



CAITHNESS & SUTHERLAND EXPEDITION AREA

Useful information from the Expedition Network

Welcome!

Green forms and requests for assessment should be submitted to the Scottish Network Co-ordinator, who can also assist with enquiries regarding landowners, routes, and campsites:

Eleanor Birch
DofE Scotland
Rosebery House
9 Haymarket Terrace
Edinburgh
EH12 5EZ

T: 0131 343 0920

E: Scotland.Assessors@DofE.org

Eleanor works 9-5 Monday, Tuesday and Thursday.

Area advisor

The local area advisor is based in the area and can assist with enquiries regarding routes and campsites.

Willie Marshall
11 Rockwell Crescent
Thurso
KW14 7PL

T: 01847 894237

E: assyntwillie@outlook.com

Contents

Contents	1
Introduction	2
Area boundaries	2
Route updates	2
Campsites	3
Travel and transport to the area	4
Expedition aim ideas.....	4
Scottish Wild land areas	4
Hazards	4
Emergencies and Incidents	5
Outdoor access code.....	6
Landuse	6
Bothies	7
Weather forecasts.....	7

Introduction

Given that the two counties of Caithness and Sutherland are very different, Caithness being largely flat and Sutherland mountainous, there is a huge scope for variations in routes both on foot and by cycle. Canoe routes are also possible but more difficult and not for the faint hearted.

Local groups make considerable use of estate tracks in Caithness for Bronze and Silver expeditions and these could also perhaps be considered as part of cycle routes.

I would suggest that any group contemplating coming to Caithness and Sutherland for an expedition at any level should first decide on an aim for the expedition and then just sit down with a map and allow plans to form around the chosen purpose.

Area boundaries

The expedition area is bounded on the west, north and east by the sea which defines much of the character of both the counties of Caithness and Sutherland. To the south, the boundary with the Ross and Cromarty expedition area is formed by various roads from Bonar Bridge in the east to Coigach in the west.

The DofE website includes a downloadable [PDF map](#) and [GPX of the area boundaries](#).



Route updates

Expeditions planning to use the Cape Wrath peninsula should note that a large part of this area is a MoD bombing and live firing range. Information on access and range activities can be found on the following websites : <http://www.visitcapewrath.com/> www.rnopsscotland.com/CWR_range.htm

Groups planning routes on Cape Wrath should also note that the ferry is quite often unable to operate because of bad weather and an alternative route should always be planned. Good alternatives are to walk in from the bridge at NC360605 or from the car park at NC195601. This latter route takes you in to Sandwood bay which is a magnificent sight. The range is also occasionally subject to unplanned closures depending on military requirements.

Way marked and long distance paths

The DofE *Expedition Guide* says “long distance footpaths should not be used, particularly by Silver and Gold teams, except in small sections to link up other paths.” (page 10, also see page 39). The quality of way-marked and long distance paths in Scotland varies considerably – some are concepts that don’t exist on the ground (for example the Skye and Cape Wrath trails) while others are clearly signposted heavily used routes (for example, the West Highland Way).

In some areas there are no alternatives to some way-marked paths. Teams may use these, but should not plan an expedition with more than half a day continuously on the same route. Heavily used way-marked paths provide little navigational challenge, undermine the sense of isolation, and potentially have negative environmental impacts, and therefore should be avoided by DofE teams as much as possible. Any such routes in this area have been highlighted in the above advice about route updates.

Scottish Hill Tracks

Scotways, the Scottish rights of way and access society, publishes ***Scottish Hill Tracks***, a book listing rights of way across Scotlands uplands. This is an excellent resource for ideas for routes as some paths are not shown connecting on a map where historic routes exist. Scotways are also interested to hear about any issues with paths and routes.

Core paths

Under the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 every local authority and National Park authority (access authority) in Scotland was required to draw up a plan for a system of core paths that gives the public reasonable access throughout their area. Some of these paths do not yet appear on OS maps, and may help DofE teams link up routes. All core paths can be seen on the SNH website, with links to details from each council.

