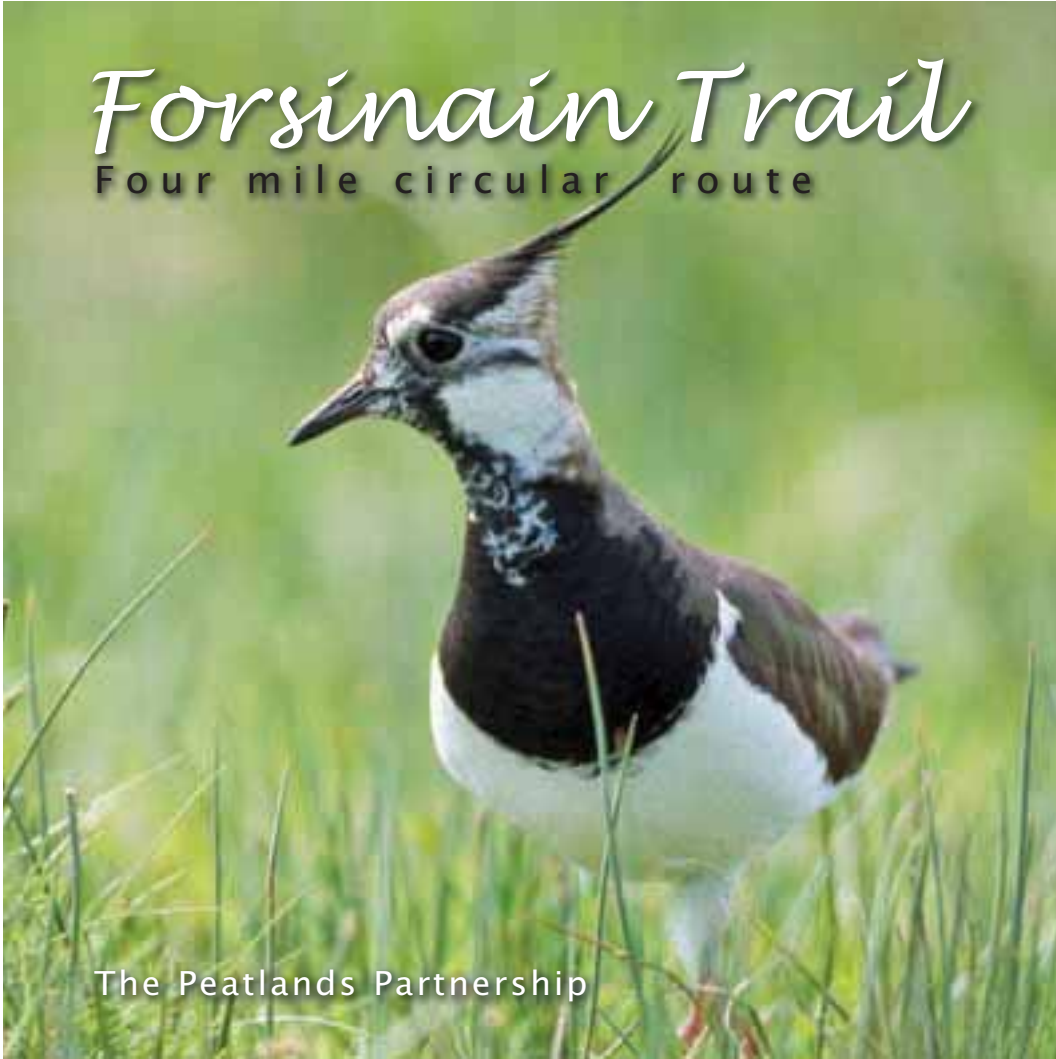


# *Forsinain Trail*

Four mile circular route



The Peatlands Partnership

## *The Forsinain Trail*

Sitting on the edge of Caithness & Sutherland's high quality bogs, the four mile Forsinain Trail is self-guided and takes in farm fields, bog pools, riverside and woodland allowing an insight into conservation management and exciting wildlife.

