

## 2·5 Habitats and wildlife

Arran's mild climate and mixed scenery makes it home to a huge variety of plants and animals. Much of the island is recognised as a Site of Special Scientific Interest. With few predators and limited threat from human settlement, the animals are surprisingly approachable. In the space of a few days one October, I saw every creature photographed in this section, in most cases from nearby and in broad daylight.



*Red-breasted mergansers*

As ever, however, animals and birds are more active in the early morning and late evening, so these are the best times to seek them, if possible carrying binoculars and moving quietly. An interesting feature of the island is the complete absence of certain species that are commonplace on the mainland. You won't see any magpies, nor moles, foxes nor, mercifully, any grey squirrel: see page 28 for its charming red cousin.

The Way passes through three main habitats – coastal, woodland and upland – of which the first is clearly dominant.

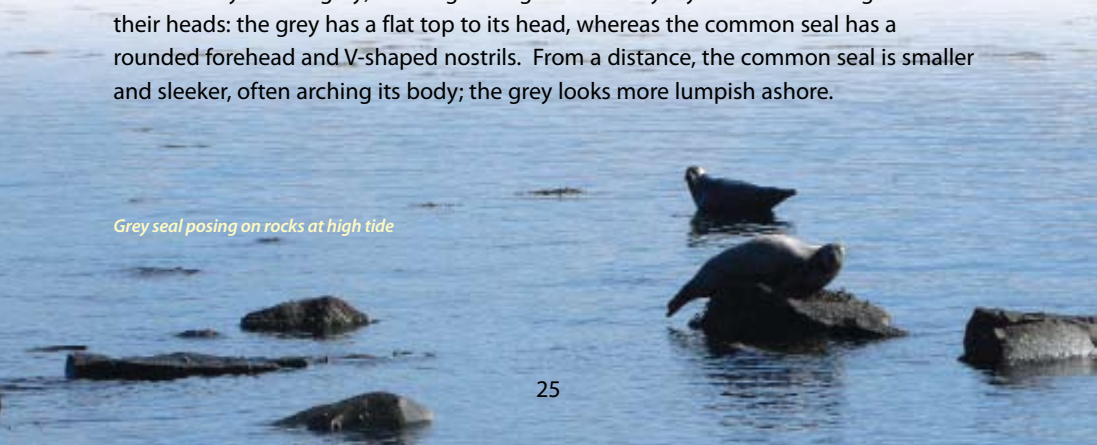
### Coastal


Much of the Way runs along or just above the beach. Arran has over 900 species of flowering plants, mainly concentrated on the raised beaches. At any time of year, wild flowers are blooming, with up to 50 kinds even in December. You'll see lots of sea ducks, including red-breasted merganser: see above and page 27 (eider duck).

You are certain to see seal, both common and Atlantic grey, especially along the Corrie/Sannox shore, near Lochranza and also in the south, near Kildonan. Around low tide they cluster in larger groups; when the tide is in, lone seals bask on isolated rocks.

Common seal are smaller than grey, and not as long-lived (20-30 years, compared with 35 or more years for grey). Distinguishing them is easy if you're close enough to see their heads: the grey has a flat top to its head, whereas the common seal has a rounded forehead and V-shaped nostrils. From a distance, the common seal is smaller and sleeker, often arching its body; the grey looks more lumpish ashore.

*Grey seal posing on rocks at high tide*





Larger marine mammals include porpoise and dolphin. Porpoises are more common, usually swimming in groups some distance offshore. They are smaller than dolphin (up to about 6 ft/1.8 m) and you'll see their rounded backs and very small dorsal fin. Dolphins grow up to about 12 ft/3.5 m, have larger fins and are predators. They are more likely than porpoises to approach the shore.

In the same family (*cetaceans*) are whales, but they are much rarer. Minke whale, which grow up to 36 ft/11 m in length, occasionally visit Arran. Your best chance of seeing any of these marine mammals is in very calm weather, using binoculars.

Between August and October, you may be lucky enough to spot the large black fin of a basking shark: see above. These huge fish (up to 36ft/11 m) feed on nothing but plankton, and have no teeth. They are second in size only to whale shark, and internationally recognised as an endangered species: see page 61 for the website.

Arran has a good number of otters around its coast, but you need luck and patience to see this shy mammal. On land, they might be confused with mink, but are much larger, with a broad tapering tail. In the water, they leave a V-shaped wake when swimming. Your best chance is around dawn or dusk on a quiet section of coast. The otter in the photograph below is feeding on codling.



There's a wide range of sea birds, including gulls, fulmar and gannet. The gannet is easily recognised by its amazing aerobatics: they glide low over the water, hunting, then climb very high, folding their wings to dive-bomb their prey at speeds of over 80 kph (50 mph).

If you see large black birds standing on rocks with their wings outstretched or diving for fish, they are probably shag or cormorant. Shag are smaller and more common here; cormorant are distinguished by a heavier bill and white throat patch.



