

The gems of THE NORTH

Big skies and birdwatching, hiking and history, magnificent moors, mountains and coastline – the Scottish county of Caithness sparkles!

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Carol Kubicki



Carol Kubicki...

...and her husband, Anthony, use their Devon Tempest to pursue their hobbies of walking and cycling while exploring historical and natural environments

It wasn't any particular sights that dictated where we would visit on this Scottish trip, it was the humble midge. My partner, Anthony, and I both enjoy touring Scotland but, in the summer months, midges can take the fun out of it.

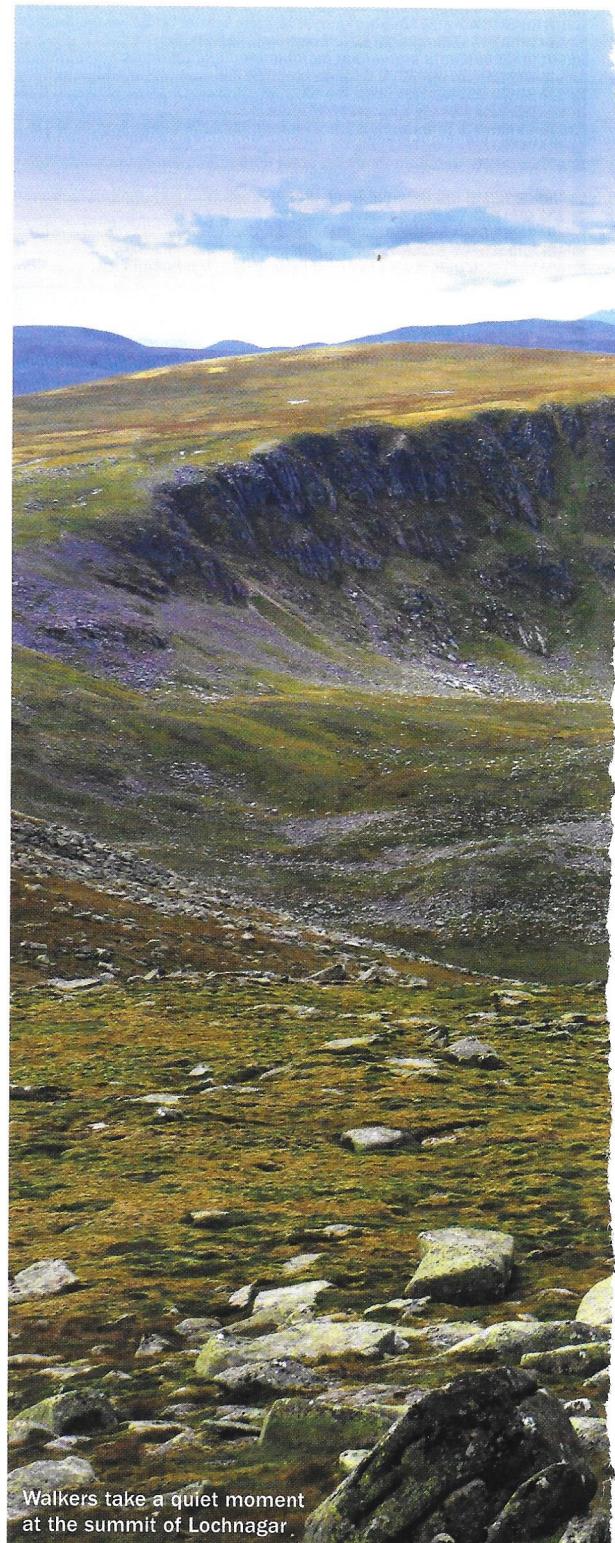
But the opportunity to spend time exploring mainland Scotland on our return from a trip to the Orkney Islands was too good to miss and so we interrogated the midge forecast for ideas. This was unambiguous: using data from midge traps and weather stations it predicted that, while midges were rampant on the west coast (level three and above), northeastern Scotland was generally level two and below.

The northern county of Caithness is ideal for hikers, birdwatchers and history-lovers. This remote land has big skies, vivid light, endless moorland and unrivalled coast. Around every corner the stories of people, from the Neolithic to the present, have been preserved in an exceptional landscape.