It starts on The Flows National Nature Reserve, part of RSPB Forsinard Nature Reserve, continues through Forestry Commission Scotland's Forsinain Forest and returns along the privately owned River Halladale salmon river.

This circular trail which rises 100m to the bog begins at the roadside car park on the River Halladale before ascending the farm road through fields used intensively by feeding and breeding peatland bird species. As there is a steep hill on the farm road, a small car park has been created

above it for the sole use of disabled drivers which will provide views and bird watching into the adjacent fields.

Further on, the trail follows a grassy track to the top of the fields and out onto a small area of blanket bog with peat cutting and bog pools, which is crossed on flagstone stepping stones.

The trail then follows an unsurfaced route for approximately one mile through a conifer plantation with restoration felling and passing close to a loch where red-throated divers sometimes breed.

Descending on the forest road the final section follows an unsurfaced route along the grassy riverbanks of the River Halladale with a short climb to a viewpoint on the way.

Front cover: *Lapwing* ©RSPB



## *Safety*

Strong footwear and outdoor clothing are highly recommended as are food, water and a mobile phone. The peat bog section is very wet and visitors are requested to stay on the marked path and flagstones for their own safety and to avoid damaging the fragile surface, which can take many years to recover from trampling.

The trail is partly on a National Nature Reserve, passes breeding areas for specially protected birds and mammals and runs through a farm with

cattle and sheep and a private dwelling.

Please keep your dog on a short lead or under close control at all times.

Please remember that National Nature Reserves are carefully managed for nature conservation and to safeguard rare animals and plants. Take care to avoid damaging the site or disturbing its wildlife, or interfering with its management or enjoyment by others.

Total circular trail length: four miles.





*Cotton grass*

©Ken Crossan/SNH



*Great sundew*

©Laurie Campbell/SNH

*Sphagnum moss*

©Norrie Russell





*Greenshank*

©Norrie Russell



*Golden plover*

©RSPB



*Dunlin*

©Ken Crossan/SNH

## 1. *Trail Head*

A great peatlands experience starts here!

## 2. *Forsinain Fields*

In addition to producing food, farmland can provide a home for a wide variety of birds, wild plants, insects and other animals. Forsinain Farm is owned by the RSPB and is managed primarily to provide a feeding ground for the golden plover and dunlin which nest on the surrounding bogs. During the breeding season (April to July), they can be seen in full plumage as they fly in daily from the surrounding peatlands to feed and gain condition for egg laying and chick rearing. Here they join local lapwing, greylag geese, curlew and snipe on the grazed fields with special bird food crops attracting breeding reed bunting and filling the air with the bubbling song of skylarks.



### 3. Peat Cutting

Here you will be able to make out the edges of old peat cuttings associated with the farm. Hand cutting peat for domestic fuel is a traditional activity that causes little long-term damage to the bog when the vegetated turves are carefully replaced to regenerate, although larger-scale peat extraction can be very damaging and is unsustainable. Once air dried, the peats, shrunk and hardened, are carried home to burn in the winter. Peat bogs consist of a relatively thin spongy living layer of specialised

moss and other bog plants covering a thick layer of peat.

This peat is composed of the dead remains of plants built up over the last 7,000 years. Unusually, the waterlogged oxygen-free conditions in peat bogs prevent the dead plants from breaking down preserving them in the soil. Peat in these blanket bogs is built up at an average rate of only 1mm every four years, so peat taken from just a metre below the surface can be four thousand years old!



*Peat cutting Forsinard* ©Norrie Russell

*An old shoe found in the Caithness peatlands estimated to be 200 years old*



©Linda Hutton





*Dubh Lochans near Forsinard* ©Steve Moore/SNH

#### *4. Dubh Lochans*

Bogs develop a surface of hummocks and hollows, with the deeper hollows lying below the water table and appearing as water-filled pools. Their colourful 'Persian carpet' appearance is due to the rich and dynamic pattern of colourful sphagnum mosses, cotton and deer grasses, lichens and other plants, changing with the local ground conditions. Sphagnum moss, which is the major creator and component of

peat, provides more or less continuous cover over the bog surface. Look closely for the tiny sundew leaves which are covered in red hairs, each tipped with a droplet of sticky 'dew' which attracts and traps unwitting insects as large as damselflies.

