

# NATURE CALLS



PHOTOGRAPH: ANDY MCCANDLISH/HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS ADVENTURES

LOOKING FOR OUTDOOR INSPIRATION THIS YEAR? FIONA RUSSELL SELECTS 21 NATURAL WONDERS TO EXPERIENCE ON FOOT, BY BIKE, OR FROM THE WATER

**F**ROM INCREDIBLE landscapes and mystical sites to quirky natural phenomena, Scotland is blessed with an almost endless list of remarkable places to explore. So, the idea of listing just 21 natural wonders in Scotland's outdoor crown might seem like a daunting task. It is also highly subjective. But we have been brave and put a lot of thought into our ultimate round-up of must-experience places – with help from many of Scotland's outdoor experts. While some locations are relatively well known, others are more secretive and require a little effort to reach – but are all the better for it.

Of course, you may not agree with us – and we would love to hear about your own favourites – but, whatever your outdoor interest, the following suggestions cover a variety of breathtaking locations, landscapes and experiences that should provide bags of inspiration for the year ahead.

## ↑1 GLEN SLIGACHAN BY BIKE ISLE OF SKYE

It is almost impossible not to be impressed by the sheer drama of the wild, cross-country trail that carves its way through Glen Sligachan between the brooding Cuillin mountains on the Isle of Skye. And possibly the best way to experience this remote but rewarding route is by mountain bike. According to Euan Wilson from Highlands and Islands Adventures, the 24km out-and-back trail from the Sligachan Hotel to the Atlantic is a “mouth-watering single-track journey that offers technical climbs, hair-raising descents, water features and rocky challenges – and all set against a backdrop of scenery so stunning you might not believe your eyes”. Go on, give it a try: you'll be exhausted but elated.

● [www.handiadventures.co.uk](http://www.handiadventures.co.uk)

## ←2 NIGHT MANOEUVRES MOUSA BROCH, SHETLAND

Magical, eerie and likely to make the hairs on the back of your neck stand up, a visit to Mousa Broch in the half-dark, or simmer dim, of a Shetland summer night will live long in the memory. Once inhabited by the Picts, this ancient tower on the isle of Mousa is now home to a colony of up to 6,000 breeding storm petrels – tiny seabirds that feed at sea during the day and only come ashore at night to avoid predators. And it is the sight – and remarkable purring sound – of these returning birds that greets visitors as they arrive by boat having crossed Mousa Sound close to midnight. If you're lucky you might see porpoises and even the occasional minke or killer whale on the way across. As Hugh Harrop, of Shetland Wildlife Holidays, says: “There's nothing quite so naturally awesome as Mousa”.

● [www.shetlandwildlife.co.uk](http://www.shetlandwildlife.co.uk)

● [www.mousaboattrips.co.uk](http://www.mousaboattrips.co.uk)



PHOTOGRAPH: RICHARD ROWE

### ↓3 DIVE THE HISPANIA

#### SOUND OF MULL

"We're talking about an amazing place to dive," says Paul Murray, an instructor with Edinburgh-based Deep Blue Scuba. The *Hispania*, a Swedish steamship which sank in 1954, now lies some 30 metres down in the Sound of Mull. "It's picturesque, intact and covered in beautiful anemones, sponges and starfish."

But caution is required to reach the wreck, warns Murray. "It's only safe to dive at slack tide, which lasts between 10 and 40 minutes, so divers must take the advice of an expert skipper from a local boat charter." Perhaps this narrow window of opportunity explains why some divers have described the dive as "mystical" and "eerily enchanting". Or perhaps they were touched by the hand of a ghost? Some say the wreck is haunted by the dead captain and his dog.

- [www.lochaline-boats.co.uk](http://www.lochaline-boats.co.uk)
- [www.deepbluescuba.co.uk](http://www.deepbluescuba.co.uk)



PHOTOGRAPH: WWW.GARYDOAK.COM

### 4 NORTHERN EXPOSURE

#### HIGHLAND WILDCAT TRAILS, GOLSPIE

Some of Scotland's further flung locations are well worth the effort of travelling to – and Golspie in Sutherland is definitely one such place. Making the most of the sublime landscape is Highland Wildcat Trails, a mountain biking centre that features the UK's longest single-track climb and descent. "It's jaw-dropping," says Andy McKenna, owner of bespoke transport company Go-Where. "The centre offers mesmerising climbs, fantastic single-track and an unbelievable setting overlooking the Dornoch Firth – with the chance to see eagles, deer and basking seals during the ride. What more could an outdoors lover hope for?"