We disembarked from the Orkney ferry in heavy rain, soon picking up the single-track road towards Dunnet Head, more optimistic about a view than the weather implied. Back in the Devonian period (around 400 million years ago), Caithness was mountainous and arid. The Old Red Sandstones were formed during this period, leaving layers of rock that split easily into flagstones. When these sandstones meet the sea the layered structure creates sheer cliffs and stacks that are perfect for nesting sea birds.

The rain had stopped when we reached the rocky promontory of Dunnet Head and we walked to the cliffs in weak sunlight. Dunnet Head is managed by the RSPB and a warden was helpfully pointing out birds.

A wispy sea mist rolled over the cliffs and



Walkers take a quiet moment at the summit of Lochnagar.

INFORMATION

For **Badbea clearance village**

information and a way for descendants of families forcibly moved to get in touch with each other

badbeafamilies.com

 caithnessbrochcentre.co.uk

 yarrowsheritagetrust.co.uk

 historicenvironment.scot

 broravillage.scot

the view was sporadic, but we managed to see puffins, kittiwakes, fulmars and a seal bobbing in the waves. We walked along the coast by the lighthouse and the old military buildings to a viewpoint; sandstone cliffs to one side, moorland dotted with lochs to the other. This was Caithness in miniature.

Following the coast to pretty Ham Bay, we explored around the old four-storey



corn mill and mill pond among fragrant meadowsweet. From the cliffs we watched a family messing about in a boat and a dog racing joyfully around the sand.

By Gill's Bay the sun had burnt off the mist and we watched an Arctic skua fly along the shore while looking out to the abandoned island of Stroma, just a few miles off the coast.

The Old Red Sandstone makes another dramatic appearance at Duncansby Head. We strode south along the grassy paths, sodden after the rain, a swarm of midges taking us by surprise in a sheltered boggy hollow. Midges dislike the sun and wind and are most numerous on still, cloudy days and at dusk.

The walk along Duncansby Head is ➤





Trip summary

OUR MOTORHOME

2015 Devon Tempest on a Renault Master MWB 2.3-litre. This is our second Devon Conversions 'van. At 5.3m, we think it's enormous and, with a washroom, also luxurious



2015 Devon Tempest

THE JOURNEY

We travelled from Salford via the M6 and M74 and Callander and Connel Bridge going north to Inverness and through Braemar and Aberfeldy back to Callander coming south. We spent 10 days exploring in August

THE COSTS

Fuel average 34mpg	£175
Site fees	£128.60

1,100 miles

Total £303.60

stunning and this wild coast contrasts with the commercialism of John O'Groats. With ever-changing views, precipitous cliffs, Thirle Door sea arch and two jagged cone-shaped sea stacks, it is breathtaking.

At the John O'Groats campsite we seemed to be the only motorhomers who weren't following the North Coast 500 route and just aimlessly meandering with a midge-avoidance plan. One guy confessed that he had abandoned the route as he found the combination of single-track roads and a campervan too troublesome.

Neolithic stone burial cairns reveal clues about life here more than 5,000 years ago. We had visited the well-known Camster Cairns before, so sought out a remote site at the Loch of Yarrows. The single-track road was made entertaining by resurfacing work and we had to wait while vehicles manoeuvred to let us by. It felt a long three miles to the car park as chippings flew up hitting the bodywork.

We had coffee whilst watching the showers rushing across the bleak landscape; a hardy windsurfer was tacking furiously across the loch. Loch of Yarrows has a short archaeological trail that includes two Neolithic burial cairns and, in a dry spell, we set off across the hillside – which quickly became boggy.

High above the loch, these neighbouring cairns were used for burials for over 1,000 years. From each entrance passage I could see across the moorland valley and isolated farmhouse. Noticing another shower scooting in, we hurried back to the 'van.

Whereas archaeologists have some idea how burial cairns were used, the unique Caithness stone rows that the Bronze Age (4,000 years ago) people left are a mystery. Pulling in to the layby at the stone row

ABOVE Jagged sea stacks at Duncansby Head

BETWEEN Picturesque John O'Groats harbour

at Mid Clyth (known as the Hill O'Many Stanes), I didn't know what to expect. Standing among the 170-plus stones that remain, I was no wiser.

The stones are mostly knee-high and fan out in 23 rows with a central axis that runs north-south. Today the site's surrounded by farmland, and when we were there, the fields were dotted with neat bales. Were these stones a landmark, part of a Bronze Age game or a graveyard?