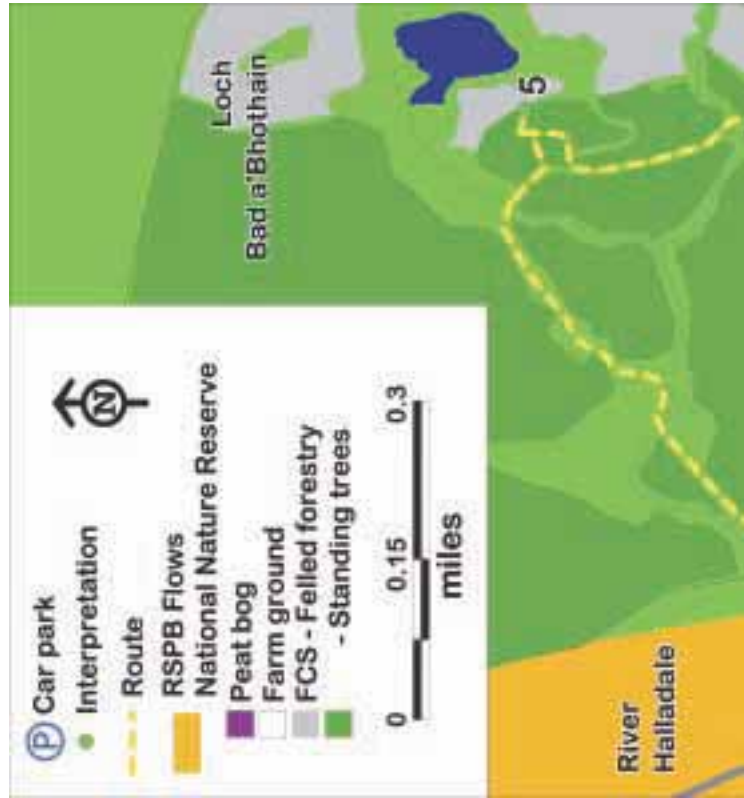
Large heath butterflies and dragonflies frequent the pools along with frogs, newts and water beetles.





Golden eagle and ravens ©Julian Smith

### *Forsinain Trail Map*







Golden eagle ©Julian Smith





*Bird hide overlooking Loch Bad a' Bhothain*

©Linda Hutton

### *5. Loch Bad a' Bhothain*

The trees around you have been cut down by Forestry Commission Scotland as part of a programme of peatland restoration. This currently involves removing recently planted conifers from the wettest areas of the naturally treeless blanket bog before they become large enough to shrink and crack the peat structure and alter its wildlife.

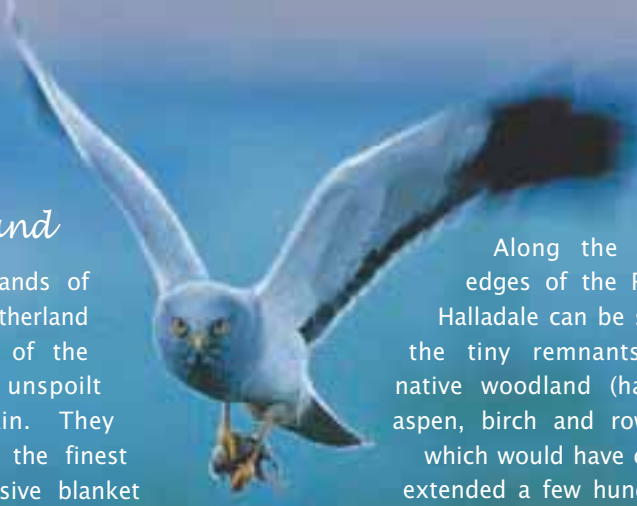
The small 'island' in the loch is actually a floating nest raft installed to attract red-throated divers. These rare birds spend most of their year at sea feeding on sandeels and other fish, commuting daily to lochs in the safety of the peatlands to feed their young between May and August. Please be as quiet as possible during this period.



