

# The 2018 David Boyd Event

## Part 3 : The Benbecula Machair





Borve Castle,



Remote Radar Head, Benbecula,



### RADAR & CASTLE WEARIE

Benbecula sits between North and South Uist in the Outer Hebrides. The three islands are connected by causeways, as is South Uist to Eriskay. Ferries link the islands to Harris and Lewis in the north and to Barra in the south. These and the various other western isles have their own local authority, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (Western Isles Council). It has its headquarters in Stornoway on Lewis.

There is large modern building a few miles south of Nunton Steading. This is Benbecula campus, part of Lewis Castle College, itself part of the University of the Highlands and Islands which is based in Inverness. Benbecula is particularly well respected as a for its music courses. So the islands may be distant from Scotland's cities and have very different life style, their educational needs are well catered for. Beside the College is the High School and a community Centre and swimming pool. North of Nunton is The Remote Radar Head, Benbecula, an air defence radar station operated by the RAF.

In complete contrast to these modern and ultra modern facilities is Borve Castle, Also known as Castle Wearie. It is a ruined 14th Century tower house. It was built around 1350 for Amie mac Ruari, wife of John of Islay and was home to the Macdonalds of Benbecula until the early 17th Century. John of Islay was John MacDonald, the first Dominus Insulorum, (Lord of the Isles) from 1336 till 1386 and chief of clan Donald. His father had received lands in Ardnamurchan, Lochaber, Duror and Glencoe by Robert the Bruce. The clan went from being poor relations to the most powerful in the western Isles. Their territory was further extended by King David II, son of The Bruce. He divorced Amie and married Margaret Stewart, Daughter of Robert II although he is reputed to have been a very religious man. The ruins of Borve castle could tell a tale fit for a soap opera. Interestingly the RAF have chosen an eagle as their crest while the MacDonalds have a raven.

