

## A grand day out

Some of us are inclined to get a little bit precious about nature. We have built up an idea that nature is pure and quiet, that people are intrusive, that noise and laughter and bustle, coffee and cakes and souvenirs, spoil it. And we have a point.

But nature is not always quiet. A colony of seabirds is not unlike the Costa del Sol. You can see the fighting and mating displays on the cliffs and in the clubs. Most humans are fundamentally sociable, and there is no reason why we should not engage with nature and have a good, sociable day out.

We looked at four examples of what could be described as a good day out (though most of them are much more than that) – and all very different. *Highland Adventure Safaris* is a small company operating in Highland Perthshire which offers a range of outdoor

and wildlife experiences. It's an example of the small eco-tourism companies which are developing throughout Scotland. *Deep Sea World* is well known – a major business close to large population centres which attracts a quarter of a million visitors each year. The *Scottish Seabird Centre* has also become a major tourist attraction, but is smaller, organised as a Trust and also serves as a community resource. *Vane Farm Nature Reserve*, a wildlife viewing centre associated with the Loch Leven National Nature Reserve is run by the RSPB and was set up specifically as an educational resource more than 40 years ago.



### For business and pleasure – Highland Adventure Safaris

Donald Riddell has always had an interest in wildlife and countryside, the stag and the Glen, the Highland way of life. He grew up with it; it's in his blood. The Highlands and deer stalking are forged together in the public imagination, and yet, thought Donald, the public rarely get to see the deer, the eagle, and all the other wildlife so closely associated with the Highland landscape. Why not get more visitors out, equipped with binoculars instead of guns? And why not use land rovers to get out there and have a look? So Highland Adventure Safaris was born with a base near Aberfeldy in the heart of Highland Perthshire. Over eight years, and with his wife Julie taking a major role in developing and promoting the company, they have developed into a significant small business, employing four full time staff, an additional six part time staff and a range of sub-contractors. A small business maybe, but important in the local context. They trade not just on the wildlife, but on the whole Highland experience, and give their clients a varied day, or week out, offering as much comfort or discomfort as the client wants.

They discovered very early on that if you focus purely on wildlife you can get yourself into trouble. This is not the Serengeti. The wildlife does not always walk across the track. What happens if you take people on the hill to see deer and eagles and you see none? As Donald says *"I take my hat off to anyone who could make a business purely from wildlife watching in Scotland"*.

They get round this in two ways. Firstly you have to make sure that your guides are tremendously knowledgeable not just about a few iconic species, but about the whole upland environment. About the plants, history, people and culture. They need to be able to point out the little clues in the landscape that tell a much bigger story. Donald recalls a moment early on when he was up on the moor with clients, and there was nothing to see or talk about. Then he spotted some droppings. They were all there – from hare, deer, grouse, owl. Each one encapsulated a story about a creature, its food, and its way of life. Years later his clients reminded him of the time he'd been reduced to picking up shit, taking it apart and talking about it. But they remembered every word.

But the main problem they have to face is seasonality. The summer is fine – there are plenty of tourists, families and school visits. People want to get out on the hills and there is plenty to see. But it's only the hardy few that wish to navigate the bogs in driving sleet; and in any case the wildlife probably have similar feelings, and are hidden away trying to keep warm.

Donald and Julie get round this problem by offering “corporate services”: eco-challenge, team building – whatever the client wants, but always against the spectacular backdrop of the Highlands. They have already gained some prestigious clients including the Clydesdale Bank, Shell, and Dewars Bacardi. Foreign companies book in for the “Highland Experience” – whisky, good food (including marquee lunches up in the hills) highland games, music, the grouse moor. And to round things off they can organise a range of activities for almost any kind of group: white water rafting, clay target shooting, canyoning, golf, falconry, history and heritage, archery, quads, paintball, 4x4 skills development and more.

Schools cannot usually afford the landrover safaris, but they do cater for them as far as commercially feasible - next to their shop they now have a wildlife garden, and organise hands-on gem hunting and other activities.

Is all of this an effective way of engaging people with nature? The growth is in the business services, and this is not really to do with wildlife - although Donald argues that the eco-challenge raises awareness about environmental issues and challenges people on coming up with ways to deal with them. But in a sense this is neither here nor there. All the activities have as their backdrop the highland landscape and its wildlife and history, and if people have a good time – which they obviously do – they will become a little more connected, a little more concerned. In any case this kind of business is surely needed to keep the highlands alive and working – while also drawing heavily on the culture and environment which has made it what it is.

## The Scottish Seabird Centre

It was the late 80's, and everything in North Berwick was in decline - apart from the gannet colony on the Bass Rock. Local businessman and community councillor Bill Gardner looked out at the thriving rock and conceived the germ of an idea. He knew a thing or two about technology and realised that remote cameras on the rock could deliver the fascinating bustle and cacophony of the colony to the shore, and so reveal it to thousands more people without being invasive.



