



Forestry and
Land Scotland

Coilltearachd agus
Fearann Alba

Nothing to See Here

.....
Delivering better wildlife
viewing experiences



Garbh Eilean
Wildlife Hide

A wooden sign shaped like a fish, mounted on a post in a forest. The sign is engraved with the text 'Garbh Eilean Wildlife Hide'. The background shows a lush forest with moss-covered tree trunks and ferns.

Introduction

Watching wildlife in its natural environment is good for us. It's also good for the tourism economy. If the experience is well managed, it can be good for the wildlife itself.

Many visitors to countryside sites enjoy seeing wildlife as part of a day out. For some people, watching wildlife can be the sole reason for visiting a site.

Providing wildlife viewing opportunities and facilities can help visitors get closer to nature. Visitors can enjoy good views of wildlife in a natural environment, whilst minimising disturbance to the wildlife itself. Wildlife viewing facilities can provide a reason to go to a site, and an enjoyable focus for the visit.

However, the provision of a good wildlife viewing facility can be a considerable investment of both time and money.

It should only be done if there is clear justification for the initial investment, and an ongoing commitment to care and maintenance.

This document shares our experiences of managing wildlife viewing opportunities on the national forest estate in Scotland. It has been informed by the other guidance we found (see References for further information) and comments from colleagues: our thanks to those who have shared their own experiences. Further comments are welcome.

Design and Visitor Planning
Forestry and Land Scotland

Planning your facility

Proper planning is really important. We've found that when our own wildlife viewing facilities have given a poor visitor experience, it's often because we haven't planned well enough. This guidance introduces the main issues to consider.

- | | |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 01 Site & species choice | 06 Windows |
| 02 Your audience | 07 Seating |
| 03 Location | 08 Habitat manipulation & feeding |
| 04 Choosing the right facility | 09 Optical equipment |
| 05 Doors | 10 Information & interpretation |

Site & species choice

The species and experience you choose to promote will affect the design of the viewing facility, and the audience you attract.

Any possible impact on the wildlife itself needs careful consideration: expert advice should be taken.

The potential of seeing an iconic species (a red squirrel, otter or eagle for example) can attract more attention than common species. A clearly themed experience can be more appealing for visitors: it's easy to understand what Mull Eagle Watch or the Kylerhea Otter Hide offer.

But be realistic – there should be a reasonable chance, of seeing signs of the wildlife you are promoting!

Issues to consider

- What is special or different about your site?
- Can you offer a unique wildlife experience?
- Can you offer closer views than elsewhere?
- Can you offer more reliable views than elsewhere?
- Is your wildlife only there at certain times of year, times of day or times of tide?



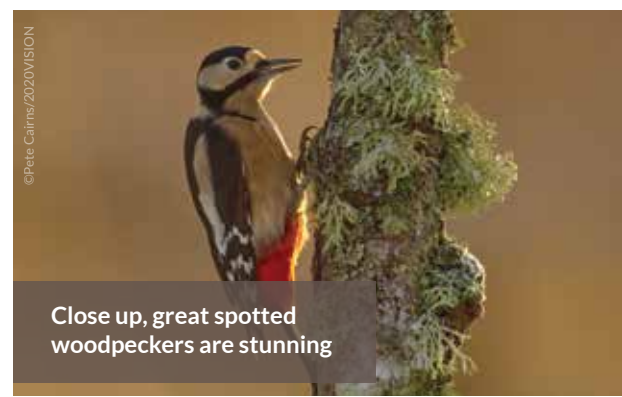
Red squirrels are popular with many visitors



Seals can provide reliable sightings when other wildlife is absent



Otters can be hard to predict



Close up, great spotted woodpeckers are stunning



Easily accessible viewing opportunities can appeal to families (Bennachie, Aberdeenshire)

Your audience

Understanding visitors' motivations and needs is crucial to designing an effective facility.

Some visitors may only be interested in good views of a particular rare species. Some visitors may be satisfied with seeing common species. For other visitors, seeing wildlife may not be important: they may just want to get some exercise, relax or spend time with friends.

Your visitor profile will be influenced by what other attractions and facilities are nearby. Your audience may change significantly throughout the year. For example, May and June are popular months for serious wildlife watches. These visitors usually have their own binoculars and telescopes, and need little help in identifying wildlife. During July and August, more non-specialist visitors are likely, including family groups. These visitors need more help if they are going to enjoy their experience.

