park, saving 1.9 miles (3km). In the absence of a lift from the end of the main route, it’s 4 miles (6km) from the lighthouse back to Pierowall.

PLANNING Maps

Use either OS Explorer 1:25,000 map No 464 *Orkney – Westray* or OS Landranger 1:50,000 map No 5 *Orkney – Northern Isles*.

Guided Walks

Westraak (☎ 01857 677777; www.westraak.co.uk; Quarry Rd, Pierowall) offers guided walks on the island; the owners are exceptionally knowledgeable and their tours are highly recommended.

Information Sources

Westray & Papa Westray Tourist Association (☎ 01857 677777; www.westrayandpapawestray.com; Quarry Rd, Pierowall) is a good place to start.

For information about the nature reserve, contact the **RSPB** (☎ 01856 850176; orkney@rspb.org.uk; 12-14 North End Rd, Stromness).

Westray Heritage Centre (☎ 01857 677414; admission £2; ☎ daily Jul–Aug, Sun & Mon, Tue–Sat afternoon Sep–Jun), next to the Pierowall Hotel, houses award-winning displays about the island’s cultural and natural heritage.

NEAREST TOWN Pierowall

☎ 01857

Pierowall, the only village on Westray, is a friendly place, spread around the sandy Bay of Pierowall. The bank opens only on Wednesday and Friday; a cash-back service from British banker’s cards is available from Rendall’s Store.

SLEEPING & EATING

The **Barn** (☎ 677214; www.thebarnwestray.com; Chalmersquoy; unpowered sites for 2 £10, dm/d £12/24) occupies a converted stone barn, complete with stone slab roof. Excellent facilities include double rooms and a campers’ kitchen; the camp site itself is sheltered. The owners are very knowledgeable.

No 1 Broughton (☎ 677726; www.no1broughton.co.uk; No 1 Broughton; s/d £25/50) is a restored mid-19th-century Orkney house with large bedrooms, the walls of which are adorned with some of the host’s artworks. Breakfast in the sunny conservatory features homemade bread and preserves.

Pierowall Hotel (☎ 677472; www.orknet.co.uk/pierowall; s/d £32/56, mains £5-11; ☎ lunch & dinner) has comfortable rooms and is justly famous for its fish and chips. The fresh, melt-in-the-mouth fish (several varieties are available) and thick chips are served up generously and are exceptionally good value. It also does takeaway fish and chips, wine and spirits.

Haff Yok Café (Quarry Rd; mains £2-4; ☎ lunch), run by the Westraak people (opposite), sells maps and crafts. Snacks and light meals are truly homemade, using local products, including bread. The name comes from the days when farms were worked with yoked horses; farmers would take a break for a snack between meals.

Rendall’s (☎ Mon–Sat, Sun afternoon May–Sep) and **Tulloch’s** (☎ Mon–Sat, Sun afternoon May–Sep) stores both have a fair range of groceries. The bakery is by the pier.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Loganair (☎ 01856 872494; orkneyres@loganair.co.uk) operates flights from Kirkwall to Westray (£31, 20 minutes, daily except Wednesday).

Orkney Ferries (☎ 01856 872044; www.orkneyferries.co.uk) runs services from Kirkwall to Rapness on the southern tip of Westray (passenger/car £7/15, 1¼ hours, three services Sunday to Friday, two Saturday).

Westray Bus (☎ 677450) links Rapness and Pierowall and meets most ferries (£2, 20 minutes, three services Monday, Wednesday and Thursday, two Tuesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday, May to September).

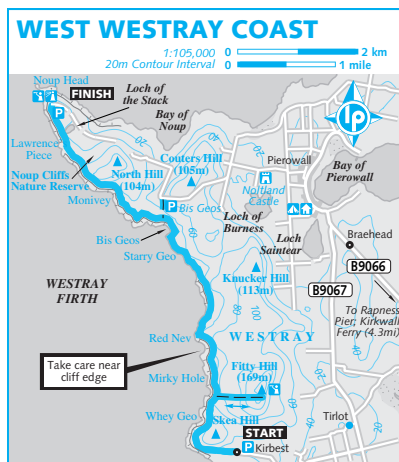
Failing all else, **Westraak** (☎ 677777) or **No 1 Broughton** (☎ 677726) can provide a taxi service.

GETTING TO/FROM THE WALK

As this is a linear walk, you need to plan carefully if two cars are available. To reach the start, follow the B9067 south from near Pierowall to a T-junction; turn right. At the next junction, turn right towards Kirbest. There’s a small parking area on the south side of the road, beside the entrance to the last farm. The road to Noup Head is signposted in Pierowall; the last 2 miles are very rough. Out of respect for your car you can park at Bis Geos (Backarass on the OS map).

THE WALK

From Kirbest set out along the farm access track; bear left at the farm buildings then bend right past a cottage. Drop down to the left and go through a kissing gate. Follow a path between fenced fields, cross a stile and continue in the same direction to another one. A clear path crosses the slope to Inga Ness, all flat, wave-washed rock shelves, then turns north and the objective, Noup Head lighthouse, comes into view. Gain a little height and pass the head of Whey Geo, its thin slices of sandstone encrusted with sea birds. Beyond a slight dip, cross a stile and go up to a pair of stiles, side by side (40 minutes from Kirbest). You can diverge east here, steeply up to the summit of **Fitty Hill** (169m), the highest point on Westray, for great views of almost the entire island,



flat little Papa Westray and much else; allow 30 minutes for this return jaunt.

