



Autumn in Caithness

The summer is over, and we are headed toward the winter. By midwinter, we in Caithness will only see a few hours of sunlight each day. We are so far north (further north than Anchorage, Alaska – but a whole lot warmer), that we get very short nights in midsummer and very short days in midwinter. But for now, we are easing toward winter through a busy autumn, with a mixed bag of sunny days and wet-windy days.

Sometimes those rainy days result in some incredible rainbows.



The rainbows here present a wider range of color than any I have ever seen in Indiana. You can clearly see the purple on the one extreme, and the bright red on the other. The air here is much cleaner and clearer than in the American Midwest – due to both our distance from any significant cities or industries, and also to the strong winds that never allow air to stagnate. If you follow this next rainbow to the end, you do not find a pot of gold.....you find something much better,.....you find our cottage in Glengolly.



We paid a visit to the Caithness Prehistoric Festival. With so many Neolithic remains in the area, there is a lot of interest in ancient history. This festival was highly educational, and researchers had built a number of examples and demonstrations as to how our predecessors lived. Here is a kiln, built from stone, wood, and seaweed, and used for firing pottery.



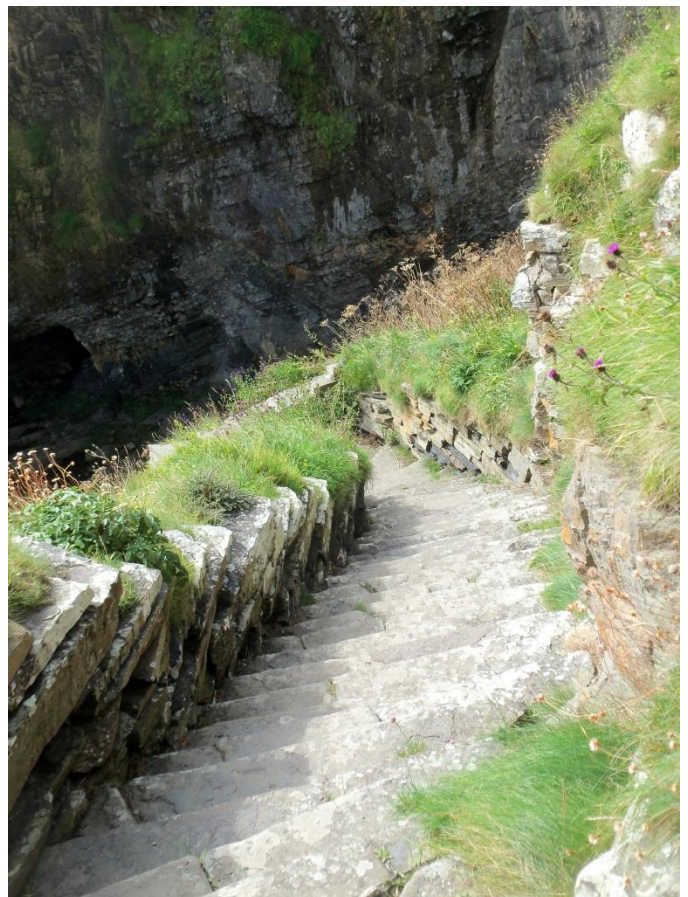
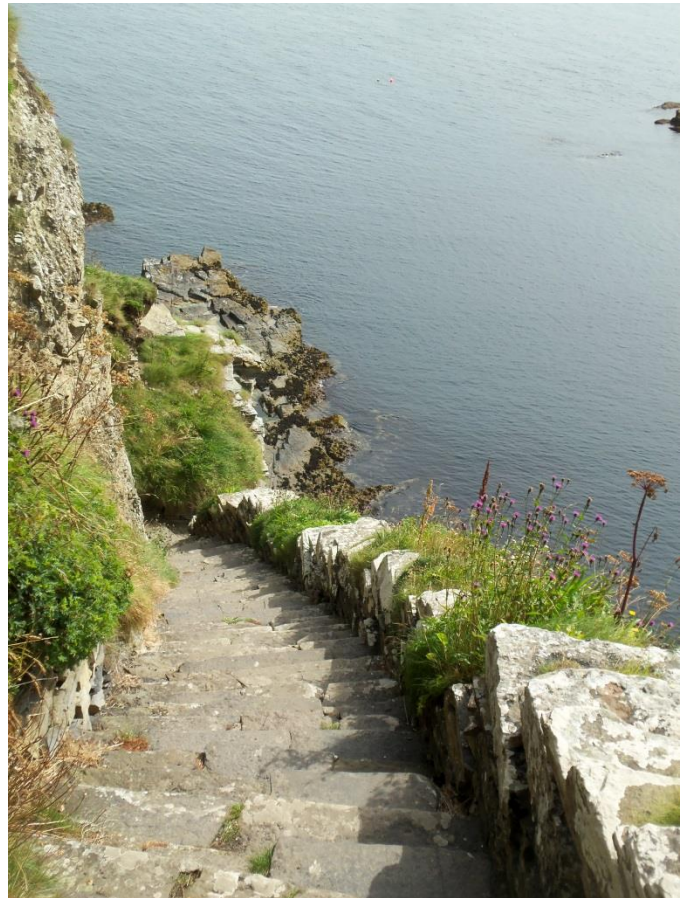
A smelter, for melting bronze so it could be cast into tools and jewelry.



