Scottish Sea-Stacks

The ribald Scottish comedian Billy Connolly once commented that his country folk were so sun deprived they'd developed a blue tinge that required two weeks of sunshine just to return to a white hue before the real tanning could commence. I feel similarly tinted whilst standing on the last bit of the "Mainland" Orkney Isle, white, puffy clouds dappling overhead as sea spray further hazes the air and desire to continue. I stare across half a pool length of surging Atlantic at our primary objective, the daunting 250-foot sea stack of Yesnaby Castle. In my boxers and chilled to the core, I'm dreading the plunge, but someone has to get the 9mm rope across so we can safely haul our kit.

Reasoning that the regional Gulf Stream-warmed water will keep away anything larger than me on the food chain, I spring from clenched feet, to stretch the dive and minimize swimming distance. Water temperature is pondered along with the power of the undertow in that hung second; I'm under, and then resurface, engaging a front crawl as rapid as the now-racing moment. I'm grateful for the swell that allows a clutch on the tower's edge and quick mantle before dropping seas can take me down. I make a couple of moves to safety, zip-line gear across the boiling gap, and establish a Tyrolean for my friends, still dry and trying not to chuckle at my shivering form.

Our goal for the day is the east-facing landward arête, an atmospheric double-overhanging edge - E2 5b (5.10) -- with good but intricate gear. Very solid rock, in a stellar position, sandy to the touch and a little less than clean, but, as we'll learn over the next couple of weeks, such is the norm with these Scottish sea stacks. In fact, perhaps the world's greatest concentration of stacks push free of the Atlantic's waves off Mainland Orkney's west coast and the cold, dark North Sea on the island's east flank. Here, solid, red sandstone guarded by a host of angry, vomiting seabirds (the notorious fulmars) renders character-building, spooky climbing far above burbling, breathing, and blasting waters.

The Orkney Isles, a collection of around a dozen rolling (plus tons of teeny ones), hilly islands off the northern tip of Scotland, are accessed from Scrabster, Scotland's northernmost port (check the map -- it just beats John o' Groats). The Stromness-bound boat swings conveniently around the isle of Hoy, perfect for viewing the Old Man. North again you pass St John's Head's, a seaward headland that is, at nearly 2,000 feet tall, arguably Britain's biggest cliff -- steep, a touch vegetated, and no doubt well-guarded by irate seabirds. We -- Norway's Odd-Roar Wiik, Scotland's Alan Mullin, England's Ian Parnell and John Winter, plus myself, the demi-Yank -- have come in pursuit of the classic seastack lines. We'll find that they're not dissimilar to desert towers, just differing in ecology, weathering, latitude, tidal concerns, and fulmars.

Rock is everywhere in the Orkneys. Ten named and climbed sandstone sea stacks (see sidebar), with 30-odd routes on them, plus loads of sea cliffs are

the draw for climbers, though farmers have for eons created intricate dry stone walls to contain livestock and crops, often borrowing from the many fine stone circles dating back to 3000 BC. (Burial mounds of a similar age have been found here as well.) But compared to man's obelisks, these sea stacks make little more than a cameo appearance in geological time, which is what makes the climbing here unique.

Scotland itself is old, no doubt. The Picts settled here around 5000 BC, their bloodline remaining untainted until Norse incursions around 700 AD. And the local rock is a Devonian red sandstone deposited some 400 million years ago. But the stacks, in a way, are quite fresh. Take Scotland's most famous sea stack, the 500-foot Old Man of Hoy, off the west coast of the isle of the same name -- it's probably less than 400 years old and may not get much older. Maps drawn around 1700 depict the Old Man area as a headland -- no stack. A landscape painter sketched the newly formed sea stack in 1816-ish; it had two legs at that time, which helped derive its name. One leg, however, would drop sometime in the 19th century, claimed by tempestuous weather and ferocious Scottish seas. To this day, erosion on the Old Man and other freestanding coastal neighbours continues apace.

My first real introduction, if it could be deemed real, came in the form of a photograph of the Yesnaby Castle stack, hung inside the ferryboat to the islands and noticed just as the Old Man slipped by to starboard. I pondered Yesnaby's impressively slender form, depicted curled into the face of a wave that maintained considerably more stature. Could swells line up just perfectly to drive a wave so high? This didn't seem possible - a 300-foot roller. The image sequence continued as the wave slammed into the cliff and continued to break high over the headland -- food for thought, and a good insight into the fragility of these unique seaside towers.

After sightseeing the finer side of Hoy, the boat hooked into the protected Scapa Flow, a world-renowned SCUBA venue. It was here on June 21, 1919, during WWI, that the German Admiral Von Reuter gave the mistaken order to scuttle 74 warships under his command. Today, divers navigate the patent water bench of Scapa Flow in dry suits, down to briny behemoths sunk as modestly as 25 feet under the waves. To me the cold, dark lustre that crinkles this water's surface, disguising any depth or lack thereof**,** holds little in the way of appeal -- I'd rather climb away from its chill shimmer.

