North & East Coasts of Scotland Sea Kayaking



Doug Cooper



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Foreword

At last, a guidebook covering some of Scottish paddling's best kept secrets. Scotland is a worldclass sea-kayaking destination, the Scottish Islands being rightly famous for the standard of paddling they offer. The north and east coasts are to some extent the Cinderellas of the Scottish coastline. They don't have as many islands as the west or north, but they will richly reward your efforts to explore their hidden nooks and crannies.

I've not given up paddling on Scotland's west coast and in the Western and Northern Isles, but I've made the effort to explore the north and east coast over the years and have not been disappointed. The north coast has some of Scotland's great headlands, and strongest tides. Treat the Pentland Firth with respect, plan well, and you will be rewarded with access to fascinating, now deserted islands.

My introduction to the far north east coast was with the local Pentland and Caithness clubs who passed on their in-depth knowledge of these waters and introduced me to many a small harbour with such names as Whaligoe and Lybster and their associated history. Further south in the Moray Firth my own club had an annual 'Dolphin Spotting' weekend, camping at Chanonry Point, and we were seldom disappointed as the country's most famous and studied dolphins strutted their stuff. The Fife coast was the location of the first expedition trip I led at the age of 19. It was only a three-day trip, but filled with much interest as we worked our way north from the Forth to the Tay via the many picturesque fishing villages of Fife, and of course the Isle of May.

The north and east coasts of Scotland do not have as many sheltered water options as you might get on the west or in the islands, and there is always some sort of swell, but if you make the effort you will be richly rewarded by stunning cliff and coastal scenery, numerous bird colonies and fascinating fishing villages, each with their own history and character. I recommend both the north and east coasts of Scotland and this guide. Enjoy investigating them by kayak. See you on the water.

Donald Thomson Level 5 Sea Coach Chairman North East Sea Kayakers

Contents

8	Conte How Abou Ackne Warn Scott Dolph	vord2ents2to Use the Guide6t the Author8powledgments9ing9ish Outdoor Access Code10nins12Coast Harbours12	4 6 9 9 0
NORTH COAST			3
	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12	Cape Wrath15Faraid Head21Whiten Head22Eilean nan Ron29Farr Point31Strathy Point31Sandside Head41Holborn Head42Dunnet Head55Island of Stroma61Pentland Skerries61Duncansby Head73	1 5 3 7 3 9 5 1 7
MORAY FIRTH –	NOF 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21	KTH79Keiss Castle81Noss Head82Whaligoe83Lybster to Dunbeath93Dunbeath to Helmsdale93Tarbat Ness103North Sutor103Sutors Stacks113Chanonry Point113	1 5 3 7 3 7 3
MORAY FIRTH –	SOL 22 23 24	TH123Burghead to Lossiemouth.125Bow Fiddle Rock.125Redhythe Point.135	5

25	Banff to Gardenstown	139
26	Troup Head	143
27	Kinnaird Head	147

ABERDEEN	COAST		151
	28	Rattray Head.	153
		Bullers of Buchan	
	30	Port Erroll to Collieston	163
	31	Cove to Stonehaven	167
	32	Stonehaven to Inverbervie	171
	33	Scurdie Ness	177
	34	Bell Rock	183

35	St Andrews	189
36	Fife Ness.	193
37	Isle of May	197
38	Anstruther to Elie	203
39	Inchkeith	207
40	Firth of Forth	211
41	Fidra	215
42	Bass Rock	219

THE BORDERS 225 43 Barns Ness 227 44 St Abb's Head 233 45 Eyemouth 239

APPENDICES		243
А	HM Coastguard and Emergency Services	243
В	Weather Information	243
С	Mean Tide Ranges	244
D	Glossary of Gaelic Words	244
E	Trip Planning Route Card - Users Guide	247

Contents

How to Use the Guide

To use the guide you will need an up-to-date tide table for the relevant area, the appropriate Ordnance Survey maps and the knowledge to use them.

