

Sea Kayaking - A Guide to Good Environmental Practice

The sea kayak offers a fantastic platform from which to see seabirds and seals, and even whales and dolphins in their natural environment. To experience the nature of the sea at such close quarters is an amazing privilege, but like all privileges it carries a responsibility.

In our enthusiasm to see wild animals we can accidentally cause disturbance without realising it, so a good way to minimise our impact on wildlife is to become more knowledgeable about it. For instance, an awareness of the breeding seasons of birds and seals will help us avoid getting too close when they are most sensitive to our presence.

This advice from the Scottish Canoe Association (SCA) provides useful guidance on the main animal species and natural habitats that you will encounter whilst sea kayaking.

Minimising Disturbance

When encountering wildlife, whether on sea or on land, your aim should be to minimise any disturbance that you might cause to wild animals and the habitats in which they live. In order to achieve this the following basic principles should be adhered to:

- Try not to startle or panic wild animals; never surround them, and don't block them in from their escape routes. You will enjoy the sightings much more if they are relaxed about your presence. Sudden movements scare wildlife and give you away.
- Be aware that the size of your group, the length of time you are there, and the frequency of human disturbance are all factors that could threaten their wellbeing.
- Don't linger for too long when you are close to wildlife. By all means look, but then move on.
- As well as avoiding disturbance to marine animals, also be aware of the need to avoid damaging plants and the habitats that the animals depend upon.
- Remember, you are sharing the environment – leave it undisturbed for the wildlife and those who follow.

Sea Birds

Cliff nesting seabirds such as guillemots, razorbills and kittiwakes are most vulnerable when the adults are with their eggs and young chicks. If they are suddenly scared off the ledges they may lose their young, which may fall or be taken by predators. It is good practice to move by quietly and steadily so as not to panic the birds. As well as being aware of cliff nesting birds whilst you are on

the water, remember that your presence whilst walking on clifftops could also be threatening to the birds. The vulnerable time is mid May to early July.

Puffins nest in burrows along the tops of cliffs. Walking over a burrow can crush the nest, or cause the adult to desert its young, so try to be aware of their presence. Reckless destruction of active burrows is illegal under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (as amended). You become 'reckless' once you have become aware and continue what you are doing. Be vigilant for nest grounds and move out of any breeding area as soon as you realise you are in or close to it.

Around 50% of the EU's seabirds are found around the UK coastline, but over the past few years their breeding success has reduced alarmingly. It is therefore vital that we do our best to avoid disturbance and help seabird numbers to become re-established.

Birds on the Open Sea

Try to avoid panicking seabirds on the water into flight. If you encounter large rafts of ducks, often eider or shelduck, avoid splitting up these rafts as the chicks are vulnerable to predators. Adult birds at sea are likely to be feeding or resting so disturbance is likely to cause them to expend extra energy, thereby reducing their feeding time, which in turn affects their survival chances. In late summer many birds moult and are at their weakest and most vulnerable. Move away quietly and steadily as soon as you are aware of being close to a colony.

Seal colonies

There are two species of seal in Scotland, the common seal and grey seal. The common seal pups from May to July, whilst the grey seal pups in October and November, and is the larger species with the Roman nose. Avoid beaches with small pups on them, as a sudden disturbance can lead to pups being squashed, or separated from their parents. Common seal pups can go into the sea almost immediately after birth, whereas grey seal pups remain on the beach for about 3 weeks as they cannot swim.

Never land on a beach with a colony of breeding seals, except in an emergency.

Seals will often watch kayakers pass by, either from a rock or in the water. Do not use your ability to approach quietly as a way to get close to seals. If you approach silently, seals (and other animals) may be startled by your sudden appearance. The best way to avoid causing them to panic is to avoid making eye contact. If you watch a seal out of the corner of your eyes it is far less likely to dive. Try to maintain a slow, steady and predictable rhythm as you paddle past seals.

Please be aware that many tour boat owners make a living from taking tourists to look at seal colonies. The seals usually stay put when these boats approach, but often take to the water when kayaks are in the same area. Difficulties arise when kayakers cause the seals to leave their rocks and beaches, to be followed by tour boats with tourists who are disappointed at not seeing the seals hauled out on land and this in turn leaves the tour boat owners annoyed. Try to be aware of the areas where such tour boats operate and take extra care to avoid disturbing the seals.

