

# *Crofters' Newsletter 2011*



*A View of Clachan Sands, North Uist - Graham Adair*

I was in the islands for the HebCeltFest in July, but owing to my husband's disability we stayed in Kenny and Moira's bungalow. Consequently I missed out on the camaraderie of the hostel. I did pop my head in though and spent a very pleasant evening with Alasdair and Cathy. It is always good to catch up with old friends - 25 years after I first came to Rhenigadale with the Schools Hebridean Society. The weather in July was not fantastic, so my walk from the Water Board's track over the mountain pass to Cravadale and round the coast to Hushinish was wet and misty. I didn't see much wildlife. However, I did observe a grouse on the path near the zig-zag path. Back on the mainland, the wildlife highlight was the sight of eleven golden eagles at Knockan Crag, north of Ullapool. Thanks to Runrig for bringing me back to the islands once more. It was an amazing night, as always.

**Jo Burgess** - Editor of *Crofters' Newsletter*

# *Rhenigidale*

Jana from Germany wrote 'what a place, what a hostel' and thought it wonderful that the hostel was unlocked and 'was very happy to have found this place'. Visitors from Sheffield/Northampton found it peaceful, quiet and inspirational writing that 'the sounds of crashing waves sent us to sleep and we woke up to birds singing'. Claire from Glasgow enjoyed beautiful views and pristine snow on her walk from Tarbert.

BN arrived here after a series of chances messed his tightly-timed itinerary to reach the Outer Hebrides by nightfall. First late trains, then snow, a shortage of money, a bus delay, a missed ferry, but then a lift and a full moon meant that instead of Berneray or Tarbert, he found himself at Rhenigidale - the place where 'dreams are hatched and the fiction of time gently expires.'

On his walk in Magnus saw, from above, a golden eagle. He did Clisham and on the way back from Tarbert he saw an otter, seal, red throated diver and a gannet. At night he enjoyed snipe drumming, a starry sky and a gentle surf on the shore. He left firelighters for others to use. On that topic CL suggested emptying coal from the sack into the coal box so that it dries out and can be used to start the fire.

Louise appreciated the fire on a wet day later in April with *MacGillivray's 1817-18 Hebridean Naturalists Journal*. Allister arrived having walked the path in 20-yard visibility owing to the mist but still enjoyed it. Gary spent a lovely evening by the fire and thanked the warden for letting him have some superglue to make running repairs to his crash helmet.

One hosteller had lost track of the time and day, but didn't care. He considered what others had written about the magical effect of this place - 'being an escape, a quiet hidden gem of a place with basic home comforts in a wild environment of inspiring beauty.' He'd come here 12 years ago, still found the fire difficult to light, but found cycling around the islands a great way (apart from the wind) of seeing things.

In May, Bettina and Silke had a lazy Sunday sitting outside the hostel reading and marvelling at the sparrows, sheep and rabbits. For Susan and Ian the peacefulness was only broken by the cuckoo. They thought the path to Tarbert was one of the best walks ever. Flo enjoyed the cosiness after two nights in a rain-soaked tent. Bill arrived in pouring rain, but enjoyed glorious sunshine the next day.

A visitor wrote that the words - 'Tis not that I love man the less, but that I love nature more' - take on a special meaning in a place like this. Lynda saw a golden eagle and red-throated divers. Despite having no head for heights, she walked the Postman's Path 'in a high state of anxiety looking at my feet as I didn't dare look down'.

Shirley enjoyed two lovely nights camping in glorious sunshine and climbed Clisham to enjoy its views. She also described the road to Rhenigidale as stunning

– ‘like driving straight into both the sky and the sea simultaneously.’ Beth and Jude thought the hostel to be like home - relaxed, comfortable and lovely. Fabio from Italy rated the islands and their hostels the best , feeling ‘out of the world and at home.’

Andrew wrote *In the Reek of the Smouldering Peat* - listen to the words at [www.andrewhuggan.com](http://www.andrewhuggan.com) - especially the line ‘And the memories you gained with you will always stay’. (These are my thoughts exactly - Jo). Emma was following in the footsteps of her father who was here in the winter 25 years ago. In August hostellers found their way here and loved the silence, but not the midges.

The Woodleys enjoyed meeting people from all over Europe, including listening to a talented ‘string contingent’. They swam and canoed in the bay, although the sea was a bit chilly. French visitors wrote thank you for this ‘little corner of paradise’. Several folk wrote that they were glad places like this still exist. John was here from Australia and thought the landscape reminiscent of parts of South West Tasmania.