Each of the forty-five trip chapters is set out into six sections:

Tidal & Route Information – This is designed as a quick reference for all the 'must know' information on which to plan the trip.

Introduction - This is designed to give the reader a brief overview of what to expect from the trip and to whet the appetite.

Description - This provides further detail and information on the trip including the coastline, launching/landing points, the wildlife and environment, historical information and places of interest to visit.

Tide & Weather – Offering further tidal information and how best to plan the trip which takes the tides, weather and local knowledge into consideration.

Map of Route – This provides a visual outline of the route's start/finish points, landing places, points of interest and tidal information.

Additional Information – This section provides further information (including Admiralty Charts and other useful maps) that will complement the trip, or be of interest if in the local area.

Using the Tidal & Route Information

Each route begins with an overview of pertinent details beginning with the following information: grade of difficulty, trip name, route symbols, and trip number.



Grade A | Relatively easy landings with escape routes easily available. Offering relative shelter from extreme conditions and ocean swell. Some tidal movement may be found, but easy to predict with no major tidal races or overfalls.



Grade B | Some awkward landings and sections of coastline with no escape routes should be expected. Tidal movement, tidal races, overfalls, crossings, ocean swell and surf may be found on these trips. They will also be exposed to the weather and associated conditions.



Grade C | These trips will have difficult landings and will have no escape routes for long sections of the trip. Fast tidal movement, tidal races, overfalls, extended crossings, ocean swell and surf will be found on all these trips. They will be very exposed to the weather and sea state, therefore require detailed planning and paddlers to be competent in rough water conditions. With this considered, the journey may require good conditions for the trip to be viable.



SHELTERED

STRING THALFFEETS

VEHICLE SHITTLE

BUSSHUTTE

SURFLANDING

Distance	Total distance for the trip.
OS Sheet	Number of Ordnance Survey 1:50,000 Landranger map required.
Tidal Port	The port for which tide timetables will be required to work out the tidal streams.
Start	Δ map symbol, name and six-figure grid reference of starting point.
Finish	igodot map symbol, name and six-figure grid reference of finishing point.
HW/LW	The high and/or low water time difference between local ports nearest to the trip and the tidal port.
Tidal Times	Location or area of tidal stream movement, the direction to which the tidal stream flows and the time it starts flowing in relation to the tidal port high water.
Max Rate Sp	The areas in which the tidal streams are fastest and the maximum speed in knots attained on the average spring tide.
Coastguard	Name of the relevant Coastguard Station.

MAP SYMBOLS

start & alternative start	\longrightarrow	major counter-current
finish & alternative finish	0	areas of counter-currents / eddies
waypoint	^_^^	areas of rough water / overfalls
possible escape	₫ *	lighthouse & light
portage	🔶 lifeboat	lifeboat station
described route	₩ K5	ferry, passenger & car
alternative route	X	campsite
tidal stream direction	}	bird reserve
time relative to Tidal Port HW		town / buildings
Max Rate at Springs	Prohibited Zone	prohibited area
High point	P	car park
	finish & alternative finish waypoint possible escape portage described route alternative route tidal stream direction time relative to Tidal Port HW Max Rate at Springs	finish & alternative finish ● waypoint ~~ possible escape ↓ portage + described route ← alternative route ↓ tidal stream direction ↓ time relative to Tidal Port HW ● Max Rate at Springs ●

About the Author

Doug Cooper

Doug works at Scotland's National Outdoor Training Centre, Glenmore Lodge, where he is Head of Paddlesports. He works as a Level 5 Coach in Sea and White Water and has the fantastic job of taking people to remote and spectacular coastlines and rivers, then helping them improve their paddling skills and understanding. Many of these days are spent on the sea on the north or east coast of Scotland, which is a great office on work days and an even better playground on days off.

Doug also enjoys pushing his envelope or just having fun on personal adventures and expeditions. He has sea kayaked extensively around the world including Greenland, Alaska, Iceland, Norway, Ireland, Corsica, Croatia, Sardinia and Greece, and always has a new destination and adventure planned.

