

2.3 Habitats and wildlife

Coast

The MCT provides unrivalled opportunities for watching wildlife – offshore, inshore and along the coastline itself.

The East Coast population of bottlenose dolphins is important Europe-wide, with about 130 resident animals. At first focused on the Moray Firth, they have spread into small groups ranging widely along the east coast of mainland Scotland. These playful mammals are most likely to be seen during summer and on a rising tide, although patience and luck may be needed.

Atlantic grey seal can often be seen basking on rocks inshore. They are distinguished from the round-headed common seal (another local inhabitant) by their pointed head. The male grey's fur is dark brownish-grey and they look large and lumpish while resting. The common seal's coat is more mottled and it often arches its sleek body when ashore. Its nostrils make a pronounced V-shape.

Whales visit the coast, the most likely sighting being minke whale between March and October. It has a sharply pointed snout, streamlined profile and is dark brown or black above and lighter below. Individual minkes are regularly seen leaping from the water. You may also be lucky enough to see harbour porpoise, orca and pilot whale.

Bottlenose dolphins (Tursiops truncatus)





Common seal pups, Lossiemouth east beach

Of the birds seen offshore, the gannet is particularly striking. It glides low over the water hunting, then climbs as high as 30 m, folds its wings and dive-bombs its prey, reaching speeds of more than 50 mph (80 kph). The cormorant is an avid fish hunter, easy to spot when perched on rocks with its wings outstretched. Up close, the black-looking plumage is subtly shaded, with blue-black chest and bronze wings.

Among the cliff-dwelling birds, the fulmar (featured in the MCT logo) is distinguished from gulls by its stiff-winged, gliding flight. Tightly packed clusters of guillemots can be seen during spring and early summer. It has a dark head and back, and a slender, pointed beak.

Along the beaches, the oystercatcher is easy to identify by its long orange bill, black head, white chest and loud piercing call. The common tern is easily disturbed: it is identified by its orange-red bill and short, forked tail.

Close inshore you may see floating flocks of eider. A large seaduck, it feeds on shellfish. The male has a black cap, white chest and back, whereas the female is mottled brown. In winter, striking long-tailed ducks are seen in large numbers around Kingston and Burghead.



Fulmar, a miniature cousin of the albatross



Thrift (sea pink)

The grey heron is often seen in estuaries, standing tall and still in the shallows, waiting to make a sudden strike, or elegantly stalking its prey. In flight it trails its legs and beats its large wings very slowly.

Several plants are specially adapted to the harsh, salty conditions along the shores. Marram grass is common on sand dunes where its tough, sharp-edged leaves help to bind the sand, slowing down coastal erosion. Thrift or sea pink, with pink, purplish and occasionally white flowers, grows in clumps on sand and in rock crevices. Dense bushes of prickly gorse are common beside cliff paths, with masses of yellow flowers giving out an almond-like scent.

Gorse in bloom



Oystercatcher



Grassland and farmland

Along coastal fringes and over fields, the broad-winged lapwing loops and whirls about, piping its sad call. It's recognised by its black-and-white head and neck and short spiky crest. Above the fields and further inland on the moors, you may hear the sweet song of the skylark as it hovers and soars so high that it's almost out of sight.

You will see various crows, perhaps including jackdaw, a small black-backed crow with a grey neck. It nests in cliffs along the coast, and in flight it's acrobatic and graceful by turns.

Among wildflowers, red campion appear along field edges with their clusters of deep pink flowers. Grassland is home to the common spotted orchid.

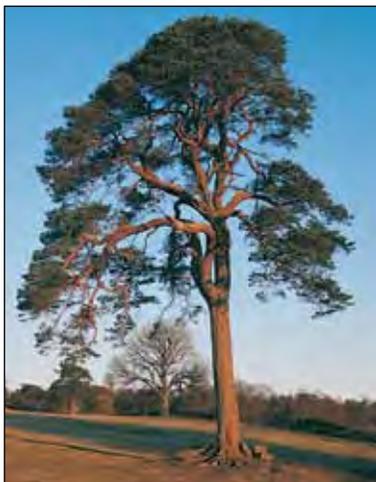


Common spotted orchid

Woodland

The most common species in the plantations along the Moray coast is Scots pine; it is also seen in small groups or singly on Dava Moor. Here, far from the onslaught of salt-laden winds, it is a more substantial and robust tree. Its bark is deeply cracked and its branches a distinctive orange-brown.

Along the Dava Way you'll also find silver birch with its white-grey bark, smooth in young trees, darker and rougher in older specimens. Rowan, with its bright-red berries stands out during late summer. Soon after, the larch begins to change colour, its fine needles turning from summer bright green through shades of yellow and orange to glowing bronze in autumn.



Scots pine (Pinus sylvestris)

Three species of wildflower are widespread. Wild primrose grows in clumps of yellow flowers with crinkly bright green leaves. Wood anemone grows abundantly during spring, its delicate white flowers on slender stems easily shaken by the wind.



Bell heather

Hence

its name, after

Anemos, the Greek wind god.

The common dog-violet appears during spring, pale violet with heart-shaped leaves.

The cuckoo, an early spring visitor to woodland fringes, has an unmistakable call, but it's difficult to spot, being an undistinguished grey-backed bird, usually low-flying.

Moorland

From July to early September, the moors are carpeted with two kinds of hardy heather, growing in bushy clumps. Bell heather has larger, deeper reddish-purple flowers while the flowers of ling are usually more pink than mauve. In poorly drained areas, snowy drifts of common cotton grass flourish in late spring with distinctive white fluffy balls.

Bird life is sparser than around the coast, but sightings may include curlew, the largest European wader. It has a very long, down-curved beak and makes a rising, whistling call. The moors are important breeding grounds also for golden plover, with its plaintive whistle and (in summer) gold and black plumage. In winter, they move to lower ground and often flock together with lapwing. The red grouse is a plump game bird. Its body is reddish brown with pale legs, and the male has a distinctive red patch above his eye. When disturbed, it takes off abruptly in a flurry of wingbeats and a harsh, guttural call.

Red grouse (male) in heather

