

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:

DofE Scotland
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Area advisor

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

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Caithness and Sutherland Expedition Area

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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. Groups can experience true remoteness – in four days they may see no one other than their supervisor.

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 **GPX of the area boundaries**.



Choosing Your Route

Access Issues

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.

Damaged Bridges

The footbridge at **Strathan Bothy** (NC 244 612) is in a poor condition and therefore dangerous. If possible, teams should avoid crossing here.

Vehicle access

There is no vehicular access to Cape Wrath. A bus runs occasionally from the ferry to the lighthouse. Find more information at: <https://www.visitcapewrath.com>

Using ferries

For some routes in this area using short ferries may help make practical routes, especially if cycling. The first of the 20 conditions of Expeditions is “All expeditions must be by the participants’ own physical effort, without motorised or outside assistance.” Therefore, whilst approval would never be given for a long distance ferry, such as from the mainland to Orkney, **approval may be given for the use of small short ferries with few facilities to facilitate sensible routes and aims**, such as the Cape Wrath Ferry. In these cases teams must not use time waiting for the ferry or on the ferry as part of their hours of planned activity, so they must expect a longer day.

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. **In this area walking, cycling and riding Silver and Gold teams should avoid the use of the Cape Wrath and John O’Groats Trails.**

Scottish Hill Tracks

Scotways, the Scottish rights of way and access society, publishes **Scottish Hill Tracks**, a book listing rights of way across Scotland’s 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 [Scottish Natural Heritage website](#), with links to details from each council.

Camping

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 (at DofE we consider this to be individual expedition teams). Although not strictly necessary, the DofE recommends that, as a courtesy and to maintain existing good relations, expedition teams inform relevant land owners 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 is also lots of useful information and resources about wild camping available via [Mountaineering Scotland](#) and [The Outdoor Access Code](#).

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'](#).

Travel and transport to the area

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 flora and fauna
- 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 land use, flora and fauna and wilderness.

Physical and Human Geography

Caithness & Sutherland together occupy much of the far north of Scotland. Sutherland has three coasts, which extend from Strathy and Tongue to Durness and Cape Wrath in the North; from Cape Wrath to Lochinver in the West; and from Helmsdale to Dornoch in the East. The only significant inland settlement is Lairg. Caithness is a roughly triangular area on the east side of the far north of Scotland and is bounded to the south and west by Sutherland. It includes the settlements of Thurso and John o'Groats on the north coast and Wick, Lybster and Dunbeath on the east coast.

History

Caithness is one of the most deeply rooted area names in Scotland, and at different times it has been a kingdom, an earldom, a county and a district. The origins of the name of Caithness date back to the era of the Picts, who occupied much of Scotland North of the Forth and Clyde for four centuries after the departure of the Romans. One of the seven Pictish kingdoms was the Kingdom of Cait. This probably had its focus in modern Caithness, and may have extended South into Sutherland and North into Orkney and Shetland. In later centuries, Caithness was an earldom on the front line as the Norse and the Scots struggled for control of the North and the West of the country.

It may seem odd to have some of the most northerly parts of the country called "Sutherland". The name reflects the rather different world view of the Norse, who controlled northern Scotland for significant periods of time. For them, this was a land which lay to the south of Caithness, and so became known as Suorland. The name was eventually anglicised as Sutherland.

The native Gaelic speakers who lived here for centuries until many were removed during the Highland Clearances knew north west Sutherland as *Dùthaich 'Ic Aoidh* or the "Homeland of Clan Mackay"; western Sutherland as *Asainte* or "Assynt"; and eastern Sutherland as *Cataibh*. *Cataibh* is also sometimes used in Gaelic to signify the whole of Sutherland, and like the name of Caithness, probably looks back to the presence in the area of the Pictish Kingdom of Cait.

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.

Some useful resources about ticks:

- Lyme Disease Action has useful downloadable [leaflets about ticks and Lyme disease](#).
- [Stop the tick](#) has lots of infographics (some are a bit graphic, but informative)
- 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 disproportionate 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). 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 barefoot, 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. [Mountaineering Scotland](#) 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. The two letter prefix locates your grid reference within a 100km square; a mistake here 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 team that covers the expedition area is Assynt MRT

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 and 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:

The Duke of Edinburgh's Award is a Registered Charity No: 1072490, and in Scotland No: SC038254, and a Royal Charter Corporation No: RC000806

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- 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](#) 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 is usually between around 10th April until around 25th 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

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Pheasant	1st October	31st January
Roe Deer (does)	21st October	31st March
Red, Sika, & Fallow Deer (hinds)	21st October	15th February

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 that covers the area are 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.

Useful Links

Listed below are some links you may find useful. Please note that the Caithness and Sutherland Expedition Area does not directly endorse any of the sites listed.

<https://www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk/areacait/index.html> An interesting tourist site.

<https://scotland-info.co.uk/caithnes.htm> A tourist information site with lots of useful advice.

<https://www.visitcapewrath.com/> Tourist information on the far North.

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/