Staffin - Natural Features

(Museum in the Environment, Feasibility Study, Staffin Trust, 2003, by Mic Mac Partnership)

"The area is one of spectacular coastal cliffs, grassy platforms and lochans with the Trotternish Ridge to the west being the longest inland cliff in Britain. The geology, one of the key features of the area mainly consists of basalt flows over sandstones and shales, and the successive erosion of the underlying sedimentary rocks has produced rotational slippage features of European importance. The coastal rocks are predominantly Jurassic, with Tertiary exposures along the Ridge and support impressive populations of rare plants and birds."[1]

Staffin rarely fails to impress those who visit. On one level you might seek the reasons for its appeal in terms of the 'assemblage' of elements, e.g. the attractive blend of nature and scenery, history and human activity, and the changing light playing on a diverse and special landscape. At a more specific level there are the attractions of the individual elements which make up that landscape and at an even more specialised level is the continued scientific fascination with the landscape and manifold questions it generates.
However, this is a landscape for which there is already a considerable body of knowledge in place, the sheer volume in itself being a measure of its 'special' qualities. The Study provides a bibliography of the books, papers and articles relating to knowledge and understanding of the natural aspects of this landscape. From this and through the expert knowledge and experience of members of the Study Team a classification of this landscape has been undertaken. This reveals that the area falls naturally into three divisions:-

1. Trotternish Ridge
2. The Coastline
3. Inland, including rivers, lochs, woodland and other features.

<u>Trotternish Ridge</u>
The ridge[2] extends north to south from Sgurr Mòr to the Storr. The best overall account is that by Prof. John Birks in the Nature Conservation Review (Ratcliffe, 1977). The whole ridge is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and a Special Area of Conservation.
The Ridge is important for several scientific reasons:-

Geology
Massive Land Slips (Birks, 1980)

Botany
General flora (Currie & Murray, 1983; Luzby & Wright, 1996)
Mountain vegetation above 450 m. (Birks, 1980)

Birds
Upland birds (New Atlas, 1993)

Key botanical areas are as follows:-
NG 4569 Quirang (The Table, The Needle, The Prison)
NG 4466 Dùn Dubh & Druim an Ruma

[1] Staffin Local Interpretive Plan, H Ancrum, 1996.
[2] The Skye and Lochalsh Local Plan notes the key landscape importance of Trotternish Ridge and states that 'The fundamental issue…is the need to protect this outstanding natural environment while ensuring that jobs are available for local people.'

NG 4562	Beinn Edra
NG 4758	Sgurr a' Mhadaidh Ruaidh
NG 4954	The Storr
NG 441679	Alpine plants can be seen by the public road between Staffin and Uig close to the bends at c. 260 m.

We should be aware that there is a great risk in publicising botanical locations. It is illegal in the United Kingdom for anyone to uproot any wild plant without permission of the landowner or occupier.
There is also a risk in publicising bird locations. Wild birds, their nests and eggs are protected. Upland birds are represented by birds of prey as well as rock dove, raven and golden plover.

The Coastline

The coast runs north to south from Flodigarry to Rubha na h-Airde Glaise. The whole length has been identified by the Scottish Development Department as a Preferred Conservation Zone (Skye Data Atlas, 1993, map no. 23). The sandy beach at An Corran (NG 490686) has been noted as the only one in Trotternish (Skye Data Atlas, 1993, map no. 22; Mather, Smith & Ritchie, 1975). An extensive block of land extending inland from the coast between Flodigarry and Rubha nam Braithairean (NG 828828); and inland to the corresponding summit of the Trotternish ridge; has been identified as a National Scenic Area (Skye Data Atlas, 1993, map no. 22). A broad coastal strip running north to south from Rigg (NG 5256) to Am Bile (NG 5044) is a geological SSSI.