Campsites

Other accommodation

It is not possible to list here all the options for accommodation for supervisors and supporters there being a huge range of B&Bs, campsites, hostels etc. Some useful links are :

Independent Bunkhouses

The Assynt Field Centre

SYHA

Serviced sites:

Supervisors should note that some campsites, eg Tongue, which are still shown on maps may no longer be open.

Wild camping

Scottish access rights (see the **Outdoor access code section** for further information) extend to wild Camping for small groups (i.e. individual expedition teams), although the DofE still recommends that, as a courtesy to land owners concerned and to maintain existing good relations, expedition teams inform them of their intentions. It is reasonable for owners to react by saying why a particular site might be unsuitable and to suggest alternatives.

If multiple teams from the same DofE centre intend to camp at the same location, this falls outside the definition of ‘Wild camping’ permitted under access rights. Therefore, centres planning to camp with multiple teams in the same location should always seek permission from the landowner.

Teams should consult the advice on camping in the *Expedition Guide* (page 101), there are also lots of useful information resources about wild camping;

- **Mountaineering Scotland** has lots of good advice, with links to their minimal impact and ‘where to go in the outdoors’ leaflets
- **The Outdoor Access Code website** has advice on responsible wild camping, including various information downloads.

Travel and transport to the area

The area can be accessed easily (if not necessarily quickly) by both road and rail. It is also possible to fly to either Inverness or Wick and hire vehicles from there.

Public transport links within the area are poor.

Road works

Road closures and works in the area can have a serious impact on the ability of team's and leaders to get to and from expeditions, and for supervisors and assessors getting around due to the lack of quick alternative routes. Information about current or planned noticed road works in Scotland is available at [the Scottish Road Works Register](#)

Expedition aim ideas

There is such a huge range of potential activities in the two counties that is difficult to suggest anything specific but the following possibilities might be considered.

- Comparison of land use east / west or coastal / inland.
- Comparison of flora and fauna east / west or coastal / inland.
- The story of the highland clearances.
- **Gold panning in Kildonan.**
- **Fossil hunting.**
- Neolithic and bronze age settlements – there are more than 70 surviving chambered cairns in Sutherland.
- Geology. The **North West Highland Geopark** was the first such venture in Scotland and the website is a useful source of information.
- Ornithology. The RSPB reserve at **Forsinard** provides a number of opportunities for study.

Scottish Wild land areas

The Scottish Government has **defined 42 Wild land areas around Scotland.** The discussions around defining these areas and the implications of this may be of interest for teams considering aims around landuse and wildness.

Hazards

Ticks

Ticks are small, blood sucking creatures found across the uplands of Scotland, especially in areas with lots of deer and sheep. Some ticks carry Lyme disease, which is treatable but can be tricky to diagnose. Teams should be made aware of the risks of Lyme disease and how to reduce the risk of being bitten. All teams should carry a tick remover and check themselves daily.

There are several useful information resources about ticks;

- The organisation Lyme Disease Action has useful downloadable **leaflets about ticks and Lyme disease.**
- **Stop the tick** has lots of infographics (some a bit graphic, but informational)
- Lyme disease UK has posters and leaflets as part of their **Wake up to Lyme campaign**, as well as detailed information about the disease

Midges

The biting midge is particularly prolific in parts of Scotland, and worst in late Spring through to early Autumn. The detrimental effect midges can have on an expedition is not proportionate to their tiny size, and should not be underestimated, especially with teams unused to them. During this summer period teams should carry midge nets, insect repellent and clothes to provide full coverage (including gloves and long sleeved tops) and first aid kits should include antihistamines to reduce discomfort. Teams should also be aware of how to reduce their impact including:

- choice of campsite (in direct sunlight and breezy, ideally in both morning and evening)
- choice of clothing (pale, bright, and smooth rather than dark, wooly, or fleecy)

- campcraft (menu planning, positioning of tents, keeping tent doors closed)

Snakes

There are Adders (the UK's only venomous snake) in the area. They are not aggressive or commonly seen, but they will bite if stood on, sat on, or picked up. Because of this teams who are wild camping should always wear shoes (which the snakes cannot bite through) and not walk around bare foot, in socks, or in sandals such as flip-flops. If anyone has the unusual misfortune to be bitten, then medical assistance must be sought urgently.

