

Summer Isles

Lizzie Williams continues, by reflecting on this winter and anticipating the coming seasons

Life on an island is a lot about self-sufficiency. Not so much in a bucolic 'Tom and Barbara' way; more in a 'responsible for all our own utilities' way. This is sometimes a good thing: uninvited telephone callers promising a better deal for our heating/electricity bills are told (triumphantly) that, "we're off-grid". Sometimes it's less of a good thing: when the lights go out or the water stops flowing, the buck stops with us.

My parents, who have lived on Tanera for 15 years, have never experienced a winter like this one. Cross-country skis bought for their new life amongst the mountains hang unused in a shed. The Island's water system - now 40 years old - was designed for a maritime setting, and certainly not to cope with persistent sub-zero conditions.

Unusual weather and unoccupied houses, together with our efforts to complete 'improvements' to the water treatment system, resulted in some uncomfortable days (over Christmas!) without running water. Here was a steep learning curve, labelled 'plumbing'. We are grateful to have the tools and the gumption to fix our own leaks, as well as a wonderful tutor of 'bush plumbing' - my father.

Outdoor Fun

Luckily we managed to rectify most problems in time for a merry gang to enjoy Hogmanay on Tanera, taking over the Schoolhouse and Farmhouse for four days of festive, creative and ragged outdoor fun. Our ambition for winter 2011 is to have some mid-term lets. The light, loneliness and landscape can be a paradise for writers and artists.

The heavy snow didn't stop otters getting about the Island. In the soft powder we could follow their clear 'toboggan' tracks - dragging their tummies and long thick tails - out of the sea and over to the fresh water lochans and streams to wash. A goldcrest watched us harvesting our Christmas tree.

Rich and I have learnt to embrace the winter: curling up by



the fire to read and educate ourselves about the rich natural and cultural heritage of the Highlands. We are excited that two books by Frank Fraser Darling, the eminent ecologist who lived on Tanera from 1938-44, will be re-printed in the spring.

Wildlife, Water and Scenery

Of course we must also plan the season ahead for we've got various new courses making the most of our natural assets - wildlife, water and scenery. And it's lovely to be hearing from previous visitors - many already feel like old friends - and new 'Tanerans' too, dreaming of their summer adventures here.

My chickens are also dreaming of summer for they started laying in early January. Other birds are less enthusiastic. The greylag geese gorge on our grass (particularly when snow melts faster here than on the mainland), and soon will be pairing up noisily. We hear the occasional haunting cry of a curlew.

A few eider ducks and their smart piebald drakes are around, but it will be a while before their heart-warming cooing and the snipe's drumming tail feathers herald spring and all it entails. In the meantime we'll continue to relish our peaceful wintry existence.