Cross another dip then go up past Red Nev, densely populated with birds. Soon the route starts to subtly veer northwest. Descend across a burn; look back here to spot a good example of a **natural arch**. Then swing around a fairly wide geo harbouring a small stack; cross a stile and continue on the seaward side of the fence. Soon you reach the first of Bis Geos. An hour from the Fitty Hill stile, you come to a small green sign on a stile post indicating a Westray walk to the right (the Noup Head loop); this leads to the alternative car park at Bis Geos.

SHORT WALK – CASTLE O'BURRIAN, WESTRAY

Of all the sea birds on view around the Scottish coast, the puffin is probably the most endearing, with its penguin-like bearing, bright red feet and colourful summertime beak. Encounters can be virtually guaranteed (especially between May and July, ideally in the afternoon) on this 3.4-mile (5.5km) circular walk. You should allow around 1½ hours to complete the walk. It starts at Rapness Mill, a short distance northeast of the B9066, about 6 miles southeast of Pierowall. Use OS Landranger 1:50,000 map No 5.

Walk past what was Rapness Mill (the skeletal wheel is still in place) and go through a gate and along a path. In a few minutes you reach the shallow inlet in which stands the castle, a thick-set rock stack and puffin residence, pockmarked with the birds' burrows. Continue generally east and you may spot a few outcast puffins on the cliffs ahead. The path turns southeast at Stanger Head and the island of Sanday comes into view. About 40 minutes from the start, at a stile above Geo of Rustling Stones (on the North Sea), turn right along a grassed track. It becomes a road and leads to the main road; cross and continue to the beach of Bay of Tafts – on the Atlantic Ocean. Walk along the sand, exiting through a gap in the fringing dunes, and passing Rapness cemetery en route to the main road. Turn left and follow it for about 300m back to the road leading to Rapness Mill.

Continue uphill, past Monivey's sea-bird colonies and through a line of cliffs to a plateau cradling Loch of the Stack. One more short climb takes you to a survey pillar (76m), from where it's a hop and a step to the **Noup Head lighthouse** car park.

SHETLAND

The Shetland isles are the most northerly outpost of the British Isles, are closer to Norway than to mainland Scotland and lie on the same latitude as southern Greenland. Of the 100 or more islands in the group, 15 are inhabited, the largest being Mainland, where the capital Lerwick lies on the east coast. With the exception of Fair Isle and Foula, the isles are clustered companionably close together. The 930-mile-long (1500km) coastline is crumpled, deeply indented, awesomely rugged and littered with stacks, geos, gloop, skerries and cliffs teeming with sea birds; indeed, the isles are internationally renowned among bird-watchers. The sea is everywhere and it's impossible to hide more than 3 miles from the water's edge.

Shetland has been settled since prehistoric times and evidence of early inhabitants is plentiful in cairns, standing stones and brochs. The Vikings took over Shetland around AD 700 and it remained under Norse rule until 1469 when the islands were presented to Scotland as part of a royal

dowry. Shetlanders are proud of their distinctive history and culture and generally regard themselves as Shetlanders who happen to be part of Scotland.

The isles have their fair share of damp, foggy weather but clear, sunny days are by no means exceptional. Wind is a constant presence, from every direction, so you need to have good protective clothing. Midsummer is the ideal time to visit, when the sun is above the horizon for up to 19 hours and the other five hours are far from dark – the 'summer dim' in local parlance. This is also the peak time for bird-watching. It's not exactly hot – maximum daily temperatures rarely exceed 18°C.

Walking here is first, last and foremost coastal; in fact, the isles collectively are the best venue for coast walking in Scotland, being second-to-none in beauty, infinite diversity and ease of access.

PLANNING

Books

Orkney & Shetland, in SNH's *Landscape Fashioned by Geology* series, explains the processes that created the indented coast, and describes the different types of rock. The islands are rich in archaeological sites, so consider either *The Ancient Monuments of Shetland* by Noel Fojut and Denys Pringle, or Anna Ritchie's *Shetland in the Exploring Scotland's Heritage* series, both by respected professionals in the field.

The isles are a bird-watcher's paradise, so *Where to Watch Birds in Shetland* by Hugh Harrop is invaluable. It includes lists of species, useful maps and illustrations. *Shetland's Wild Flowers* by D Malcolm has good, clear photos and brief descriptions.

An alternative to most of these is an excellent series of leaflets, produced by Shetland Amenity Trust and others and available from TICs, covering many topics including wildflowers, the seashore and the several districts within the isles.

For walks, Peter Guy's seven-volume series *Walking the Coastline of Shetland* is ideal. The maps are fairly basic but the information certainly isn't. They're illustrated with contemporary and historic photos. *Walk Shetland*, a pack of 13 plastic cards, each with brief notes and a rough map, is good for ideas that you can follow up elsewhere, but the notes aren't very helpful.