You need to consider your own objectives here as well: do you want to concentrate on experienced wildlife watchers or attract a larger and more diverse audience? Do you want to attract specialist interest groups such as wildlife photographers, or education

Issues to consider

- What might visitors want to see?
- When are people likely to visit?
- What will visitors need to enjoy their visit?
- What other reasons may people have to visit your site?
- Could there be any conflicts between your visitors' motivations?



The beaver viewing platform in Knapdale was built to accommodate guided walks



The Garbh Eilean hide sits within the native oakwoods on Loch Sunart

Location

The facility should be positioned so that it provides good views of wildlife, an attractive background and easy access for a wide range of visitors.

How close can you get to the wildlife? Some species are more sensitive than others. Viewing facilities should be designed and positioned to minimise disturbance to wildlife. This can include screening the approach, and minimising the silhouette of visitors. Earthworks and natural vegetation can help with this.

Can the facility fit sympathetically into the surrounding landscape? If it will be obvious, can you reflect the local vernacular?

Looking out onto an attractive area will enhance everyone's experience, especially if wildlife isn't present. Photographers will often be looking for a natural but uncomplicated background for their images.

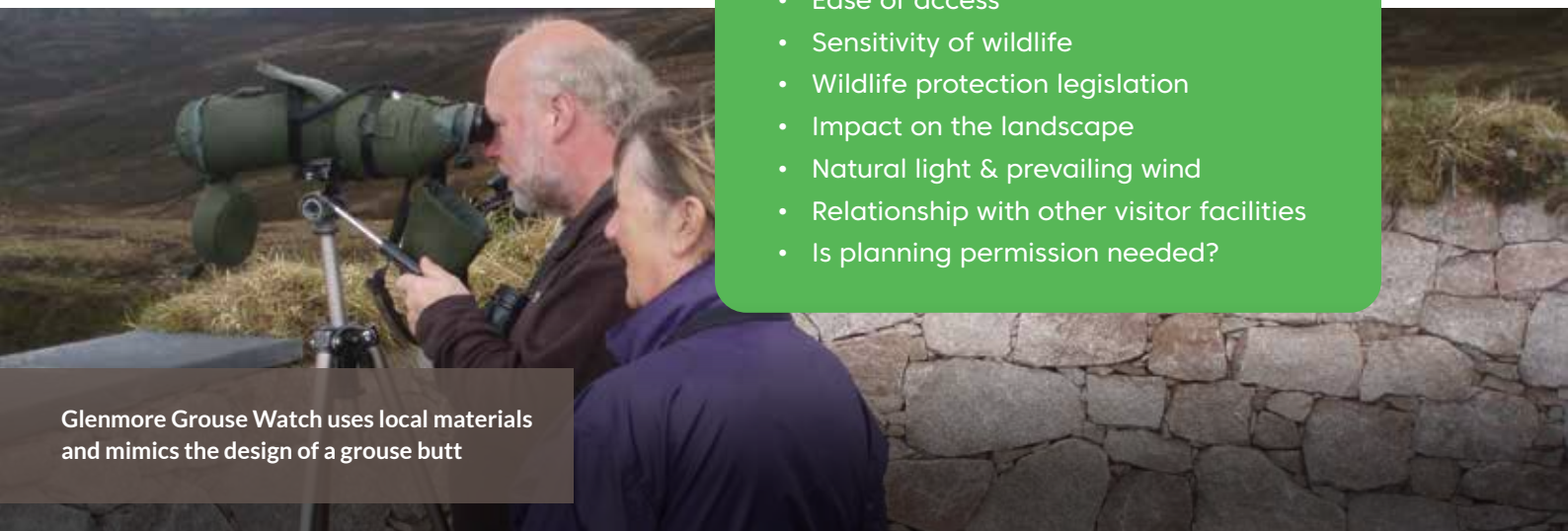
Photographers may also need space for their tripods and sometimes space to work with a large lens. They may also want to position their camera at eye level to the species, so it's worth considering these aspects in greater detail if photographers are a key audience at your sight.

If the hide is for watching mammals, take account of the prevailing wind direction to minimise smell and noise from the hide.

Think about what else visitors need: where will visitors park, how will they get to the hide itself, where are the nearest toilets?

Issues to consider

- Ease of access
- Sensitivity of wildlife
- Wildlife protection legislation
- Impact on the landscape
- Natural light & prevailing wind
- Relationship with other visitor facilities
- Is planning permission needed?



