



# Balmacara Estate Newsletter

Issue 29 – April 2010

## Visitor Management & Access Plan

The Balmacara Estate Visitor Management & Access Plan has now been finalised. Following the community consultation exercise carried out late last year Alba Interpretation has completed this important new plan. The document sets out the Trust's key themes, aspirations and priorities for management of visitors and access on the estate. The report addresses a variety of issues based on a central theme of "*Crofting on the Balmacara Estate connects land, people and nature*" and sets out recommendations for action during the period 2010-13:

- Shift emphasis of interpretive activity to Plockton with the possible development of the garages at the car park as visitor facility
- Reassessment of the Balmacara Square Visitor Centre
- Improved signage of main facilities
- Delivery of thematic messages through appropriate interpretive media
- Improve the Balmacara Estate pages of the NTS website with greater local input/relevance
- Develop educational opportunities with local schools and other institutions linked to the main theme
- Upgrade path network as prioritised and monitor use
- Develop access opportunities with relevant recreational bodies, e.g. orienteering, mountain biking, walking, etc.
- Undertake further audience research
- Research local stories as linked to theme.

## Plockton Visitor Information Point

One of the main recommendations of the new Visitor Management & Access Plan is the development of a new visitor information facility at the garages at Plockton Car Park. There has been significant interest from individuals and groups to lease these premises but the NTS has decided that, on a trial basis, its objectives would be best served by putting these garages to use as a Visitor Information Point. This may only be a temporary arrangement and would be reviewed, and possibly removed, should the more ambitious plans for a new shore-head development proceed. The Trust was concerned that such a development may take some time to bring forward to completion and meanwhile some interim measures were required to provide better information provision for visitors. Plans for garages will be developed over the coming months, and it is possible that some kind of partnership with a local group might be explored. The NTS has a limited budget for some further improvements to the buildings and production of new information/interpretation panels and we hope to have these in place by the peak season. As part of this development we are hoping to take on a Volunteer Conservation Officer/Ranger for the summer and this person may provide a daily guided tour of the village for visitors. The tour will be developed with input from locals and will focus upon the historic development of the village, the crofting history and the strong links with sailing and the sea. This service will add a valuable attraction of the village to visitors.

## New Sustainable Heating System for Lochalsh House

The NTS has recently installed a new wood pellet central heating boiler in Lochalsh House and Estate Office. The new system replaces an old oil-fired boiler with a more environmentally sustainable alternative which should be more efficient and reduce the carbon footprint of the estate significantly. The project was grant aided by the Community Energy Scheme. The new system runs on Brites wood pellets and the NTS is setting itself up as a local distributor. Up until now users of these pellets had to buy them from further afield with substantial transport cost, now the Trust is selling them locally by the 10 kg bag, or by the 1 tonne pallet, which should provide users with a substantial saving. Anyone who is interested in buy pellets please contact the Balmacara Estate Office for details.

## Housing Association Agreement

The long-awaited management agreement between NTS and the Lochalsh & Skye Housing Association (LSHA) will be signed this month. This agreement means that LSHA will be the new management agents for the NTS in relation to all the Short Assured Tenancy (SAT) accommodation on the Balmacara Estate. The agreement will come into effect in April and is expected to improve the level of service to our tenants. Only the Trust's SAT tenants will be affected by this change, all other leases will continue to be administered directly by the NTS.

## Coral Beach path to be repaired

The Coral Beach path at Plockton has for many years been a difficult route down to one of the Estate's most popular beauty spots. The combination of wet ground, running water and grazing cattle make this path very muddy during wet periods causing the route to become impassable at times. Work was carried out to improve the route in the late 1990s but the difficulties here are particularly hard to deal with. The NTS has considered whether the path should remain open, but realising that the Coral Beach path is a much valued and popular walk it has been decided to fully upgrade it from the gate at the top of the track to the shore. The work will be carried out by contractor and it is hoped to complete the repairs by this summer.

Footpath work on the Estate has for many years been carried out with funding received through the National Concordat between the National Trust for Scotland and Scottish Natural Heritage. We are nearing the end of the current Concordat period and will this year be drawing up plans for the next three, starting in February 2011. The main focus for footpath work on the Estate in 2011 will be the Drumbuie to Duirinish to Port an Eorna route as the next priority for funding. During the next few weeks we will be consulting with crofters over the possible replacement of stiles with kissing gates and making the route easier for less mobile walkers. Particular emphasis will be placed on improving two difficult burn crossings on the route and improving signage at Duirinish Station to direct walkers in the right direction.