WICKS, GLOUPS & NOOSTS

The Northern Isles' (especially Shetland's) Norse heritage strikes you as soon as you open a map. Maritime and land features bear unfamiliar and often unpronounceable names. The reasons for this lie in the distant past. Norse settlers arrived in the Northern Isles around AD 800 and stayed for several hundred years; their language, Old Norse, soon displaced Pictish and Gaelic. Its continuing and extensive use in place names should guarantee permanence but its future as a spoken language (Norn) is less certain. It is in everyday use among Shetlanders but is taught only to a limited extent in local schools. Here's a guide to the more common terms.

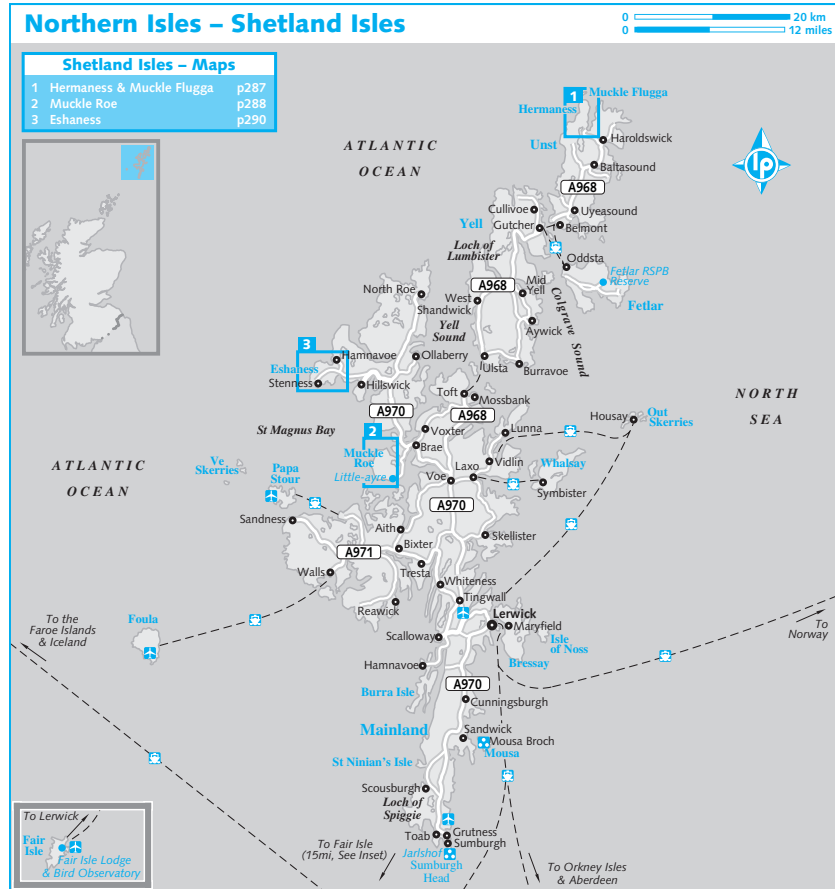
- **ayre** sand or shingle beach
- **-bister, -sta** farm
- **brough, burg, burra** broch, or watch tower
- **dale** valley
- **-garth** fence, enclosure
- **geo** narrow inlet
- **gloop** cleft with land bridge at seaward end
- **hamna** harbour
- **holm** small island
- **houbie** lagoon
- **ness** headland
- **noost** skerry
- **papa** celtic priest, monk
- **quoy** cattle enclosure
- **voe** creek, bay
- **wick** bay, inlet

Guided Walks

The Shetland ranger service runs programs of guided walks in north and south Shetland; contact **Shetland Amenity Trust** (☎ 01595 694688) for details.

Information Sources

VisitShetland (☎ 08701 999440; www.visitshetland.com) produces a guide to accommodation and services, available both online and in hard copy, and can handle accommodation reservations.



If you're particularly interested in wild-life, check **Nature in Shetland** (www.nature-shetland.co.uk), an independent site that's particularly good for the latest sightings and links to local groups.

So you know what you're in for, have a look at www.northisles-weather.co.uk – it's more useful than the usual publicly available forecasts.

Shetland's annual walking festival, held in September, has become an institution and attracts many people from far afield. Knowledgeable locals act as guides on a wide variety of walks, and social events keep you up late most evenings; check the 'Walk Shetland' link on VisitShetland's website.

GETTING AROUND

Although there's an extensive network of public buses throughout the islands, the timetables to more remote areas don't really make for a relaxed walking holiday, so you're better off bringing your own car or hiring one locally. Try **Star Car** (☎ 01595 692075; www.starcar.co.uk; 22 Commercial Rd, Lerwick) or **Bolts Car Hire** (☎ 01595 693636; www.boltscarhire.co.uk; 26 North Rd, Lerwick). Car fuel is around 10p a litre more expensive than on the Scottish mainland.