When not out on the water Doug can be found in the mountains at work as a Mountain and Ski instructor or at play in search of new crags or fresh powder tracks. He was also co-author of *Scottish Sea Kayaking* and author of *Sea Kayak Handling* and *Rough Water Handling*, all published by Pesda Press.

So if it involves discovering new remote parts of the world, having an adventure or helping friends and clients, then Doug will have a smile on his face and definitely be having fun.



Doug Cooper

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all those people with who I have shared a sea kayak journey on the north or east coasts of Scotland. Your company and enthusiasm will have shaped my feelings for these fantastic sections of coastline, and you will have no doubt shared some personal insights and knowledge along the way. In this you will have not only inspired me to write this guide, but also strengthened my passion for these coastlines which I hope have come through in the following pages.

The process of turning that knowledge and passion of a coastline into a guide book could not have happened without the constant support, enthusiasm and encouragement of my wife, Lara. We have paddled the majority of the trips together, and spent many a night staying in the van working on the day's photos and researching the next section of coastline.

Invaluable local knowledge was readily given by Ken Nicol, Alan Meikle and Donald Thomson; without this the guide would not be as comprehensive as it is and certainly would be missing that essential 'local' ingredient. Charlie Phillips, the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society field officer, has been invaluable with his expert advice on the east coast bottlenose dolphins. A big thanks to all of you.

Finally, thanks are due to Franco Ferrero and his team at Pesda Press. Without their attention to detail and professionalism this book would not look as good as it does and certainly would have never have made it to your bookshelf.

Photographs

Thanks to Charlie Phillips for the fantastic dolphin photo on page 122. All other photographs by Doug and Lara Cooper.

WARNING

Sea kayaking is inherently a potentially dangerous sport. The sea is one of the most committing and unforgiving environments. Conditions can change quickly and dramatically on the sea. When planning to venture out on any of the trips described in this book, ensure that your knowledge, experience, ability and judgement are appropriate to the seriousness of the trip. The author recommends acquiring appropriate training and advice from experienced and qualified individuals.

The information in this book has been thoroughly researched. However the author can take no responsibility if tidal times differ or if the information supplied is not sufficient to negotiate the conditions experienced on the day. The outdoors cannot be made risk-free and you should plan and act with care at all times for your own safety and that of others. The decision on whether to go out sea kayaking or not, and any consequences arising from that decision, remains yours and yours alone.

Scottish Outdoor Access Code

Access to the outdoors in Scotland is encouraged; visitors and locals have a right of responsible access. Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) is responsible for promoting and publicising the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (SOAC).

Where you have access rights to is not shown on Ordnance Survey maps, or any other map in Scotland. The Scottish Outdoor Access Code deals with the land and freshwater access which is pertinent to the sea kayaker as you have to gain access to the sea over land or down a river and then again land to camp, walk or rest.

You are completely free to kayak on the sea, and there is no limit how far offshore you can travel. However, for safety rather than access reasons, the further you travel offshore during a crossing to an island, for example, the more reason there is to contact the Coastguard and let them know your plans.

The Scottish Outdoor Access Code is based on three key principles and these apply equally to the public and to land managers.

RESPECT THE INTERESTS OF OTHERS

Acting with courtesy, consideration and awareness is very important. If you are exercising access rights, make sure that you respect the privacy, safety and livelihoods of those living or working in the outdoors, and the needs of other people enjoying the outdoors. If you are a land manager, respect people's use of the outdoors and their need for a safe and enjoyable visit.

CARE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

If you are exercising access rights, look after the places you visit and enjoy, and leave the land as you find it. If you are a land manager, help maintain the natural and cultural features which make the outdoors attractive to visit and enjoy.

TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR OWN ACTIONS

If you are exercising access rights, remember that the outdoors cannot be made risk-free and act with care at all times for your own safety and that of others. If you are a land manager, act with care at all times for people's safety.

