

Proposed An Dun seashore and Snorkel trail?

DRAFT 16 April 2015

The An Dun headland is located at the far end of the Gairloch Golf Course beach. The headland can be reached most easily via a path to the beach from the golf course / church car park, shown below.



The headland is named after the 'Dun' or stone fort which dates from the megalithic period. This Iron Age fort is vitrified: some of the stones have been subject to very high temperatures and partially melted. 'An Dun' was probably destroyed then rebuilt during the early centuries AD by the Vikings and later became the seat of local Macleod and Mackenzie chiefs. Not much of the fort can now be seen above ground, but excavation has found sections of fire-fused stone walling.

The seas around the headland provide opportunities for viewing marine wildlife by snorkelling. This leaflet has been prepared to provide some basic information of where and when to visit the headland, and what might be seen.

To snorkel in comfort you should wear a dry suit or a warm 5mm winter wetsuit, with neoprene hood, neoprene gloves and neoprene socks. I wear old training shoes so that I can clamber over the rocks (especially at the south end of the trail). Others may prefer wearing fins on top of strong-soled socks.

Go at own risk with a buddy at low tide when the sea is calm, the tide is out and the sky is bright.



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Habitat 1. Rock pools at low tide



When the tide is very low there are rock pools at the north of the headland by the lagoon and the kelp forest; and on the south west side of An Dun. Some of these pools are big enough to snorkel in. Take great care not to stand on anything sensitive or fragile! Float! The pools can be full of animals including crabs, starfish and anemones. I recorded a **netted dog-whelk** and a larger **whelk** feeding on a dead crab, **snakehead anemones**, and several kinds of fish including **two-spotted goby**, juvenile **cod**, juvenile **pollack**, **sea scorpion** and **pogge** here. You never know what you might find sheltering under a kelp frond . . .



(left) whelk and netted dog-whelks feeding on a dead crab .The winkle shell had a hermit crab in it.