ACCESS TOWN

Lerwick

☎ 01595 / pop 6830

The capital of Shetland, Lerwick is by far the largest settlement of the islands. The old

SHETLAND'S SECRETIVE WILDFLOWERS

Sea birds are Shetland's outstanding natural attraction, closely followed by the magnificent coastline. Wildflowers may not register high on such a list, but Shetland does have them, even if only 400 species have been recorded, a number that's comparatively low on account of the islands' northerly location and severe climate.

Yet, between May and September you will find vividly colourful displays in many places. On and near coastal cliffs, mats and clumps of sea pink (thrift) are particularly striking. In sheltered sites, look for purple-flowering thyme and magenta-coloured red campion. Moorlands are brightened by the white 'balls' of bog cotton, yellow bog asphodel, heathers and spotted orchids.

Beautifully illustrated brochures about wildflowers are available free from TICs.

town, with its intriguing alleys and closes, is clustered around the busy harbour. Suburbs and commercial areas are spread further along the bay and up the surrounding hillsides.

INFORMATION

Lerwick TIC (☎ 08701 999440; www.visitshetland.com; Market Cross; ☒ daily Apr-Oct, Mon-Fri Nov-Mar) is very helpful and well organised. It can book accommodation for you; pick up the public transport timetable for inter-island ferry information.

Shetland Times Bookshop (☎ 695531; www.shetland-bookshop.co.uk; 71-79 Commercial St) stocks a huge range of books about Shetland and the wider world.

SLEEPING & EATING

Clickimin Caravan & Campsite (☎ 741000; www.srt.org.uk; Lochside; unpowered/powerd sites for 2 £7/11) is a small site with grassy pitches overlooking the eponymous loch. Washing and showering facilities are in the nearby Clickimin Complex, where you can also have a swim and patronise **Horizons Cafe** (mains to £6; ☒ to 8pm) for snacks and full-scale meals.

Lerwick SYHA Hostel (☎ 692114; www.islesburgh.org.uk; King Harald St; dm £16) occupies Islesburgh House, built in 1907 for a herring fisheries magnate. It's been refurbished to provide quality accommodation in largish dorms. The downside is its popularity with groups. Within is the House Cafe for inexpensive snacks and light meals (to £3).

Seafeld Farm B&B (☎ 693853; Seafeld Rd; s/d £23/46) enjoys a great location overlooking Brei Wick; relax in the conservatory in this home away from home. Rooms are larger than average and neatly furnished.

Osla's & La Piazza (☎ 696005; 88 Commercial St; breakfast £5-6, lunch mains £4-10, dinner mains £8-17) is

a popular place in the centre of town from which you won't emerge feeling underfed. Go for a pizza baked in the authentic Italian pizza oven. Vegetarians will have to make some inventive choices.

Monty's Bistro (☎ 696555; 5 Mounthooly St; lunch mains £7-8, dinner mains £10-17; ☒ lunch Tue-Sat, dinner Mon-Sat) is unquestionably the place to eat in Lerwick. In the brightly decorated, not-too-crowded bistro, choose from a small menu featuring the best local produce enhanced by Mediterranean flavours. Don't miss the rosemary bread, baked on the premises daily.

The **Co-op** (Holmesgarth Rd) supermarket is at the northern end of town, while Somerfield is close to the A970 roundabout at the southern end.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

NorthLink Ferries (☎ 0845 600 0449; www.northlinkferries.co.uk) operates a daily service departing from Aberdeen via Kirkwall (passenger/vehicle/two-berth cabin £32/112/106, 12½ hours).

British Airways/Loganair (☎ 0870 850 9850; www.britishairways.com) operates daily flights from Glasgow (three hours), Edinburgh (2¼ hours), Aberdeen (1¼ hours) and Inverness (1¾ hours) to Sumburgh, Shetland's main airport, 25 miles from Lerwick, on the southern tip of Mainland. Fares vary considerably according to season and special conditions.

Atlantic Airways (☎ 01737 214255; www.flyshetland.com) does a direct flight from London Stansted to Shetland (1¾ hours, Monday and Friday late June to October).

John Leask (☎ 693162) operates the bus service between the airport and Lerwick (£3, 45 minutes, six services Monday to Friday, four Saturday and Sunday).

HERMANESS & MUCKLE FLUGGA

Duration	3–3¼ hours
Distance	5.5 miles (9km)
Difficulty	easy
Start/Finish	Hermaness National Nature Reserve car park
Nearest Town	Haroldswick (right)
Transport	private

Summary An exhilarating walk through Hermaness, home to vast numbers of sea birds, overlooking Muckle Flugga and Out Stack, the northernmost points of the British Isles.

Every year, between May and August, more than 100,000 sea birds – puffins, great skuas, fulmars, gannets, guillemots and razorbills – come to the rugged granite and gneiss cliffs in Hermaness National Nature Reserve on the island of Unst to breed. The air is loud with their calls and the distinctive aroma of guano wafts across the cliffs. Unst is the most northerly inhabited island in Scotland; Muckle Flugga ('big, steep-sided island') lighthouse, improbably perched on a rock stack a mile or so off the coast, is the first and last signal on British land.