GETTING MORE ADVICE AND INFORMATION

The Scottish Outdoor Access Code cannot cover every possible situation, setting or activity. Free information and advice on access rights and responsibilities, and on who to contact in your local authority, is available online at www.outdooraccess-scotland.com.

In addition to this, further information about responsible use of the environment while sea kayaking can be found on the Scottish Canoe Association's website (www.canoescotland.org/AccessEnvironment) and on Scottish Natural Heritage's website (www.snh.go.uk)

DOLPHINS

The east coast of Scotland is particularly lucky to be home to the most northerly population of bottlenose dolphins. These dolphins enjoy feeding and playing along the entire east coast, but Chanonry Point, the Kessock Narrows and the areas between the North and South Sutors are the best feeding sites in Europe. Bottlenose dolphins are rare in Europe and are protected by both UK and EU law as they are a European Protected Species. As sea kayakers we clearly have an amazing opportunity to see and enjoy dolphins. However we also have a similar opportunity to disturb, prevent feeding and harm dolphins. Please follow this agreed Code of Conduct for seeing dolphins while paddling on the east coast, in particular around the Moray Firth.

Be cautious and courteous; approach areas where there are dolphins with extreme caution.

Stay at least 50 to 100 metres away, and if they come to you that's fine but don't paddle towards them. When they depart do not try and follow them as this means the interaction remains under their control.

Be predictable and act in a sensible way, do not make sudden changes in speed or direction.

Approach from the side on a parallel converging course, not from the front or behind. Maintain a parallel course as you paddle past them. Try to avoid pointing your kayak at them as this may make them feel threatened (you'll look more like a predator).

Make sure the whole group paddles on one side. If you split up and 'surround' the dolphins they're likely to feel trapped or hemmed in.

EAST COAST HARBOURS

The east coast is characterised by its exposed coastline broken only by a few small bays or long expanses of unbroken sand. Launching and landing opportunities are limited, and these are often reliant on the local harbours. Many of these are run by harbour trusts, which at various stages over the last 200 years have been granted the right in law to build and operate a harbour, and to charge fees to support its construction and maintenance. Some of the smaller harbours only support one or two inshore lobster and crab fishermen, and see an ever-increasing leisure use of the harbour. With the constant need for repair and maintenance of these historic and important harbours, some Harbour Trusts (appropriately) charge fees for leisure as well as commercial usage. As sea kayakers we will be classed as leisure users in some of these harbours and will be asked to pay a launching fee. This could be in the form of an honesty box, or could be asked for by the harbour master. So whenever making use of a harbour please be mindful of this and look to see if a contribution is asked for. If it is please pay accordingly or choose to launch elsewhere. After all, if it were not for the harbours we would not have such easy access to this amazing coastline and losing them would be a real blow to the sea kayakers of the future.



How to Use the Guide



Introduction

The north coast of Scotland is one of the most dramatic coastlines in the British Isles. With its exposure to the Atlantic Ocean and strong tidal flows it is also one of the most serious. In good conditions and with appropriate experience it offers some of the most spectacular and rewarding sea kayaking that Scotland has to offer.

For those who like to paddle around big headlands the north coast is made up of some of the biggest, with Cape Wrath at its western entrance and Duncansby Head at its eastern end. Between these two giants there are plenty more, including Britain's most northerly mainland point of Dunnet Head. This coastline is not just about committing headlands though; there are some unique islands to explore as well. The relative shelter of Eilean nan Ron, Eilean Neave and the Rabbit Islands are set amongst a landscape of pristine sandy beaches all overlooked by Scotland's most northerly Munro (mountain over 3,000 foot) of Ben Hope. To the west of these is Eilean Hoan surrounded by Ceannabeinne and Sango Sands, perhaps some of the most beautiful beaches in Scotland. In contrast to these are the exposed islands of Stroma, Swona and Muckle Skerry, situated in the heart of the Pentland Firth that has a fearsome reputation for its strong tidal flows and associated tidal races. All of these islands still have plenty of evidence of the unique history of the north coast of Scotland, a wild place where for generations people have strived to make a living. The north coast is also home to a lot of wildlife with numerous birds nesting on the cliffs and marine life enjoying the good feeding that the ocean and its tidal flows bring.

