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Balmacara Estate Newsletter

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Footpaths

A key element of the Balmacara Estate and one of our priorities is footpaths, with over twenty two kilometres in our care this is no small task. We have sought to improve some of the routes in poorest condition using money from the NTS and Scottish Natural Heritage. Last year the path to the Coral Beach was the priority because of its condition, made difficult with livestock and fragile soils. The path was upgraded with measures to allow cattle and people to enjoy the same area and we are happy to report that this has worked well with the newly completed path in good condition even after heavy rainfall. The next route we targeted for work was the popular path through the meadows and heaths of Drumbuie. This work was completed in early summer this year and has made a great difference to walkers using this route. We are planning a few touch ups to this work over the winter with improved signage in Dumbuie and at Duirinish Station, so watch this space. We are now actively seeking funds to continue improvements on other routes, so, watch this space.

Kirkton Meadow

Regular readers will know that this time last year work began to create a new species-rich meadow at Kirkton to celebrate and demonstrate the rich value of the croft land and associated wildflower meadows found in the crofting townships here. The ground was prepared and a tailor-made seed mix, based on the meadows in Drumbuie, Duirinish and Plockton, was created by Scotia Seeds. This was sown last autumn ahead of some worrying weather conditions. There was heavy rain, followed by a long period of snow and cold but as spring marched on the meadow began to grow. Photographic monitoring has followed the progress of the meadow this year together with a survey of species growing inside and outside the sown area with good results. Whilst this year the meadow was blooming yellow from the buttercups and the yellow rattle, it is thought that the oxeye daisies and other flowers will create an attractive display next season and in future years. The field will be managed as a demonstration conservation meadow with further planting of yellow flag iris in the wetter areas and traditional management of late annual cutting and cattle grazing in the winter to keep a healthy sward. Who knows, the glorious orchids found in the meadows elsewhere may find roots here in years to come.

Ranger Report

The new Balmacara Ranger reports on a busy first six months with the NTS:

Well the nights are fairly drawing in and the broadleaf trees are beginning to show signs of autumn. One last flourish of colour as the season starts to turn; summer is almost gone but not forgotten. It has been a busy time on the Balmacara Estate and I have really enjoyed settling in to my new part time role. We had a full guided walk programme from June through to August. People who joined the Crofting and Coastline walk were treated to the delights of the Drumbuie and Duirinish species rich meadows, the vibrant bird song

and an occasional glimpse of the elusive otter. The new Historic Plockton village tour proved a success and I must thank the members of the Plockton Historical Society who passed on their local knowledge and intriguing stories at the start of the summer season.

The events programme has seen a good mixture of activities. In early July I was dabbling in 'Natural Dyeing'. My kitchen was full of bubbling pots as I experimented with various roots, leaves, berries and lichens to see what colours they might produce. In partnership with Rag Tag 'n' Textile we ran a workshop based on natural dyeing and items crafted from recycled materials. Next up was our 'Wonderful Woodlands' event that gave family groups an opportunity to explore the Lochalsh Woodland Walks and take part in a number of hands on activities. Then there was the 'Creatures of the Night' event and the bats and moths stole that show. At the moment I am organising our 'Stramash at Strome Castle' which will be held on 12th October to coincide with the 2011 Highland Archaeological Festival. Further details can be found on our website <http://www.nts.org.uk/Property/Balmacara-Estate-Woodland-Walks/>

In conjunction with my colleague Rule Anderson, based at Kintail, we have been organising and delivering a local Wildlife Watch Club, aimed at 7-12 year olds who live in the region. We had good numbers attending our summer programme and we involved the children and adults in everything from pond dipping to rock pool rambles and from bat box building to senses, colours and camouflage. One of the highlights was our boat trip with Callum MacKenzie when the dolphins of Loch Carron came out to play. Keep an eye out for our future events or contact the Ranger at the estate office to find out more information.

Crofting Education

In addition to these exciting activities described by Gavin we have been working towards delivering a new Education Programme focused upon matters relating to crofting - past, present and future. We have had ongoing discussions with Plockton High School, and other possible partners regarding implementing a programme that combines Crofting with Rural Skills. This is one for the future and hopefully we will be able to report on further progress during future newsletters. In the shorter-term Gavin has co-ordinated a number of taster sessions for the upper primary school students of Kyle and Kyleakin based around the topic of crofting. In early September we had a field trip to a working croft in Duirinish and a trip to the West Highland Dairy at Achmore. Morag MacKenzie and Catherine Biss did a wonderful job of introducing the topics and showing the students what modern crofting is all about. The following week we had a classroom session with Roddy MacKerlich, who has been working on a family croft for close to fifty years, giving an entertaining and informative presentation. This was followed by Iain Turnbull, the Balmacara Estate Property Manager who explained why crofting was important from a heritage perspective. The

third week involved looking at traditional crafts. Monique Bervoets had the students willow weaving and each pupil made a willow fish, these will be sold to raise funds for the schools. James Kean from Plockton High School came in along with a couple of High School students to give a talk on the *Am Bata* project and traditional boat building skills. The next session involved clothing and textiles. Reenie Gibson demonstrated the art of spinning and each student spun their own yarn. Gavin led a session on natural dyeing and then Andrea and Sue from Rag Tag 'n' Textiles had the children making a bag from an old t-shirt showing how we can all recycle materials and put them to a good use. The final session (still to come) will see the students take part in a big picnic with the emphasis on local produce and traditional recipes.