Drinking water

Watercourses across Scotland can contain a variety of waterborne infections. Therefore, when wild camping it should not be assumed that streams and rivers are clean sources of drinking water, especially due to the high density of livestock and deer across large areas. Leaders should refer to the DofE *Expedition Guide* advice on taking water from streams (pg 122). Other good sources of information about health and hygiene outdoors (including issues around drinking water) are the NHS advice about [avoiding bugs and germs outdoors](#), and the Mountaineering Scotland advice on [health and hygiene](#).

River crossings

Rivers and streams throughout the area rise quickly after rain, or during snow melt, and careful consideration should be given to any route which involves river crossings. Even small streams can quickly become completely impassable and larger rivers can become very dangerous even if the rain has not been falling in the immediate vicinity of the planned crossing.

All teams should understand what to do in case of streams rising – stream levels will fall as fast as they rise and often waiting overnight is all that is needed. In case of snow melt, peak levels are often late afternoon/evening, and the lowest levels in the morning. Teams planning river crossings must have an alternative plan in the event of continued wet weather.

Hours of daylight

All visitors, especially those from the south, need to be aware of the shortness of daylight hours in the expedition shoulder season; March has 11 hours of daylight and the October half term a little over 9 hours.

Emergencies and Incidents

Mountain rescue

In Scotland, responsibility for the provision of rescue facilities rests with the Police Force - who will call out/co-ordinate mountain rescue as appropriate. Teams must be clear that if they need to call for help they must ask for the police, and then ask for mountain rescue. Teams may not be connected to the nearest police control room to their location, so should be clear on the general area they are in, and their exact location. [Scottish mountain rescue](#) has advice about the process of calling for help, and the information that should be supplied.

Teams must be trained to supply the control room with a six-figure grid-reference for their location, including the two-letter prefix code e.g. NX 345 678 not 345 678. 'GR' is not the correct prefix for any location; it is a commonly used shorthand for 'grid refence'. There is information about six figure grid references [the Ordnance Survey website](#). Correct provision of a full six figure grid-reference is essential as the police computer system will not be able to interpret a grid reference without this two-letter prefix. Also, some Network Areas in Scotland have intersections of the letter labelled 100 km² grid squares in their centre, so a mistake may lead to significant delays in support from Mountain Rescue. DofE Scotland strongly recommend that all DofE route cards are prepared including two letter prefixes to avoid delays or uncertainty in emergency situations.

The Mountain Rescue team that covers the expedition area is the [Assynt Mountain Rescue](#).

Remember that in case of an incident both the team's Licenced Organisation and the [Scottish Expedition Network Coordinator](#) should be notified using the DofE Incident Report Form (available through the resources zone in eDofE).

Mobile signal

It should be noted that in many parts of the area telephone boxes are rare and the mobile phone network reception is limited/non-existent away from centres of population and cannot be relied upon for getting assistance. Therefore, teams must know how to deal with an emergency in a location without mobile phone signal.

Teams should be encouraged to **sign up for the 999 text service** in advance of their expedition to give them the best chance of contacting emergency services in an emergency.

Outdoor access code

The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 has been implemented through the Scottish Outdoor Access Code. This provides access rights for the purposes of recreation or education across most of the land and inland water in Scotland. This includes mountains, moorland, woods and forests, grassland, margins of arable crop fields, paths/tracks, rivers and lochs, and the coast. These access rights are balanced with responsibilities towards the environment and the interests of those who make a living from the land.