The north coast is an incredible location and with its remoteness offers a solitude and dramatic beauty that few other coastal destinations could match.

Tides and weather

The tidal streams of the north coast and in particular the Pentland Firth are formidable, with tidal flows, eddies, tidal races and overfalls unlike anywhere else. It has a justifiable reputation. That said, as with any tidal area, with good planning it is accessible to experienced sea kayakers. Perfect weather, neap tides and trips planned around slack water is the norm when starting to venture into the Pentland Firth. The use of tidal vectors, transits and GPS are all essential to maintain an awareness of the tidal movement effect.

To the west of Dunnet Head the extreme tidal flows of the Pentland Firth subside, and although there is tidal movement off all the headlands it becomes a lot easier to plan. Along with the tides the swell has a huge impact on the north coast. It is exposed to the Atlantic as well as the North Sea and the swell coming from any of these areas must be taken into account. Many of the landings along the coast involve beaches, rocky shores and reefs; with any swell these quickly become inadvisable.

There are few coastlines affected by wind, swell and tidal streams more than the north coast and this needs to be taken into account when planning any trips to this amazing area.



North Coast



Cape Wrath

No. 1 | Grade C | 32km | OS Sheet 9

Tidal Port	Ullapool
Start	A Balnakeil Bay (NC 391 687)
Finish	OBalnakeil Bay (NC 391 687)
HW/LW	HW/LW at Durness is around 3 hours and 30 minutes before Wick.
Tidal Times	From Stack Clo Kearvaig (NC 294 736) eastwards: The E going stream starts at about 2 hours and 20 minutes before HW Ullapool. The W going stream starts about 3 hours and 50 minutes after HW Ullapool.
	From Cape Wrath to Stack Clo Kearvaig: The E going stream starts at about 3 hours and 50 minutes before HW Ullapool. The W going stream starts at about 2 hours and 35 minutes after HW Ullapool.
Max Rate Sp	At Cape Wrath, expect rates of up to 5 knots. To the east, close in to the coast along to Stack Clo Kearvaig the rate is 3 knots. At An Garbh-eilean the rate is 3 knots. Close to the cliffs either side of Cape Wrath there may be eddies, on the east side this can form a continuous west going flow.
Coastguard	Shetland (E of Cape Wrath), tel. 01595 692976, VHF weather every 3 hours from 0710. Stornoway (S of Cape Wrath), tel. 01851 702013, VHF weather every 3 hours from 0710.



Introduction

Cape Wrath, the furthest north-west point of mainland Britain is a wild and stunning place. A lighthouse stands high above the caves and arches where the sea swirls and boils as it forces its way around the headland on its journey from the west coast of Scotland to the north coast and back again. The highest sea cliffs on the mainland are here at Clo Mor, 180 metres of towering vertical rock. In amongst this rugged coastline is an amazing beach at Kearvaig, its beauty will provide a respite from the rugged cliffs that surround you.

Description

Balnakeil Bay is a superb place to start this journey, the wonderfully clean, sandy beach stretches for two kilometres to the north and the water is crystal clear.