*Eider duck (male)*

The oystercatcher is a striking bird with a long orange bill and, in flight, an obvious M-shape in white-on-black. Unlike inland Scotland, where they are summer visitors, in Arran you'll see them year-round, sometimes in large flocks on the beaches. When disturbed, their piercing shrieks are unmistakable.

A very different, crooning 'ah-ooo' sound is made by the eider duck, one of the world's largest and longest-living sea ducks. Drakes have the striking black and white breeding plumage shown in the photograph. Females are dull brown and mottled, well camouflaged for sitting on their nests, where they pluck down from their breasts for lining. In Iceland, this is still harvested for luxury duvets, jackets and eiderdowns.

## **Woodland**

On the first day, the Way passes through a fine stretch of mixed woodland in Brodick Country Park *en route* for Goat Fell. There are mature spreading oak and beech, mixed with slender birch, ash and rowan. Conifers include Scots pine, the only pine tree native to Britain, with a sprinkling of imported species such as Sitka and Norway spruce. In spring, the colours in the Country Park's famous collection of rhododendrons are spectacular. In autumn, foliage and berries show their warm colours.

*Brodick Country Park, with Castle*



*Red squirrel on birch branch*

North of Sannox, and between Lochranza and Catacol, the Way passes through patches of mixed natural woodland. In spring, wild flowers flourish here, with patches of bluebells (wild hyacinth) and red campion. Wild primrose grows in clumps, with yellow flowers and crinkly bright green leaves.

Between Whiting Bay and Lamlash, the Way runs through planted conifer forest, with less variety of bird and plant life. Still, these trees are home to many birds, including coal tits and birds of prey. The Way also passes the foot of Glen Catacol, home to two endemic species of whitebeam, rowan-like trees found nowhere outside Arran.

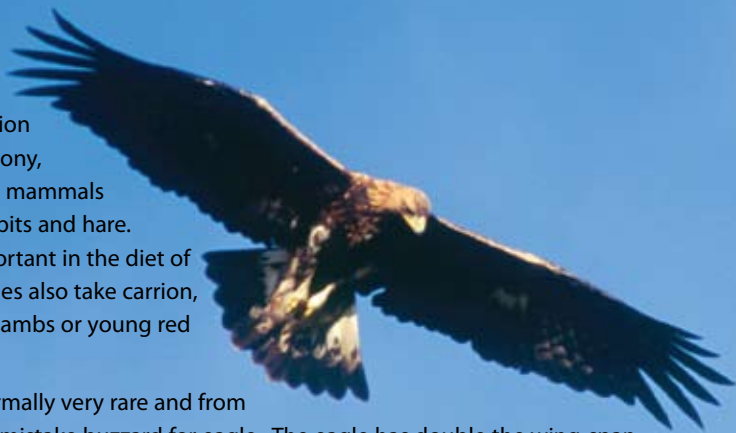
Arran is one of the last strongholds of the agile red squirrel, elsewhere threatened by disease and competition from its non-native grey cousin. They're quite easy to spot, especially in autumn when hoarding food for the winter. If you see stripped pine cones on the ground, they've almost certainly been chewed by red squirrels. They occur anywhere on the island, especially in Brodick Country Park, the grounds of Auchrannie and even on garden bird feeders.

## **Upland**

On the first day, the Way rises through Brodick Country Park to ascend via moorland to the shoulder of Goat Fell. Ground cover is rough grass, with blaeberry (*bilberry*) and heather, in places also with bog myrtle. These provide important habitat for brown hare and grouse. Gorse (or *whin*) grows in dense, spiny patches with yellow almond-scented flowers almost year-round.

Thorny brambles (*blackberry*) flourish, providing a heavy crop of fruit in autumn. Lower slopes have huge areas of bracken, the commonest and most invasive of ferns. There are over 45 other species of fern on Arran.

Higher up, the vegetation becomes sparse and stony, but still supports small mammals such as vole, mice, rabbits and hare. The latter two are important in the diet of the golden eagle. Eagles also take carrion, on Arran mainly dead lambs or young red deer.



Eagle sightings are normally very rare and from afar, and visitors often mistake buzzard for eagle. The eagle has double the wing-span, and its flight looks very powerful, even from a distance, with an almost rectangular wing outline. A pair of these magnificent birds live above Lochranza, and the mountainous interior of the north island offers your best chance of a sighting.

If the eagle is the iconic bird of the Scottish Highlands, then the red deer is its iconic mammal. On Arran, they are commonplace, mostly kept in the northern half by a deer fence right across the island. In October, you will hear the loud bellow of the stags in rut, each one trying to collect a group of hinds and fighting off other stags with clashing antlers.

Red deer are easy to spot around Lochranza, especially out of season where they invade unprotected gardens, stroll on the golf course and even wade around the beach. On the mainland, they are normally seen only from a distance on the skyline. On Arran, they stay upland in summer, feeding on the sweet grasses, but in winter they descend for heather and other foliage. Culling is essential, to control numbers and to prevent the destruction of habitat which would lead to slow death by starvation.

*Red deer stag with hind, from roadside, Lochranza*

