

2.5 Habitats and wildlife

The Kintyre Way passes through five main types of habitat, described below:

- coast
- woodland
- field and grassland
- lochs and streams
- moorland

If you are keen to spot wildlife, carry binoculars and walk alone or in the company of fellow walkers who share your interest and will keep quiet when it matters. Try to set off soon after sunrise, or go for a stroll in the evening. Animals are then more active than in the middle of the day. Midges also prefer these times, so protect your skin completely, especially between May and September and in calm weather.

Coast

You spend almost a full day and parts of several more beside Kintyre's coastline, which ranges from shingle beaches to steep cliffs.

In the waters of Kilbrannan Sound off Skipness and Carradale, you may be lucky enough to spot a basking shark. The second biggest fish in the world grows up to 35 feet long, has enormous fins and usually glides close to the surface, occasionally making spectacular leaps. Internationally recognised as an endangered species, basking sharks are summer visitors to the inshore waters of Scotland's west coast.

Seals bask on small inshore rocks near Ronachan Point ('ron' is Gaelic for *seal*). Grey seal are more numerous here, distinguished from common seal by their pointed, rather than rounded, head shape. The male grey's fur is dark brownish-grey and they look large and lumpish when resting. The common seal has a more mottled coat, and often arches its sleeker body when ashore.

Male grey seal (Halichoerus grypus)



Many plants are specially adapted to the harsh, salty conditions along the shores. Marram grass is common on sand dunes, notably along the west and south coasts. With its tough, sharp-edged leaves, it helps to bind the sand, slowing down coastal erosion. Thrift or sea pink grows in rock crevices, with colourful flowers – usually pink, purplish or even white.



Thrift (sea pink)

Inshore, on the shingle and sand beaches, oystercatchers are common and easy to identify by their long orange bills, black head, white chest and loud piercing call. Broad-

winged lapwings loop and whirl about, piping their sad call. Recognise them by their short, spiky crest and black-and-white head and neck.

Cormorants are great hunters for fish, easy to see when perched on rocks with their wings outstretched. Up close, their black-looking plumage has subtle shades, with blue-black chest and bronze wings. From either coast, you may sight gannets gliding low over the water, hunting. They climb high (up to 30 m) and fold their wings to dive-bomb their prey, reaching speeds of over 80 kph (50 mph).

Gannet taking off





Red squirrel with nesting material in her mouth

Woodland

The Way passes through several deciduous woodlands, notably south of Tarbert, east of Killean near Tayinloan, and the upper reaches of Carradale. Large, productive conifer plantations are widespread, mainly with fast-growing sitka spruce, notably around Deucheran Hill and between Saddell and Lussa Loch.

The Atlantic oakwood between Tarbert and Skipness, and in a small pocket near Claonaig, is a 'habitat of high importance' in a European context. Restricted to coastal fringes, it supports around 500 species of plants and animals. Careful management is aimed at restoring this threatened woodland.

Kintyre is one of the last strongholds of the red squirrel. Rare elsewhere in Britain, these charming animals are threatened by disease from their non-native grey cousins. Some 70% of greys carry the squirrelpox virus, which is harmless to its host but fatal to reds. The plight of the red squirrel is grave and although research into a vaccine is under way, time is running out. For more information, visit www.red-squirrels.org.uk.

In the deciduous woods, silver birch is easily identified by its bark – smooth white-grey in young trees, but darker and rougher in older trees. In spring, the woodland floor may be carpeted with bluebells (wild hyacinth) with violet-blue bell-shaped flowers. Wild primroses grow in clumps of yellow flowers with crinkly bright green leaves.



Mature beech in autumn

There are some outstanding beeches in Carradale, south of Deucheran Hill. Standing up to 25 m high, these huge trees have smooth bark and dark green shiny leaves that turn russet in autumn. Woodland is also home to many roe deer, although sighting them can be tricky: they tend to be shy, especially in the middle of the day. Their coat is brownish-red, with a pale buff patch on the rump, and they are smaller than their red cousins, who have adapted to more open ground.

Field and grassland

Buzzards are commonly seen sitting on fence posts or hovering over fields. The bird is recognisable in flight by its V-shaped profile, spread tail and high-pitched mewing call. Plumage is generally brown above and pale-patterned below. At over three feet, its wingspan is only half that of the golden eagle.

Large clumps of yellow iris, together with the more discreet meadow buttercup bring splashes of vivid colour around ponds and on wet ground, in tune with the moorland yellows of broom and gorse. Red campion is usually found in hedgerows along field edges, with its clusters of deep pink flowers atop hairy stems.



Yellow flag iris



Barnacle geese taking off

Lochs and streams

During winter and spring, Lussa Loch (see page 50) is a haven for flocks of white-fronted Greenland geese. Generally mottled brown in colour, they have white rumps, distinctive orange-yellow beaks and orange legs.

Greylag geese are also winter-spring visitors, arriving from Iceland during October. Ancestors of the farmyard goose, they are almost completely grey-brown in colour, with large orange bills and pink legs. More striking are barnacle geese, also winter visitors, with white faces and chests and black necks.

Grey heron sometimes stand tall and stock still in the shallows, waiting for a sudden strike on fish and frogs, and sometimes they stalk their prey elegantly. In flight they trail their legs, and their large grey wings beat very slowly.

Near streams and rivers, look out for the dipper, an athletic starling-sized bird with aquatic tendencies. It often stands or walks in fast-moving water, plunging in fearlessly to feed on tiny fish, molluscs and tadpoles. Recognise the dipper by its white throat and chest, with mainly black body and brownish head.