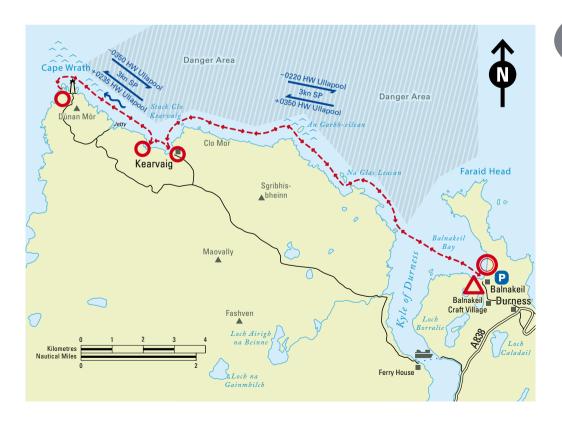
Leaving the stunning beach behind and setting off in the azure blue waters is a magical way to start, and the journey takes you across the entrance to the Kyle of Durness. While crossing you may just get a glimpse of the small passenger ferry that crosses the Kyle to the road that provides access for visitors to travel out to Cape Wrath by land. If you have non-paddlers in the group this is highly recommended, however getting there by kayak is going to be a far more dramatic journey. Once on the other side of the bay, the cliff scenery that will dominate the trip begins and the island of An Garbh-eilean will be clear to see. The area you are now paddling in is the only place in the Northern Hemisphere where NATO forces combine land, air and sea capabilities in assault mode for training manoeuvres. They will deploy up to 1,000 pound live bombs, and it is

Cape Wrath

the rock that forms An Garbh-eilean that is often the unfortunate target. Paddling close to this island you will see the effect these bombs have had on the island, with remnants of the bombs sticking out of the rock face. Ensure you paddle this trip when there is no live firing; you do not want to become a new target for the bombs!

Paddling round Cleit Dhubh the spectacular view of Clo Mor opens up, and it is truly breathtaking with the immense 180 metre cliffs towering vertically up from the sea and stretching for more than three kilometres. These cliffs provide the highest sea cliffs on mainland Britain, paddling beneath them is an unbelievable experience and you will feel very insignificant in this 'on the edge of the world' environment. The impressive sea stack of Stack Clo Kearvaig marks the end of the mighty cliffs and just beyond this is the beautiful beach of Kearvaig. The sea stack itself is a popular place for breeding birds such as guillemots and razorbills. The stack is also known as 'The Cathedral' due to it having two spires and a natural window created by the fierce north-coast weather.

There will always be a certain amount of surf rolling into Kearvaig beach, so be prepared for a fun landing. At the back of the beach lies Kearvaig house which the Mountain Bothies Association have converted into a bothy, and this provides shelter for a lunch break, or maybe you could consider making this a two-day trip and spend a bit more time savouring this amazing location. After negotiating a surf launching from the beach the final section of coastline that leads out to Cape Wrath lies ahead. About halfway along look out for the old lighthouse jetty which can provide another possible landing. This was used by the lighthouse tender MV *Pharos*



Cape Wrath



Cape Wrath

that brought supplies on an annual basis for the lighthouse keepers, a remote place indeed for these hardy men to live and work. Cape Wrath is as 'out there' as it gets on mainland Britain and with a lively ocean under you and soaring impregnable cliffs above you, it will feel like it! Underneath the headland are two large arches that you might be able to paddle through and 'circumnavigate' the headland. The tidal stream runs through these arches so there is no guarantee this will be possible, so care should be taken. Standing 121 metres above on top of the headland is the Cape Wrath lighthouse, facing out to the expanse of the Atlantic Ocean. First lit on Christmas day 1828 this light was built by Robert Stevenson and clearly marks this remote corner of Britain. The name Cape Wrath is derived from Old Norse 'hvarf' which means turning point, this is possibly due to the fact that the Vikings often used to turn around here and return back home. So if the mighty seafaring Vikings decided to turn and head for home at the Cape, it is time for us to return as well.

The trip back takes the same route as already paddled, however this time it is worth landing at Geodha na Seamraig to have a rest. This lovely beach provides an incredible view out to Stack Clo Kearvaig. Although paddling the same coastline, it is certainly no compromise as it just gives more time to take in these amazing cliffs. The views will be different as well, with some of the other dramatic headlands that reach out into the Atlantic being visible, Faraid Head initially and then Whiten Head beyond. Before long the expansive white sands of Balnakeil Bay will be clear to see and the crystal clear waters will lead you to a picture-postcard landing spot on the beach. You will feel that you have been to the edge of the world and back, and this will not be too far from the truth!