But I'm one of the few -- climbers just don't seem to come to the Orkneys, though the isles are primed for vertical (above-the-waves) exploration. It's indeed strange that some of the cliffs were only "discovered" in this millennium. Perhaps it's a result of the weather. Or perhaps it's the Orkneys' sparse population. Or perhaps it's the area's isolation from the mainland United Kingdom and lack of local climbing community. The outer islands -- Hebrides, Shetlands, and some Orkneys -- house a plethora of unexplored cliffs, plus there's no shortage of windswept coastline on Scotland's west side, though ice gear may prove most useful there.

After our first day's adventure with Yesnaby Castle, we weathered a couple more on the main island, strolling along Stromness' single road past its few shops, fish, chips, curry, ovine veterinary, mini-supermarket, tartan supplier, tea room, and a pub or five. Sturdy stone houses and businesses that lean into the narrow slash of already dim low-angle summer sunlight overlook the main drag's intricate cobbles; all have stood the test of time. Weathered, rustic and well-kempt, Stromness promotes the image of its early seafaring-era construction.

A short ferry relocated us to the Ratwick Bay Bothy (stone bivy shelter) on the island of Hoy. Again forced into a holding pattern by more inclement weather, we holed up in the stone shed and waited for an Old Man. Since its televised first ascent by Joe Brown, back in 1966, the Old Man of Hoy has become an iconic British feature: Tower of London, Stonehenge, York Minster, Ben Nevis, Hadrian's Wall, Old Man of Hoy -- firmly on the list and known to the British public. Even with such a raised profile, the Ratwick locals say it rarely sees more than five separate visits per season, for any of five free lines (or perhaps primary repetition of the 1967 A4?). Hoy, Norse for "High," towers above neighbouring landmasses, not just rising higher, but darker, rockier, bleaker, and a touch more austere. The Old Man is certainly the most sought/climbed of all the stacks, and is one of the UK's longer outings.

We managed a teasing hike across the fine sea cliffs of Rora Head for an Old Man viewing just before encroaching rain swept in, blotting out the panorama of the stack's massive fulmar population. Tales abound of these seemingly innocuous white gulls pecking the hands of those trying momentarily to use a ledge, and even launching aerial strafing runs with flapping, pecking, and repeated swooping. Above all, fulmars have a spectacular ability to shotgun-style regurgitate bright-orange semi-digested fishy bits to a distance of 40 feet, as they demonstrated in the 1997 film Rock Queen ("Catherine Destivelle, la Madonne de la Montagne) toward the French superstar. It's hard to say how many reside on the Old Man, but such a well-protected residence with so many horizontals must allow their township to approach a thousand.

Whittling away time, we beach combed the unusually fine strip of golden sand trapped by Ratwick Bay's craggy coastline, and over-indulged in inevitable Bothy festering, swapping tales to pass the time during frequent, forceful downpours. Bothys -- very simple long stone sheds with fireplaces, and raised (stone) benches along either wall for biving -- dot the islands and Scottish highlands, and provide a free, welcome respite from the rain. Alternately, you can camp in the walled (sheep-free) front garden. This Bothy nestles behind the first, wind-deflecting row of dunes from the sandy shore, deep in the centre of the picturesque trough that forms Ratwick Bay, and has a thatched roof as thick as its walls.

After four days of rain, we had our break. Here, the annual 37-inch average isn't delivered in deluges -- it's more of a constant mist with a daily interjection. Occasionally (and luckily) it forgets, and we were poised for such a moment. From the headland, steep ledge shuffling down an improbable trail led to the climb's beginning -- no water involvement for this classic. As we

dropped off the island, the Old Man unveiled its more mammoth proportions; the lower we went the more our respect grew. A few fulmars tried traditional bombing runs (just number two's -- no fishy bits) with varying degrees of success, though none sufficient to thwart our quest. We scampered across a rib - the collapsed leg shed in the 1800s -- above tides' reach, then motored up a short fifth-class approach pitch to reach a ledge immediately above the rib's junction with the tower.

Pitch one of this classic, demanding 5.10 commenced apace. You begin with a descending step onto a very sandy traverse platform, with immediate 100-foot exposure down the landward (east) facet; a few unprotected, dirty sideways moves gain the essence of the route, vertical fissures jogging discontinuously up the tower's entirety. Climbing a very steep hand crack in the back of a decomposing flare, I led out on tipped-out cams (not wishing to port the big rigs; note: if you have 'em, bring 'em), and then did a double take as the crack widened and steepened. Easy 5.10, eh? Memorable thrutching in an offwidth textured akin to a steep beach -- classic -- ensued, with lots of jamming, bridging (stemming), and body wedging.