The coast is important for several scientific reasons:-

Geology

Papers by Morton (various dates). The author listed the important sections as:-

NG 522578 – 522561
NG 521544 – 520518
NG 520508 – 515470
NG 504447 – 500443

Bell & Harris, 1986 (The Geology of Skye)

Excursion 21 describes Kildorais – Staffin Bay (NG 4671 – 4769). Fig. 34 a,b,c,d,& e.
Excursion 20 describes the Kilt Rock (NG5066) Fig. 33.
Excursion 18 describes Bearreraig bay (NG 5152 – 5153) Fig. 32.

Botany

There is broken woodland on parts of the coast south from Staffin Bay. The best sections are as below:-
Rubha Garbhaig (NG 490686 – 499681) (Birks, 1978).
Bearreraig Bay (NG 515530) (Currie, personal communication) There is good woodland below cliffs mid bay, also to the north and the south. There is good grassland below the cliffs at parts of the coast south from Rubha Garbhaig. Among the best sections are:-
Rigg (NG 5256) (Currie, personal communication) This extends north and south of Rigg.
Bearreraig bay (NG 5152) (Currie, personal communication) This extends south from the bay perhaps a mile or two.
Digg (NG 4769) Hazel with occasional rowan extending to shore line and running towards Dunan.

Birds

Birds are associated with woodland and coastal cliffs. Coastal and woodland birds include birds of prey as well as raven, willow warbler and stonechat. Best from Bearreraig Bay to Rubha na h-Airde Glaise. (NG5145)

Inland

Rivers

Lealt River (NG 5060 & 5160) and Kilmartin (NG 4863 &4868) are the most important of the few rivers. See Birks (1978) and Benn et al. (1991). In the latter, Excursion 4,3 describes Lealt. As well as Quaternary interest, the flora and the ravine woodland are notable as are the fresh water mussels in the Kilmartin.

Lochs

There are several lochs in Staffin, the three outstanding ones are Loch Mealt, Loch Cuithir and Loch Fada.

Loch Mealt (NG 5064 & 5065) This loch is significant for climate, Quaternary geology, minerals (diatomite), birds (wildfowl including barnacle geese) and botany. Climate was recorded by Maclean at NG 499651. Quaternary has been described by Vasari & Vasari, 1968 (Fig, 37 Palynological map); Pennington, 1977, Fig 1; Birks, 1973 & 1980; Walker et al., 1988. For minerals see Lowe, 1991.

Loch Cuithir (NG 4759) This loch is significant for Quaternary geology, minerals (diatomite), wildfowl and waders, and botany. For Quaternary see Vasari & Vasari, 1968, plus bryophytes, Birks, 1973 & 1989; Birks & Williams, 1983; Ballantyne et al. 1991, Excursion 4,4; Walker et al. 1988. For diatomite see Bell & Harris, 1986, Excursion 4, Fig. 33. For botany see Birks, 1973.

Loch Fada (NG 4948 &4949) This loch is significant for Quaternary, botany including bryophytes, and birds. Quaternary is described by the same authors as above, namely Vasari & Vasari, 1968, Fig. 37 plus bryophytes, Pennington, 1977, Fig. 1; Walker et al. 1988; Birks, 1973, 1980; Birks & Williams, 1983. See Ballantyne et al., 1991, Excursion 4,1.

Woodland

Woodland is generally sparse, but good where it occurs. Coastal woodland at Bearreraig Bay (NG 5152) was dealt with under the coastline. Woodland at Lealt River (NG 5060 & 5260) was dealt with above under the Lealt River. Woodland at Rubha Garbhaig (NG 490686 – 499681) was dealt with under coastline. There are fragments of woodland at Dun Dubh and Druim an Ruma (NG 4466)

Birds

Birds of significance are wildfowl, mainly barnacles. See Ogilvie & Atkinson-Willes, 1983; Ellis, 1981; and Owen, Atkinson-Willes & Salmon, 1986. Barnacles at Trodday, Loch Mealt and Sartle.

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