- [www.highlandwildcat.com](http://www.highlandwildcat.com)
- [www.go-where.co.uk](http://www.go-where.co.uk)

### →5 DAWN PATROL

#### RIVER BEAULY, INVERNESS-SHIRE

A canoe or kayak trip on any one of a number of rivers in Scotland offers a wonderful opportunity to get up close and personal with the local wildlife and landscape. But for an experience that is hard to beat, why not make a river journey at dawn? The River Beaully in Inverness-shire offers a perfect setting for one such Canadian canoe trip with outdoor adventure specialist Boots N Paddles. Setting off through Aigas Gorge in the early hours, you'll find that a near-silent paddle offers a perfect opportunity to witness all manner of river life. Sightings can include roe deer drinking from the water's edge, otters, ospreys, badgers and even peregrine falcon fledglings on the rock ledges above. You'll feel as though you've stepped into your own wildlife documentary.

- [www.boots-n-paddles.co.uk](http://www.boots-n-paddles.co.uk)



PHOTOGRAPH: WWW.MACLEIGHLANDS.CO.UK

### ↑6 ENJOY ROARING WATERFALLS

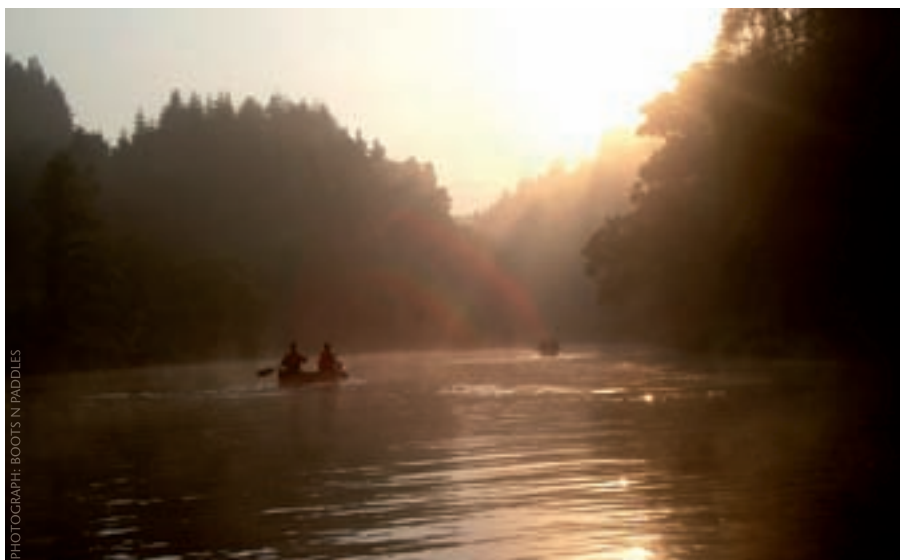
#### VARIOUS LOCATIONS

Scotland abounds with fabulous waterfalls – so many that it was impossible to choose just one to rave about. Instead we're cheating and offering a 'best of' selection. The Falls of Clyde at New Lanark boasts a series of dramatic waterfalls, including Corra Linn which was described by Wordsworth as "the Clyde's most majestic daughter". Then there's the sinuous 100-metre drop of the Grey Mare's Tail near Moffat; Plodda Falls (*pictured*) set in the woods near Glen Affric; and Foyers, a 150-metre-high waterfall that plunges into Loch Ness; or for true waterfall devotees there is the seven-hour round-trip walk to the Falls of Glomach near Sheil Bridge.

And if you want even more interaction with the water there is always canyoning. Adventure companies can guide you along the Falls of Bruar near Blair Atholl, the fabulous Inchree falls near Fort William, or the more challenging Allt Nathrach near Kinlochleven.

- [www.naelimits.co.uk](http://www.naelimits.co.uk)
- [www.verticaldescents.com](http://www.verticaldescents.com)

D



PHOTOGRAPH: BOOTS N PADDLES



PHOTOGRAPH: BLUE REEF COTTAGES

**7 HARRIS BEACHES**  
**OUTER HEBRIDES**

On a bright, sunny day on the west coast of Harris you could be forgiven for thinking you've found Scotland's answer to Hawaii. Travelling along the edge of the Atlantic from Northton past Traigh Mhor to Luskentyre further north, you'll be transfixed by the miles of white sand and wonderful views to the deserted island of Taransay. In summer, the scenery is further enhanced by seemingly endless swathes of colourful machair – coastal grassland full of wild flowers. To make the most of this inspirational arena, why not travel by bike? That way you can make frequent stops and truly savour the sights and sounds of this magical area.