Glenmore Grouse Watch uses local materials and mimics the design of a grouse butt

Choosing the right facility

Wildlife viewing facilities should always be of good quality, fit for purpose and good value for money.

You need some idea of how many people might visit, and their visit patterns, to inform the overall size of the facility. Could there be large numbers arriving at the same time, for example a school group, or a guided tour? Species which are best viewed at a particular time of day (capercaillie at dawn, beavers at dusk) may concentrate visitors and cause capacity issues.

The species you want to show your visitors will influence the design of the facility and the shape, size and type of viewing slots/windows. For example, visitors will need to look up for eagles in flight but down for seals in the water.

Will low light levels present a comfort or safety issue? If so, an open backed hide, screen or platform may be a better option as there will be more natural light.



The simple screen at Glenrigh offers easy access to views of red squirrels

Is the location of the best viewing experience likely to change? If so, a permanent build may be risky. The Mull Eagle Watch project developed a large mobile hide, to allow for the annually changing nest sites. However, moving the hide proved very challenging!

Fully enclosed hides can be expensive – do you really need one? In some locations, we have provided simple screens with viewing slots. These seem to work best where visitors just want a quick look, in destinations locations where wildlife watching isn't the main reason for visiting. Screens are a lot cheaper to design, install and maintain than enclosed hides, but they provide less of a destination for visitors.

Issues to consider

- How many visitors will you need to accommodate at one time?
- What times of day will the facility be used?
- Where will visitors be looking for wildlife?



The Wild Watch hide at Kirroughtree works well without doors or windows

Doors

Fully enclosed hides can be intimidating to new visitors. Think about ways to minimise any barriers to access.

Enclosed hides can be intimidating to some people. If doors are necessary, a glass panel in the door can be more welcoming, as it allows visitors to look in before opening the door.

Lever-style door handles can be easier to use than door knobs, which can be slippery when wet and need more gripping power. Door handles should be positioned around one metre from the floor for easy access. Make sure there is good clearance between the door and the handle so visitors can grip the handle easily.

For visitors with sight impairments, door handles should be clearly distinguishable from the door by choosing a tonal contrast, for example a metallic silver handle against

a darker wooden door.

Avoid noisy metal bolts and catches – they may disturb wildlife and will annoy other visitors. Make sure the hide cannot possibly be locked from the outside by visitors: if there is a bolt it must be kept locked open whilst the hide is in use.

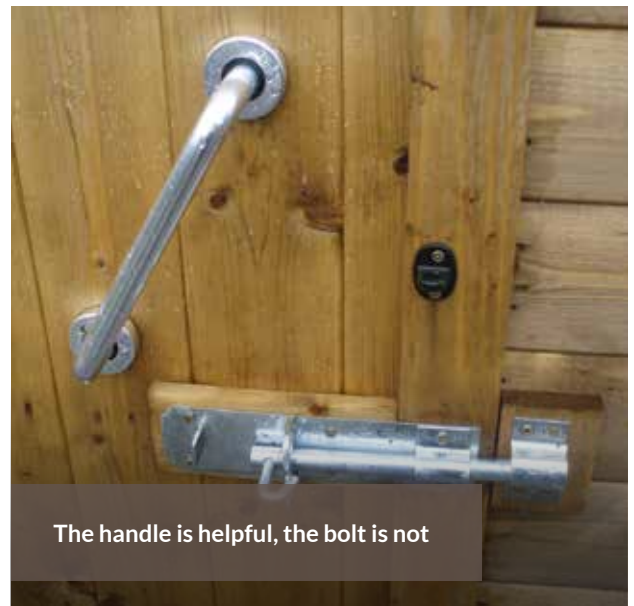
Make sure the door will not bang shut in the wind - add a suitable soft closing mechanism or padding on the door frame.

Issues to consider

- Do you need to have a door on your facility?
- Allow visitors to see in before opening doors
- Make sure any doors and fittings are easy and safe to use



Glass panels can make hides more inviting



The handle is helpful, the bolt is not



Note how our windows at the Kylerhea Otter Hide obscure the view

Windows

Hide windows have given us more problems than any other aspect of our wildlife viewing facilities.

If the correct windows are not included in the original build, we've found that retrofitting can be difficult and expensive.

Are windows really needed? We have built large hides with no doors or windows: in relatively sheltered woodland settings, these have proved popular and successful. This accessible design may be less suitable in a more exposed, windy location.