Sarah and Robert made use of Neil Pinkett’s book in their explorations. A cyclist agreed it was certainly worth the effort to get here. Fairy Fi found heaven on earth on the path - ‘turquoise seas turning silver to mirror the skies that never end, tumbling waterfalls, hypnotising pure magic as they cascade down the hill side towards the sea.’ Tony and Lucy arrived feeling weather-beaten at the end of September.

Ken wrote, ‘Great place, warm fire, good company, wild weather’ at the beginning of October. Armina was here on her birthday enjoying the fire (thanks to Alasdair) ‘ready to embrace the solitude with my tunes, a warm mug of cocoa and Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.’ Corina came in November from California. Lizzie enjoyed drawing and drinking whisky.

## *Berneray*

Lynn and Scott wrote in March that it was a fantastic place to stay. ‘We loved every minute of it’. The beauty of waking up so close to the sea and nature will long be remembered and hopefully re-visited’. BN wrote of Berneray - ‘A place where man is nearly absent, from centre stage.’

Ben and Anna camped and went for a bike ride on Easter Sunday to the graveyard. They recommend taking five minutes to take a look around and read some of the gravestones, for they inspire. Sabrina, from Italy, sensed moments of infinite beauty, fell in love with the area and will leave with memories of amazing sunsets. Louise - ‘surfing on the waves of destiny’ - arrived to a party and left with ‘quiet in my soul’.

Beate from Germany was back for the first time in 13 years and found the hostel as lovely as it used to be, but the weather had deteriorated with two days of storms and rain. She wrote ‘ I wouldn’t know where I’d rather be stuck -

watched turnstone, ringed plover, redshank, oystercatcher, sanderling and purple sandpiper from the window and a film on George's laptop'.

Anna and Mike took shelter when their camper-van flooded and loved the luxury of cooking facilities, a fire and flush toilets. After two nights camping at Hushinish beach, Al cycled here with a tailwind. Paul didn't want to leave and his wish came true - as he was back for an extra night having missed the ferry at Tarbert by minutes.

Sandy and Pauline saw otter-tracks on the beach. The Langors Cycling Club found it a truly beautiful place and a suitable way to end their journey from Barra. Art and Design students were here for four hours from Lochmaddy, drawing and painting the stunning seascape. Steven and Emma found the walk down the Western Beach amazing - not one footprint.

In May the hostel was full, with a warm welcome enhanced by a fire. Rosie was recommended to stay and having cycled the North Uist loop, was ready to stop pedalling and discover what she termed as 'the best-located hostel ever visited'. Despite having a room to herself, she slept very little because there was too much to look at.

In June, cyclists from Edinburgh had wonderful weather, but one fell on the slippery rocks, was taken out by helicopter and spent two nights in Stornoway Hospital. Luckily his hip wasn't broken. However, the accident put paid to his cycle tour. Like many, Michael, from Dundee, intended to stay one night and took two, because it was such a wonderful, restful place where he also met some great people.

Rob and Natasha stayed several weeks and enjoyed great hospitality and company. It was stormy at the start of July leading to some unexpectedly lengthened stays. Elysha from Australia wrote of lasting memories made. Unlike on previous visits, the stormy weather confined Jim and others to the hostel - huddled round the fire, drinking whisky, playing cards, sharing card-tricks and stories.

A family from Edinburgh found it warm and cosy - just what they needed after and before a windy wet night camping. Scott on his first visit wrote that the hostel deserves more than one star. Marsha from Arkansas enjoyed improvements, especially the hooks on the bunks to hang things on. A visitor from London wrote that the island is perfect for reflection and exhilaration, for wind, sea and sand.

Visitors from the Netherlands wrote that the hostel felt like a home away from home. Sam and Vic had three nights here, made great new friends, learnt foraging skills and wrote 'Berney rocks'. George and Dagmara wrote 'Just as great as it was in 2008 - Oh! the memories'. Anne and Nic saw 'seals a plenty, but the quest for the sea otter continues'. Emily just didn't want to leave.

The Woodleys from Yorkshire wrote 'Places like this really capture the essence of youth hostels, more than just somewhere to rest. They provide a base from which one can explore the wonders of the natural world and meet and befriend people from every nationality and walk of life.' Elizabeth and Philip from Cumbria

were back in their favourite hostel.

The Moors from Leicester wrote 'Thanks for the amazing spectacle which is your view'. Like many others, Steve from London wrote that he would be back. Inns and Olaf from Germany were back three years after their last visit, enjoyed a brilliantly sunny day and remembered their friend David Turner who previously came here with them, but sadly passed away 'so early'.

Dougie enjoyed superb scallops. Jo and Chloe stayed an extra night as they didn't fancy cycling in high winds and after the first night on their own, the place became 'chokka'. Simon had never felt so sad leaving somewhere. Tandem-riders, John and Karen, returning after 12 years and gale force winds thought it hadn't changed a bit. Linda and Jane praised a splendid well cared for hostel.