Porpoises, Dolphins, Whales and Basking Sharks

The Scottish coast is renowned for its range of cetaceans (porpoises, dolphins and whales) and its increasing numbers of basking sharks. All of these can be seen from a sea kayak, but it is important to be aware how you can be a danger to the animal, and how it can be a danger to you.

When approaching large animals - such as cetaceans and basking sharks, remember - a moving kayak outline can appear threatening when heading straight towards them. Always approach at an oblique angle. Move steadily and predictably, and do not go too close.

Never chase after a cetacean or basking shark. If they want to see you they will come over and check you out, but if they choose to swim away from you then respect their wish.

- **Porpoises** never show any interest in kayaks so you will just see them swim by without altering their course.
- **Dolphins** on the other hand are more inquisitive and will often come over towards you. The best advice if you are close to dolphins is to just stay still and watch, or maintain a straight course and they will follow if they are interested in you.
- There are various species of **whales** in Scottish waters and they can also come close to you. Their colossal size is obvious when they are next to you, so avoid blocking their escape route, but otherwise stay still and let them do the moving.
- Avoid getting too close to a **basking shark** as it could easily capsize you if you get in front of it, or cause you serious injury if it lashed out with its powerful tail with you alongside it.

Otters

Otters are commonly encountered along the Scottish coast. They should be observed from a distance that doesn't disturb their routine activities, such as fishing, resting and playing. Under no circumstances should they be pursued by kayak.

Shingle Shores and Dunes

Terns, ringed plovers and oystercatchers all nest on shingle beaches. Care should be taken not to disturb nesting birds on these sites between early May and early July. The eggs and chicks are very well camouflaged against the shingle and are easily trodden underfoot.

Take care during stops not to damage vegetation on dunes, which is important for stabilising and helping them grow. The Hebridean islands have a unique dune grassland known as machair, which is home to wading birds such as lapwing, ringed plover and dunlin.

Carry kayaks rather than dragging them, especially in dunes.

Seaweed

Scottish seashores have a huge variety and abundance of seaweed. One species in particular is a rarity, with most of the world population in Scotland, and which kayakers should be aware of and try to avoid damaging. *Ascophyllum nodosum* *ecad mackaii*, or wigwrack, is a form of unattached eggwrack that grows in very specific conditions in very sheltered sea lochs on the west coast and islands of Scotland and around Ireland. Its distinctive form floats in shallow water at high tide and is stranded at low tide, forming golden carpets, often with other seaweeds. It provides a sheltered and humid habitat for lots of animal species. Kayakers should learn to recognise this type of seaweed and avoid trampling it. The largest bed of this seaweed in Scotland is in Loch Duich, although there are many other locations where it can be found growing, particularly on the Western Isles. Plantlife Scotland would be grateful for any reports of sites, if seen. Link to Plantlife document on wigwrack - <http://www.plantlife.org.uk/uk/plantlife-scotland-species-conservation-wig-wrack.html>.

Non-Native or Alien Species

The seas around Scotland contain a number of non-native, or alien, species of plants and animals, some of which can cause problems due to their ability to out compete our native species.

One such species is a seaweed known as wireweed or *Sargassum muticum*. Wireweed is native to the western Pacific, but is now found in many other regions. First found in Scotland in 2004, it is spreading within the Firth of Clyde and along the Argyll coast, and has now reached Skye. To find out more about wireweed, visit www.snh.org.uk/wireweed. Take care not to transfer seaweed between locations by cleaning your boat and checking inside the housing of retractable skegs.

For further information about alien species visit the Marine Life Information Network website at: http://www.marlin.ac.uk/marine_alien/marine_alien.htm.

Estuaries

Scotland's estuaries play host to waders and waterfowl between October and March. Undisturbed feeding and resting may be vital to their survival, especially in severe weather. Avoid mudflats and sandbanks with large concentrations of birds.

Rocky Outcrops and Marshes

Be aware that rocky outcrops and marshes often provide shelter and safety for wildlife. Otters use outcrops for their nest holts and seals haul out onto rocks exposed by the tide. A number of birds live in marsh areas and use reed beds for security from predators.