Windows can provide protection from poor weather and annoying insects like the infamous Scottish midge. They can also minimise the noise and smell from the hide. However, windows can also be a barrier to good viewing. Serious wildlife watchers or photographers may not like using binoculars, telescopes or cameras through glass, as the image quality will normally be reduced. Low-iron glass does give far clearer views than standard glass, though it is more expensive. Windows which can be opened need to stay

safely and securely open. Many traditional bird hide windows open inwards and are secured above the head of the viewer. This does ensure that views are unobstructed, but all fixings must be very secure otherwise there is a serious safety issue. Visitors also need good upper limb strength to use these windows.

Issues to consider

- Do you need windows?
- Do all the windows need to open?
- Design any windows to be safe and easy to use
- Use low-iron glass for the best views
- Consider the viewing needs of children

Some hides now use sliding windows. These windows slide down into the body of the hide, or outside the hide. We reckon this solution offers the best combination of safety and ease of use.

Inclusion of some larger non-opening windows within the hide can offer more viewing opportunities, if the seats at the other windows are all taken. Reflective glass windows close to feeders can provide extremely close views. Glass can come with a self-cleaning coating – if you don't have this, make sure you clean your windows regularly! Any glass in windows should be toughened safety glass.

A narrow shelf below the windows can provide welcome elbow support for binocular and camera users. Some visitors may come with attachments to fit telescopes onto these shelves.

Wheelchair users and children will need viewing opportunities at different heights.



Another good example of RSPB's sliding and static windows



The sliding windows of this RSPB hide are easy and safe to use

Seating

Will visitors want to call in for a quick look or stay for a long time?

Some of our simplest viewing facilities do not have any seating. Comfortable seating will be more important if visitors are staying for longer periods to look for elusive species like otters.

Individual seats or short benches can be more user-friendly and flexible than long benches. We've also found that our longer, wider benches have been used for sleeping on and other unintended recreational activities. However, movable benches can scrape noisily over floors.



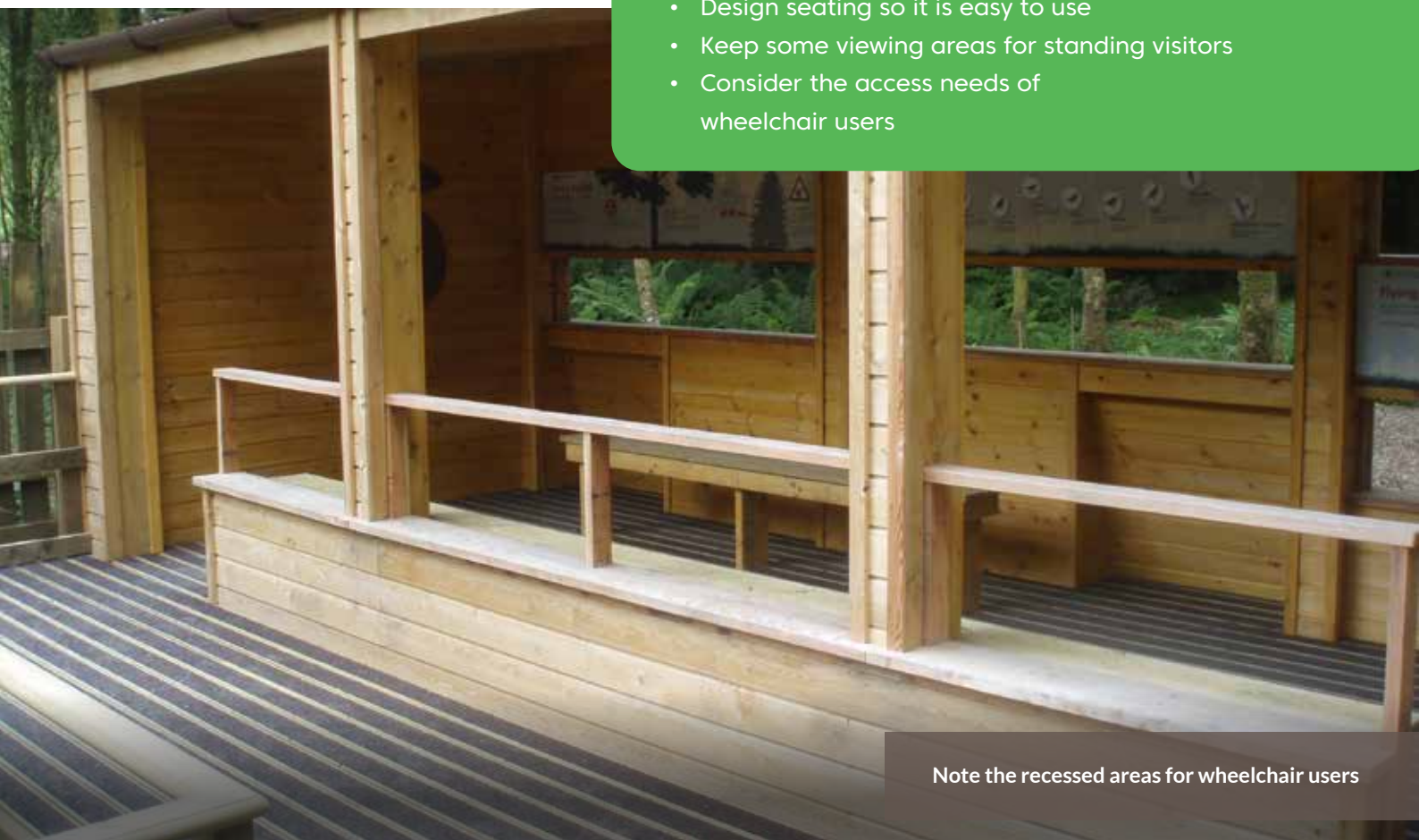
Unattached benches are flexible but might be left in awkward places