● [www.visithebrides.com](http://www.visithebrides.com)

**8 BRAVE THE CORRYVRECKAN**  
**SOUND OF JURA**

Fancy taking a spin in one of the world's largest whirlpools? When conditions are right, a boat trip to the Gulf of Corryvreckan, located near the Sound of Jura, can be a wet and wild experience. The collection of swirling pools and standing waves is created by a combination of fast-moving tidal water that runs through a narrow channel between the islands of Jura and Scarba, strong westerly winds and a complex underwater terrain. Seeing really is believing.

- [www.seafari.co.uk/oban](http://www.seafari.co.uk/oban) (from Easdale)
- [www.craignishcruises.co.uk](http://www.craignishcruises.co.uk) (from Ardfern)
- [www.whirlpool-scotland.co.uk](http://www.whirlpool-scotland.co.uk)



PHOTOGRAPH: LORNE GILL/SCOTTISH NATURAL HERITAGE



PHOTOGRAPH: R. PICKERING



PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID PHILIP





## ←9 EXPERIENCE FINGAL'S CAVE

### STAFFA

The uninhabited island of Staffa is a unique wonder of the natural world – with Fingal's Cave in particular providing an awesome spectacle. This vast sea cave was formed when the surface of a mass of hot lava cooled, cracked and eroded into the exposed hexagonal columns of basalt that can be seen today. While boat trips head to Fingal's Cave – also visiting the nearby Treshnish Isles, another delight – it is only possible to look inside by heading in on foot. But the rewards of landing on Staffa are great and you might feel as inspired as the composer Felix Mendelssohn who wrote his *Hebrides Overture* after a visit in 1892.

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



## ←10 WILDLIFE BOUNTY

### MULL & IONA

The Isle of Mull is about as good as gets when it comes to catching sight of Scotland's varied marine life – on land as well as from the water. While the island may have become more famous for its associations with the children's show *Balamory*, wildlife fans head to Mull for a number of superb land-based viewpoints. Ardmor Point is a great place to spot porpoises, sea eagles and basking sharks. At Caliach Point you might be lucky enough to spot minke whales and bottlenose dolphins. Elsewhere, Grasspoint is another cracker for porpoises and sea eagles. And for further marine life watching adventures, Morven Summers from the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust suggests the neighbouring island of Iona as a "magnet for cetacean activity". We reckon you could spend all summer on Mull and Iona and never tire of staring out to sea.

- [www.whaledolphintrust.co.uk](http://www.whaledolphintrust.co.uk)

## ←11 STARE INTO A BEEFTUB

### DUMFRIESSHIRE

Fascinating history and gorgeous views combine during an airy walk via the wonderfully-named Devil's Beef Tub near Moffat in Dumfriesshire. Shaped like a giant cauldron and with yawning drops below, the area once provided a perfect hiding place for stolen cattle during the days of the Border reivers.

Hikers today should not be put off by the dramatic abyss, although the most common route from Moffat via Great Hill and a ramble along the head of the Tub does require a good level of fitness.

- [www.walkingworld.com](http://www.walkingworld.com)
- [www.bordersforesttrust.org](http://www.bordersforesttrust.org)



## ↑12 BACKCOUNTRY EXPEDITIONS

### CAIRNGORMS

Scotland specialises in magnificent mountain ranges. But taking pole position, in our opinion, are the Cairngorms – part of a national park that is some 40% larger than the Lake District and has a total of 18 Munros. For experienced adventure-seekers, Nigel Williams from the National Outdoor Training Centre at Glenmore Lodge recommends a multi-day, wild camping hike starting from Achlean in Glen Feshie. Head south to reach the stunning glen of Coire Garbhlach before a steep climb out at the far end (tough going with camping gear) leads on to the Moine Mhor giving access to Munros such as Sgor Gaoith, Cairn Toul and The Devil's Point.

Camping on the plateau is possible as there is plenty of water and some sheltered areas but remember to check the forecast before setting out. Either return the way you've come or continue east across the plateau and down into the Lairig Ghru to Corrour Bothy. From there you can head south into Glen Dee and along the Geldie Burn back to Achlean. The possibilities are endless.