## 6. *Native Woodland and Peatland*

The wider peatlands of Caithness and Sutherland represent some of the last remaining unspoilt areas in Britain. They contain perhaps the finest and most extensive blanket bog to be found anywhere in the world.

This trail only manages to skirt around its edges in areas where man has had significant impacts, with brief glimpses of its vast wildness beyond. From here can be seen the rolling open bog sitting above the other side of the strath and swathes of conifers planted in the 1980's.

A photograph of a hen harrier in flight, showing its white plumage and dark wingtips. The bird is captured in a dynamic pose with its wings spread wide, set against a clear blue sky.

Along the very edges of the River Halladale can be seen the tiny remnants of native woodland (hazel, aspen, birch and rowan) which would have once extended a few hundred metres up the steeper strath slopes to the edge of the deep blanket peats. Indeed older maps name one of the bracken-covered slopes across the river as 'Coille Mhor' (Gaelic for big wood) and these slopes with better soils are where native woodland can be successfully restored as is happening here. Watch out for red deer, hen harrier, merlin, raven & cuckoo.

*Hen harrier*

©Ken Crossan/SNH



## 7. River Halladale

Many salmon rivers such as the Halladale have catchments dominated by bog. In addition to the standing pools and lochs further on, rainwater falling on the bog runs off the saturated peat to form fast-flowing burns and rivers. Fertile river straths fed by the flowing waters are home to a rich community of mammals, fish, birds, insects and plants. This spot is

a good place to look out for feeding birds, some of which nest on the peatlands come to the river to feed on water insects and their larvae. Birds regularly seen in spring include: greenshank, common sandpiper, dipper, curlew, hen harrier and short-eared owl. Otters are occasionally spotted and in November the salmon can be seen spawning in the shallow river gravels.





### *Why the land is important*

The peatlands of Caithness and Sutherland are a special place of national and international importance. Nowhere else in Britain, and possibly the world, is there such an extensive area of this type of peatland (c400,000ha). Together with associated areas of moorland and open water, large areas of the peatlands are designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). They are recognised to be of national importance for conservation both as a habitat in their own right and because of the diverse range of rare and unusual breeding birds they support. The designated peatlands are also part of the Natura 2000 series of sites (Special Protection Areas and Special Areas of Conservation), which seeks to maintain representative examples of the range of habitats and species across the European Union (EU).

*The Caithness peatlands* ©Norrie Russell

## *The Peatlands Partnership's Vision*

Our vision for the peatlands is one of a revitalised landscape, with extensive sweeps of hill and bog intersected by fertile straths. These straths and coastal strips support a mosaic of productive crofts and farms, rivers, forestry and woodland. Above and between the straths lie the world-renowned peatlands, which, together with their lochs and lochans, support a spectacular assemblage of birds, plants and other wildlife, including

internationally important numbers of raptors, waders and waterfowl. The straths, bogs, hills, lochs, rivers, woodlands and forestry are managed together for the wide range of services they provide and interests they support. No one land use dominates to the detriment of others. Rather there is mutual support, with everything underpinned by a healthy environment, at the centre of which is the great peatland of the north.



*Red deer hind and calf*

©Norrie Russell





*Produced by :  
The Peatlands Partnership*

For more information about the Partnership please contact:

Linda Hutton, Peatlands  
Project Officer: 01847 893104  
email: linda.hutton@snh.gov.uk

Other Partnership Contacts:

SNH North Highland:  
NORTH\_HIGHLAND@snh.gov.uk

Forestry Commission Scotland  
Malcolm MacDougall: 01862 810359

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)  
Norrie Russell: 01641 571225

Distance to Trail (miles)	
From Melnich:	14
From Thurso:	28
From Helmsdale:	25
From Wick:	49
From Inverness:	93



*Tern harriers*  
©Julian Smith



*Red-throated diver*

©RSPB c/o Chris Gomersall



Designed by Designsmith 2009