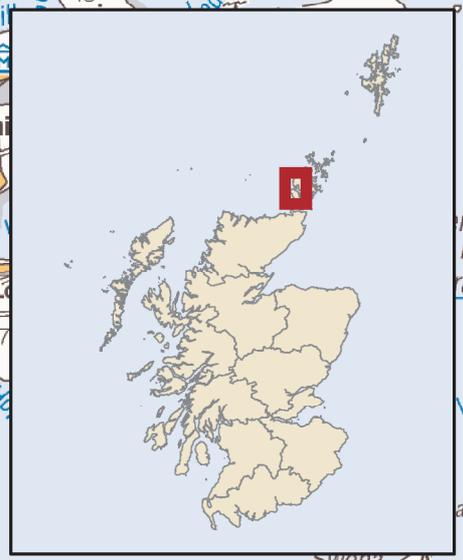


Orkney - Hoy & West Mainland

National Scenic Area



Scale 1:150,000
Data source: Scottish Government. © Crown Copyright and database right 2009. All rights reserved.
Ordnance Survey Licence number SNH 100017908.



HOY AND WEST MAINLAND NATIONAL SCENIC AREA *Orkney Isles*

Description from *Scotland's Scenic Heritage 1978*

The great ice-rounded eminences of the hills of North Hoy dominate the Orkney scene with a power that is scarcely in tune with their modest height (479 metres). Their bold shape, fine grouping, soaring cliffs and headlands, including the famous stack of the Old Man of Hoy, are almost as important to the Caithness scene as they are in that of Orkney.

North Hoy has a particularly strong visual inter-relationship with the south-west mainland of Orkney, the pastoral character of which around the shores of the Loch of Stenness makes a good foil for the bold hills of Hoy. The basin of this loch is enclosed by low rolling hills of lush grassland, some arable land, scattered farm steadings and stone dykes with a noticeable lack of trees, giving a very open landscape, the character of which is enlivened by the abundant remains of ancient occupation.

This landscape culminates in the west in cliffed headlands like a rampart against the sea, which breaks through at Hoy Sound in a tidal race of impressive swiftness. The stone-built settlement of Stromness rising steeply out of its harbour further enhances the character of the area.

The Special Qualities of the Hoy and West Mainland National Scenic Area

- A palimpsest of geology, topography, archaeology and land use
- An archaeological landscape of World Heritage Status
- The spectacular coastal scenery
- Sandstone and flagstone as an essence of Orkney
- A long-settled and productive land and sea
- The contrast between the fertile farmland and the unimproved moorland
- A landscape of contrasting curves and lines
- Land and water in constantly changing combinations under the open sky
- The high hills of Hoy
- The townscape of Stromness, its setting and its link with the sea
- The traditional buildings and crofting patterns of Rackwick

Special Quality	Further information
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>A palimpsest of geology, topography, archaeology and land use</i> 	
<p>This is a landscape composed of different layers that can be readily seen and understood:</p> <p>A base layer of Geology, with its horizontal strata of Devonian sandstones and flagstones, exemplified by the Old Man of Hoy and the cliffs of the western coastline.</p> <p>Overlain by undulating Topography, where a rocky coast rises through gentle lowlands to higher rounded summits.</p> <p>Overlain by Archaeology and Land Use, where a succession of different inhabitants have left their own distinctive patterns and monuments in the Orcadian landscape.</p>	<p>Orkney is a landscape of distinctive geology, topography, archaeology and land use which can be seen as layers within the landscape - a palimpsest. The NSA exemplifies this.</p> <p>The geology is horizontally bedded and relatively uniform. The topography consists of coasts both shallow and steep, extensive lowlands in the basins of the Lochs of Harray and Stenness, and the extensive uplands of Hoy. The surface layer contains archaeological sites, modern farmland and unimproved moorland.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>An archaeological landscape of world heritage status</i> 	
<p>By their location, shape and vertical presence, the Neolithic monuments of the Ring of Brodgar, the Stones of Stenness and the grass-covered tomb of Maes Howe, are distinctive landmarks of international renown.</p>	<p>'The Orkney imagination is haunted by time.' George Mackay Brown</p> <p>The Neolithic monuments of central Orkney comprise the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site, and have become recognisable landmarks of West Mainland. Within the NSA they include:</p>