- [www.walkhighlands.co.uk](http://www.walkhighlands.co.uk)
- [www.cairngorms.co.uk](http://www.cairngorms.co.uk)
- [www.glenmorelodge.org.uk](http://www.glenmorelodge.org.uk)



PHOTOGRAPH: BORDERS FOREST TRUST

PHOTOGRAPH: GLENMORE LODGE PICTURE LIBRARY

**D → 13 PADDLE THE SUMMER ISLES**  
SUTHERLAND

Like giant stepping stones dropped from the sky, the Summer Isles form an enchanting archipelago in the mouth of Loch Broom in the northwest Highlands. Only one of the 30 or so islands – Tanera Mor – is inhabited, so the over-riding feeling here is of peace and solitude. According to kayaker Simon Willis, the Summer Isles offer a “delightful paddling playground that is spiritually calming and scenically rewarding”. Willis, author of the *Scottish Sea Kayak Trail*, suggests that kayakers weave a relaxing route through the islands, perhaps stopping for a picnic on one of the beaches or to enjoy varied marine life that can include dolphins, whales and basking sharks. Be sure to also paddle into the imposing Cathedral Cave on the west side of Tanera Beag.

- [www.scottishseakayaktrail.com](http://www.scottishseakayaktrail.com)
- [www.norwestseakayaking.com](http://www.norwestseakayaking.com)



PHOTOGRAPH: SIMON WILLIS



PHOTOGRAPH: WDCS/CHARLIE PHILIPS

**↑ 14 NEXT STOP ICELAND**  
HERMANESS, UNST, SHETLAND

As the most northerly point of ‘inhabited’ Shetland, Hermaness on Unst already takes the plaudits for being a special place geographically. But this large headland is also a National Nature Reserve and a heaven on earth for fans of wildlife – or just wild seascapes. The best plan is to follow the Hermaness Circuit, a glorious moorland and coastal walk that offers fine views over soaring cliffs and down to the many arches and sea stacks below. And, boy, will you be treated to an array of bird life. Expect to see – and hear – thousands of seabirds, including puffins, gannets and Britain’s second largest colony of great skuas (or bonxies). But don’t step too close – bonxies don’t take kindly to intruders.

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

**↑ 15 DOLPHIN-SPOTTING**  
CHANONRY POINT, BLACK ISLE

Dolphin-spotting guarantees are hard to come by except perhaps when you head for Chanonry Point – a spit of land on the Black Isle near Inverness that extends a mile into the Moray Firth. During spring and summer months you are very likely to witness a superb display from Scotland’s main resident population of bottlenose dolphins – often just metres away from the pebbly beach. You might need to wait a while, so take a picnic as well as a good camera.

And once you’ve had your fill, head off for a coastal walk from Fortrose along the eastern side of the peninsula to Rosemarkie.

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



PHOTOGRAPH: KIERAN CAMPBELL

PHOTOGRAPH: LORNE GILL/SCOTTISH NATURAL HERITAGE

## ↓16 CRUISE TO ST KILDA

### WESTERN ISLES AND BEYOND

If Christina Campbell had her way we would all have a chance to enjoy a memorable “wriggle” on St Kilda – a wild archipelago located in the stormy Atlantic some 40 miles west of Benbecula in the Outer Hebrides. Christina, from St Kilda Cruises, believes that to really experience St Kilda we should “wriggle on our bellies to get a peep over the highest sea cliffs in Britain and watch the gannet colonies swirling below”. Such an experience on Hirta, the main island, will provide a flavour of why this special place has been designated a World Heritage Site. Christina recommends May or June for “wonderfully long, sunny days” or September, “a month that brings an astonishing clarity of light”.

- [www.kildacruises.co.uk](http://www.kildacruises.co.uk)
- [www.kilda.org.uk](http://www.kilda.org.uk)