Nearby on a low rise above Loch Stemster is another peculiar setting of Bronze Age standing stones. Achavanich is a rare U-shape of 35 Caithness flagstones all around my height. Unusually, the broad ▶



face of each stone does not face the centre but is at 90 degrees, forming a row of domino-like stones. I imagined pushing one and the stones falling neatly one on the other.

A single-track road out of Dunbeath ends at a small parking area. From here there is a memorable six-mile return walk along the valley track into remote Caithness flow country, the magnificent pyramidal peak of Morven before you and a ruined barn near the river to picnic by.

If you must ascend Morven (2,316ft) because it is the highest mountain in Caithness, be warned, it is a long and steep climb with bogs, scree and no marked path. We set off up the leeward flank, but the midges had the same idea and were waiting.

We plastered ourselves in repellent but, as usual, I missed somewhere and they discovered my naked earlobes. At this point it's no consolation knowing it's only female midges that are feeding on my blood. Waving my arms around to deter the midges, we ascended as quickly as the slope allowed onto the exposed midge-free ridge.

Resting, we spotted a herd of deer below us and a mountain hare was nibbling grass among the rocks as we walked by, bright red

cloudberry fruits grew among the heather. Banks of cloud scudded across the sky, shrouding the landscape below.

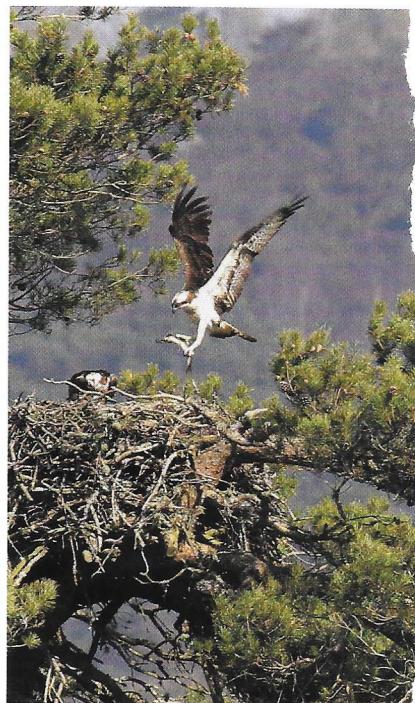
When the sun reappeared, the views from the summit over moorland, green-ribbon valleys and the bulk of Ben Hope over 30 miles away were stunning.

Caithness is peppered with brochs – impressive Iron Age fortified round towers with a double wall enclosing stairs. Near Nybster we found the remains of a broch and, below, a fishing hut with a Caithness flagstone roof. Beside the site is a weathered ornate monument decorated with gargoyles. Known as Mervyn's Tower, this was erected by Tress-Barry from unearthed stones.

A few days later – and further south in Sutherland – we came upon Carn Liath Broch, again with a clifftop position.

This well-preserved and remarkable broch gives a good sense of the sophisticated construction.

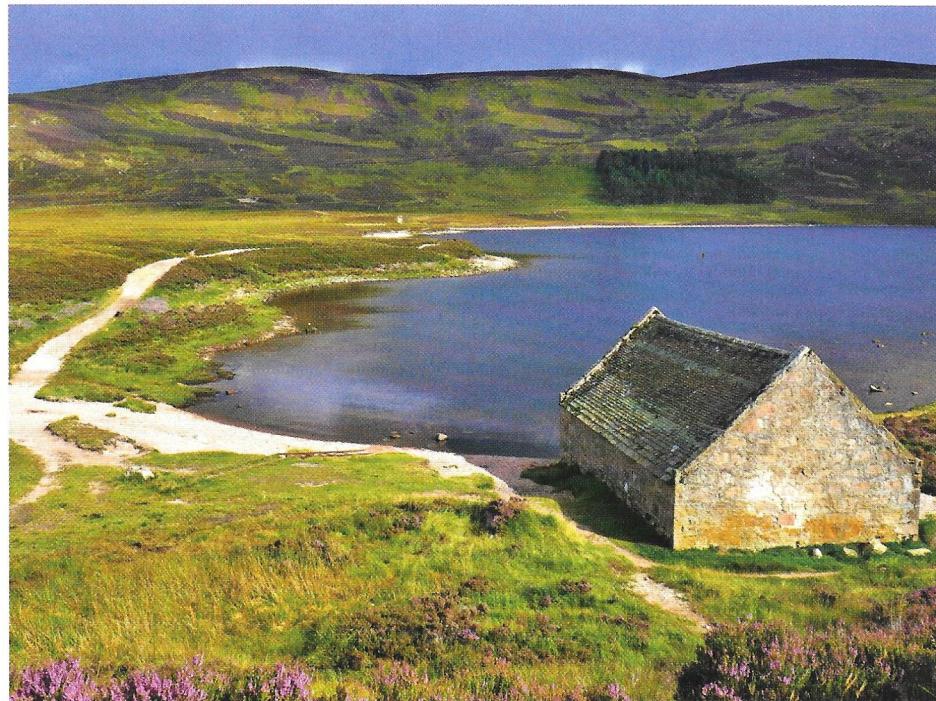
After a night at the attractive harbour at Helmsdale, a popular halt where we ate in a local pub and wandered the harbour walls watching a seal bobbing in the water, we returned north in sunshine. Whaligoe Steps has been on our list for some time