Bill Hart was travelling by public transport and wrote 'Viva Gatliff'. Bob arrived after days of gales and rain at Howmore to glorious sun - the Hebrides at their magical best, and enjoyed otters as well as a baby seal. Returning after 20 years, he wrote that the hostel hadn't lost its charm - beautiful and well-organised. A German hosteller from Trier found all the people very friendly, helpful and welcoming.

A French visitor in December wrote that it was a lovely place perfect for solitude and meditation. On 18 December the Stornoway Canoe Club arrived after a stormy crossing from Leverburgh - all the islands were white with snow and they had to dig out the hostel doors because of snow drifts. They enjoyed a glorious sunrise over Skye before heading home again, hoping they'd get over the Clisham pass!

## *Howmore*

In March Dave and Karen were cosily tucked up at Howmore waiting for the wind and horizontal sleet to die down. In April, cyclists Jo and David watched swans, tufted ducks and mergansers on Druidibeg Loch, then fell asleep in the heather. On an evening stroll to enjoy the sunset on the beach, they saw some otter prints, redshank and ringed plovers.

Beate from Germany on her third visit found Howmore still an enchanting place and saw a black-throated diver in the sea, diving with its young on its back. For Dagmar, another German hosteller, it was his first visit and he found it very comfortable and the people good company. 'Birdwise it was brilliant with golden plovers, a snipe, lots of waders, eider, shelduck and geese - just wonderful.'

Rob sheltered from a storm and gave big thanks to Betty. Mike and Anna in a camper van made use of the shower on their short stay. Cyclists had an unintended stop due to broken spokes and found it a cosy and stunning location, waking at 4.00am in their tents to the sound of skylarks, snipe and their first corncrake. They thanked Betty and Tommy for his help with the bike.

Ben and Vicky on their honeymoon found South Uist beautiful and the birds

great. They had blue skies with puffy clouds over the hills. Holly and Frances were glad of the beds, the fire, the kitchen and the shower after a wet night camping on Barra. Nina from New Zealand enjoyed the amazing beaches and a nice climb up Beinn Mhor. Jonathan loved listening to the birds.

Bill and Peter arrived after a 16-mile hike along the Machair Way from Pollachar, having seen otters and seals. They walked out to Uisinish Bothy and back, enjoying great views from the bealach or pass between Hecla and Beinn Corrodale when the mist parted. Andy and Sian, back after 18 years, wrote 'Gle Mhath and still magic'. Despite rain and drizzle, Donald and his friend went up Hecla and Beinn Corrodale.

Harry was also back on a return trip - the first time he was here Betty's mother was the warden and gave him hen's eggs for his tea. Kevin had the place to himself - a rare treat - no other noise other than the wind. Roxanne was here from France and met great people. Merseyside CTC members were here in June and enjoyed the history.

Ramsey McD, from Adelaide, arrived after wind and rain, but the sky turned blue and he was able to get everything dry before heading north. Cyclist Paul was learning the true joy and freedom of bunkhouses and hostels and found being on the islands was a very emotional experience.

Richard the Thatcher finished his work after 34 days. He thanked the many visitors who took time to lend a hand and take an interest in the process. He had found it a pleasure to work in such surroundings and to get to know some local people rooted deep in these islands. Anne and Nic found skeletons on the beach and enjoyed Salar oak-smoked salmon with a bottle of red.

Some German hostellers had a cloud-free day with a cool wind to climb Beinn Mhor, Beinn Corrodale and Hecla. They enjoyed great views, but their walk back was hard work. Dave and Rob arrived cold and wet after cycling from the ferry, had hot food and drink and then a great evening. Lisa and Colin arrived after a head-wind all the way from Eriskay.

Jenny, aged 10, thought it a great little spot and hostel. Jane and Martin were making folk welcome in August, including Emily who was on the final stretch of her walk from the Butt of Lewis to Castlebay. Elizabeth and Philip on a return trip praised the new thatch. The Woodleys had a breath-taking experience hiking up Beinn Mhor with mist swirling about the summit.

Marjo from Australia loved her first hostel experience, encountering great people and warm as well as cosy accommodation. Jane, Izaack and Martin left at the end of August, having learnt new tricks, enjoyed hitching to the North Uist Show, hearing Jackie's observations, seeing new babies, walking along the beach and building walls.

A return hosteller from Wiltshire was sadly leaving just as the customary wonderful September weather was arriving. Ellen and David had an awesome adventure on their way from Barra including encounters with Eriskay ponies, a scary run-down school and a bull!!! Jake nearly trod on an owl while bog-hopping

on the way back from the mountains, from which the views were fantastic.