Three key principles of access

- Take responsibility for your own actions
- Respect the interests of other people
- Care for the environment.
-

For further information (including a downloadable e-book) visit www.outdooraccess-scotland.com

Any access issues should be reported to the **Scottish Expedition Network Coordinator** who will investigate.

Landuse

The **Countryside Calendar - Year** gives a month by month snapshot of typical activities and happenings in the farming and wildlife year in Scotland, any may be helpful in planning expeditions and thinking about appropriate aims.

Landowners

To identify the borders of estates see www.whoownsscotland.org.uk. There is a subscription option which gives access to see contact details.

Lambing

Sheep and lambing season cans start as early as February and can continue until the end of May and lambing ewes must not be disturbed. If an apparently 'lost' lamb is seen - do not touch or intervene, as the mother will not be far away. At all other times it is advised that teams should pass through sheep quietly and if possible at a distance in an effort not to disturb and stress them.

Traps

Teams may observe traps on the high moorland. These should not be touched or disturbed as they have been set by the game keepers to catch predators to the ground nesting birds, typically the Hooded Crow.

Scottish game seasons

During the deer stalking season teams should utilise the **'Heading for the Scottish Hills website'** in addition to contacting landowners to find out where and when shooting will be taking place. Teams should stay on recognised footpaths whilst in these areas for safety reasons.

Game	Season Opens	Season Closes
Salmon/Sea Trout	Jan/Feb	October (dates vary)
Trout	15th March	6th October
Roe Deer (bucks)	1st April	20th October
Red & Sika Deer (stags)	1st July	20th October
Fallow Deer (bucks)	1st August	30th April
Grouse & Ptarmigan	12th August	10th December
Snipe	12th August	30th January
Black Grouse	20th August	10th December
Wild Fowl	1st September	30th January
Partridge	1st September	31st January
Capercaillie & Woodcock	1st October	30th January
Pheasant	1st October	31st January

Roe Deer (does)	21st October	31st March
Red, Sika, & Fallow Deer (hinds)	21st October	15th February

Bothies

Bothies are basic shelters in the hills. Many are open to the public for use and managed by the **Mountain Bothies Association (MBA)**. If teams plan to use a bothy for lunch or shelter they should be aware of the **MBA's bothy code**.

DofE teams are generally advised not to camp within close proximity to a bothy without permission from the owner because of problems that come with the pressure of numbers. This often leads to issues with pollution from human waste, so risk assessment would suggest these sites are not appropriate as a campsite. You can find more information about use of Bothies, via the DofE **'Use of Bothies information sheet'**

Weather forecasts

- The Met Office provides:
 - **Forecasts with summaries for the region and 7 day detailed forecasts for the chosen town/village.**
 - **Surface pressure charts**
 - **Mountain area forecasts for the Northwest Highlands.** This included a forecast for the region, with forecasts for individual summits available. These summit forecasts are for the summit height of the mountain, which should be considered when teams interpret them.
- **The Mountain Weather Information Service (MWIS)** provides 72 hour forecasts for 5 Scottish regions. These forecasts are for the summits of the mountains which must be considered when interpreting them for DofE use. They provide some interpretation which can assist participant understanding. The forecast area that covers the expedition area is **North-west highlands.**
- Outdoor conditions forecasts are available on BBC Radio Scotland (FM: 92.8-94.7, MW: 810) at 18:25 Monday-Friday, and on Saturday and Sunday at 07:00 and 19:00.

DofE resources

The current DofE expedition kit list can be downloaded from:

www.dofeshopping.org/expedition-kit

A range of expedition downloads, such as the Green Form and spare expedition safety cards, can be downloaded from: **www.dofe.org/leaders/resources-and-downloads/expedition-downloads/**

Further information of the Expedition section can be found at: **www.dofe.org/doing-your-dofe/activities-sections/expedition/**