In addition to this we are building on the creation of the Kirkton meadow by establishing a smaller replica that will be created in the grounds of Auchtertyre Primary School. Pupils will take a key role in site preparation and sowing, and also watching and learning as the school meadow grows and develops.

If you would like to know more about our education work, get in touch with us at the estate office.

Successful Partnership for Visitor Centre at Plockton

The new Plockton Visitor Centre was opened by Geoff Webster of the Plockton Historical Society on 18th July. A small gathering of locals and visitors came along to see the key turned and the door opened for the first time (officially at least) by Geoff. The centre has been operated through a partnership between the NTS and the Plockton Historical Society (PHS), providing a mix of interpretation about the crofting history of the area and the historic development of the village, through a mix of NTS and PHS panels and information. Volunteers from the PHS have generously agreed to open and close the centre on a daily basis in return for the use of the space for their exhibition. The whole project has been a great success and has been uniformly welcomed as a significant enhancement to the village as a tourist centre. Feedback in the visitors' book has been entirely positive emphasising that this type of development has been long overdue. We would like to thank all the volunteers and NTS staff who have made this venture possible.

Volunteers Play an Increasingly Valuable Role

Following our call for gardening volunteers for Lochalsh Woodland Walks we now have a small group who are helping us to maintain the most important horticultural elements of the site in a safe and tidy condition. Adrienne Sowood is doing a wonderful job of keeping the more formal areas looking good. Tim Godfrey, a previous Head Gardener here no less, is targeting individual areas for opening up, tidying and generally making good. Tim, with the help of other volunteers is also planning to help catalogue some of the collections of important plants here and working with others within the Trust to take propagation material to grow on for other, similar sites. There was also unexpected help in the form of holiday makers staying at one of our holiday cottages this summer. A request for the loan of secateurs to snip intruding branches back turned into days with the whole family getting stuck in to vegetation management and being of great help to the property.

This autumn, a group of Trust volunteers from the Grampian region removed grass from the paths around the Pond in Balmacara Square, work that has been well received locally. There will be another party working on the paths in Balmacara Square on the 15th October.

The Conservation Volunteer Groups that visit Balmacara come from far and wide in Scotland, but this may change in the future. The Trust is currently consulting on the idea of creating a Highland Volunteer Group to carry out day projects at various properties in this region. If volunteering, either at Lochalsh Woodland Walks, or as a Highland Volunteer is something that you would be interested in then contact us at the Estate Office for a chat.

Finally, we would like to say a very big thank you to Adrienne, Tim and all those who have volunteered with us this year, it is greatly appreciated.

Balmacara Fayre and Square

There were two new shopping opportunities in Balmacara Square last year, the opening of Rag Tag 'n' Textile's new shop and two Local Produce Markets. The first market was run in conjunction with the Skye and Lochalsh Environment Forum's Biodiversity Day and the second was held on 16th July with Skye and Lochalsh Producers and Rag Tag. These events were the seedlings of what we hope will become more frequent and well known events to be held in Balmacara Square toward the end of this year and in 2012. There will hopefully be eight of these '*Balmacara Fayre and Square*' days with the first event being a Christmas Fayre on 26th November followed by an Easter Fayre in April. The events will then be once a month between May and September on Saturdays (exact dates to be finalised), except for July which will be on a Friday to avoid clashes with local Games and Galas. The days will hopefully include a variety of arts, countryside themed activities and market stalls. We would very much welcome expressions of interest from local producers wishing to take part and ideas of other themes and activities. Also if you know of any major events on dates we should try to avoid let us know soon, but otherwise watch out for posters this October and November for confirmation of the *Balmacara Fayre and Square* Christmas event.

Crofting Support – concerns over future funding

The NTS has been directly supporting crofting agriculture on the estate for six years now and we hope to continue to do so for some time to come. This direct support was considered necessary because we felt there was a lack of effective and properly targeted Government support for agriculture at the crofting scale. This is a view shared by many people, but not everyone, across the Crofting Counties. There is currently a review of European & Government support measures and so NTS & Skye & Lochalsh Environment Forum are planning to host a conference to discuss the future of crofting agricultural support in November. Dates and venue will be advertised very soon. If you are interested in being involved please contact Iain Turnbull at the Balmacara Estate Office.

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