It took years of hard work and support from the local community, business, organisations, the Millennium Lottery Fund, and many individuals to bring the project to fruition, and it finally opened in May 2000 in a stunning location. It is set up as a charitable Trust, but pays its way as far as it is able. I was given a thorough introduction by Paul, the young and enthusiastic manager of the Discovery Centre which is downstairs from café and shop. The first things he showed me were the remote camera controls and screens. The cameras are set up on the Bass Rock and on other the other nearby islands of Fidra and the Isle of May, and new cameras have been installed at Craigleath and Dunbar Harbour. Most of the seabirds arrive in April and leave in October, but there are birds to see all year round. And from October to December you can watch the Grey seal colony on the Isle of May, with their white fluffy pups born late October.

You can control the cameras yourself with a joystick, and zoom in or out. This says Paul, is a real family attraction. It brings in all kinds, with or without particular wildlife interests. It goes down particularly well with children and grand parents. The children play with the joystick, the grand-parents offer advice and snippets of knowledge. And if they get the chance they ease junior off the joy stick and grab it themselves. But also – and this is perhaps where it differs from many other such centres - it attracts young couples: a nice neutral location for a first date.

If you are lucky the cameras will deliver moments of high drama on the screens: the courtship and fights of the gannet colony; baby peregrines hatching live on camera; the birth of a seal pup; a fulmar facing up to a peregrine. Most people would never get the chance to see any of these, and it can thrill. Here you

can see drama and drudgery in the daily lives of seabirds and sea mammals – in all seasons and weather conditions, and without disturbing them. You can even see the litter and pollution on the beach.



There is much else to see here: a cosy theatre with a series of stunning wildlife films; various interpretation panels; a tunnel with audio-visual experience to simulate migration and tell you more about other forms of marine life including whales; and an environment centre designed as an information resource on environmental issues, and also as an exhibition space.

But what I liked was the telescope deck. After being entombed in a kind of virtual pit, seeing bizarre and fascinating things, you are suddenly up in the open air with a fantastic view and a good telescope. You can watch gannets plunge diving; you can see puffins - just - one and a half kilometres away. And if it is less spectacular than a close-up of gannets beak-fencing on the screen downstairs, it is much more real, and in a strange way makes what you have seen down below seem much more real. You can see the rock and islands in the sea, you can see the mass of birds like confetti blowing around the bass rock. And you know that the camera is somewhere in the middle of all that reality. And interestingly enough I am not alone in feeling this way. Their visitor surveys show that the live cameras are most popular, the theatre/cinema second, and the telescope deck third.

But there is another statistic worth mentioning. The café and shop get one hundred and fifty to two hundred thousand visitors a year. Only thirty thousand go down into the Discovery Centre. Still, that's thirty thousand, and the shop is an important source of funding for the centre as a whole.

I have mixed feelings about this centre. On the one hand it is a tremendous success in so many ways. It is highly effective at “mainstreaming” wildlife. You get many people in here who are literally just on a day out, with no particular interest in wildlife. And you get the full range from toddlers, through teenagers and first dates to young couples, families, grannies and grandchildren. Some of them will be sufficiently thrilled to become more involved with nature, more aware, have more respect. You have a resource that can be of tremendous value to local schools – a safe convenient place to do some “field-work”, get out of the class, hear people talking about something which is there, before their eyes. And it's an excellent monitoring centre. Seabirds and seals are near the top of the food chain, and you have here an on-going film record of what is happening. If mortality increases, you will see it, literally, on the screens. And finally, and by no means least, it has made a great contribution to the community and re-vitalising of North Berwick.

But I also have a slightly uncomfortable feeling. I feel a screen is a barrier to engagement. This place is rather like a hi-tec extension of the modern living room, dominated by screens. This was one of the reasons I felt relief when I came out on the telescope deck. This is zero intrusion wildlife watching, but if we cease to intrude altogether, if we cease completely to interact directly with wildlife, do we not set ourselves too far apart? *You do not learn to be quiet when watching wildlife in here. You do not think about the direction of the wind.* This place has a huge amount to offer to all kinds of people and must be



considered a great success in terms of engagement. But for me personally it's all served up too neatly on screens with coffee and buns.

## Vane farm

The location is ideal. A couple of miles from the M90 between Edinburgh and Perth, and easily accessible to most of the central belt. Part of the Loch Leven National Nature Reserve which is home to the largest concentration of breeding freshwater duck in the UK, and in winter *twenty thousand* pink footed geese, as well as thousands of wintering ducks and waders. It clearly has the potential to attract large numbers of wildlife and people. But Vane Farm started more modestly as a dedicated field teaching centre exactly forty years ago, and retains a good deal of that philosophy.



I was lucky. I arrived on a crisp winter's day with the afternoon sunshine still sparkling on the water and ice. There were few people, but ducks everywhere – teal, pochard, mallard, goldeneye. And cattle gently ambling in the water meadows.