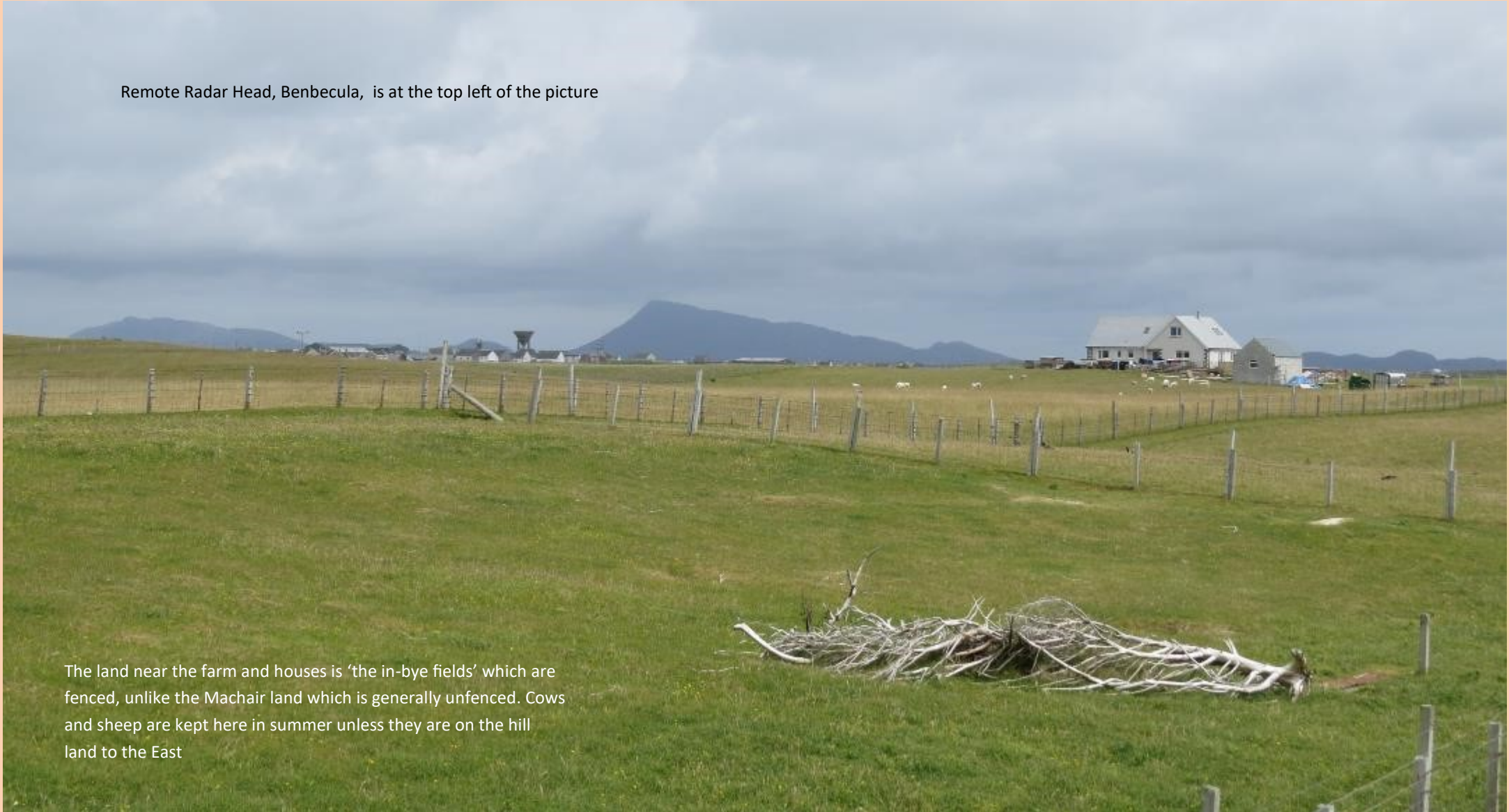


## FRIDAY 22 JUNE 2018

This was our Growing Rock Garden Plants in Containers morning. It was the chance for the 41 SRGC members chance to mix and work alongside the 16 local gardeners who had come to learn. In no time at all everyone got stuck in. At each stage of the morning demonstration, the three instructors instructed. Matt Topsfield, who organised the whole event, Ian Young and Ian Christie led the participants through the stages. I think several members learned a lot as well. This was a high powered SRGC event. There were four Past Presidents in Benbecula. Enough knowledge between us to fill a few troughs! Questions were interspersed throughout the demonstrations. At the end of the morning it was time for a group photograph in which all the troughs were laid out in the courtyard and everyone lined up behind them. every school has a class photo taken each year so it was fitting that we recorded our morning's work in the same fashion.

I have written up the morning workshop separately as 'Rock Gardening in Containers, the 2018 David Boyd Event held in Benbecula'. Snappy title!

Remote Radar Head, Benbecula, is at the top left of the picture



The land near the farm and houses is 'the in-bye fields' which are fenced, unlike the Machair land which is generally unfenced. Cows and sheep are kept here in summer unless they are on the hill land to the East



We then sat around to enjoy the sunshine. Tea, coffee & cake was also available. In the afternoon Matt introduced us to the topography, geology, botany, agriculture and ornithology of the Uists and Benbecula and how they all interact to form the landscapes which we had come to see and study—The Machair. As our introduction he talked about three sites near Nunton Steading which we could explore. At our leisure. This was important as some members were fitter and more able than others. The result was that we split up into small groups and would come across others in our group, chat and compare finds then move on and soon up with meet others.

The sites of the Benbecula Machair which we could explore were:-

- **Nunton Beach and Machair**, dunes and beach (walking trail from Nunton Steadings).
  - **Benbecula Lochs** (a short drive away, see a variety of wading and water birds).
  - **Lionacleit machair**, knee locally as "stinky beach" - dunes and beach (a short drive away)
- Matt thoughtfully produced laminated guides to the three sites.

