

57° 16' 42.92N; 5° 44' 20.42W

*The First Day of Summer*

I sit down to write this on the first day of summer - the twenty-first of June, the summer solstice, the longest day. From here on in it'll be shorter days, darker nights; plants will reach their potential then wither and die. I am told that spring came late to the whole of the British Isles this year; that we all endured a long winter. It dragged its heels.

At the beginning of March snow lay on the island for a couple of days and I could track what was on here: prints in the snow of the bird-brained birds hoppitying about in circles down by the sensory garden; otter marauding out of the sea by the jetty to lollop up the zig-zag path to have a look-see at the front of the house before leaping back down the path and into the sea again; and other otter tracks running along the old lighthouse wall and down onto the rocks below, then back to the sea; the head of a dogfish left in the snow by Lookout Point by the bay in front of the house.

At other times during the winter a peppering of snow covered the mountains that surround the island, that ring my horizon: the high tops of the Five Sisters to the east, Applecross to the north, the Cuillins in the west. Blue days of crisp air, far vistas and sunlight; a flat sea and the 'ooh ooh'-ing of eider duck in the kyles and the Inner Sound. In winter the colours about here are muted. The greens all but disappear and the browns and the greys make up the palette I see around me. And never before have I been so impatient for a spring to spring forth. Then the gorse flowered, the first daffodils broke through and soon there were carpets of bluebells all over the east side of the island. The wild grasses grew tall, and the honeysuckle and wild roses and heathers awoke. And of course the bracken - which in places grows seven feet tall - renewed its advance, its continued invasion; its mission, as with the brambles, to cover and suffocate and

obliterate all else beneath it.

All things must sleep, but the plants, now, after their long months of hibernation, are wide awake, sleepless. The foxgloves lean over the paths; the rosebay willowherb has shot up and come into bloom on the east side. We are overrun with shades of purple and green, of yellows and pinks; the blues and greys of the sea and sky; the white of the house and buildings, of the bramble blossom. Soon we shall see the beautiful flame-coloured flowers of montbretia

People come to the island with different interests, personalities, histories. Stories. Some of those who come to visit the island arrive here after having spent many hours in the otter hide at Kylerhea, waiting patiently for a sighting of the elusive Lutra Lutra. Because this place is known for the otters that regard it as their domain, many visitors come expecting to be guaranteed a sighting – of otters romping about, rampaging along the shoreline juggling crab and dabs and diving and doing figure of eights in clear waters and generally waving in a friendly fashion to an appreciative, captivated audience. But many times during the course of a tour there are only the seals and the seabirds to be seen - the seals lolling about, the terns turning and weaving above us.

From my own experience this island is the home of a mature dog otter; a smaller female visits irregularly. I often see the dog, silhouetted on the rocks by the jetty down at Lighthouse Bay, or swimming around the island. When the people go away and I go back to my work and then in the evening, when the traffic over the bridge has dissipated and the place is at its quietest, at dusk, I step out and take my own tour of the island and there is the shape in the water, the v-shaped wake in a still sea, moving slowly, often diving, the flip of a tail. The otter, the water dog, oblivious to all those hoppers and admirers, taking a leisurely tour of its territory, out and about in its domain, now that all is quiet again.

I have acquired a small dinghy and on fair days I go exploring the coastline and neighbouring islands. Out by the skerries in front of the hide on the north side, and in Loch na Beiste by Kyleakin, I am often accompanied in my sea-ambling by the common seals who have haul-outs nearby. They bob up close and look at me with their sad eyes and follow the boat for a short time, unsure of my intentions. Like dogs, I think, they are unhappy with

eye contact, and so I whistle and sing softly and look askance. Aboard bigger boats I've seen dolphin bow riding, and out in my own boat, far down Loch Alsh towards Dornie, I've been in the company, for a short while, of

porpoise

. I hope not to be happened upon by the basking sharks

that are occasionally spotted round here. One little nudge from one of these behemoths could easily send me tumbling from my little boat to a meeting with Davey Jones in his capacious locker wrapped up in those bedraggled mermaid's tresses.

It's a year since I arrived here, and the world that I inhabit has shrunk considerably: to about two square miles of sea and rock, and the two communities of Kyle and Kyleakin. And that's all right. There's a lot contained therein, and a lot more than can be found in a fair-sized town or city. And over there – in the over-peopled places - they're all still doing the same things they were the last time I looked: shopping, walking quickly (and slowly, bedazzled by the extraordinary riches for sale in the shops), dining, boozing, avoiding traffic, all this activity overshadowed by the loom of concrete and brick. On the island, people come and stay in the main part of the house and leave and come again. The tours bring others. Some of them tell me about their lives out there. More stories. The creatures around here see this place as their home as much as I do it (for the time being) mine. Sea, boats, islands, sky, sun, tide and moon. Nature's rhythm.

I sat down and began to write this on the first day of summer. It was meant to have been completed by the end of June. We are now approaching the end of July. Highland time. Apologies.

*Dan Boothby - Summer 2006*