We regrouped on the large ledge 150 feet up, grins all around after this brutal but elegant ropelength. However, I hadn't noticed a fully flared fulmar squatting a scant 10 feet away. Its wings open, tail flared, and beak agape, the creature was just gurgling and not producing. Trapped by our anchors, we were grateful that he was only a fledgling, too young, perhaps, to have gleaned shooting skills.

Above lay another two 150-foot character-filled pitches, and leering from every ledge flocks and flocks and flocks … o' now squawking fulmars, cocking their heads from side to side as if plotting timing/aim. Alan and Odd both reside at far northern latitudes; either a lack of faith in weather or a touch of bird knowledge had them donning a shell layer upon first glimpse. Ian, John, and I must have had more faith, as we hadn't brought rain gear. Still, Alan and Odd somehow cajoled me into leading the next pitch, using their sufficient tether from the belay to look up around the corner and bird-spot for me.

An intricate piece of climbing followed I traversed commando-style beneath every ledge, staying low then quickly peeping, mantling, or scuttling to cover. After 150 feet of this, and a few off-route bits of bouldering up dead-end walls, I spied the belay ledge from 20 feet below, yet still had to pick, weave, and dodge around fulmars to its sanctuary. I probably passed 20 close-proximity birds on this pitch alone, and in the midst of committing the final mantle drew beak to face with an angry specimen.

I think we were both equally shocked, hovering in that shared moment without reaction. I dropped to arm's length, dangling taut, flinching in the face of an anticipated fishy peppering. The gull rolled its neck with the first coiling of delivery, yet no onslaught? I didn't check further, instead engaging a rapid traverse, via more bouldery avoidance, to reach a belay stance on a higher terrace.

I gave Odd bird Beta as he joined me. He looked at my shoddy perch from the luxurious but occupied terrace, where he decided to stay put, maintaining a safe distance from the still-retching bird. Alan's arrival caused it to convulse a third time, while Odd, eager to be off, launched into the 5.9 summit pitch and sounded to be involved with similar dealings. Our Norwegian compadre, yelling profusely, suddenly dropped into his native tongue, something I'd heard him do only once before, whilst totally gripped on our first shared outing, an A5 called Roulette on Yosemite's Leaning Tower. These little white birds now shoved him into that same stressed mode, and we could only wince with the louder diatribes.

Ian climbed into sight. "Don't worry -- this one doesn't spit," I told him, pointing out the fulmar. We watched nonchalantly as it repeated the neck coil and retch. This time, however, it cut loose with a resounding "Blam!" -- unfortunate for Ian, recoiling with the blast's force and now sporting pointillist orange specks along his right side. Perhaps the fledgling had needed those three dry runs to mature shooting skills. Flexing newfound aptitude, it gloated with each successive blast, nailing Ian four or five more times. Only Ian's cower limited its area of projectile-vomiting coverage.

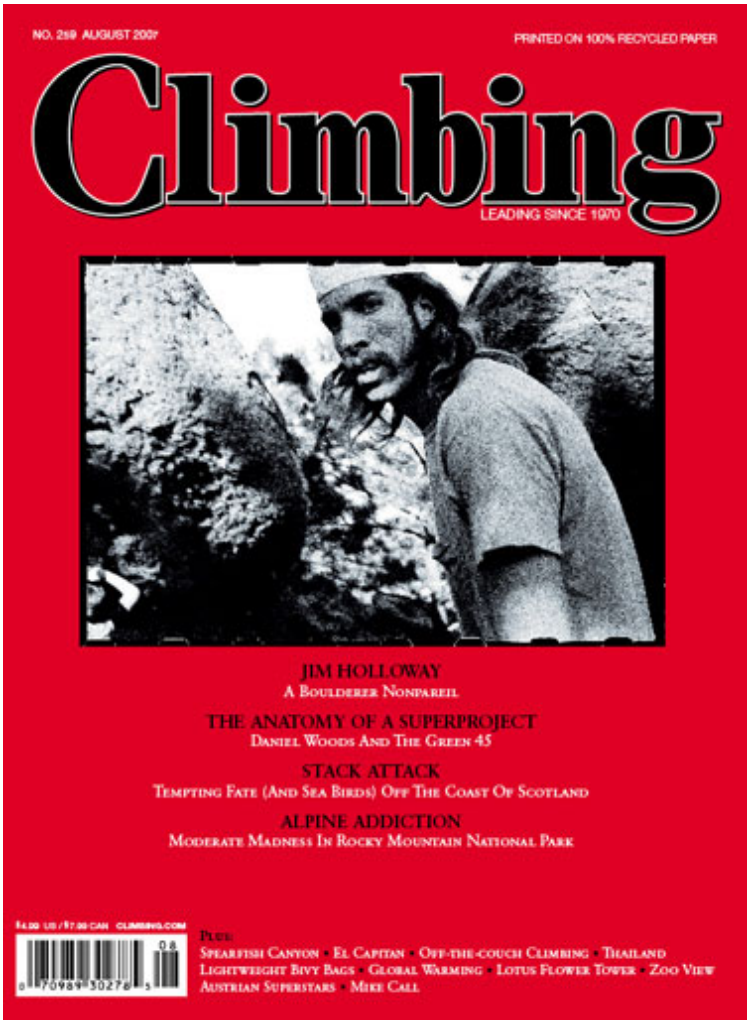
Odd, meanwhile, had reached the summit and started reeling in rope. Ian scurried up to our belay ledge and was immediately cast upward, better to keep "Mr. Fishy" on the move. We experienced no real avian events on the final rope length. Perhaps reticent due to Odd's vociferous passage, the birds were reduced to half-hearted high-altitude bombing runs. Alan and I were free to enjoy steep climbing via big cracks, plentiful horizontals, and naught to ponder but the calm, shimmering Atlantic 500 feet below. We shared a seat on the summit, varying degrees of fishy-ness enriching the air around the aerial grassy terrace hovering just below the overlooking cliff-line. The Hebrides shimmered distantly to the west as seals flopped onto the rocky shore far below, with the fulmars, of course, continuing to spiral but keeping their distance, resuming their housing scheme only after our rope whipped down from the final rappel.