The use of suitable floor coverings can reduce this noise, but this won't be appropriate for all locations. Views can be blocked if all windows have seating and all the seats are taken, so consider some viewing areas without seating. Some of our hides include viewing areas designed for standing visitors.

Wheelchair users will need access to a viewing area which is kept seat-free. A recess for the wheelchair will allow easier viewing.

Issues to consider

- Design seating so it is easy to use
- Keep some viewing areas for standing visitors
- Consider the access needs of wheelchair users



Note the recessed areas for wheelchair users



Birch stumps dug in to provide natural-looking perching points for woodland birds



Providing nuts is very effective at encouraging red squirrels

Habitat manipulation & feeding

You might get better views of wildlife by manipulating the habitat. The creation of feeding, perching, nesting or lekking opportunities can all bring wildlife closer to a hide.

If done well, these interventions can look quite natural. Any such intervention needs to be carefully planned and discussed to ensure it is appropriate.

Habitat manipulation can also help to manage visitors: vegetation or wet ground can be used to dissuade visitors from wandering around the front of the hide, without the need for fencing.

Providing food can bring wildlife much closer and make viewing more predictable. Wildlife will often tolerate higher levels of disturbance if food is available. Feeding in a specific place can also provide a reliable target for CCTV and webcams. Again, this needs to be planned and discussed to ensure it is appropriate.

We have found feeders to be really useful for reliable views of red squirrels, and close views of woodland birds. We know of other sites which have successfully used feeding to attract red kites, badgers and pine martens.

However, providing food for wildlife can have negative impacts for wildlife in terms of dependency and disease. Some visitors may dislike this unnatural intervention. It also takes time and money to provide the food.

Issues to consider

- Is it possible or desirable to manipulate habitat for better views?
- Can you use natural features to manage visitors?
- Consider if feeding is necessary, and sustainable
- Follow good practice guidelines for feeding hygiene

Optical equipment

Not all visitors will arrive with binoculars. If the wildlife is generally so far away that magnification is essential to obtain a good view, this can be an issue.

Many keen wildlife watchers will arrive with their own binoculars and telescopes. However, non-specialist visitors are far less likely to have their own equipment.

We do provide binoculars and telescopes at some unstaffed sites. Our Kylesha Otter Hide and the Garbh Eilean hide both provide binoculars, secured with steel cords. Both sites have experienced occasional theft and damage. Whilst this is frustrating, positive visitor feedback suggests that the benefits of supplying decent optics outweigh the issues. However we've also had negative feedback when the binoculars have been missing or damaged, so any provision needs to be managed.

We have also fitted secure telescopes at some of our hides. Whilst the optical quality is not equal to high quality bird-watching telescopes, they do provide a good basic service to visitors arriving without their own equipment. The telescopes have been a lot easier to manage than the binoculars, though they were rather more expensive.