*Anthyllis vulneraria*, Kidney vetch, is common on the slopes of the dunes and on the Machair

The white sand of the beach is the result of thousands of years of shells being smashed and broken into tiny particles by the thrashing of the Atlantic waves against the coastal rocks. The sand is blown into dunes by the prevailing winds and anchored in place by Maram grass and washed up seaweed. The forests of Kelp just offshore reduce the power of the waves as they lap up onto the beach. Several plants grow in the dunes but few actually on the beach. The Machair is the flat land sheltered behind the coastal sand dunes.

Nunton Beach and Machair



The Shifting Whispering Sands. Also a great tune as recorded by Billy Vaughn his orchestra.



The Sand dunes at Nunton are well clothed in Marram Grass and Lyme grass. Note the patches of Kidney vetch. Further along the vegetation had 'failed', resulting in a collapse of the dune. Stones and pebbles washed up on the beach help to stabilise the sand. I like the way the waves have arranged the pebbles into lines.





Sea Mayweed—*Tripleurospermum maritimum*

Eider ducks down on the rocks

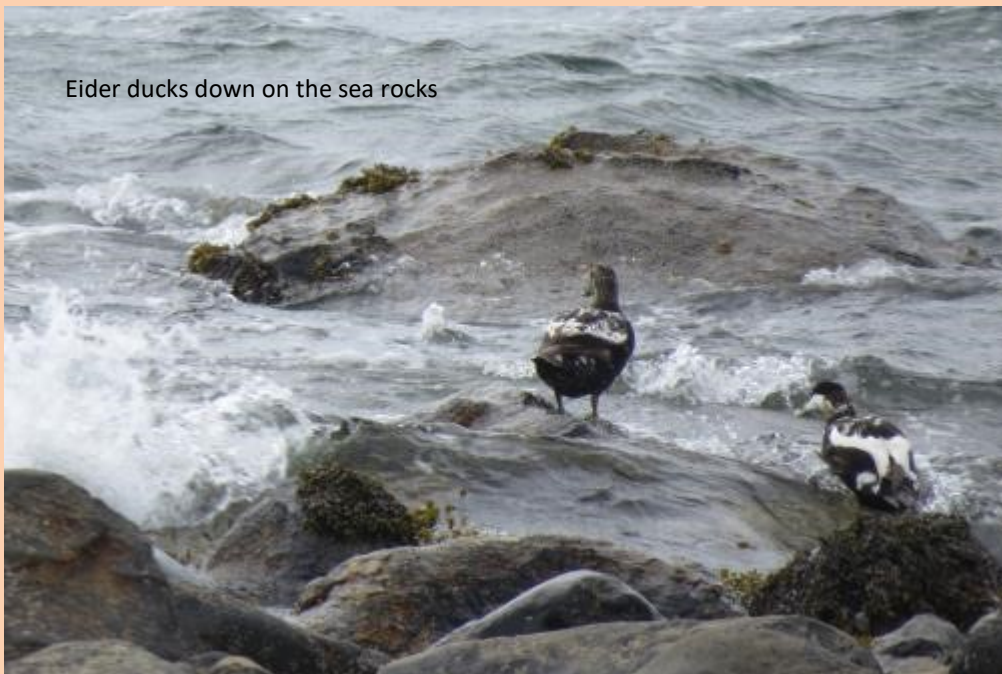


Blackheaded Gulls at Nunton Beach enjoying the surf



Fields of Kelp offshore modify the force of the waves, allowing beach sand to accumulate

Eider ducks down on the sea rocks







Nunton Beach



The Machair above Nunton Beach





Common Cotton Grass, *Eriophorum angustifolium* is really a sedge not a grass. It spreads by underground rhizomes. It has tiny flowers which produce seeds with longhairs. The attractive cotton heads are in fact seed heads.