And a cooking pit. Buried under the coals, and roasting for dinner, is shank of venison, wrapped in dough, and then wrapped in seaweed.



We made a trip to see the Whaligoe Steps. Whaligoe was a fishing village. It had a wonderful sheltered harbor and a large flat stone area next to the water, where the boats could be landed and herring catch processed (gutted), even in bad weather. The fish wives would then carry the catch in creel baskets.....up the 365 steps built into the cliff face



Our next outing was to travel south, past Inverness, to one of my favorite Scottish towns, Drumnadrochit, in the Great Glen, on the shores of Loch Ness. We discovered the Ben Leva Hotel, a 300 year old inn, on our second visit



to the Highlands, years ago. It is a lovely old building, with the local hanging tree (no longer in use) in the front yard.



Every autumn the Ben Leva hosts a week-long Loch Ness Ale Fest, with live music, pool, poker, and quiz nights. We had booked early, so we got one of their few rooms for the opening weekend. On the way back we took the long route (as if there were a short route to Caithness) and visited the Flow Country. This is a huge peat bog that stretches for many miles. It is now a nature preserve with a lovely new boardwalk leading to a brand new viewing tower out in the middle of the huge bog. You might expect a peat bog to be rather boring. However, the views can be stunning, the terrain is quite interesting, and there are more colors from the various ferns and mosses than you might think, as these photos show.



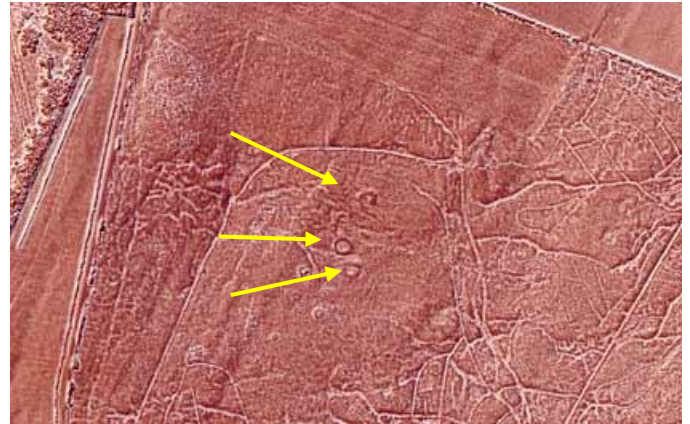
Another thing that occurs every autumn is a week-long Highland Archeological Festival, highlighting the discoveries and investigations by archeologists. With as much Neolithic stuff as we have in Caithness, you will not be surprised to hear that several events took place up here. And I was able to join a couple of the weekend jaunts. One walk was a combination of the old and the new, as we explored how LIDAR technology is being used to locate hut circles.

A hut circle is a circular or oval depression in the ground with evidence of a low stone wall around it. The wall was used as the foundation of a round house, or “hut” and the superstructure would have been made of timber and thatch. They are numerous in northern Scotland (and you can’t get much more northern than us) and most date to around the 2nd century BC. Hut circles can be up to 40 feet in diameter, with the rock walls being 2-3 feet thick, and around 3 feet high. They were believed to have been covered by conical rounded roofs, supported by posts that were internal and maybe external as well for the larger ones.

LIDAR (Light Imaging, Detection, And Ranging) is a new surveying tool that measures distance to a target by illuminating that target with laser light. It is similar to radar, but using light instead of electromagnetic radio waves. LIDAR first found use in making high-resolution maps, using an airborne scanner on an airplane or drone. One major advantage, compared with photographic methods, is the ability to filter out reflections from vegetation to create a digital surface model which represents ground surfaces which would be concealed by vegetation.

Archeologists have found LIDAR useful in detecting the presence of overgrown structures of antiquity. On this hike, we explored how LIDAR had been used to detect the presence of over 300 new hut circles in the Highlands. As can be seen in this LIDAR image, the circles can be seen as circular features (the yellow arrows point to them in

this image).



