

# SCOTTISH SAFARI

WHY TRAVEL THOUSANDS OF MILES TO GO ON SAFARI THIS YEAR WHEN YOU CAN ENJOY SPECTACULAR WILDLIFE MUCH CLOSER TO HOME? READ ON FOR OUR GUIDE TO EXPERIENCING SCOTLAND'S VERY OWN 'BIG SIX'



THERE IS NOTHING QUITE LIKE a close encounter with a wild animal to quicken the pulse. And if the encounter takes place in an area of great natural beauty, then it only makes such a shared moment – however brief – that much more special.

The good news is that you don't have to travel half-way round the world to experience just that. In recent years, Scotland's diversity of landscape and life has seen it recognised as one of the leading wildlife-watching destinations in Europe. You want whales, dolphins, seabirds, eagles, otters and more? You've got it right here.

Of course, wildlife sightings can often be down to luck as much as judgment, but with some prior knowledge and a little patience, it is possible to enjoy some magical experiences this year. And if you are not sure where to begin, help is at hand. Rangers at nature reserves and wildlife centres are always happy to help out, while there are also a huge number of specialist wildlife tour operators available – some of which have been studying their subjects for decades.

Many have come together as part of Wild Scotland, an association of Scottish wildlife and nature tourism operators. Members sign up to a charter that puts wildlife welfare first, so you know that they have the animals' best interests at heart.

The wildlife-watching possibilities in Scotland are rich and numerous, but here are six top targets to whet the appetite.

## MINKE WHALES

Whale-watching is not just something to be enjoyed in far-flung places such as British Columbia and New Zealand – you can have your very own intimate whale experience right here in Scotland.

Minke whales move close inshore between May and October, lured by food supplies stirred up by strong tidal races and the complex underwater topography found around many Hebridean islands – although they are also spotted off the east coast from May onwards.

Typically between seven and 10 metres in length, minkes are the smallest of the baleen – rather than toothed – whales. These usually solitary animals feed by filtering water through baleen plates that hang from their top jaws. The plates act as a sieve trapping prey items as the animals take in huge amounts of water. Its nickname 'herring hog' betrays one of the minke's favourite foods.

Studies by the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust in Tobermory on Mull highlight just how many animals return to the same feeding areas each summer. The Trust has records of more than 60 individuals, each identified by features such as fin marks and body scars.

**When:** May to October

**Hotspots:** Waters off the west coast, particularly around Mull, Coll, Tiree and the Small Isles.



Snap happy: minke whales are naturally inquisitive (top); puffins nest in vast numbers around the Scottish coast (above); the dog-like head of a common seal (left)

## **PUFFINS**

Even for people with little interest in birds, puffins rarely fail to enchant. Charismatic and colourful, puffins stand out in even the busiest of seabird colonies.

These tough little birds spend the winter far out at sea, returning to traditional breeding grounds in vast numbers in early-April. The colonies on St Kilda alone number in the region of 135,000 pairs.

Puffins nest in burrows, often in grassy slopes at the tops of sea cliffs. Equipped with strong claws, puffins are quite capable of digging their own homes, but also take over abandoned rabbit burrows.

A single egg is laid in May and, once hatched, each puffin chick – or puffling – remains within the safety of its grass-lined nest chamber until fledging in August. Even when they do eventually venture out, pufflings tend to do so under cover of darkness to avoid the attentions of predators such as gulls and skuas.

Spending time at a puffin colony can be a wonderful experience, with incredibly close encounters possible if you sit very still. If really lucky, you may even find puffins landing all around you as they return from fishing trips out at sea.

**When:** Early-April to August

**Hotspots:** Puffins breed in small numbers in many coastal areas, but there are particularly large colonies on St Kilda, Shetland (Sumburgh Head, Hermaness), the Treshnish Isles (off Mull) and the Isle of May (Firth of Forth).

## **SEALS**

Scotland is home to two types of seal: the common (or harbour) seal and the grey seal, which is actually more common than its smaller cousin. Britain holds roughly 5% of the world population of common seals and nearly 40% of all greys – with the majority found in Scottish breeding colonies.

Seals spend most of the time at sea, but come ashore to breed, moult and rest between fishing trips. Although both range widely, greys generally prefer more exposed coasts and skerries, while common seals frequent sandy estuaries, sheltered sea lochs and even busy harbours.

Although location can offer a clue, spotting the difference between the two in the water can be tricky. Common seals have a more dog-like head, while greys have a longer 'Roman' nose. If you get really close, it is possible to spot that commons have v-shaped nostrils, while the nostrils of greys are parallel.

The differences become clearer on land: commons are generally smaller than greys and have a more uniform spotted coat. However, the biggest difference is in pupping time with commons giving birth in summer and greys in autumn. If you see a pup in the summer time, you can be sure that it's a common seal.

**When:** Throughout the year, although numbers peak in summer (common seals) and autumn (grey seals).

**Hotspots:** Breeding strongholds in Orkney, Shetland, North Rhona and the Monach Isles. Often seen hauled out on rocks in firths and on the sandbanks of Tentsmuir Point near Dundee.

