



## SCA Sea Paddling Guide to Good Practice

Sea paddling offers a fantastic platform from which to see seabirds, seals, 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 responsibilities, please consult the [Paddlers' Code](#).

To avoid or minimise our accidental disturbance and impact on wildlife we can increase our knowledge; e.g. being aware of the breeding seasons of birds and seals will help us avoid getting too close when they are most sensitive to our presence.

### Minimising Disturbance

When encountering wildlife your aim should be to minimise any disturbance that you might cause to the animals / habitats. This can be achieved by:

- Try not to startle or panic wild animals; never surround them / 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, 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.

### Birds

#### Birds on Cliffs

For cliff nesting seabirds such as guillemots, razorbills and kittiwakes their vulnerable time is mid-May to early July because the adults are with their eggs and young chicks. If adults are suddenly scared off the ledges, they may lose their young which may fall or be taken by predators. It is good to practice move by quietly and steadily

so as not to panic the birds. Please remember that your presence whilst walking on clifftops could also be threatening to these birds. At this time please avoid entering sea caves as birds often nest above and inside.

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. Be vigilant for nest grounds and move out of any breeding area as soon as you realise you are in or close to it. 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.



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 by moving away quietly and steadily as soon as you are aware of being close to a colony. 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 causes them to expend extra energy and reduce their feeding time, which in turn affects their survival chances.

In late summer many birds moult and are at their weakest and most vulnerable.

### Birds on 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 paddling equipment rather than dragging it, especially in dunes.

### **Birds of the 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.



### **Wildlife of the Rocky Outcrops and Marshes**

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

### **Seals**

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 paddlers 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 because they 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. It is an offence to disturb seals.





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 may take to the water when paddlers are in the same area. Difficulties arise when paddlers cause the seals to leave their rocks and beaches, tourists are disappointed to miss the seals and tour boat operators become 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 by paddlers, 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 – the outline of a moving paddler 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 wishes.

- Porpoises don't show any interest in paddlers 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. If you are close to dolphins 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 lashes 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 paddlers.



## Seaweed

Scottish seashores have a huge variety and abundance of seaweed. One species in particular is a rarity: *Ascophyllum nodosum ecad mackaii*, or wig wrack, is a form of unattached egg wrack 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. 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. For information on Wig wrack click [here](#)

Paddlers should learn to recognise this type of seaweed and avoid trampling it.

## 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*. It 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, click [here](#). Take care not to transfer seaweed between locations by cleaning your equipment and checking inside the housing of retractable skegs.

For further information visit [Marine Life Information Network \(MarLIN\)](#)

## Landing, Camping and Fires

### On Land and Camping

When on land 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 helping to improve the environment and support wildlife. Follow the SCA's advice on [Wild Camping](#) and [Human Sanitation](#). Avoid camping in Machair or dunes and pitch tents on grass behind beaches or on the sand.



## Fires

Paddlers 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.



- Light the fire below the high-water mark to be washed away by the next high tide.
- 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.
- Check on boulder beaches for the presence of birds, such as storm petrels nesting between the boulders.
- Ensure your fire is well burnt out or that there is no risk of it spreading before you go to your tents.

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.

## 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 revised in April 2017.

**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.

Please refer to the [Paddlers' Code](#) for more information about your responsibilities.

If there is evidence of [serious pollution](#) in the area, please refer to our guidance for reporting it.

The Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code also contains a useful section on the **law** (page 19) 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 or harass the white-tailed eagle at any time
- To deliberately or recklessly disturb or harass any whale, dolphin, porpoise, marine turtle or otter, or intentionally or recklessly do so to a basking shark
- To deliberately or recklessly capture, kill or injure any marine turtle, whale, dolphin, porpoise, or otter, or intentionally or recklessly kill, injure or take a basking shark
- To damage or destroy a breeding site or resting place of any marine turtle, whale, dolphin, porpoise or otter
- To deliberately or recklessly obstruct access to any structure or place used by an otter for shelter or protection
- To possess, sell or offer for sale any marine turtle, whale, dolphin, porpoise, basking shark or otter or any part of these animals
- To knowingly cause or permit any of the above offences
- To intentionally or recklessly kill, injure or take any live seal at any time
- To intentionally or recklessly harass seals at designated haul-out sites.



Please read the SCA document on [Wildlife Crime](#)



### Seeking Further Wildlife Advice

If in doubt about carrying out any activity contact [NatureScot](#) or one of the nature conservation bodies (please follow links below) 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.

### For more information please consult:

[The Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code](#)

[Marine Conservation Society](#)

[RSPB Scotland](#)

[Wildlife Trusts basking shark information](#) [Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust](#)

[The Scottish Outdoor Access Code](#)

[List of protected bird species](#)

[Plantlife Scotland](#)

[Scottish Wildlife Trust](#)

[Marine Life Information Network  
\(MarLIN\)](#)

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