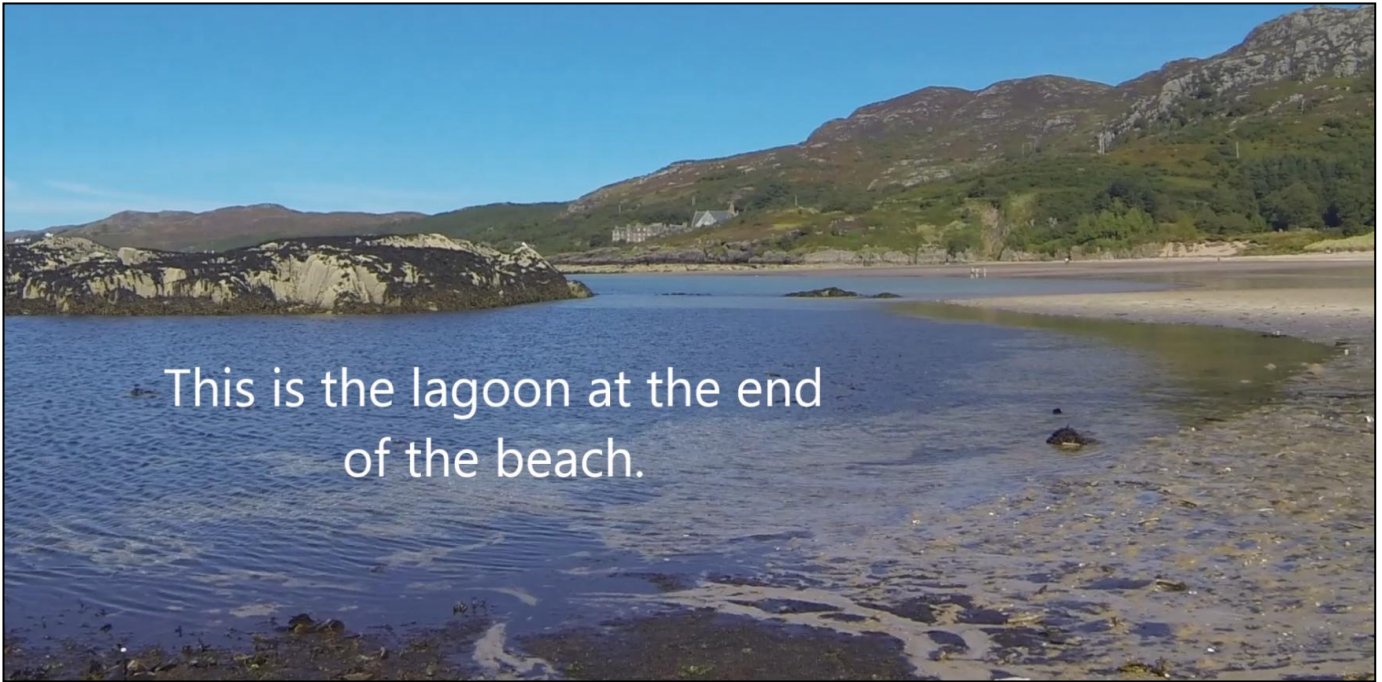


(right) Snakelocks anemone



(left) This photo (screenshot from Go Pro video) was taken in October 2014 at very low spring tide. Most of the fish are juvenile pollack; however a juvenile cod can be seen emerging from beneath a frond of serrated wrack; and to its left, the head of a camouflaged sea scorpion.

Habitat 2. Sandy shore and low tide lagoon



This sandy-bottomed lagoon is formed by large waves breaking over the rocky reef. At very low tide, from when the tide level goes below about 1.1m, the lagoon provides a sheltered place to paddle over a sandy sea bed. At very low spring tides (0.6m or less; these are usually around the middle of the day or early in the afternoon), the depth is only about 50cm or even less.

As the tide goes out, small fish are crowded together as the area of the lagoon becomes smaller, and the depth becomes shallower. Seagulls often patrol the outflow, taking fish which make a break for deeper water as water levels recede. Fish diversity is highest toward the end of the summer when **common (?or sand) goby**, **?painted goby**; juvenile **grey gurnard**, juvenile **pollack**, juvenile **cod**, **sea scorpion**, **15-spined stickleback** and **sandeels** can often be seen.

Usually there are many small **hermit crabs** trundling about, mostly in winkle or periwinkle shells. Larger **shore crabs** can be found hidden under seaweed. One year there were many **sea hares**. The seaweed covered rocks on the far side of the lagoon are worth exploring for crabs, anemones and starfish. Some years, the lagoon tends to fill up with sea weed debris in which many animals are able to hide. Snorkellers who search through the debris may get an interesting surprise!

For those who do not wish to venture into deeper water on the other side of the rocky headland, many of the animals of the kelp forest can be found here in and around the lagoon if you look carefully.



*(left) a male **?Common goby** showing its dorsal fin with black and blue spots.*



*(right) Juvenile **grey gurnards** in the lagoon.*

Many animals live within the sandy seabed, including **sea potatoes** (burrowing sea urchins), many worms, and several kinds of bivalve mollusc including **common cockle**, **tellins**, **venus shells** and **razor shells**. However all of these animals remain buried in the sand with only the top of the siphons or feeding tubes visible to a snorkeler. However **sand stars** can sometimes be seen on the surface of the sand.

In September 2014 we netted the beach and caught mostly juvenile **plaice**, plus gobies. We also caught **lesser weaver fish**; these have a poisonous spine, and very painful if stood on. Best to wear shoes or fins!

As the tide goes out, some of the animals which feed over the sand retreat towards deeper water and remain partially buried in the sand, relying on camouflage for protection. Others retreat to the cover of the kelp forest around the headland where they remain until the tide comes back in again.

Common starfish (below left) feed mainly on bivalve molluscs including mussels. **Spiny starfish** (below right) eat a variety of other animals, sometimes including other starfish.



Edible sea urchins (below right) are common in the kelp forest. They are powerful animals and eat algae, barnacles and other animals which they scrape off. **Dahlia anemones** (below left) are very common and come in many different colours. They are active predators and can catch and kill prawns and small fishes.



Habitat 3. Kelp Forest



The kelp forest on the far side of An Dun provides a home for many animals.

Kelp grows from the rocky seabed around the north and west side of the headland, and provides a home for crabs, starfish, sea urchins, sea anemones and many other smaller animals. The forest is best explored at low spring tide when the sun is shining, providing lots of light for exploring beneath the fronds. Fish are most abundant from July to October.