<p>They lie within a landscape of low-lying farmland, which has been farmed for millennia. Wilder moors and hills rise to the east, and the Hills of Hoy form the backdrop to the south. Unusually for Orkney, there are few clear views of the open sea. The area feels enclosed, in the middle of a vast lowland amphitheatre of glistening loch and fertile pasture.</p> <p>The NSA is also rich in remains from other eras, from Norse and medieval to the Second World War.</p> <p>However, visible monuments represent only the clearest element of much more extensive and complex evidence of settlement and use of the landscape as revealed by archaeological excavations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Stones of Stenness, the Ring of Brodgar and other standing stones composed of large flags of Devonian sandstone. • Maes Howe and Unstan (Onston) cairns, and other cairns and tumuli, which form distinctive, often grass covered low mounds in the landscape. <p>The solid carved boulder block of the Dwarfie Stane on Hoy lies within the NSA (although not in the World Heritage Site).</p>
<p>• <i>The spectacular coastal scenery</i></p>	
<p>With their towering red cliffs, the Atlantic coastline creates a spectacular scene, enhanced by the presence of the Old Man of Hoy, the highest sea stack in the British Isles.</p> <p>These vertical structures of red sandstone, home to numerous seabirds are both a landmark and an iconic image of the Orkney Islands, especially for those arriving by sea from across the Pentland Firth.</p> <p>In comparison, the sheltered waters and gentle topography of the western approaches to Scapa Flow contrast with the Atlantic-battered western seaboard.</p>	<p>The west coast of Mainland and Hoy contain high vertical cliffs, with St John's Head on Hoy, rising to 338m (the third highest sea cliff in Britain). They are composed of the Devonian Sandstone, with its distinctive bedding planes. The erosive force of the Atlantic storms and waves has exploited weaknesses in the strata to create cavities, skerries, groups, geos, caves, wave cut platforms and boulder-strewn beaches.</p> <p>The Old Man of Hoy towers 137m from its resistant, igneous rock foundation at sea level; it was not climbed until 1966.</p> <p>The cliffs provide home to numerous sea birds. The west coast of Hoy is part of the Hoy SSSI, SAC & SPA, and RSPB reserve, containing around 120,000 birds. These include nationally important populations of fulmar, great black-backed gull and guillemot.</p>
<p>• <i>Sandstone and flagstone as an essence of Orkney</i></p>	
<p>The presence of sandstones and flagstones, whether occurring as natural exposures or comprising human artefacts, is a characteristic of the NSA, indeed of Orkney as a whole.</p> <p>There are the towering cliffs and stacks of Hoy with their rusty reds and ochres, and also the lower rocky coasts with their</p>	<p>Hoy and West Mainland are composed predominantly of Devonian Old Red Sandstone, which includes Hoy Sandstone and Stromness Flags. The sandstone fractures along bedding planes, creating blocky stones and flag stones, which creates an excellent building material, including for standing stones. It is also prone to weathering, leading to changes in the colour and hue of the rock.</p>

<p>wave-cut platforms and beaches of flagstones.</p> <p>There are the drystone dykes with their characteristic flattened stones, the traditional flagstone roofs as exemplified at Rackwick, and the golden or honey coloured stone of farm buildings and of old Stromness.</p> <p>There are ancient sandstone tombs, the solid carved boulder of the Dwarfie Stane, and the upstanding standing stones of the ancient circles.</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">• A long-settled and productive land and sea</p>	
<p>The land has the appearance of a long and well-settled agricultural landscape, with solid farm buildings, fertile, green fields and numerous cattle.</p> <p>Likewise the ever-presence of the sea is a reminder that fishing and whaling have also been key to the prosperity of the islands.</p>	<p>The history of agriculture in Orkney goes back to Neolithic times. The mild climate, level ground and fertile soils have always made Orkney surprisingly fertile compared to Shetland, the Western Isles or mainland Scotland immediately to the south. This has been the key to the prosperity of the islands. Currently there are over 100,000 cattle in Orkney.</p> <p>It is a working landscape, and the current farms have had a long evolutionary history, including crofting townships and 19th century improvement farms. The steadings often preserve examples of kiln barns and other 19th century structures typical of crofting, such as the linear farmsteads. Examples of old townships include Clouston and Grimeston.</p> <p>The sea has always provided a source of food, as far back as the fish and shellfish remains found in the Neolithic middens. Additionally, Stromness was a centre of whaling and fishing industries, which brought prosperity to the islands.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">• The contrast between the fertile farmland and the unimproved moorland</p>	
<p>The fertile low ground with its farms and fields contrasts markedly with the open, uninhabited higher ground of moorland and hill. This is emphasised by the differing colours of the two areas – the bright greens of the farmland and the browns of the uplands.</p>	<p>Much of the low ground of the NSA, around the loch basin of Stenness and on the gentle, coastal slopes, is comprised of rich, fertile agricultural land. The fields consist of improved grassland.</p> <p>On the higher ground of Ward Hill (Stenness), and on the rugged, glaciated hills of Hoy there is open, unimproved, often heather-dominated, moorland and blanket peat. These areas have long been used for peat extraction, with old cuttings and extraction routes visible in many areas.</p>

- ***A landscape of contrasting curves and lines***

The combination of curves and lines is a defining feature of this landscape. The pattern of the landform is smooth, with gentle curves, but the land itself often ends spectacularly in vertical cliffs and a horizontal horizon of sea. Rocks on the seashore and in the buildings and dykes tend to be flat and linear, and the field boundaries take straight lines across the curving landscape.