### **Biological Recording**

Lochalsh and the Balmacara Estate are places of wide diversity in the landscape and in the wildlife found here with some rare and important flora and fauna. However new, and sometimes very interesting, plants and animals are being found in the area which is an indication of what we still have to learn. In previous issues of this newsletter we have told you about the Biological Recording Packs we have created to help aid those that have an interest in wildlife to share their sightings in the best way. We would now like to take the process a step further and invite those who are interested to a lunch meeting to discuss starting an informal recording group that can be our eyes on the ground, and in the air in Lochalsh. The aim of the group will be to collate wildlife records of all kinds, from spiders, to butterflies to birds and badgers and from flowers to trees to lichens. The records collected by the group will be shared and used to contribute to the knowledge of our area, and of the Highlands. The Highlands are notorious for being under-recorded in many, if not most, groups of plants and animals, even the common ones we see every day. Records are valuable in many ways and collecting them can be an enjoyable way to pass an afternoon or an easy addition to a days work!

The Recorders Lunch will be held in the Plockton Hall on April 20<sup>th</sup> 2010 Please contact Babs Macritchie at [bmacritchie@nts.org.uk](mailto:bmacritchie@nts.org.uk) or call 01599 566325 if you would like to attend.

### **Survey of Bees, Wasps & Ants**

This summer Murdo MacDonald from the Highland Biological Recorders Group (HBRG) will be undertaking a survey of bees, wasps and ants on the Balmacara Estate. With the wonderful meadows in some of our crofting townships we are hoping to find a good range of wild bees and wasps and our woodlands should also be host to wood ants. These small invertebrates all play critical roles in our ecosystems so this survey should be very interesting in terms of defining the significance of the estate's biodiversity.

### **Purple Thistle Orienteering Event**

The Balmacara Estate will play host to a major national orienteering event this summer. The event is held every two years at different locations around Scotland. Following the completion of survey work for a new orienteering map around Balmacara the site has attracted the attention of the event organisers and the two-day event will take place here on 14-15<sup>th</sup> August. The organisers anticipate in excess of 150 participants competing in a number of races over the two days. The Lochalsh Woodland Park will be the registration centre of the event and will also be used for camping by some of the competitors. Anyone interested in taking part in this event should contact the organisers at [brooner@purple-thistle.co.uk](mailto:brooner@purple-thistle.co.uk)

### **NTS Support for Dornie's 3D Youth Club**

The NTS has recently approved a sponsorship deal with the 3D Youth Club at Dornie. The club will use the funds to purchase a set of strips for their young members to use when playing in a range of sports across the Highlands. The Trust has a Highland Community Fund, which is maintained by part of the rental income from its crofting estates and this is used to support local projects at NTS properties across the Highlands and Islands.

### **Rhododendron Control Project**

The problem of *Rhododendron ponticum* is widespread on the Balmacara Estate. After control work carried out by contractors in Badicaul, Erbusaig and Balmacara in early 2009 we are again going to tackle the problem, but in a slightly different way. Phase II of the Rhododendron Control Project will be carried out by an in-house team of two, part-funded by SNH, recruited to control the plant primarily using a technique called Lever and Mulch. This method was demonstrated at a workshop in Kyle of Lochalsh last November and is a relatively new method. It involves levering stems off the roots, taking the plants ability to re-grow with them, and using the remains of the plant as a mulch that will prevent seedlings from re-colonising the area. Where plants are particularly large or difficult the stems will be injected with Glyphosate to kill them without other plants around being harmed. Plants that are very small will be pulled using a hammer to loosen the roots. This means that there are no fires, no chainsaws and very limited use of chemicals. This way of controlling Rhododendrons is ideal for the type of problem encountered here, with small to large stands surrounded by young plants spreading through the landscape. There are unfortunately Rhododendrons in gardens and on neighbouring properties that act as seed sources that we cannot control. A long-term strategy is needed to remove seedlings on a regular basis unless ways can be sought to control all the plants in the area. If you would like advice on how to control this one type of Rhododendron or if you have a small bush that may be acting as a seed source that you would like removed then please do not hesitate to get in touch with the Estate Conservation Officer at the details below.

### **Kirkton Species-rich Meadow Creation**

Work has recently commenced on the creation of a species-rich meadow at Kirkton. The meadow is being created by combining two old permanent pasture fields to the east of the shinty pitch into a single unit. The fencing will be replaced and the rushes topped. The better areas of land will be ploughed, leaving a substantial area of rough margins around the edges and where the ground is wetter. After this preparatory work the ploughed area will be sown in the autumn with a species-rich mix, based upon the species composition of the meadows found at Drumbuie and Duirinish. After being left over the winter and the 2011 growing season, the first crop of hay/silage will be cut, late in the season to allow the new flowers to set seed. From November to February the land will be leased for cattle grazing on a grazing licence. In subsequent years this pattern of growing, cutting and grazing will be used to encourage the meadow to sustain itself and maintain the sward without it becoming too rank. Some iris will be transplanted into the wetter areas to provide early cover for ground nesting birds. The project, part funded by SNH, will be completed in the autumn. We hope to involve Auchtertyre Primary School in setting up a mini replication of the meadow in their grounds and to carry out species monitoring over a number of years.

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