Of invertebrates: look out for: **shore crab**, **brown (edible) crab**, **velvet swimming crab**, **great spider crab**, **common starfish**, **spiny starfish**, **cushion star**, **edible sea urchin** (these graze the kelp fronds), **dahlia anemones** (of many colours), **plumose anemones** (in a few deeper gulleys). **Lobsters** also live here, though during the day are usually in lairs under boulders, out of site of a snorkeler.



*(left) A **velvet swimming crab**, on a colourful ledge in October 2014. These crabs are caught in creels around the Western Isles and mostly exported to Spain! They are particularly fierce and will readily use their pincers for deffence if provoked!*

Of fish, from mid-summer shoals of juvenile **pollack** are most common (larger **pollack** may be seen through the autumn and early winter); juvenile **cod**, **saithe**, and shoals of sandeels may also be seen. **Sea scorpions** can be found in the kelp; and there are also **wrasse**. **Ballan wrasse** are present, though rather shy. Do they or other wrasse species breed here? Other wrasse which could be seen include **corkwing wrasse**.

(right) the edge of the kelp forest near the southern end of the longer trail in October 2014.

Underwater visibility was in excess of 20m that day!



*(left) This little gully was full of wildlife. **Dahlia anemones** occupy the middle of the picture, with **common starfish** and **shore crab** to the right.*

*(below) A **lobster** in a creel! From a video recorded in August 2014. Could the area around the headland become a small voluntary no take zone?*



(right) Lions' mane jellyfish are often encountered. That's another good reason for wearing gloves and a hood [they sting!]. They are very interesting things to snorkel around. They eat common (moon) jellyfish and sometimes have small whiting living amongst their tentacles.

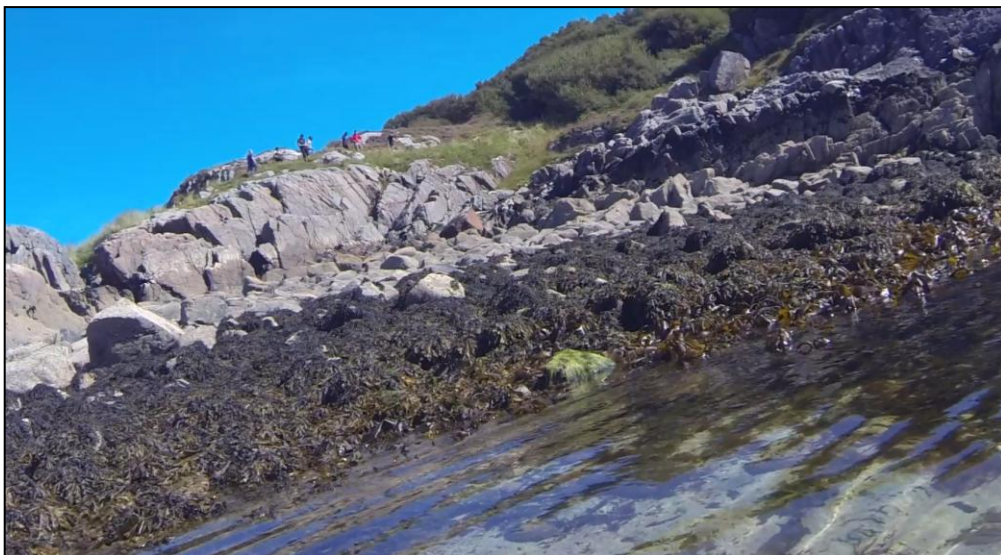


(left) I'm not sure what sort of anemone this one (the red one) is?

*(right) Female **ballan wrasse**. The more colourful male was hiding in the kelp nearby. Both fish fled before I got a good look.*



I usually snorkel the longer trail from north to south, so that I come out of the sea on the boulder beach (*shown below*). **The boulders are very slippery**, so take great care! Go on all fours when you come out, especially if like me you are a bit wobbly after spending 30 minutes or so in the water.



All the photographs in this leaflet (except Google base maps which can be replaced if publication would infringe terms of copyright) were taken somewhere along the trail during 2014, they are screenshots from GoPro Hero3 videos.

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