### **OTTERS**

Otters are deceptively large animals, with males reaching up to 1.2m in length. Even so, they can be frustratingly hard to spot, particularly in the water when only a head and a trailing ripple gives away their presence.

We often associate otters in Scotland with seawater, but the animals also need access to supplies of freshwater to clean the salt from their fur – essential for maintaining the insulation and buoyancy of their coats.

Nimble and adaptable, otters are opportunistic hunters that are just as happy foraging in the shallows for crabs and butterfish as following burns inland to lochans where frogs are on the menu.

With otters being so elusive, it is common to spot signs of their presence, such as webbed paw prints and spraint (droppings), before the animals themselves. It can take a keen eye or good local knowledge to spot them in the wild – an example of when professional wildlife guides really earn their corn.

If you do spot one, be sure to stay still: otters are short-sighted but expert at detecting movement. If the animal is in the water, wait until it dives before shifting position or reaching for a camera.

**When:** Year-round, although most active during the summer months when females have cubs.

**Hotspots:** Shetland (especially Yell) and the Isle of Skye offer outstanding otter habitat. Also found in good numbers in the Western Isles, on Mull and Ardnamurchan.

### **BOTTLENOSE DOLPHINS**

The bottlenose dolphins that inhabit the Moray Firth and coastal waters along the northeast coast represent just one of two main resident populations in the UK – the other being at Cardigan Bay in Wales.

Comprising around 130 animals, the Moray Firth population is thought to be made up of two interconnected social groups: one larger school that remains within the inner firth for much of the year and another that ranges down the east coast as far as Newcastle.

Population size is very much determined by food supply, with dolphins focusing on nutritious staples such as mackerel, salmon and bass. The animals make efficient solo hunters, but often also work together to corral fish to the surface of the water.

The Moray Firth dolphins can be spotted from a variety of land-based locations, but the best by far is Chanorny Point, near Fortrose. Here, two peninsulas come together to form a narrow but deep channel that is ideal for dolphins to ambush fish as they are funneled through by changing tides. It is not unusual for dolphins to come close enough to splash people watching just metres away on the beach – an unforgettable sight that understandably draws the crowds.

**When:** Year-round, although more reliably encountered during summer months.

**Hotspots:** Many points along the northeast coast can be fantastic places for dolphin spotting, although the inner Moray Firth (and particularly Chanorny Point) can be hard to beat. Ask at the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society wildlife centres at Spey Bay and North Kessock for the latest on sightings.



Playing to the gallery: bottlenose dolphins in acrobat mode at Chanorny Point (right); an otter gets to grips with its latest meal (above); a sea eagle glides in on huge wings (right)



## GOLDEN AND SEA EAGLES

It is hard to imagine a more potent symbol of Scotland's wild places than the golden eagle. Scotland holds around 430 pairs, ranging from a stronghold in Hebridean islands – in particular, Skye and Mull – to Highland Perthshire.

These imposing birds nest on inaccessible crags and are not often seen at close quarters. Spotting a golden eagle can require patience, but it is always worth scanning for large shapes breaking the skyline above the hills as the birds soar on wings held in a shallow 'v'.

Interestingly, golden eagles now increasingly have to share the skies in some areas with their even larger cousin – the white-tailed sea eagle. Once the dominant species on islands such as Skye, sea eagles were wiped out in the 1900s, but are now gradually reclaiming old haunts following a phased reintroduction that began on Rum in the 1970s.

With a wingspan of more than two metres, sea eagles are the fourth largest birds of prey in the world. They can be spotted above rocky coastlines, gliding on huge 'fingered' wings.

Conflict between the two is not unknown, although they have largely established their own separate territories. While golden eagles are more attached to the land, the sea eagle is a mainly coastal species with a corresponding diet heavy on fish and seabirds.

**When:** Both species are most active during late-spring and summer months when feeding chicks, but can be seen throughout the year.

**Hotspots:** The islands of Mull, Skye and Islay are particularly good for both species, while the Cairngorms and Highland Perthshire are excellent for golden eagles.

## ESSENTIALS

### WILD SCOTLAND

An association of more than 80 top-quality wildlife tour operators. [www.wild-scotland.co.uk](http://www.wild-scotland.co.uk)

### RSPB

Fantastic reserves around Scotland, plus a special sea eagle hide on Mull. [www.rspb.org.uk/scotland](http://www.rspb.org.uk/scotland)

### NATIONAL NATURE RESERVES

A network of outstanding reserves managed by Scottish Natural Heritage. [www.snh.org.uk/nnr-scotland](http://www.snh.org.uk/nnr-scotland)

### HEBRIDEAN WHALE AND DOLPHIN TRUST

Learn more about the Trust's cetacean conservation work. [www.whaledolphintrust.co.uk](http://www.whaledolphintrust.co.uk)

### WHALE AND DOLPHIN CONSERVATION SOCIETY

An international research and conservation body with two centres in Scotland. [www.wdcs.org](http://www.wdcs.org)

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## Dolphin Day Out!

**WDCS Wildlife Centre**  
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t: 01343 820339

**WDCS Dolphin and Seal Centre**  
North Kessock, Inverness  
June – September: 9.30am to 4.30pm  
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