

## Northern exposure

# Gone fishing

## New film explores natural talents of Hebridean ghillies

By Sandra Dick

COUNTLESS lochs dot the landscape of North Uist, creating a paradise on Earth for anglers in search of trout and the king of fish, salmon.

Without the guiding hand of an expert ghillie, however, hopeful anglers would, in the words of one, “spend your day rowing, and not fishing”.

Expert in every element of their beat – from the impact of the wind speed on the salmon’s behaviour to, most importantly, the precise spot to land that whopper – the craft of the ghillie may seem to be all about bagging the biggest fish.

But, as a captivating new BBC Alba documentary shows, the catch of the day is almost a sideshow for the unique experiences shared by angler and ghillie as they while away the hours with just nature’s glory and each other for company.

And, while the day-to-day lives of the well-off high-fliers who sweep into west coast island estates can be a world away from that of the humble ghillie, it transpires the bond – and confidences – they often share surpasses any wealth or social backgrounds. Against a backdrop of mesmerising Hebridean scenery, the BBC Alba film follows North Uist ghillie Seumas (James) MacLetchie as he ventures beyond his own familiar beat spanning dozens of lochs and sea lochs to meet fellow ghillies on estates in Lewis and Harris.

### Local insight

ALTHOUGH the distance between them may seem relatively small, the mountain lochs, roaring rivers and turquoise sea pools that make up their individual beats require expert local knowledge of terrain, weather patterns and waters only acquired from years spent in nature and the company of other ghillies.

**A fascinating BBC documentary follows North Uist ‘Jedi master of the ghillie’ Seumas MacLetchie as he shares his unique experiences with others familiar with the craft**



Above and left, Seamus MacLetchie on the job. Left is youngster Isla Docherty and right are John Docherty and Lena Harris



Despite the differences, however, the film uncovers entwined stories of camaraderie between anglers and ghillies, respect, and deep affection for the landscape.

Seumas, a ghillie at Lochmaddy Hotel on North Uist for more than

40 years, said: “The Hebrides have a reputation of being fantastic places to go, but behind the estates are these people who live there and take clients there. The film is a nostalgic journey through the Hebrides about people who live in that environment, respect it, and appreciate it. It’s about their love of the land.”

Trusadh: The Ghillie’s Story also examines how ghillie culture has shifted from days when tweed-suited ghillies were expected to keep a respectable distance from well-to-do visitors –

including eating lunch separately – to present days, when they often forge lifelong friendships with guests.

### Lost heritage

IT also highlights the role they have in keeping an eye on the changing environment, and the desperate need to ensure their craft and a slice of heritage is not lost. “Ghillies are really silent ambassadors for the environment. They are continually looking at the health of





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the water and the fish," said Seumas. "Fish are a good indicator of health of a system, but everything is intertwined, the sea eagles, the fish, the water temperature.

"Ghillies know if you take something out of that equation, and as soon as you remove ghillies from the environment, you have issues and problems."

## Prime spots

THE film traverses stunning Hebridean landscapes and encounters current and retired ghillies at Borge Estate in west Harris, Uig Lodge on the Isle of Lewis and Grimersta Estate where, in 1888, one angler landed 54 salmon and 15 sea trout in a single session. There, Grimersta's full-time ghillie, Peter Ratcliffe, tells how the role is more than simply guiding guests to prime fishing spots.

"The real pleasure is when you introduce people to fishing for the first time," he said. "The idea you can help someone catch their first salmon which could potentially hook them for the rest of their life ... that is an honour.

"Sometimes it's the reverse, it's the last fish you have helped people catch. We had a member last year who died, and I won't be able to go out this year without remembering his reactions, the fish he caught, the time he broke his rod in half and the fly that got caught in his finger."

John Docherty of Lochmaddy Hotel, who also works as a ghillie, added:

"Ghillies are worth their weight in gold. "If you are going to go into a boat but don't have a ghillie and expect to catch sea trout and salmon, you are going to spend your day rowing and not fishing.

"Mastering a boat when it's blowing 30 or 40mph takes a special kind of ghillie."

Seumas, he said, is "like a Jedi master of the ghillie – there's not a part of water on North Uist that he doesn't know something about."

There were 12 ghillies at Lochmaddy Hotel when a 16-year-old Seumas joined – numbers have now dropped to just three.

■ Trusadh: Sgeulachd a' Ghille/The Ghillie's Story is on BBC Alba on Monday, November 15 at 9pm

## Second beaver site identified

A second beaver release site has been identified in Scotland.

Argaty, a centre near Doune which is famous for its red kites, is to be Scotland's second such location after Knapdale, Argyll was designated back in 2009.

Scotland's nature agency NatureScot has issued a protected species licence allowing beavers to be released into a new location, reinforcing the population that is already resident nearby.

NatureScot's head of wildlife management, Donald Fraser, said: "This will allow beavers to be trapped and removed from highly productive agricultural land where they are causing damage to farmland.