There are no trees to soften the regular outlines of the farm buildings that stand proud on the undulating pasture, and the ancient monuments can be a combination of the linear and the circular: upstanding stones within a circular surround.

The low-lying land rises gently from the sea, to rounded farmland and moorland; above are the more dramatic, steeper, but smoothly-curved hills of Hoy.

There are curves also in many of the ancient monuments: the distinctive curved forms of Maes Howe and other cairns in the landscape; and the circular forms of the ditches in the henge monuments of Brodgar and Stenness.

These curves contrast with the linear, angular forms, often derived from the underlying sandstone: the geological bedding planes, the joints and fractures in the rocky coastline, the vertical and angular cliffs and stacks, the blocky nature of the stones, the dykes with their flat stones. Additionally, the fields and buildings tend to be rectilinear.

- ***Land and water in constantly changing combinations under the open sky***

Under the wide horizons, endless combinations of water, land, sea and sky can be experienced, varying both with location and the weather. Movement is brought to the landscape by the almost ceaseless wind, whether the scudding of clouds, the shafts of sunlight moving across the fields and moors, the patterns on the water, or long grass blowing in the wind.

Sea or loch is never far distant: the lochs of Harray and Stenness, surrounded by smooth lowlands and hills; small voes and wicks such as Hamnavoe; the larger bay of Ireland, leading to sounds and deeps, and to the whale-shaped Graemsay; the enclosed Scapa Flow (bordering the NSA); the exposed Pentland Firth; and the open Atlantic Ocean.

Location-specific qualities

- ***The high hills of Hoy***

The high, rounded hills of Hoy form a spectacular backdrop to much of West Mainland. With their corries, deep U-shaped valleys and patterned ground, these rugged, moorland hills reflect their glacial history.

Within a sheltered gully in these hills lies the small Berriedale birchwood, the most northerly native wood in Britain.

Glaciated landforms on Hoy include distinctive U-shaped valleys, moraines, including a terminal moraine at Rackwick, and corries, the most northerly in Britain.

Post-glacial features include patterned ground on the summit of Ward Hill (Hoy) and raised beaches. In contrast to Hoy, Mainland is a drowned coast without raised beaches.

Berriedale Wood is composed of downy birch, with rowan, willow, aspen and hazel. There is an understorey of heather, roses, honeysuckle, ferns and blaeberry.

• **The townscape of Stromness, its setting and its link with the sea**

The stone-built settlement of Stromness, rising steeply out of its harbour, further enhances the character of the area.

The townscape is distinctive, comprised of sandstone houses around the bay and on the hill behind, its traditional settlement pattern little altered.

Particularly notable are its narrow, stone-flagged main street, with vennels leading down to the numerous private wharves; and narrow streets and paths leading up the hill behind.

The town has always been dependent on the sea, and maintains strong maritime links. There is constant movement of boats in the harbour and the surrounding seas, from fishing and diving boats, to the arrival and departure of the ferry from Caithness.

Stromness and Hamnavoe go back to Viking times, if not before, with the natural harbour and relative calm waters compared to the surrounding seaways of the Atlantic ocean and the North Sea.

Immediately north of mainland Britain, Orkney and its seaways have always been a strategic point for sea navigation. In times of war it has been an alternative route to the potentially dangerous English Channel.

The town has had a rich, maritime history, including being of key importance to the herring fishery. It has been an important strategic location in times of war, for example during the Napoleonic and First & Second World Wars. It has had strong links to the arctic, particularly through whaling and as base for the Hudson Bay Company.

• **The traditional buildings and crofting patterns of Rackwick**

Set at the end of a glacial valley, between towering sandstone cliffs and a rocky beach open to the Atlantic Ocean, the distinctive and attractive village of Rackwick contains stone buildings and crofts in a traditional layout and in a spectacular setting.

'Rackwick... the only example of a ... crofting township on estate land where most of the houses are still in place.'
Bailey (2007)

The distinctiveness of Rackwick is brought about by the prevalence of vernacular buildings. Modern buildings, where present, have broadly retained the vernacular style. There are also examples of old longhouses. Sandstone is the building material and some roofs consist of flagstones or turf.

Selected Bibliography

Bailey, P. 2007. *Orkney*. Newton Abbott: David & Charles.

Berry, R.J. 1985. *Natural History of Orkney*. London: William Collins.

Historic Scotland 2008. *Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site, Management Plan 2008 –13*.

Ritchie, A. 1995. *Prehistoric Orkney (Historic Scotland)*. London: Batsford.

Ritchie 1988. *Scotland BC, Historic Buildings & Monuments*. Edinburgh: HMSO.

Land Use Consultants 1998. Orkney Landscape Character Assessment. *Scottish Natural Heritage Review, No. 100*.

www.firth.orkney.sch.uk/trees/berriedale.htm (accessed October 2008)

www.orkneyjar.com (accessed October 2008)