In wetter land above the beach cotton grass grew in profusion. Oystercatchers screamed and generally behaved noisily when we disturbed them. Several *Dactylorhiza purpurella* [Northern Marsh orchid] were there to be found, 'once you got your eye in'. Several were burnt by the sea winds on the side of the flower head which faced west. Small plants of *Lychnis flos-cuculi* were dotted around. If this had been a wet spring we would not have been able to walk on this normally boggy ground.

# Thyme for lunch



Lunch 'Al Fresco' at Nunton Beach



The red-headed green grass of the Uists



I think this grass is Red fescue, *Festuca rubra*. It is very attractive in seed and if I were a sheep I might be tempted to eat it. Why I did not nibble some is a mystery as I often pick long grass and munch on the inner sweet stem. As children we thought it would be healthy and might quench our thirst.

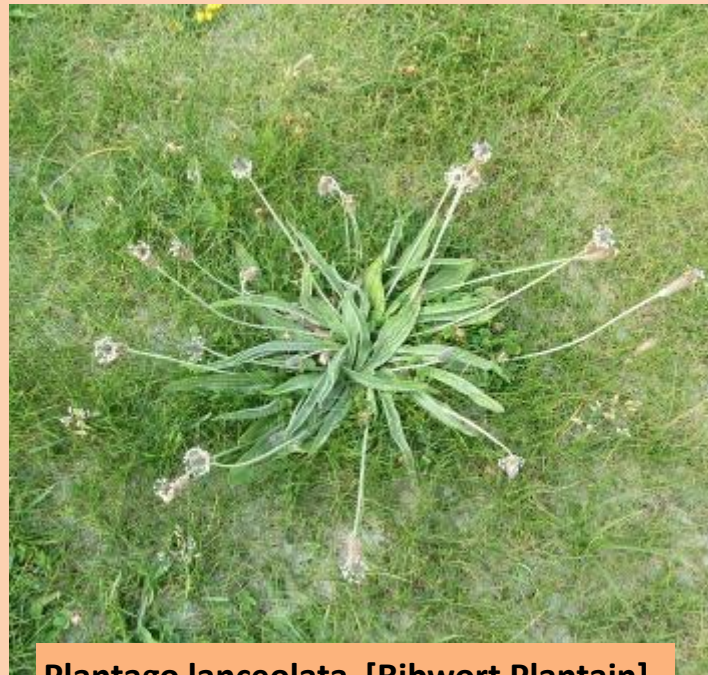


**Lionacleit machair**, Stinky Beach, is a stretch of sand on the south eastern coast of Benbecula, a bit west of the causeway linking to South Uist. The channel between the islands is Bagh nam Foailleann, which is relatively shallow at the western end where the Loinacleit beach and at its western end is dotted with hundreds of small islands. The sands of the west extend from Lionacleit to the eastern side of the causeway. It is in these sands that the cockle pickers work at low tide. The prevailing winds and tides combine to build up masses of gather broken seaweed onto Stinky Beach. The name is a bit derogatory but those with a sense of smell agreed that it was indeed an appropriate one. I could not smell it! The machair here lies between the beach and the main road with an easy path parallel to the road.





The spectacular view south from Lionacleit beach where the hills of South Uist stand proudly on the horizon. The machair sparkles with wee floral gems. The plants thrive protected by the long grass but I was exposed to the 'brisk breeze'. It was more sheltered on the beach.



*Plantago lanceolata* [Ribwort Plantain]



*Ranunculus acris* [Meadow buttercup]  
dwarfed by the weather



South of Stinky Bay, Lionacleit Beach's typical white sands



*Lotus corniculatus* [Bird's foot trefoil]



*Leymus arenarius* [Lyme Grass]