ABOVE An osprey landing on its nest

BETWEEN The Caithness coast at Duncansby Head rewards walkers with views like this





and we grabbed the chance to explore this picturesque anchorage on a fine day.

Built in the late 1700s, these steep and winding steps were used by fishing folk. It is said that there are 365 steps built into the cliff; I didn't count them as I was too busy enjoying the views!

It was warm in the tiny sheltered harbour. I sat among purple Michaelmas daisies listening to the waves, admiring the yellow algae-covered rocks and abandoned buildings. Back at the top there is a splendid café with a picture window, sea views and excellent ice cream.

Helmsdale has a touching memorial to the people who were cleared from their productive land to make way for sheep farms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The deserted village of Badbea gives visitors some idea of the hardship those evicted families underwent.

Moved from sheltered Berriedale to this exposed sloping hillside between heather and sea cliffs, the forced settlers had to tether their sheep and children to stop them blowing into the sea! I walked between the haunting ruined crofts that homeless families had hand-built from scratch.

Along with the usual things campsite wardens tell you, at Brora campsite they will suggest you avoid the Arctic terns that nest on the beach in summer, as they will protect their nests by swooping at your head. This isn't a problem as Brora's long sweep of sand has plenty of room for terns and humans. That evening, our meadow-side pitch was

ABOVE CLOCKWISE Stromness lighthouse; a typically Scottish scene around Loch Muick; Carn Liath Broch gives visitors a good sense of how these fortified dwellings were used

bathed in warm light and the shrill calls of oystercatchers filled the air.

Every village along this coast has a folk museum. In the Brora Heritage Centre I learnt that Brora was the original Northern Powerhouse; as the first place north of Inverness to have electric lighting it became known as 'electric city'.

The historic village once had a coalmine, brickworks, salt pans, a mill making high-quality tweed and a whisky distillery; only the latter survives today.

Stopping at Loch Fleet, another motorhome pulled alongside. "You can sometimes see an osprey here," its occupants told us and we chatted with our eyes searching the water. The other motorhome moved on northwards; just a few minutes later, flying low over the river, came the osprey!

After Inverness we headed east, continuing our midge avoidance. At the campsite in the grounds of Geddes House the owners apologised for the 'state' of their garden. "The grandchildren have visited and taken up all our time," the owner told me as I paid. So, the glorious and colourful walled garden was a pleasant surprise.

I sat there the next day with my morning brew watching a red squirrel scampering in the trees.

We drove among the whisky distilleries, forgoing a tasting visit to fit in a straightforward half-day walk up Ben Rinnes (2,759ft). The summer sky oscillated between blue and black as we hurriedly ▶