Members of the James family were glad of the hostel as it was very windy and camping would not have been much fun. Ingrid and Paul thought it a special place and a lovely well-looked after hostel. On 21 December Bronwyn and D enjoyed the winter solstice, a full moon and lunar eclipse, and spent their second Christmas in the hostel - the snow and ice giving magical light.

## *Garenin*

In January, visitors were here from USA and South Africa when, after snow, the path to the hostel was a solid sheet of ice. The Callanish Standing Stones were also surrounded by ice. They heated up smooth stones in the coal fire then took them to bed and hoped all visitors in 2010 have as great a time. However, they believe mice stole their bread.

At the end of February, a surfer had the place to them self and enjoyed sun, snow and waves. Visitors from Finland wrote 'You feel humbled and small in the universe when you see nature here, especially at the Butt of Lewis'. In March Claire and Marion enjoyed sun and amazing views and like others finally got the fire going and enjoyed warm stones in the beds.

Also in March, visitors from Mumbai in India spent the night here with the howling wind for company. They wrote that rules about the stove should be: '1 Don't let it go out 2 Make sure you have a fresh layer on top with the draught set to minimum before you go to sleep 3 Be patient - for peat has to be dry 4 Get rid of the ash and use the poker generously'.

They thought the place magical, the sea was at its furious best and they couldn't ask for more. Cara was also challenged by the fire, having arrived in rain and wind with one side of her body soaked, the other absolutely dry. Isles FM had some piping on and the shower was incredible. Denis from Canada gave fire advice too and watched the sunset.

In April, the Jones were in the hostel escaping the wind and found it a good place to recuperate. Surfers and campers enjoyed the hostel facilities too. Visitors were here from the Basque Country and Germany enjoying the place and people, especially the wardens. Cheryl from Ohio enjoyed a perfect 62nd birthday at the hostel which was the highlight of her trip.

A group of hostellers wrote that 27 May was a great day - barbeque, a sunset-that-never-was and having to settle for a 'cloud-set'. Cyclists, Sue and Ron, were hoping for a tail-wind to take them back to Stornoway, having been impressed with the blackhouses. Other hostellers wrote that it was a very busy, clean and friendly hostel.

Janet from Tucson Arizona wrote that she had not slept better anywhere else and indicated that she was including b&bs and hotels. She walked north, had

**Garenin** – **Lewis**  
**Rhenigidale** – **North Harris**  
**Berneray** – **North Uist**  
**Howmore** – **South Uist**

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wonderful hitch-hiking experiences, appreciated the astonishing stonework as well as a couple of bracing dips in the ocean. It has to be added that she also had glorious sparkling weather.

Cyclists on their way from Lands End to John O Groats were on Day 18 before heading to Ullapool and north. They thought it 'the best place so far'. On Midsummer's Day, Lea and Alastair had a wonderful walk and remarked on the beautiful views. Hostellers from Switzerland recalled a splendid sunset that included a rainbow, the amazing beaches on Harris and a visit to Barvas Church.

John found the people and incredible co-incidences meant a rich time with conversation flowing. An Italian family from Rome felt at home because of the friendly people. Luis, aged 13, thought the hostel wonderful (as was her English). Deborah and Leonard did some lovely drawings and thought it an attractive place with a friendly warden.

Susanna wrote about their adventure trip in Catalan and about 'the rain, the rain and the magical place we are right now'. Daemon wrote 'This region has wonderfully combined the rains of Vancouver, the winds of Saskatchewan and the ruggedness of the Yukon. Toss in a large amount of history that Canada can't touch with a 200-year pole and it makes for an incredible stay. The fire is nifty too'.

David from Toronto found Garenin a welcome change from city hostels and the three days spent here were by far the highlight of this trip. For Gail, the hostel was a warm shelter from gale force 11 winds. In August Elizabeth and Philip were here on one of many return trips. The hostel was full so they camped, but the wind got up and other hostellers helped strike their tent. They cheerfully resorted to mattresses on the floor.

Lis and Andy wrote 'Melting sunset dives below the waves; blazing coals huddled with a warm brew; banter, sharing food with new friends as the wine flows; full moon, clear skies, starry vista as we curl into bed; a perfect location en route from Barra to The Butt of Lewis by bike.'

Hostellers from as far apart as Devon and Strontian found it somewhere to savour. Brian from Alaska had waited eight years to stay here and felt as though he had come home, despite never having been to the place before. Alan relished a fantastic display of Northern Lights after paddling round the Butt in October. Some come on foot, some by bicycle or vehicle and, sometimes, someone by sea.