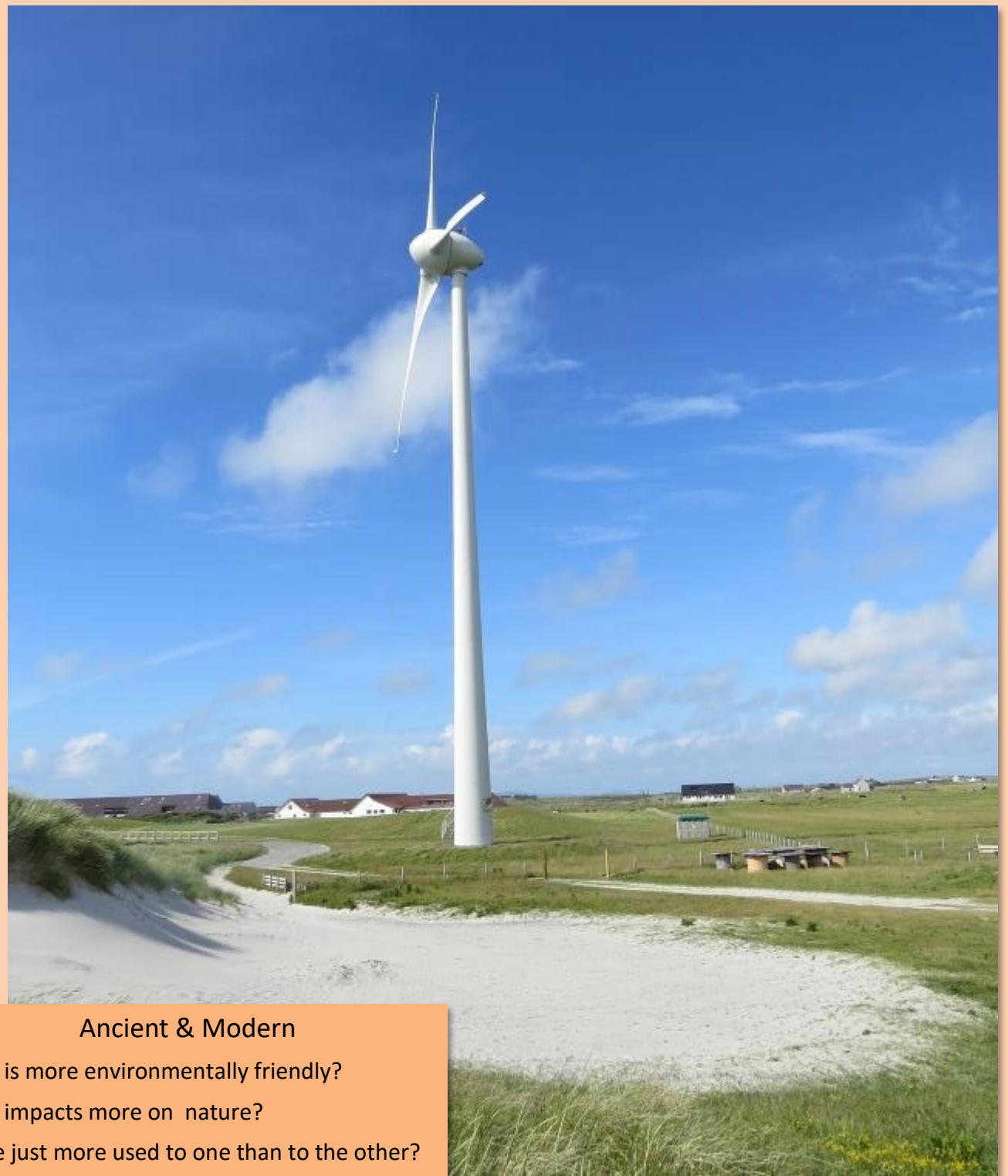


A visitor to these islands, coming from city or mainland might expect that the island life would be unchanged and unaffected by the pace of change in our modern world. They would be wrong!