Protection of sea birds here dates right back to the early 19th century, when the local landowner realised that the great skua population had been reduced to just three pairs – thanks mainly to taxidermists and egg collectors. His personal crusade ensured the species' survival; today about 700 pairs nest on the moorland. The lighthouse was completed in 1858 by David Stevenson. In 1869 his famous nephew Robert Louis paid a visit Unst, which is said to have inspired him to draw his map of *Treasure Island*.

Most of this walk is waymarked and sections of boardwalk make for dry crossings of the boggy bits. The western stretch passes above sheer cliffs up to 170m high, where considerable care is needed; this is not the place to be in strong winds.

PLANNING Maps

Use either OS Explorer 1:25,000 map No 470 *Unst, Yell & Fetlar* or OS Landranger 1:50,000 map No 1 *Shetland – Yell, Unst & Fetlar*.

Information Sources

SNH's **Hermaness Visitor Centre** (☎ 01595 693345; www.nnr-scotland.org.uk; ☽ Apr–Oct), in a former lightshore station, is a couple of minutes' walk from the start of this walk, and is well worth a visit to find out more about the flora and fauna of the area.

For a more general run-down on the whole island, go to www.unst.org.

NEAREST TOWN Haroldswick

☎ 01957

Haroldswick is a small collection of houses gathered around a shingle beach, and the closest settlement to Hermaness. Here you'll find **Unst Heritage Centre** (admission £2; ☽ 11am–5pm May–Sep), which houses displays featuring local history, and where you can purchase local crafts. There's a cash machine inside the **P&T Coaches depot** (☽ Mon–Sat), near the Hagdale turn-off, about 1 mile south of Haroldswick.

Beyond Haroldswick is Baltasound, 2.5 miles south, which is Unst's largest village, with the island's sole post office.

SLEEPING & EATING

Gardiesfauld Hostel (☎ 755259; www.gardiesfauld.shetland.co.uk; Uyeasound; dm £11, unpowered sites for 2 £8) is the nearest hostel to Haroldswick, around 10 miles south. It enjoys an uninterrupted sea view and has a well-set-up kitchen; the hostel's rules prohibit alcohol.

Joan Ritch (☎ 711323; Gerratoun, Haroldswick; s/d £20/40, dinner £6) is Scotland's most northerly B&B, in a traditional crofter's cottage, in the most peaceful of locations. You'll be made most welcome, and will be well looked after at dinner.

Clingera Guest House (☎ 711579; clingera@btpenworld.com; Baltasound; s/d £25/50) has large, comfortable rooms in a modern family home.

Baltasound Hotel (☎ 711334; s/d £53/86, lunch £3–5, dinner mains £6–8), the nearest hotel (and the most northerly in Britain), is popular with tour buses and offers good, plain fare, using local produce wherever possible.

Wind Dog Cafe (☎ 744321; Gutchter; lunch £2–4, dinner mains £10–12), right beside the Yell–Unst ferry terminal, offers homely, good-value fodder.

Northern Lights Cafe (mains £6–8; ☽ lunch & dinner) occupies space in the Uyeasound public

hall, though the enthusiastic proprietor expected to open in Baltasound as Northern Lights Bistro in 2007. The food is truly homemade, using as much local produce as possible. The bistro will include a gallery featuring local artists.

Skibhoul Store (Baltasound; ☽ Mon–Sat), in a two-storey, 19th-century stone building, has its own bakery and sells maps and books. There's a small self-service café under the same roof for hot drinks to wash down something from the bakery.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

You first need to cross from Mainland (Toft) to Ulsta on the island of Yell by the **Orkney Ferries** (☎ 722395; www.orkneyferries.co.uk) service (driver/vehicle return £3/7, 20 minutes, half-hourly). The next crossing is from Gutchter (Yell) to Belmont on Unst (free, 10 minutes, half-hourly).

You can fly to Unst with **British Airways/Loganair** (☎ 0870 850 9850; www.britishairways.com) but you would then be relying on taxis to take you from and to the airport, and probably to and from the walk.

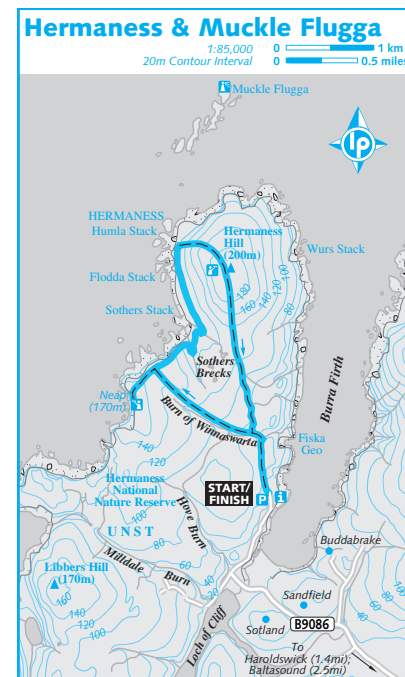
GETTING TO/FROM THE WALK

The walk starts and ends at the Hermaness National Nature Reserve car park 3 miles northwest of Haroldswick, along the single-track road signposted to Burrafirth.