The last voyage of the Maggie from Hull

(from Cape Wrath Light: wreck log, 1897)

14 miles off the north-west tip was no time to discover a hole in their ship

they tried for hours to bail and float but they couldn't keep up – there was little hope

at 1am on December 13 the fishing boat foundered filling with ocean its last bell was sounded

the crew had nought but a small rowing boat and their love of life to keep them afloat

they sat caught, way out, in the Atlantic night as their fair lass the Maggie slipped away out of sight

"row said the captain row for your lives think of your children think of your wives"

"over yon is a beacon I see it flashing on and off if I'm not mistaken that's the light of Cape Wrath!"

"come on pull – if we all pull together and if Jesus and Mary sends us calm weather"

and they rowed and they rowed and they rowed through the night always keeping the bow on the light

the swell it was boisterous and the wind it did blow though they sweated and heaved, their progress was slow

the beacon was visible yet never seemed to get bigger their resolution was tested, their mettle, their vigour

but in the early glimmering pink of the dawning they could see the white tower as it heralded morning

and they knew in their hearts that somehow they survived the currents of chance on the deep Atlantic tide

and as they got closer to under the cliff hands blistered from rowing their shoulders stiff

within the next hour they had made it to shore at 9am, the records show, they made their approach to the lighthouse door

and a welcoming meal from the keepers provided the crew were exhausted but their spirit undivided

they set off on the road next day for Hull their home town and sang songs all the way of how they survived

when the Maggie went down ...

(Scottish Lighthouse Poems, Knotbrook Taylor, www.knotbrook.co.uk and Blue Salt Publishing, www.bluesalt.co.uk Working with the Scottish Lighthouse Museum, www. lighthousemuseum.org.uk)



Tides and weather

This is not a section of coastline to get caught out on. There are few landing spots, these often with the potential of big surf and challenging walk-outs. The headland of Cape Wrath is fully exposed to the Atlantic and rarely will there be a day without much swell, so whichever direction it comes from it will have an effect on how this trip goes. Ideal conditions are required, light winds and minimum swell.

The trip needs to be planned to make use of the strong tidal movement in this area. Timing the trip so that Cape Wrath is reached at the slack water at the end of the west going stream is essential, this being about 3 hours and 50 minutes before high water Ullapool. The few kilometres leading up to Cape Wrath will most probably be continuously flowing in a westerly direction due to the tidal stream and then eddy effect, this can be paddled against at the slack water time when it is recommended to arrive at the Cape.

Additional information

Cape Wrath is a live firing exercise area for the military. Check with the coastguard, look out in local papers, check at the shop in Durness and look to see if any red flags are flying before you set off. It is also possible to phone the range control on 0800 317071 to ask about the live firing. At Balnakeil there is a craft village that is worth a look and provides a café, Cocoa Mountain, which is highly recommended for a chocolate fix on completing the trip.

Cape Wrath

Variations

The obvious variation would be not to turn around at the Cape but continue on around to the west coast. If this is the case this will usually be a two-day trip and finishing at Kinlochbervie (NC 217 564) is recommended. To complete this trip further tidal planning will be required and the overnight stop would usually be either Kearvaig or Sandwood Bay. To help with the tidal planning look at Scottish Sea Kayaking, Fifty Great Sea Kayak Voyages by Doug Cooper and George Reid, and the appropriate tidal pilots.







At last, a guidebook covering some of Scottish paddling's best kept secrets.

Forty-five journeys are described in a way that is both inspirational and informative. Details of launching and landing sites, tides and potential hazards are provided and the coast is described in exquisite detail.

The North and East Coasts of Scotland do not have as many sheltered water options as you might get on the West or in the Islands, and there is always some sort of swell, but if you make the effort you will be richly rewarded by stunning cliff and coastal scenery, numerous bird colonies, and fascinating fishing villages each with their own history and character.

