

SULE SKERRY AND SULE STACK



Interior of Sule Skerry lamphouse

The remote offshore islands of Sule Skerry and Sule Stack are part of Orkney and trips are occasionally organised to visit them during the summer. Both are best known for their huge bird populations.

SULE SKERRY (ON *Sula Sker*, Gannet Skerry), lies 60km (37 miles) west of the Brough of Birsay at 59°05'N, 4°24'W. This isolated small island owes its attraction to two things, its remote situation and its huge Puffin colony. This is by far the best place in Orkney to study the *Tammy Norie*. The skerry is flat and only 15m high. Scentless Mayweed covers most of the peaty surface, which is riddled with Puffin burrows.

The Puffins keep flying nearly all night



Lighthouse The main landing is on the east side below the lighthouse, which was first lit in 1895. The two isolated islands had previously been a considerable hazard to shipping. Sule Skerry was the most isolated manned lighthouse in UK until it was automated in 1982. The tower is 27m high and though the nominal range is 21 miles, the light is frequently seen from the Mainland, 56km (35 miles) away.

The station was attacked on 5th February 1942 by a German bomber, which dropped three bombs about 60m north of the lighthouse. No one was injured and damage was minimal. On 18th November 1944 a mine

drifted ashore and exploded.

Wildlife Besides the Puffins, which fly around in two circles, the north clockwise and the south anticlockwise, there are Guillemots, Razorbills, Shags, Kittiwakes, Eiders, Arctic Terns, Fulmars and Stormy Petrels. Leach's Petrels have been caught and heard calling.

During the migration seasons many species rest here, with large falls of Fieldfare, Redwing and smaller birds in October. The Puffins disappear to sea in August, some returning in early April, but most in early May.

Grey Seals are present all year, and many come ashore in the autumn to have their pups. The oceanic location is also good for whale watching.



This one hit me on the forehead!

A group of Puffins at dawn



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SULE STACK (ON *Sula Stakkur*, Gannet Rock), is about 8km (5 miles) southwest of Sule Skerry. A steep-to granite rock 37m high, the Stack has a colony of about 4,000 pairs of Gannets, as well as a few Guillemots and Kittiwakes. Landing is only possible in fine weather.

On a recent visit a large unexploded shell was found on the top of the rock, showing that the Navy used it for target practice. It was also used as a target for aircraft in the past. There seem to be a large number of immature gannets present, perhaps because no culling has taken place for many years.

In the past both islands were important sources of food, and as recently as 1890, 100 dozen eggs from Sule Skerry



Gannets on Sule Skerry

Guillemots with young



Leach's Petrel



Sule Stack from the east in the early morning

were said to have been on sale in Stromness. The Vikings are known to have hunted Seals and collected eggs and young Gannets there and no doubt so did earlier Orcadians. Today's visitors take only photographs and memories - that is if they are lucky enough to reach the remotest part of Orkney.

Shipwreck On 8th April 1968 the 1,333grt Greek ship *Marina* ran into the east

side of Sule Stack at about 5am. The 14 crew abandoned ship but 9 of them were lost. The ship broke up and sank soon after the collision. Stromness and Kirkwall lifeboats, RAF Shackletons and several ships took part in the search and rescue operation.

Helen Waters & Sule Skerry

In the 1800s an Orphir girl was about to get married. Shortly before the wedding her fiancé with some friends decided to go shooting in Hoy. When they did not return for the wedding they held the reception anyway as the guests were gathered and the food prepared.

After hearing bad omens from a local daft wife called Annie Fae it was then heard that the men may have gone to Sule Skerry to shoot seals. A boat was sent and the men were found dead. They had somehow failed to secure their boat and died of starvation. When the bride saw that her fiancé was dead, she was so shocked that she was dead the next morning. Thus a bridal feast turned into a burial and the young lovers sleep in the same Orphir grave.