THE WALK

From the car park, go through a gate and follow a well-made gravel path up the hillside above Burra Firth, and then down to Burn of Winnaswarta. A short distance on, bear left at a junction. The pattern of the next stage soon takes shape: sections of boardwalk separated by a grass-and-heather-moorland path. Dark-brown great skuas nest here; they'll probably skim low enough to let you know they're around, but are unlikely to practise their notorious dive-bombing antics (see the boxed text on p275).

Reaching the crest (45 minutes from the start) is a startling experience: suddenly you're on the edge of nowhere, being welcomed by a dapper puffin or two, and surrounded by sea, sky, black cliffs and birds. Turn left here to reach **Neap** (170m), the highest of the cliffs, which is especially good for gannets. Continue along or near



the cliff edge. There's no formed path but the trodden way is clear enough, down over two burns then up across the steep hillside, past more puffin burrows and cliff-ledge nesting sites, with fine views of the stack-littered coast to the south. The best place for puffins is near a fenced-off chunk of unstable cliff; these most endearing of birds seem to be putting on a show just for passers-by. **Muckle Flugga** lighthouse, and Out Stack just to its north, soon come into view and you reach a familiar waymarker post (30 minutes after reaching the cliff edge). It takes a while to accommodate to the acute sense that you've come to the edge of everything.

Follow the posts right up the steep flank of **Hermaness Hill** to its summit (200m), which is around 15 minutes' walk from the waymarker post, from where most of Unst is in view, notably Burra Firth and the lochans of Sothers Brecks below. Descend along the line of boardwalks and paths to a junction, and here turn left and return to the start (35 minutes from Hermaness Hill).

MUCKLE ROE

Duration	3¼–3½ hours
Distance	7.5 miles (12km)
Difficulty	moderate
Start/Finish	Little-ayre
Nearest Town	Brae (right)
Transport	private

Summary An exceptionally scenic walk along a rugged and intricately indented coast with wide-ranging views along the central west coast of Mainland.

Muckle Roe is an island, though a bridge has long since replaced the original stepping stones that connected it to the west coast of Mainland. It's a wonderfully rugged area of craggy red and green hills, lochans and, naturally, magnificent coast.

The route of this walk invites further exploration and variation, by venturing out onto each and every headland, climbing the several small hills and lingering at the secluded coves and beaches, so you could easily spend the whole day here.



PLANNING

Maps Use either OS Explorer 1:25,000 map No 469 *Shetland – North West* or OS Landranger 1:50,000 map No 3 *Shetland – North Mainland*.

NEAREST TOWN

Brae ☎ 01806 / pop 660

Brae is a scattered village mainly housing workers at the nearby Sullom Voe oil terminal. It's strung out along the A970 from Lerwick. More attractive Hillswick (opposite) isn't too far away (10 miles) to serve as a base for this walk.

SLEEPING & EATING

Westayre B&B (☎ 522368; www.westayre.shetland.co.uk; Muckle Roe, Brae; s/d £24/50) is right beside the start of the walk, 4.5 miles from Brae, with superb coastal views, a lovely garden and perfect peace and quiet.

Mid Brae Inn (☎ 522634; mains £7-13; ☺ lunch & dinner) has a traditional-style lounge bar-dining room. It specialises in seafood and local lamb and there's an unusually wide choice for vegetarians.

Brae Stores (☺ daily) stocks a small range of goods; it's licensed and operates a cash-back service with a British banker's card.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

To reach Brae by car, follow the A970 west and north from Lerwick, a distance of 25 miles.

GETTING TO/FROM THE WALK

The walk starts and finishes at a small road-side parking area at Little-ayre, 4.5 miles from Brae, at the end of a quiet single-track road signposted to Muckle Roe.

THE WALK

Go through a gate near the parking area where signposts point to 'Lighthouse' and 'Hams'; shortly, follow a track to the right towards Hams. It leads northwest up the wide glen, across a broad saddle, then gradually down past Burki Waters and on to a wider, more fertile glen. At a junction near a stream crossing, continue straight on, over a stile beside a large green shed, through a gateway and on, beside a small burn. Soon you'll reach a stile next to a gate at the northern

end of Town Loch (one hour from the start). Below, the sheltered inlet of **North Ham** dictates a break on green grass beside bleached shingle and deep-blue water reflecting brick-red and black cliffs and stacks.

Continue south up the slope from the stile and along the cliff top, past deep, colourful geos then down, from near a ruined stone building, to **South Ham**. From the further shingle beach, follow a track up to a gate then swing left (more or less west) uphill to a roofless stone cottage. Climb to the crest to overlook the Big Geo of Stromness, where there's a stack in the making on the southern cliff line. Cross a stile over a fence in a slight dip then go up to the elongated ridge that is West Hill of Ham.

From a large cairn (45 minutes from North Ham) drop down to the head of Dandi Geo. The route continues in undulating fashion, past a lochan and on until the beacon above Murbie Stacks comes into view. Follow the ridge crest to a wide glen and walk across to the **beacon**, a lovely spot for a spell (40 minutes from the cairn). Head north and northeast up the glen; keep east of a cairn on the crest and follow a path across the slope above Gilsa Water to its outlet. From here a clear path leads east, keeping below the high ground to the north, past a nameless beach, across moorland then steeply down to another strand. Follow a path on the seaward side of a low hill, through a gate; the car park is nearby (50 minutes from the beacon).