"They will then be released in an area where nature will benefit and there is less risk to agriculture."

## Welsh's vax views

Trainspotting author Irvine Welsh has insisted he is not "an anti-vaxxer" after appearing to question the safety of Covid vaccines.

Referring to the Prime Minister, Welsh tweeted: "Make sure you take this sound medical advice on a third dose of an iffy product from a serial liar ..."

When his followers questioned his remarks – with one saying "Thought you were better than that" – he replied: "Okay it's a great product, it's saved humanity, Nobel peace prize for our leaders ..."

## Granite City plans

A multimillion-pound plan is set to transform Aberdeen's city centre, market and beachfront.

The scheme given the go-ahead by Aberdeen councillors will include the pedestrianisation of Union Street, the creation of a new city market and the revitalisation of the beach area.

The plans also include the creation of a new pier, new green hub and a state-of-the-art sports area which could include a new stadium for Aberdeen FC.

## Beauty at home

# Scottish destination is UK's most favourite scenic spot

By Neil Lancefield

IT is a majestic landscape of stunning natural beauty that draws visitors from around the world.

Now the area of Assynt-Coigach in Sutherland in the north of Scotland has been named Britain's most favourite scenic destination due to its "wild, spectacular and unique" landscape.

The area was honoured along with Cornwall's Isles of Scilly, according to the findings of a new survey.

Some 5,800 members of consumer group Which? were asked about their experiences of travel throughout the UK to garner opinion.

It is the second year in a row that the Isles of Scilly – renowned for their white sandy beaches – were honoured for their outstanding natural beauty (AONB) across England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The archipelago received five stars for scenery, walks, wildlife spotting, peace and quiet, food and drink, and accommodation, with an overall score of 91 per cent.

Scotland does not have AONBs, so respondents were questioned about its 40 national scenic areas, resulting in Assynt-Coigach being ranked in first place.

Its spectacular landscape features cliffs, sea stacks and wild moorlands.

The fishing port of Lochinver is the main settlement in Assynt, while the crofting community of Achiltibuie, overlooking the Summer Isles – is the centre of Coigach.

The area was given an overall score of 92%, with five stars for scenery and peace and quiet,



Assynt-Coigach in Sutherland is the UK's favourite beauty spot

and four stars for walks. One visitor described it as "wild, spectacular and unique".

The Causeway Coast was the highest scoring AONB in Northern Ireland, with 84%.

The main attraction on this stretch of the Antrim coast is the polygonal basalt columns of The Giant's Causeway.

One respondent to the poll said: "A visit to the Giant's Causeway alone is reason enough to visit. Combine this with the Causeway coastal path and the other attractions of the area to ice the cake."

Wales's top scoring AONB was the Gower Peninsula (82%), where visitors flock to Rhossili Bay.

Which? said the fact many of us have had to explore home shores amid the pandemic, with foreign travel banned and then restricted, has essentially introduced areas of the country to more people, with UK hospitality firms hoping the interest continues post-pandemic.

Research by Hoseasons suggests the staycation boom

will continue into 2022, finding 83% of those who took a staycation this year hope to do so again next year, with 24% already planning their next trip.

More than one-quarter of holidaymakers (28%) polled preferred a staycation over a holiday abroad while just over half, 52%, planned to take one of each in 2022.

Rory Boland, editor of magazine Which? Travel, said: "During the pandemic, many of us discovered the joys of a British holiday and our survey findings show that areas of outstanding natural beauty and national scenic areas have plenty to offer, with stiff competition between the nation's favourites.

"The best news from the survey is just how many highly-rated destinations we have to choose from, including many little-known destinations that you'll be able to enjoy without crowds."

Which? said that even the destinations ranked at the lower end of its tables received "respectable scores".

## Furloughed workers 'six times more likely' to have lost jobs

WORKERS who were furloughed are six times more likely to have lost their jobs than other employees, new research suggests.

But the end of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme is likely to have led to only a small increase in the number of people not working, said the Resolution Foundation.

Its study among 6,100 adults indicated that around 136,000 workers moved from furlough to either unemployment or inactivity. The think-tank's research showed that nearly nine out of 10 workers who were furloughed in September were

employed in October, while 12 per cent moved into either unemployment or inactivity.

The foundation said its study showed the Government was right to extend the scheme to the end of September, adding that the biggest economic contraction in a century has led to one of the smallest recession-led rises in unemployment.

However, recently furloughed workers faced a risk of entering unemployment in October that was six times higher than other workers.

Charlie McCurdy, economist at the Resolution Foundation, said: "Plans to prematurely close

the scheme led to concerns that its end would spark a fresh rise in worklessness, but extending the scheme to beyond the reopening of the economy this summer has helped to limit this rise to just 136,000 workers.

"While it is welcome that unemployment has remained low, recently furloughed staff did face a much higher risk of losing their job in October.

"This reinforces the need for Britain's stuttering economic recovery to strengthen so that more of these workers can be helped back into work swiftly rather than leaving the labour market altogether."