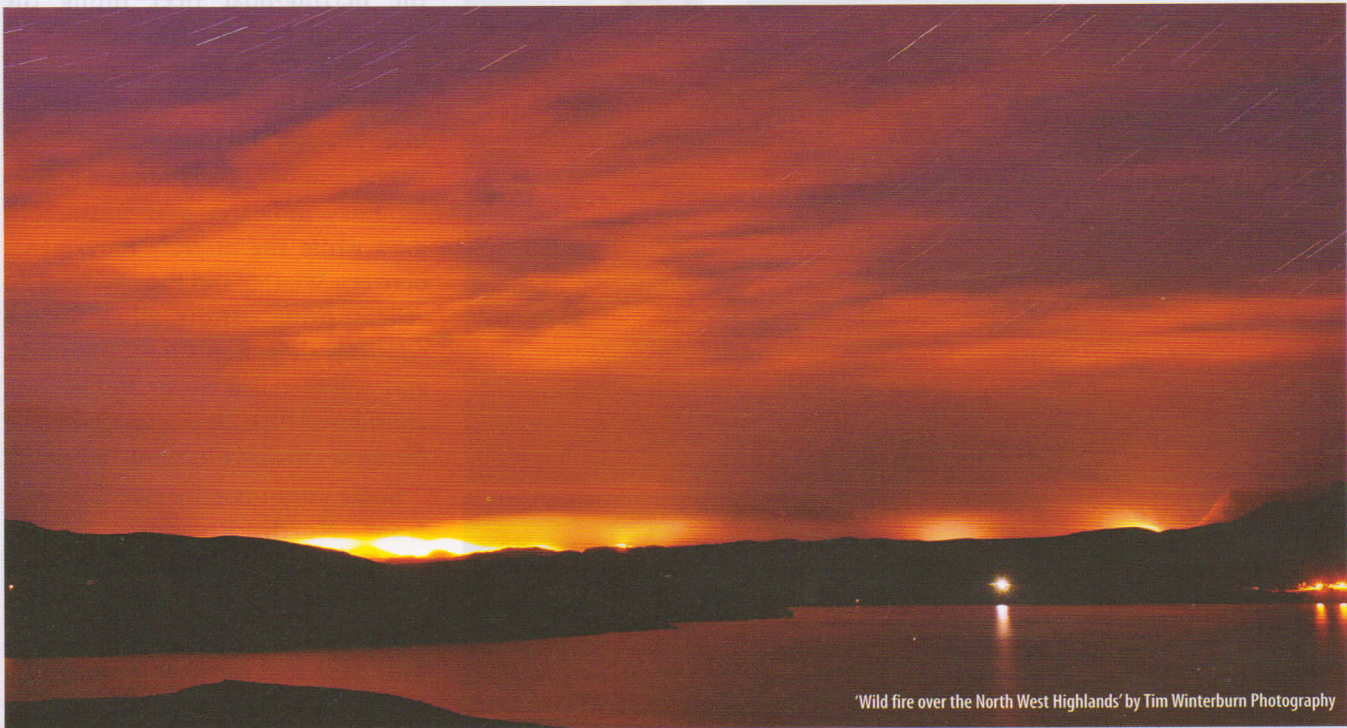


Summer Isles

Lizzie Williams surveys the Spring and an island population that has increased from four to forty



'Wild fire over the North West Highlands' by Tim Winterburn Photography

Spring started splendidly. For an amazing three weeks in April and May my waterproofs hung redundant on their peg; not even the ever-present 'yellow-wellies' saw much action. This was fantastic for Tanera's first non-family wedding; in all the months of careful planning we never dreamt we'd be using our cache of umbrellas to save the congregation from sunstroke.

The hot dry weather was less fantastic for the wildlife on the mainland, as several wild fires raged through the tinder-dry vegetation devastating thousands of hectares of precious habitat. This is quite remarkable for a 'drowned landscape'.

My days are spent mixing up vats of chocolate brownies or soup or stew for those who visit the Island on day trips or for our residential courses in ecology, art, willow weaving, writing or kayaking. From our winter population of four we are creeping up to a high of perhaps 40 temporary residents, both holiday-makers and 'working-holidayers' who help run the cafe and Post Office.

It's not only the human population that is increasing. Yesterday I saw the first eider ducklings: five tiny brown pom-poms dabbling in the seaweed. Soon the mothers of other broods will work together to form a kind of crèche to protect their offspring from predatory gulls. Sadly we have seen fewer greylag gosling - larger, greenish pom-poms. We blame the brutal winter for the adults' poor condition and inability to breed.

Our most 'aerobically elegant' visitors, swallows and

arctic terns, flirt with the idea of breeding on Tanera, and it would be lovely to see them succeed. But there is one summer visitor whom we struggle slightly to welcome - the cuckoo. His first call is an exciting harbinger of summer, but the joy wears off at 4am when he hasn't shut up all night. One holiday-maker commented ruefully. 'Now I know why cuckoo clocks are so effective.'

The inaugural Coigach Coastal Rowing Regatta took place on Saturday in a sheltered harbour on the mainland. Despite 'challenging' weather it was a huge success: crucially some of the local teams were victorious (particularly those blessed with Tanera muscles!), so our hard winter training must have paid off. Visiting teams commented on the strong community spirit of Coigach. They're right - and this lovely wooden boat certainly had everyone working together to create a great day.

On Sunday a flotilla of the beautiful boats was due to row from the mainland to Tanera for a well-earned brunch. Sadly the sea was too ferocious even for these intrepid athletes, so our brave ferry Patricia (and her courageous skipper) stepped in, and a lot of soggy people had a happy afternoon eating sausages and reliving the glories of Race Day in our cafe.

As I write, sheets of rain thrash the windows. The sea is a deep menacing blue frothing with white. Even gannets are taking refuge in the relative shelter of the bay. Who knows what meteorological delights the Summer might bring ...?