



Viewpoint

Spirit world



Time: 15 mins

Region: Scotland

Landscape: rural



Location:

Linklet Bay, North Ronaldsay, Orkney, Scotland

Grid reference:

HY 76705 54629

Keep an eye out for:

Sheep grazing on the seaweed

At just three miles long and with a population of around 100, sheep outnumber the population of North Ronaldsay in the Orkneys.

This is one of the remotest parts of Britain where life is lived literally on the edge and at the mercy of the elements.

Yet for writer and naturalist Mark Cocker, the island exerts a magical pull.

What makes North Ronaldsay so special to Mark Cocker?



Fulmars use the sheep dyke as a nesting site



Aerial view of Linklet Bay

North Ronaldsay is the most northerly of the Orkney archipelago and where my wife was born and in-laws live. Perhaps it is the wishful thinking of a naturalist, but I cannot look at the outline to the place and not see a bird's head facing out to sea.

The sheltered east-facing cove called Linklet Bay is represented by the bird's throat. It is always a centre of operation during any home visit. The island is barely 70 feet at its highest and the lack of contour and intense greenness of Linklet's broad coastal turf give the illusion of an easy, humanised landscape. There are even golfers' flags on the greens to compound the idea of Sunday softness.

In truth the Arctic Circle is just 450 miles away. There are stories of days so wind-blasted that men had to crawl and the chickens were blown out to sea.

At Linklet the lawn turf isn't cut by mowers, but by the relentless molars of North Ronaldsay's famous sheep.

These ancient, unapproachable animals inhabit a world of seal song and the screams of Arctic terns. The rams may have salt-loaded fleeces that look like rags but they have the sumptuous horns of Beelzebub and are magnificent creatures and the presiding spirits of Linklet. At all hours of the endless summer days they wander its shoreline.

There is a wall all around the island's coast which was built almost two centuries ago and is now so colonised by beautiful green or orange lichens it is a nature reserve itself. The 'sheep dike', as it's known, is there to keep the flocks not on the pasture, but on the beach.

It marks a boundary division between the land and sea, between the human and natural, between the cultivated and the wild. To cross it at Linklet is to feel at times as if you've entered another realm.



Written and photographed by author
and naturalist Mark Cocker.
Mark's books include *Birds Britannica*,
Birds and People, *Crow Country*
and *Claxton*.