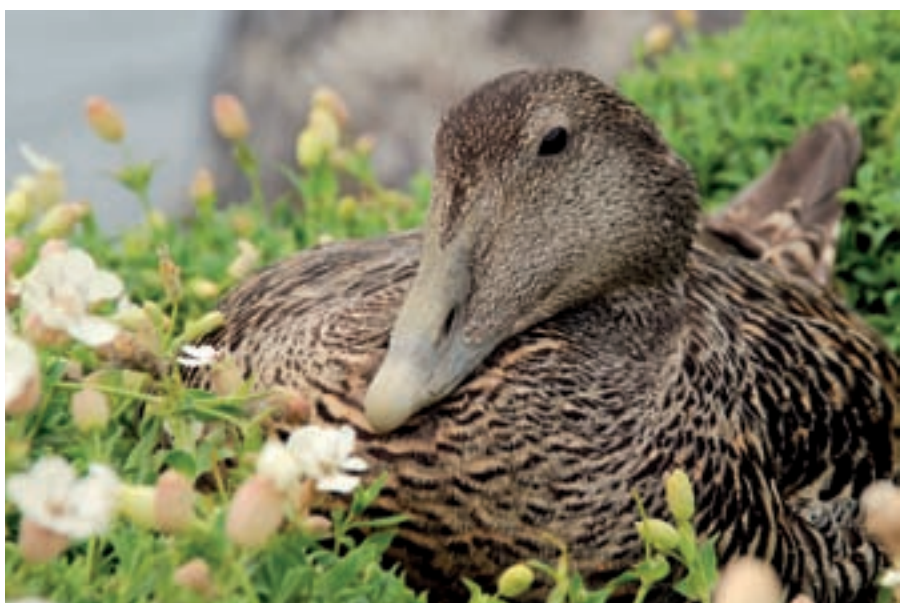
## ↓17 ISLE OF MAY

### OUTER FIRTH OF FORTH

“The Isle of May belongs to wildlife and anyone who visits is a guest in their territory,” says an enthusiastic Therese Alampo, the resident Scottish Natural Heritage reserve manager. This tiny island, situated five miles off the Fife coast near Anstruther, is home to almost a quarter of a million seabirds as well as a healthy population of grey seals. “It’s jam-packed with breeding seabirds, including one of the largest single colonies of puffins in Britain,” she says. Easily accessible, the Isle of May is perfect for families. And why not make it a Firth of Forth double header by also visiting fabulous Bass Rock just off the East Lothian coast at North Berwick?

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

PHOTOGRAPH: LORNE GILL/SCOTTISH NATURAL HERITAGE



## 18 VIEWS FOR DAYS

### MAOL CHEAN-DEARG, TORRIDON

It’s not until you crest the final ridge on the summit of Maol Chean-Dearg that you clap eyes on your panoramic prize. For while the hike to the top of this 933-metre peak, situated between Glen Torridon and Glen Carron, offers its fair share of eye candy, it is the view from the top that is sure to really grab the attention. On a clear day the 360-degree vista – particularly the northern perspective over the Torridon hills – is so awe-inspiring that we recommend you just sit down, make yourself comfortable and soak it all in. A better picnic spot would be hard to imagine.

- [www.walkhighlands.co.uk](http://www.walkhighlands.co.uk)

## 19 BEACH DAYS

### BALMEDIE, NEAR ABERDEEN

Balmedie beach, north of Aberdeen, is a dream spot for family outdoor fun. Part of Balmedie Country Park, the area boasts several miles of fabulous golden sandy beach backed by sweeping dunes that are a playground for fun-loving adults and kids alike. The sands are part of a dune system that stretches 14 miles from Aberdeen to just north of the mouth of the River Ythan at Newburgh.

The sea here is also renowned as a haven for surfers of all abilities, with hundreds of individual breaks.

- <http://tinyurl.com/y89a8qr>



**D** → **20 VISIT AN OLD MAN**

HOY, ORKNEY

The most rugged of the Orkney Isles, the atmospheric island of Hoy is best known for the towering Old Man of Hoy. This famous sea stack rises 137 metres out of the water and is a highlight of any trip to Orkney. "The nearby cliffs themselves are amazing enough, being some of the highest in the British Isles, but the stack is just astonishing," says Charlie Cornelius of Wild In Scotland. "If you lie at the top of the cliffs, looking down on the Old Man with fulmars soaring and hopefully a creel boat below for scale, it's a scene that can't be beaten." And when you're tired of exploring, Cornelius suggests "cooling your aching feet with a paddle in beautiful Rackwick Bay".

- [www.wild-in-scotland.com](http://www.wild-in-scotland.com)
- [www.visitororkney.com](http://www.visitororkney.com)

**↓** **21 CALL OF THE WAVES**

ISLE OF TIREE

The beautiful, white beach-edged island of Tiree is a wonderful find whether you're a lover of wide open seascapes, or an outdoor sports fan – but especially a surfer. In particular, Barrapol beach on the west of the island offers a surfing heaven for all abilities. "Barrapol boasts more waves and greater wave size than many of the other well-known surfing spots in Scotland, but is much less populated," says Willie MacLean from adventure company Wild Diamond. And the backdrop is also special. With Tiree being largely flat, the scenery at Barrapol is dominated by one of three 'bens' on the island – the 103-metre high Kenavara (Beinn Ceann a' Mhara).

- [www.wilddiamond.co.uk](http://www.wilddiamond.co.uk)



PHOTOGRAPH: WWW.VISITORORKNEY.COM



PHOTOGRAPH: WILD DIAMOND