ESHANESS

Duration	2¼–2½ hours
Distance	5 miles (8km)
Difficulty	easy
Start/Finish	Eshaness lighthouse
Nearest Town	Hillswick (right)
Transport	private
Summary	A circuit taking in some of the finest coastal cliffs in Shetland, a geologists' paradise with sea views far and wide.

Eshaness means 'headland of volcanic rock' and here, on the west Mainland coast, you can see graphic, colourful evidence of Shetland's fiery ancient past. Volcanoes spewed lava and ash over the surrounding land about 370 million years ago; the various

types of rock that subsequently formed – black basalt, lighter-coloured tuff and dark, pinkish rhyolite – can be seen. Indeed, it's the best geological showcase of its kind in Britain. An information board at the start of the walk describes all this in vivid detail.

The walk described here isn't waymarked but there are stiles across the fences along the way and the going underfoot is unbelievably easy, as if you're wandering a golf course.

PLANNING

Maps Use either OS Explorer 1:25,000 map No 469 *Shetland – North West* or OS Landranger 1:50,000 map No 3 *Shetland – North Mainland*.

NEAREST TOWN

Hillswick ☎ 01806

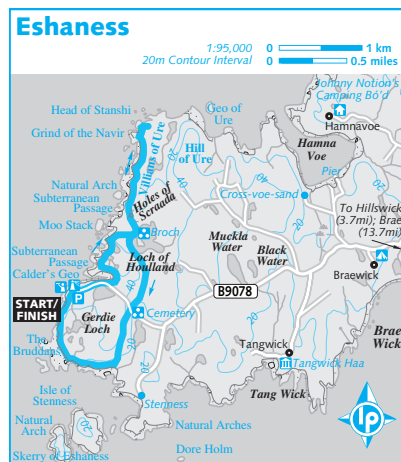
Hillswick is small, dispersed settlement in a very picturesque setting on the shores of Ura Firth on northwest Mainland. It can serve as a base for the Muckle Roe walk (opposite) and for the Ness of Hillswick walk (p291). Brae Stores (10 miles south-east) provides a cash-back service on British bankers' cards.

SLEEPING & EATING

Braewick Cafe & Caravan Park (☎ 503345; Braewick; unpowered/powered sites for 2 £5/10, lunch £3-7) has a fantastic view of sea stacks and rugged coastline. Genuinely homemade snacks and light meals are available and you can make a reservation for an evening meal. Campers' facilities are immaculate.

Johnny Notion's Camping Böd (☎ 01595 694688; shetlandamenity.trust@znet.co.uk; Hamnavoe; dm £8) is named in honour of the local man who invented his own inoculation against smallpox. Modernised since it was home for fishermen and their gear during the fishing season, it has a single bedroom and no electricity. BYO bedding, eating and cooking utensils and food. It's 1.5 miles down the Hamnavoe road, off the road to Eshaness.

Almara B&B (☎ 503261; www.almara.shetland.co.uk; Upper Urafirth; s/d £25/50) looks out across the firth. Be assured of a warm welcome and the opportunity to gain insights into life from a Shetlander's point of view; breakfast is first-rate.



Da Bød Cafe (☎ 503348; mains £4-7; 🍴 lunch & diner Sat & Sun May, Wed-Sun Jun-Sep) is an excellent, discreet vegetarian café on the seafront, and is linked to the Hillswick Wildlife Sanctuary. It's not licensed but you can BYO.

The small shop is below the prominent (former) St Magnus Hotel.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

To reach Hillswick by car, simply follow the A970 west and generally north from Lerwick, a distance of 37 miles.

SHORT WALK – BURRA ISLE

Burra Isle, south of Scalloway (the ancient capital of Shetland), is comprised of four peninsulas, which are all linked by the slenderest of causeways or dykes. The most southwestern of them has a wonderfully remote atmosphere and boasts a superb coastal walk. This 4-mile (6.4km) circuit of a low-lying grassy islet takes in remarkably varied coastal scenery and delivers up a fine range of wide views.

To reach the island from Lerwick, follow the A970 to the head of East Voe of Scalloway, then turn south to Burra Isle. Continue via Bridge End through the hamlet of Papil to a small parking area at the road end. In Scalloway there are two shops, Scalloway Hotel and **De Haaf Restaurant** (☎ 01595 880747; NAFC Marine Centre), renowned for its fish and seafood. Use OS Landranger 1:50,000 map No 4.

Go through a small gate to a vehicle track. Cross the sandy isthmus, go through another gate and head south past a roofless stone building. The next gate is slightly uphill. Continue past a row of roofless cottages, through a gate; the last gate is about 250m further on. Walk south across open ground and follow the shoreline, past the colourful Bight of Sandy Geos. Continue southwest, along much rockier coast. Climb to a knoll above the sheer cliffs of Groot Ness then descend to and pass a lochan. Go up to a cairn on the Heugg, a narrow promontory. Turn southeast to gain a nearby knoll then head northeast to the highest point locally, which is particularly good for views north. From here, descend to a stile near the seaward corner of the fence and make a beeline for the isthmus to return to the start.