We do provide live CCTV feeds from some hides into our visitor centres and to our website. This can encourage visitors to go to the hide and also provides an experience to visitors who are unable to access the hide. We've had a mixed experience with webcams, in terms of quality and reliability of the technology, and reliability of sightings. Our best viewing experiences have been from cameras on osprey and eagle nests: during the nesting season, there is always something to see.

New technologies may provide additional and cost effective ways of offering visitors good views via their own devices (mobile phones, tablets etc).



Binoculars secured with steel wire: this could be cut with pliers



The telescope at Garbh Eilean is bolted into the floor

Issues to consider

- Can visitors enjoy the experience without optical equipment?
- Secure and maintain any optical equipment
- Consider ways of providing a wildlife viewing experience for all your visitors



Content and design work together at the Scottish Beaver Trial site, Knapdale

Information & interpretation

Wildlife is unpredictable. This makes good information and interpretation even more important. Accepted good practice for heritage interpretation applies to any wildlife interpretation.

Appropriate information and interpretation can make a big difference to the quality of the visitor experience. It should be an integral part of the design and build of a facility, rather than an afterthought.

Experienced wildlife watchers may need little assistance; however the majority of people who visit our wildlife watching facilities are not experts. Some visitors may have very little knowledge of wildlife, or of how to watch wildlife. And even experts can benefit from specific, local information.

Face to face interpretation can be the most flexible and enjoyable way to provide wildlife interpretation. However, most of our facilities are unstaffed so we rely largely on graphic panels.

We think it's really important to help visitors actually see the wildlife. When to look, where to look and what to look for may be obvious to experienced wildlife watchers, but not to all visitors. Don't assume that people know this stuff just because you do. The use of good quality wildlife images can inform and inspire without words; this is especially useful if overseas visitors are expected.

Issues to consider

- Review your target audiences before developing interpretation
- Plan interpretation as part of the design and build
- Follow good practice guidance for interpretation



Sharing the what, where and when at Glenmore Grouse Watch



Helping visitors identify common coastal birds, along with their Gaelic names at Fishnish

In a hide, the focus for visitors is 'out the window'. If all the information is on the back wall, it may not get read. We try to use the space around windows, but are aware that if the hide is busy some visitors may not get close enough to see the information. In some hides, we have repeated the interpretation panels around the windows so visitors have more chance of seeing them.

A whiteboard with suitable pens allows visitors to add their own sightings, which can provide a useful record for other visitors. A visitor book can be an even simpler way of recording sightings and collecting feedback.

These may need some checking and moderating, but we've experienced a very low level of inappropriate comment and artwork.

There is some helpful interpretation guidance, including guidelines for interpreting wildlife at www.snh.gov.uk/policy-and-guidance/heritage-interpretation/good-practice-guidelines (or search for 'FCS / SNH wildlife interpretation').



Content and design work together at the Scottish Beaver Trial site, Knapdale

References

The publications listed below provide more detailed information and examples.

- Bell, S. (2008) *Design for Outdoor Recreation*
- Colorado Division of Wildlife *A Guide to Wildlife Viewing and Photography Blinds**
- Forestry Commission Scotland / SNH (2015) *Wildlife Interpretation Guidelines**
- Hibberd, P (2106) NAI Legacy Magazine *New Guidance for Interpreting Wildlife*
- Norfolk Coast AONB (2002) *Guidelines for the Provision of Birdwatching Facilities in the Norfolk Coast AONB**
- Oberbillig D.R. (2001) *Providing Positive Wildlife Viewing Experiences*
- Retief, E. *Universally Accessible Bird Hides**
- Rewilding Europe (2012) *Wildlife Watching Hides**
- RSPB *Showing People Birds – Providing Viewing Facilities*
- Tourism Intelligence Scotland *Wildlife Tourism in Scotland**

*Available online for free at the time of writing.



Forestry and
Land Scotland

Coilltearachd agus
Fearann Alba

Contact

.....

Design and Visitor Planning
Forestry and Land Scotland,
Silvan House
231 Corstorphine Road
Edinburgh
EH12 7AT

Tel: 0300 067 6000

E-mail: lucy.hadley@forestryandland.gov.scot

Published by - Forestry and Land Scotland
February 2022 © Crown Copyright 2022

All photography from Forestry and Land Scotland unless otherwise stated
Designed by Design and Visitor Planning, Forestry and Land Scotland, Edinburgh D&VP- PDF - FEBRUARY 2022