Sometimes the hut circles are easier to see in the LIDAR image than they are on the ground, as you can tell from my hiking companions, who in the photo below are standing exactly where the GPS coordinates and LIDAR map claim this hut circle is.



Here is one that is easier to see. The hike leader is standing atop the wall, and you can see the wall is circular, and about 20 feet in diameter.



Here is a smaller one, with my companions standing on a raised circular wall in the grass, with taller weeds grown up in the center.



This is a unique picture from that hike, showing one of the many Caithness wind turbines, with the Pentland Firth and Dunnet Head in the distance.



The next weekend, there was another hike near Brora where a hydro-power project has opened development of a new area deep in Sutherland (which is next door to Caithness). This project has opened a pathway to terrain that has seen little, if any traffic, since the Clearances swept the crofters out of the region in the early 1800s. Local archeologists have found Bronze/Iron Age hut circles, corn-drying kilns, building footings, sheildings, enclosures, the vestige of a mill, banks and ditches, and cairns, that may well not have been seen by anyone alive today. Both hikes required

several kilometers of rugged terrain, but it was worth it to see the sites.

This is the biggest structure still standing.



Most were more near to the ground like this longhouse.



Or barely visible like this shepherd's shielding (a small and simple structure used for protection when the sheep were taken up into the higher ground for summer grazing)



Near one of the crofter cottage foundations, we discovered a corn drying kiln, by uncovering the stone walled fire pit (red arrow) and the flue that supplied air to the fire (yellow arrow). Corn was spread across a platform above the fire for drying.



The background of these cairns in the next photo are undetermined. They may be Iron Age burial cairns, or they may simply be what are called clearance cairns – piles of stones from clearing a bit of land for cultivation. No way to tell without a bit of digging – leave that to the real archeologists.



Quiz time.....Did I take this next photo in Montanta.....or Caithness?



Later this autumn came one of the most memorable days we have ever spent in Britain. After World War 1, Britain experienced an industrial revolution, fueled by steam - particularly the steam railway engine. In 1921, the UK government reorganized over 100 small railways into 4 major lines. The London and North East Railway (LNER) was one of these. In an effort to outdo their competitors in the Big Four, the LNER designed a new and better steam engine, released in 1923. It became the pride and joy of the line. It was the first steam engine to run non-stop from London to Edinburgh – over 369 miles, in under 8 hours. It was the first steam engine to travel over 100 miles per hour. It was the first steam engine to star in its own movie. It was known as The Flying Scotsman.

It was promoted as the symbol of the LNER, fast, efficient and modern. It had a cocktail bar, a cinema, a hair dresser, and a dining car serving 4 course meals. It is perhaps the most iconic train in history. It was the height of British Engineering.

After years of success, in 1955, the British Rail modernization plan announced that Steam Engines would be done away with, to make way for modern diesel engines. The Flying Scotsman was to be scrapped. A wealthy train lover, Alan Pegler, bought the Scotsman and took her on tour, first around Britain, then in America, during the sixties. He repeated the non-stop London-to-Edinburgh run

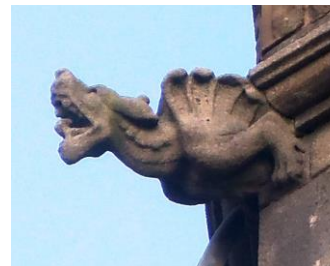
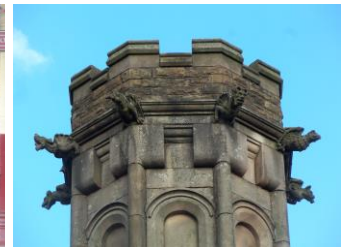
40 years after the original. He promoted the train as a piece of history. He showed her, in all her glory, to the world. He kept her alive. Until he ran out of money in the mid-70's. She was left stranded in America, and was in jeopardy of being scrapped again, until she was saved by another rich railway enthusiast, who brought her back to Britain.

But by 1996, she was in need of a major overhaul and a major influx of cash. Eventually the British Railway Museum acquired her, and 6000 individual donors contributed enough money for the museum to restore her. It took 10 years, but this spring, The Flying Scotsman rolled under her own power once more.

She was greeted by huge crowds of spectators and a giant demand for the limited tickets to ride. This has continued all year. I managed, however, to get two tickets to ride the Flying Scotsman on the East Lancashire Railway in October.



Naturally there was a pipe band. And a castle....with cool gargoyles



"Did not strong connections draw me elsewhere, I believe Scotland would be the country I would choose to end my days in."Benjamin Franklin