GETTING TO/FROM THE WALK

The walk starts and finishes at Eshaness lighthouse, where there's plenty of parking space. From Hillswick, follow the B9078 for about 5 miles to a junction; continue on a minor road to the lighthouse.

THE WALK

Set out north, close to the cliff edge, soon skirting deep Calder's Geo then passing two tranquil lochans. Fulmars and kittiwakes squat on the precipitous cliffs and narrowest of ledges on massive **Moo Stack**, pitted with caves and natural arches. Then come the wonderfully named Villians of Ure: several hundred metres of volcanic crags, cliffs and small stacks. About 45 minutes from the lighthouse, you come to the northernmost point of the walk, dramatic **Head of Stanshi**, waves pounding the black offshore crags.

Retrace your steps as far as the stile from which Loch of Houlland is visible to the south. Cross it and steer a course to the relatively high ground above the loch's western shore. Soon you almost trip over the most amazing **gloup**, though you should have been warned by the deep, subterranean booming of waves bursting through a passage between the sea and this inland chasm. Continue to the western shore of **Loch of Houlland**, where the vestigial remains of an Iron Age broch sprawl on a small

promontory. Further on, cross a stile over a dyke, then head south across open grassland. With luck you'll reach the lighthouse road just east of Loch of Framford (40 minutes from Head of Stanshi), where there's a fine view of the famous Dore Holm stack, which resembles a horse drinking.

Drop down to a walled burial ground; in here the prominent vertical headstone remembers unlucky Donald Robertson, whose doctor prescribed Epsom salts but gave him lethal nitre. Continue across country on the uphill side of the burial ground, cross the crest and descend towards the Isle of Stennes. Gradually veer west to parallel the scenic rocky shore, west then north. One last climb takes you up to South Head of Caldersgeo, from where it's not far to the lighthouse (45 minutes from the burial ground).

MORE WALKS

ORKNEY Mainland

Mull Head Local Nature Reserve, at the northern tip of the east coast of Mainland, protects a variety of habitats and geological formations, and a probable Norse chapel. A 3.5-mile (5.6km) circular walk takes in these features and gives fine views of islands to the north. The route is signposted at crucial junctions and there's the odd length of boardwalk over some potentially boggy places. Allow about 1½ hours; use OS Explorer 1:50,000 map No 6. From Kirkwall follow the A960 to St Peters Pool; continue along the B9050 and signposted minor roads to a car park.

Stronsay

This peaceful farming island has broad sandy beaches, a bird reserve, impressive rock formations and some good coastal walking. The Odin Bay footpath is in the south of the island. It encompasses heritage sites, a Norse harbour and the Vat of Kirbuster, Orkney's most spectacular natural arch. The footpath is 4 miles, but the complete circuit from Whitehall (the island's capital) is 10 miles. **Orkney Ferries** (☎ 01856 872044; www.orkneyferries.co.uk) runs ferries to Whitehall from Kirkwall. Use OS Landranger 1:50,000 map No 5.

Sanday

Sanday is an island of pristine white-sand beaches that might be more at home in the Caribbean. The island is almost entirely flat and hosts several impressive archaeological sites, including a 5000-year-old chambered cairn. A signposted walk makes a 3.5-mile (5.5km) circuit around Backaskaill Bay in the east of the island. For further information, pick up *The Sanday Trail* brochure from TICs in Stromness or Kirkwall. **Orkney Ferries** (☎ 01856 872044; www.orkneyferries.co.uk) runs regular ferries to the island from Kirkwall. Use OS Landranger 1:50,000 map No 5.

SHETLAND Ness of Hillswick

This spectacular headland is just south of Hillswick village (p289). A short but very scenic route passes good cliff scenery and Neolithic and Bronze Age remains; you may also see otters in the more sheltered waters. The walk starts and finishes in Hillswick; allow around two hours to complete the 5-mile (8km) circuit. Use OS Landranger 1:50,000 map No 3.

St Ninian's Isle

Here you'll come across the ruins of a 12th-century church and may also see puffins and skuas near the cliff tops. The main feature of this short but extremely scenic walk is the beautiful sand-and-shell isthmus that gives access to the island. The walk starts and finishes at Bigton on south Mainland; allow about 1½ hours for the 3.8-mile (6km) circuit. Use OS Landranger 1:50,000 map No 4.

Gloup Ness, Yell

The north coast of the island of Yell is rugged, indented and there's even a beautiful sandy beach. A 5.3-mile (8.6km) circuit leads west from near Breckon Sands along the coast to Gloup Ness, south to a memorial to 58 fishermen who drowned nearby in 1858, then back over Scordaback (113m) for the views. The route is waymarked as far as the memorial. Use OS 1:50,000 map No 1. Access is from the A968 along B9082 (near the ferry terminal). After 4.3 miles turn right to Breckon Sands; park at the farm house. For refreshments, there's the Wind Dog Cafe at Gutcher (p286).

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