Welcome to Caithness!

Caithness is a historic county bordered by Sutherland and the North Sea, in the very northeast corner of Scotland. Like the rest of the Scottish Highlands, it is home to some truly wild places. The variety of protected habitats from blanket bogs to coastal landscapes mean that this county has much to offer wildlife and visitors alike.

Hunt high and low for the UK’s rarest bumblebee!
Identify other species of bumblebee and wildflowers too
Explore Sibster’s newest woodland
Learn about Caithness’ historical flagstone industry in Castletown
Look out for whales and dolphins from the cliffs of Scrabster
Visit the castle ruins of Thurso and Keiss

There are a great many places to see wildlife in Caithness. This guide will take you on a journey to just a few of the best places in Caithness to see not only wildflowers and bumblebees, but also rare birds, cetaceans and timeworn architecture.

The Great Yellow Star of Caithness

Caithness and Sutherland hold the last remaining mainland Great yellow bumblebee populations. This guide highlights some of key sites in Caithness where you might be lucky enough to spot one of the UK’s rarest bumblebees.

Identifying Bumblebees

In Caithness you can find 13 out of the 24 UK species, including the ultra-rare Great yellow bumblebee. Use the ID chart below for the main species of the area.

First check the colour of the bee’s tail end and narrow down the options from there. Next count the number, colour and positioning of the other coloured bands.

Q W M
Common carder bee

Great yellow bumblebee

Moss carder bee

Garden bumblebee

Bluff-tailed bumblebee

White-tailed bumblebee

Heath bumblebee

Gypsy cuckoo bumblebee

Early bumblebee

Bilberry bumblebee

News from the Biodiversity Conservation

The sites in this guide are home to many UK Biodiversity Action Plan species, including the Great yellow bumblebee. When visiting, please help us to protect these important, sensitive habitats by remembering the Scottish Outdoor Access Code – www.outdooraccess-scotland.com.

Note: A red sneezeweed is a threatening species and is not to be collected. Always leave plants in the wild!

The Great Yellow Star of Caithness

Follow us on www.bumblebeetrail.org.uk

Visit
Explore
Look
Identify

Photographic guide to identifying wildflowers


The Great yellow bumblebee (Bombus distinguendus) was once widespread across the UK, but over the last century intensive farming methods and the loss of wildflower rich habitats have caused its distribution to decline by 80%. Now this bee can only be found on the very north coast of Scotland and a few of the outlying islands, where traditional crofting practices protect the machair landscape that it needs to survive.

Queens emerge from hibernation from late May, later than most other species of bumblebee. They nest underground in abandoned mouse or rabbit holes. Throughout the remainder of summer the 20–50 workers in each nest will forage for pollen and nectar to support the growing young bumblebees. Favourite foraging plants include Red clover, Knapweed and vetches.

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Caithness Bumblebee Trail

Key
- woodland trail
- coastal walk
- public toilets
- car park
- picnic site
- by foot
- by car
- by train
- by bus

Holborn Head, Scraber
The grassy topped cliffs of Holborn Head provide a promising habitat for bumblebees, as well as popular look out point for whale-watchers!

Activities: The coastal footpaths provide an easy 7.5km circular walk along the cliffs with views over Thurso and the Orkney Islands, passing interesting geological features such as the Devil’s Bridge blow hole. Visit the Holborn Head lighthouse and look out for bumblebees in the sandy grasslands. If you have the time, venture out to Orkney by ferry from Scraber harbour.

Broubster Leans RSPB Reserve
The RSPB manage this 300ha site, formed on the floodplains of the River Fors, in collaboration with local farmers and crofters. The reserve is a fantastic mosaic of different habitat types, including wet grassland, transition mires, pools, rush pasture, farmland and protected blanket bogs.

The herd of cattle that graze in the area is a vital part of the management plan of this reserve, keeping the vegetation short and allowing many species of wader to breed here. In fact, this site is home to nationally important populations of Greenland white-fronted geese in the winter and has been accredited as a Special Protection Area (SPA) and a Special Site of Scientific Interest (SSSI).

Activities: There are no designated trails here but this site has some of the best bird-watching opportunities in Caithness. Wildflower rich road-side verges and meadows provide fantastic bumblebee habitat.

Thurso Castle
In 2015, Thurso was declared the UK’s first ‘Great yellow bumblebee town’ and made home to a Heritage Lottery funded Bumblebee Conservation Trust project entitled Thurso: Gateway to the Great Yellow.

Activities: Visit the museum and exhibition gallery Caithness Horizons to learn more about the rich history and current events in Thurso and the surrounding areas. Thurso is the perfect base for exploring the county of Caithness.

Castlehill Harbour
The stone harbour at Castlehill was built by James Bremner in 1820 to facilitate the Caithness flagstone quarrying business. Stone from Castlehill quarry can be seen in the field walls of Caithness but was also exported as far afield as Sydney and Mumbai.

Now, the harbour is home to Castlehill Heritage Centre & Flagstone Trail and is accredited with a series of informative, detailed signposts.

Keiss Harbour
Once a favourite landing spot for Norwegian pirates and raiders, now a thriving fishing village. Keiss Harbour was built by James Bremner in 1831 and is used by whale, crab and herring boats. This part of the coast line is particularly rich in wildflowers including knapweed and clover but also has plenty of nectar rich comfrey – a favourite foraging plant of long-tongued bumblebees such as the Great yellow bumblebee.

Activities: A footpath track will lead you through wildflower rich coastline between Keiss Harbour and the sandy beach of Sinclair’s Bay, taking in the 16th century castle ruins along the way.

Dunnet Forest and dunes
Part of Dunnet Links SSSI. Dunnet Forest is owned and managed by a local charitable trust for the benefit of the whole community. Explore the forest with its rich wildlife and varied habitats. Opposite the car park is a path through the dunes that will lead you through an area full of kidney vetch towards the white sands of Dunnet Bay.

Activities: A network of paths and bridleways lets you explore the whole forest, with a few surprises to find along the way – look out for the sculptures, a huge wooden xylophone, and a log cabin in the heart of the forest.

Sibster Forestry Commission Scotland
In 2010, Forestry Commission Scotland planted 350,000 oak, birch, beech, alder and rowan trees on the 213ha site of an old farm in Caithness, creating this young broadleaf woodland.

Activities: Sibster has two, short circular walks on site. Both are gravel paths suitable for wheelchair access although be aware that the ground may be uneven or steep in some places.

If you see a Great yellow bumblebee, please submit your record (with pictures) to iRecord: http://bit.ly/BBCTiRecord

Information from recorded sightings is shared across conservation organisations and your data could help to create accurate up-to-date atlas and educational material, as well as helping to focus conservation efforts where they are needed.

Thurso: Gateway to the Great Yellow
Wildflower areas around the ruins of 19th century Thurso Castle offer a lovely walk, along the coastline with the chance to see the elusive Great yellow bumblebee that has become an emblem of this harbour town.

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www.bumblebeeconservation.org