On Land

When on land kayakers still need to be aware of their responsibilities towards wildlife. Do not leave behind any food scraps, as these attract scavenging animals and birds. Take out all your litter and if you take out some litter left by other people you will be leaving the coastline that bit cleaner than it was before your visit. Follow the SCA's advice on Wild Camping and Human Sanitation.

Fires

Sea kayakers on multi-day trips will quite often have a fire on a beach as part of their overnight camping experience. Following a few simple guidelines should ensure that you don't cause any damage.

Fires below the high water mark are washed away by the next high tide, so this can be a good way of ensuring that your fire is cleared away and properly put out.

Before starting to build a fire assess the fire risk. Consider the wind direction and strength and think about the proximity of any dry forest or vegetation. If in doubt, don't have a fire.

Be careful on boulder beaches that there aren't any birds, such as storm petrels nesting under the boulders.

If you have a fire above the high water mark then use established fire rings or mound fires on sand or soil piled up to provide a protective base for your fire.

Make sure your fire is well burnt out and that there is no risk of it spreading before you go to your tents and check there is no trace whatsoever of your fire before leaving in the morning.

The [Leave No Trace](#) website and publications have good advice on fires.

Kayaking in Context

The impact that sea kayakers have on the sea has to be seen in context. Compared to certain industries and other recreational activities the disturbance we cause is minimal, but we should not be complacent. We should all strive to learn more about the sea, and develop skills and senses that ensure marine wildlife does not suffer from our visits. The breeding season for birds and common seals coincides with the best conditions for kayaking, so it is important to be aware of the needs of wildlife.

Seeking Further Wildlife Advice

If in doubt about carrying out any activity contact SNH or one of the nature conservation bodies (RSPB, SWT, Plantlife, etc.) for advice regarding special areas, or species that may be at risk from your presence, or particular nesting and breeding times when you should be particularly vigilant.

The Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code

Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) has a duty under Part 3 Section 51 of the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 to “prepare and issue a code, to be known as the Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code, setting out recommendations, advice and information relating to commercial and leisure activities involving the watching of marine wildlife”. This Code was published in November 2007.

The three principles defined in the Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code are:

Be aware. Before you go wildlife watching learn as much as you can about the animals. Understand how your actions could affect wildlife and recognise the signs that animals make when they feel threatened. Be alert, observant and patient, and be sensitive to the interests of the wildlife you are watching.

Take responsibility for your own actions. Constantly assess wildlife, and if you see signs of disturbance move away quietly. Consider how much time you spend watching animals. The presence of people over long periods can be disturbing, however careful you may be.

Have respect for other people, wildlife and the environment. Use your right of responsible access wisely. Respect the privacy and livelihoods of those who live by the sea. Leave the environment as you find it.

The Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code also contains a useful section on the law (page 23) in which it sets out a list of points taken from conservation legislation. Offences that paddlers should be aware of include the following:

It is an offence:

- to intentionally or recklessly disturb any specially protected bird at its nest, or its young before they are wholly independent;
- to interfere with the nest or nest sites of the white-tailed eagle at any time;
- to harass the white-tailed eagle at any time;
- to deliberately or recklessly harass any whale, dolphin, porpoise or basking shark. These offences can incur fines and/or up to 6 months in prison.

Identification of Species

It is always interesting to get home from a trip and look up in a wildlife book a bird or mammal that you have seen. Most sea kayakers have a few wildlife books to help them with their identification queries. To get you started on bird identification, the small bird you often see running around beaches is a sanderling.

Links to Further Information

The Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code <http://www.marinecode.org/>
Scottish Natural Heritage <http://www.snh.org.uk/>
Marine Conservation Society <http://www.mcsuk.org/mcsaction/scotland>
RSPB Scotland <http://www.rspb.org.uk/scotland/>
Wildlife Trusts basking shark information <http://baskingsharks.wildlifetrusts.org/>
Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust <http://www.whaledolphintrust.co.uk/>
The Scottish Outdoor Access Code <http://www.outdooraccess-scotland.com>
List of protected bird species http://www.jncc.gov.uk/PDF/waca1981_schedule1.pdf
Plantlife Scotland <http://www.plantlife.org.uk/uk/plantlife-scotland.html>
Scottish Wildlife Trust <http://www.swt.org.uk/>
Marine Life Information Network (MarLIN) <http://www.marlin.ac.uk/>
Leave No Trace <http://www.lnt.org/>