Side by side with and built on top of some of the most ancient rocks in the world there are modern wind turbines. One does not have to like them but I don't think that a few here and there are too intrusive. The turbines are certainly spectacular. That they produce 'clean' electricity when they work is true. There is controversy as to how much 'dirty' energy is used in the construction, transport and assembly stages. I hope they find a way to store their excess electricity in batteries very soon. All over the islands and in many places in highland Scotland people still cut and dry peat for fuel. I have little doubt that folk argue that burning peat is carbon neutral as it eventually builds up again. Another contrast is in the stone walled, thatched houses and today's well built and well insulated Benbecula college and other new buildings. Internet access may be slow or non-existent in places but it is a wonderful link with the modern world. The paucity of shops might seem a negative but it is fascinating to note that people can exist without superstores and shopping malls. It appears that the few shops that there are sufficient for the islanders' needs.

This contrast of ancient and traditional beside the modern and intrusive is one of the things that stimulate the mind and make a visit more enjoyable.





### Ancient & Modern

Which is more environmentally friendly?

Which impacts more on nature?

Are we just more used to one than to the other?



The kelp and seaweed fields, just offshore, are home to Eider ducks [top pics] and Shelducks [bottom pics]. Even the young eiders enjoy disappearing to look for food beneath the surface. The kelp is important in stabilising the sand while also reducing the eroding force of the waves.





**Shelduck ducklings and Eider duck ducklings swim together in the shelter of off shore rocks off Stinky Beach. They just bob up and down as the waves run past.**

**Benbecula Lochs.** We hoped to find Phalaropes on this wee loch but unfortunately rare birds don't appear on demand. Quieter members of the group did see them. Our hotel friend Ian knew where they were. This land between the machair and the peat lands is very wet in winter and dries out in summer. Water occupies a greater area than land in this corner of Benbecula. The houses are built on the higher ground. Yellow flag Irises (*Iris pseudacorus*) lined many of the roadsides. Common Cotton Grass grows in huge patches.



**Black Headed Gulls**





**The community of Griminis**









Cotton Grass  
*Eriophorum angustifolium*

Creeping Thistle  
*Cirsium arvense*





### ***Nymphaea alba***

The surface of many of the fresh water Benbecula lochs were home to White Water lilies. I have little doubt that lightweight amphibians could walk from one side of a pond to the other just walking on the round lily pads. The first time I saw water lilies in the North west highlands I wondered if they had been introduced. I now know better and that they are native. They are one of our most exotic native plants. I looked around and listened expecting to see and hear a Budweiser frog.



The sites which Matt chose were easy to find and park cars as well as to walk on. They were definitely a good introduction to the flora and topography of the islands. At the end of the day after our group supper in Nunton Steading, provided and cooked by Matt, we had two choices. For those with enough energy there was the opportunity to step outside to see ( I think that should be 'listen') if they could hear corncrakes at dusk in the field over the road from Nunton Steading. I wanted to, but fatigue defeated me. Anne, Andrew and I returned to the Orisay Inn.

The full bellies, good company and fresh air combined made a relatively early return to bed necessary to refresh us for morning.

**We did not see any Seals, Corncrakes or Phalaropes. Here are pictures taken by the RSPB and visitscotland**

**Both give good advice for anyone planning to visit the Western Isles. We SRGC members had Matt.**

**Local knowledge...ye cannae whack it!**



The RSPB is organising a trip for 8 people on 20th till 25th May 2019 . It is advertised on their web site. I have used the list of species they hope to see. As you can tell I must return to be more observant.

**Short list of species:** Whooper Swan, Eider, Gadwall, Garganey, Whimbrel, Black-tailed Godwit, Golden Plover, Red-necked Phalarope, Purple Sandpiper, Glaucous Gull, Great Skua, Arctic Skua, Arctic Tern, Little Tern, Corncrake, Short-eared Owl, Golden Eagle, White-tailed Eagle, Hen Harrier, Peregrine, Merlin, Red-throated, Black-throated and Great Northern Divers. Manx Shearwater, Black Guillemot, Corn Bunting, Twite, plus many more. Red Deer, Grey and Common Seals, Otters.

