

Summer Isles

Lizzie Williams tracks natural and domestic happenings and considers the interests of Frank Fraser Darling

It is curious how, when there aren't many other people around (three, to be exact), different noises substitute for those of human companionship. As I write in early March, greylag geese are hanging around in romantic pairs on beaches and in long grass; their soft chuntering is so familiar, subconsciously comforting in the way that friendly voices are. Admittedly their uproarious leave-taking is less soothing.

Oyster catchers have been away through the winter, giving their breeding grounds a rest. They are returning now and their hysterical screeches, graceful flight, and less graceful carrot-faced strutting on rocks, are a cheering sight. And of course one shouldn't have favourites, but mine are the eiders who gather in gently cooing rafts in the bay.

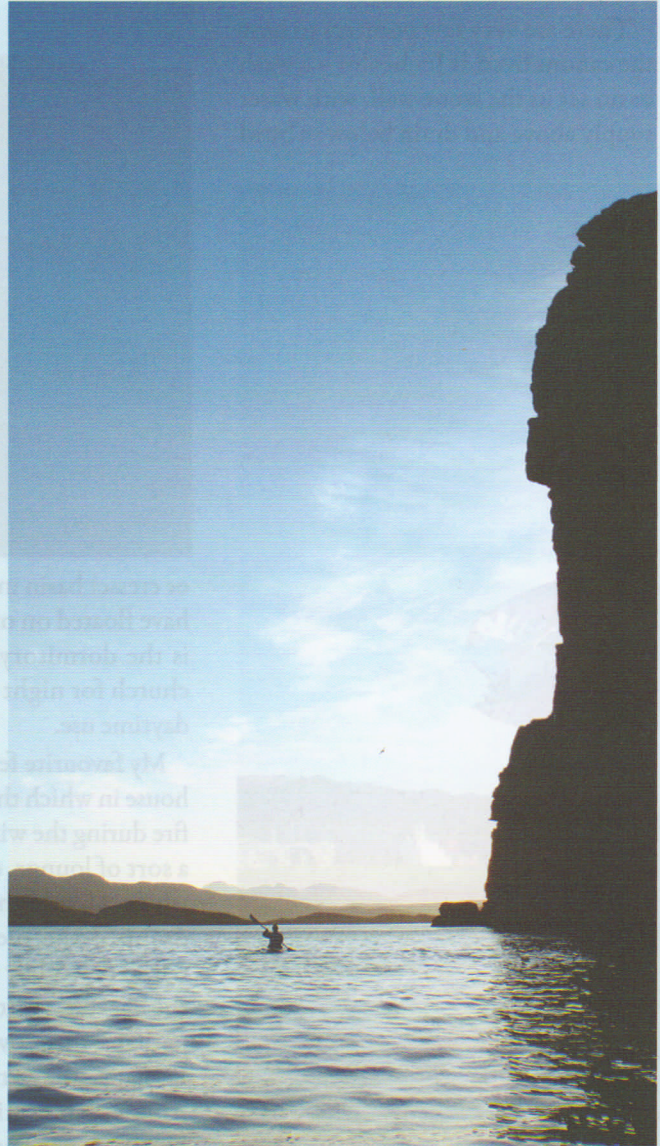
Apparently the porpoises we see are resident year-round, but I've only seen them in the summer months. But when Rowena Birkett-Jones (who will teach a Sketchbook course here in October) visited in March she was blessed with two sightings of these quiet cetaceans, as well as a white-tailed eagle circling high in a blue sky.

Reduce our dependence

It's not all about nature spotting; there's work to be done! The wood-fired replacement for the elderly Rayburn in Murdo's Cottage is installed at last. At quarter of a tonne, it was no small feat shifting it across the sea, onto the island and into the cottage. But such extra exertions are needed if we're to reduce our dependence on dirty and increasingly costly oil.

Before growth starts in earnest we have been coppicing alders and continuing to thin out the Sitka spruce plantation. Heron families, gawkily balancing in neighbouring tree tops, squawk nervously. But careful and gradual removal of non-native trees to make way for enthusiastic new growth of birch and rowan is the 'Right Thing' for the island's wildlife, and provides us with fire wood and construction timbers.

Over on the mainland, the Coigach Lass - the elegant wooden skiff built by the community as part of the Scottish Coastal Rowing project - is back on the water. Have the months of gruelling winter training been worthwhile? Will the teams be as victorious in 2011 as in 2010? We'll see ... the season starts with Coigach's inaugural regatta in May, followed by a well-deserved Sunday brunch in Tanera's cafe.



Parallel Experiences

We're almost ready for the 2011 tourism season, which starts gently with weekend courses and cruise boat visits. This year's stamp issue will be launched in May featuring photos of Frank Fraser Darling's life in the Summer Isles. [The reprint of his 'Island' books is featured on page 6]

The parallels between the Fraser Darlings's experiences 70 years ago and contemporary life are fascinating. Of course we have a far easier existence (central heating and broadband come to mind), and it's not surprising that we share his elation at being here and his frustrations when wild weather interrupts work. But his feelings about the need to look after a place, of hard work and the importance of fostering wise use of resources - both natural and human, could have been written yesterday.