With time shrinking we headed back onto another "mainland" island -- the United Kingdom, land union of England, Wales, and, of course, Scotland – where, off its west coast, we hoped to climb a couple more stacks and cast even more hope toward the weather being cooperative. There was even pre-emptive talk of taking boats to the outer isles to achieve all 10 slender Orkney towers. However, as is often the case with keen individuals, our tick list proved fatter than weather allowed.

In the end, despite the weather, we had plenty of fine experiences. The Old Man of Hoy had been on everyone's hit list, and for some indescribable reason so had a swim, cured of course by Yesnaby: Strange, but after the initial ferry photo of the tower-swallowing wave, we all had to see it. Am Buachaille, just below the North West tip of Scotland proper, is the one we'd all return for and the reason we skipped back to Scotland. It's probably the

stack least likely to survive the next major Atlantic onslaught, so skinny is the pedestal that keeps this ever-so-aesthetic, slender tower above the sea.

That darn maritime weather again and again. This time it thwarted us on Am Buachaille's multi-mile approach, and instead we poised for the more easily accessed Old Man of Stoer. The most accessible of all sea towers, as per road/civilization proximity, this Old Man stands just west of a peninsula of the same name, in the western Highland region, a long day trip from Glasgow or Edinburgh … or a picturesque hour spent traversing the nation at its skinniest point, from Inverness. Alan and I had endured horizontal sheets of rain dampening an attempt on this same 140-foot tower in 2005, so it somehow seemed fitting to head across the highlands and end a journey on such a fine obelisk. It was, however, not meant to be. Again we reached the overlook. And again, it began to rain. We dashed for cover over the bleak cliff top, rain soaking up from the spongy grass and pounding upon our backs, driving us homeward.



Orkney Stacks
These northern British Isles may not have complete monopoly on sea stacks, but the small cluster of Orkney Islands just off the north Scottish coast

certainly has the lion’s share. From south to north, here are the principal (climbed) stacks of the Orkney Islands (visit orkneyseastacks.co.uk for more):

- The Cleft of Crura is a little-known stack on the east coast of South Ronaldsay. Two routes with no more than as many subsequent ascents.
- Stackabank, another very seldom visited stack (once?) on the opposite (west) coast of South Ronaldsay, with one route E3 5C (5.10+).
- The Needle has seen one ascent, from a Mick Fowler visit in 1991, via a monster 180-foot pitch.
- The Old man of Hoy is by far the best known and documented of all seastacks, yet it never has a queue. TK NUMBER OF routes up to TK GRADE.
- North Gaulton Castle is one of the more aesthetic stacks, and, tucked conveniently away on the west Mainland coastline, has drawn several ascents. It was featured in a car advert in the early 1990s.
- Yesnaby Castle is another scenic west Mainland stack with its own road to the headland. Five excellent routes from E1 to E3 (5.10- to 5.11). The stack and surrounding cliffs are the most explored rock on the islands, with around 70 routes.
- The Stack O' Roo is a remote little stack that offers two routes for those willing to swim 110 feet.
- Standard Rock, a monstrous lump of stone, sits 130 feet across a less than tranquil channel from the northern tip of Mainland -- i.e., close enough to not to be an island yet far enough out to discourage a casual swim.
- The Brough is a huge, flat-topped, lonely stack off the island of Stronsay.

•The Castle of Burrian is a steep little stack deep within a bay off the island of Westray.

Kevin Thaw ‘07
Photos Ian Parnell