As you walk down toward the hides you are at first taken aback by the earthworks: they are almost military in scale, great banks either side of the path designed to minimise disturbance of the birds. And then you see the black bunker looming up before you, open the door, and enter another world. The bird and water world.



To begin with I had some of the uneasiness I had experienced at the Seabird Centre: I was in a dark box with windows, an unseen alien looking out on a separate world. Then some more people came in, and to my surprise simply opened (gently and quietly of course) the windows. The cold winter evening air, the sounds of water and wildlife, the smell of damp earth and rushes flooded in. And the ducks stayed. I think they sensed us more keenly, and perhaps moved away a little, but not from fear, just a sensible precaution. I spent hours there, and loved it, until it was too dark to see and I was

chilled to the bone.

I was surprised how little interpretive material there was. There were pictures of some of the birds you are likely to see, so that you can identify them, but no text, and this was refreshing. I didn't feel anyone was trying to sell messages. *Just watch the birds.* Uwe Stoneman who manages the reserve, told me later that this is intentional. People don't read: *let nature speak for itself.*

Vane farm is much more than a few hides. It has a dedicated educational centre and team that work with schools. They explicitly link work at the centre with the curriculum and teachers needs. They also do outreach – taking the reserve to the schools. They have had to adapt to the changes in education. Fifteen years ago a school groups would come and “have a day out” and hopefully learn something. Then it became much more structured, with lots of curriculum boxes to tick. Now with the “curriculum for excellence” it has become much more flexible again, and this offers tremendous opportunities for imaginative outdoor/environmental education and interdisciplinary learning.



And like all good modern centres it has the café and viewing deck – very comfortable, very impressive. Trained staff are usually in attendance here, ready to help, assessing clients needs, offering everything from packs for kids to information and stories about the birds and the farm. These are people people, who know the area, know the birds, and can tell good stories.

I asked Uwe for a magic moment – an example of people getting really *engaged*. A group of secondary school children came to Vane Farm with a poet. They were asked to observe, think, and then describe as best they could. “It worked”, said Uwe. “It really worked”.

## Deep Sea World

Its hard to be unimpressed by a three meter shark swimming over your head. And it's hard to be unimpressed by a quarter of a million visitors a year. The fact that you enter this massive aquarium, built within a disused quarry, directly below the Forth Rail Bridge adds an extra dimension.

Most people likely to read this story will have visited Deep Sea World, and if not they should do so. There is no doubt that this is an exiting place, and introduces a huge range of people to the marine environment. It appeals to everyone from toddlers to grannies, and from scientists to courting couples (not necessarily mutually exclusive). I have been there with my children, and I am sure that it was a significant factor – along with rock pools at the beach, and the “Blue Planet” - in getting them interested in marine life. What do they remember? The Conger eels, touching starfish, and of course the sharks. The shop? Yes the shop as well. But I think all of us remember that bizarre experience of walking through the acrylic tunnel, surrounded by fish. I have done a lot of diving in many wonderful locations round the world, and this was very nearly as good.

I talked to Karen Philip, the education officer about the work of Deep Sea World. This is first and foremost a business, but it's part of their philosophy to try to get everyone to learn something while they are here – from what a star fish feels like to the issues of climate change. The key, says Karen (and this echoes the words of Uwe Stoneman at Vane Farm) is the staff. People listen, especially if you have a talented communicator, but very few read, especially in a busy place like this. She recalls a moment when she was visiting another large aquarium, and was telling stories to a friend about the lives of some of the creatures they could see. Within minutes a small crowd had gathered to listen.

But this is not just an attraction or a big day out. They offer educational packages across the range of needs from primary to College and University, and from *Henry the Hermit crab* to pollution, food chains and Leisure and Tourism studies. They design their resources not just for families, but to support the educational curriculum. Karen noted – as have many others – that the old curriculum was very constraining. They always found it hard for example to relate it to whales and dolphins. But the new Curriculum for Excellence is undoubtedly more flexible.



How do you get messages across? Apart from inspirational communicators there are the usual tricks: stories about Henry the hermit crab for the very young; treasure hunts with embedded learning in the clues; quizzes and prizes; theme days or weeks. Don't just present information: get them to handle it, get them to use it.

What about age? Deep Sea World clearly appeals to all types and ages, but it is the 6-8 year olds who really get excited by this kind of thing, and you can see it in their eyes. They see things many adults don't even notice. Teenagers are the toughest to engage, but Deep Sea World employ some excellent communicators, and you can watch their lazy-cool body language gradually change to something more alert and interested. And even teenagers can't fail to be impressed by the tunnel.

## Links

Highland Adventure Safaris <http://www.highlandadventuresafaris.co.uk>  
The Scottish Seabird Centre <http://www.seabird.org/home.asp>  
Vane Farm <http://www.rspb.org.uk/reserves/guide/v/vanefarm>  
Deep Sea World <http://www.deepseaworld.com>