

be rewarded with breathtaking views to Skye and over Canna to the distant Western Isles. Far below, at picturesque Guirdil Bay, is another bothy that, if anything, is even more dramatically located than the one at Dìbidil.

Another positive result of the community buyout is that Rum now has its own community ranger service. Mike Wendly is the new full-time ranger and his job is to help interpret Rum's flora and fauna and make it accessible to the general public. I joined Mike on a guided walk called 'Where Eagles Dare', part of a programme of weekly walks now available to visitors.

The walk has a fitting name given Rum's role in the return of sea eagles to Scotland. Over a 10-year period, starting in the 1970s, some 82 pairs were re-introduced here. Sea eagles still visit the island, but did not breed on Rum this year – unlike the island's three pairs of golden eagle which between them successfully reared two chicks.

Although actual sightings are not guaranteed on the walk, we got lucky on ours. After about an hour, I spotted a large bird silhouetted above the hills and sure enough it was a golden eagle. There can be few wild animals more perfectly suited to their surroundings.

Later, I accompanied Mike on a two-hour walk to Kilmory, an area at the north end of the island that is home to a renowned red deer research project. Run by researchers from Cambridge and Edinburgh universities, it is



Walking wild: Community ranger Mike Wendly (above); village signage (below); preparing the ponies (bottom right); antler graveyard (bottom left)

one of the most complete scientific studies of its kind in the world, with the results long forming the basis for deer management across Scotland.

It is also a spot made famous by the BBC's *Autumnwatch* programme, which focused on the lives of the resident deer during the annual rut – a noisy time to be at this end of the island. Earlier I had asked local stalker Marcel Blankers what the chances were of seeing deer at Kilmory. "A hundred percent!" he replied with what turned out to be justified confidence.

Unlike other parts of Rum, stalking is not allowed at Kilmory. This means that the deer are used to people and so it is possible to get unusually close – certainly near enough to see the collars on some of the animals that are used by researchers for tracking purposes.

Down near the beach, an old laundry building dating back to the Bullough days is now used to store research data. It is also stacked with antlers. "One of these is the skull of Caesar," says Mike, referring to one of the now-deceased stars of *Autumnwatch*.

On our return to Kinloch, we visit the Rum ponies – a rare breed that usually roam free on the other side of the island, but have been brought over to help with stalking. Sturdy and sure-footed, the ponies are used to bring deer carcasses off the hill. They are tough animals and the sight of these relatively small ponies carrying a large deer is impressive. It's something rarely seen in the Scottish hills, but is just one more example of how people have learnt to work hand in hand with nature on this challenging but beguiling island. ■

Further info

GETTING THERE

There are two ways to reach the Isle of Rum: the large Caledonian MacBrayne (www.calmac.co.uk) ferry service from Mallaig, or the smaller sight-seeing boat (MV Shearwater) operated by Arisaig Marine (www.arisaig.co.uk). Between them, they provide at least one sailing a day, although it might be necessary to combine the two if wanting to travel on your preferred days.

STAYING THERE

Kinloch Castle houses a youth hostel with dormitory rooms, as well as doubles and family rooms. You can even stay in a four-poster bed with original horse-hair mattress. Space is limited, so bookings should be made in advance. Tel: 01687 462037.

A community campsite is located midway between the pier and the village. Much-improved in recent years, it has a shower, toilets, plus a couple of wooden shelters. Midge nets are strongly recommended. Wild camping is also permitted on the island, but campers are asked to advise the SNH reserve office (in Kinloch) before setting out.

Rum also has two bothies at Dìbidil and Guirdil. They are pretty plush by bothy standards, but you will have to take in all supplies (and pack out all rubbish). It's a long walk in to either, but well worth it.

GETTING AROUND

A mountain bike can come in handy for those wanting to visit Harris and Kilmory, or to save a long walk in to more remote hills.

For more information, visit www.isleofrum.com

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