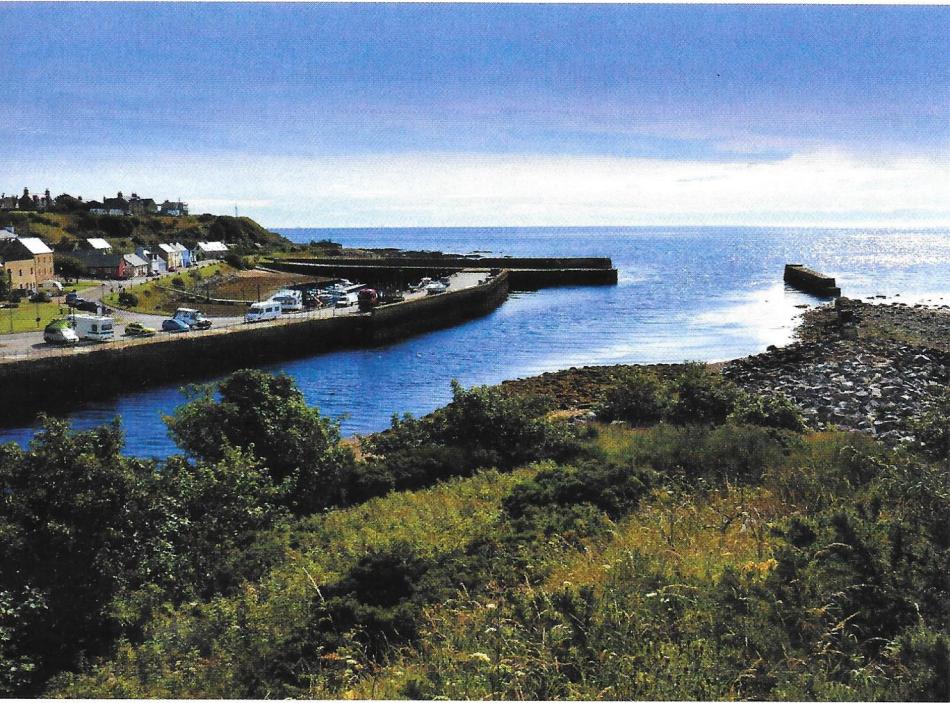
TOP TIPS

Between May and September check the **Scottish Midge Forecast** smidgeup.com/midge-forecast

Apply repellent to all exposed areas. Any that contain picaridin are effective. We use Lifesystems Midge and Mosquito Repellent Spray

To find **Whaligoe Steps**: from the south on A99 north of Lybster is a sign for a left turn to Cairn of Get. Opposite this there is a phone box and post box at a small lane. Turn right here and the small car park is at the end

We stayed for free overnight at **Helmsdale Harbour** and a layby on the south side of Loch Earn



descended, the sporadic sun transforming the panorama of fields golden and a rainbow spanned the valley.

From the charming town of Ballater we drove to the ample parking at the Spittal (hospital or hostel) of Glenmuick. This is Balmoral Estate land and you can walk along the track by the alluring and remote Loch Muick. With a boathouse on the loch, Scots pine and heather-clad hills, this is shortbread-tin Scotland and you might expect to hear a piper any moment.

We hiked up Lochnagar (3,789ft), a popular (but tough!) climb that isn't for the unprepared, even in glorious weather. We were lucky to spot a plump ptarmigan on

the summit ridge and descended to the loch by the lively waterfalls of Glas Allt.

We continued south via Glenshee, taking a stroll through the valley accompanied by curlew and lapwing. In Aberfeldy we had ice cream and drinks in the charming Watermill Bookshop and Café before heading out on the narrow single-track road on the south edge of Loch Earn looking for a vacant layby. It was late and we were almost at Lochearnhead before we stopped.

We sat on the shore with mugs of tea as the sun dipped behind the hills opposite. Miraculously there wasn't a single midge in sight and we toasted our thanks to the midge forecast. **WWW**

ABOVE LEFT The pretty harbour at Helmsdale

ABOVE RIGHT The Emigrants statue commemorates the people who were forcibly cleared from their land

WE STAYED AT

Oban Camping and Caravanning Club Site, Barcaldine by Connel, Argyll PA37 1SG

01631 720348

campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk

29 March - 29 October

Two adults, pitch and electric: From £17.40

Inver Caravan Park, Housty Road, Dunbeath, Caithness KW6 6EH

01593 731441

inver-caravan-park.co.uk

All year

Two adults, pitch and electric: From £19

John O'Groats Caravan & Camping site, County Rd, John O'Groats, Caithness KW1 4YR

01955 611329

johnogroatscampsite.co.uk

1 April - 30 October

Two adults, pitch and electric: £21

Brora Caravan and Motorhome Club Site, Dalchalm, Brora, Highlands KW9 6LP

01408 621479

caravanclub.co.uk

23 March - 8 October

Two adults, pitch and electric: From £20.50

Geddes House CL, Geddes, Nairn IV12 5QX

01667 452241

caravanclub.co.uk

1 April - 1 October

Two adults, pitch and electric: From £10 (members only)

Ballater Caravan Park, Anderson Road, Ballater, Aberdeenshire AB35 5QW

01339 755727

ballatercaravanpark.com

30 March - 4 November

Two adults, pitch and electric: From £23.50