



Lockdown in Scotland



What a truly bizarre and unexpected year we have all had. It seems that no matter where you were in 2020, you experienced a major change in your way of life, and some form of the dreaded lockdown. Scotland applied one of the most stringent lockdowns of any country. From mid-March until the first of July we had no shops open except those deemed “essential” like food suppliers and pharmacies (and liquor stores). Unless you had an “essential” job (as in working in one of the above shops plus health care workers, delivery people, and those tasked with maintaining infrastructure) you were supposed to not leave home at all. All businesses were shut down unless employees could work from home. The university classes that we teach were all taken completely on-line, and all examinations were cancelled and we had to create new assessments that could be done at home and submitted on-line. The move to teaching on-line from home (with questionable Scottish internet connections) posed quite a challenge for us, but we persevered, and I am proud to say that we managed to get almost all of our students across the finish line.

We were only supposed to leave home once per day to exercise or for “essential” trips (food, medicine, etc.) and any travel was supposed to be of not more than 5 miles. When in mid-July, we were allowed to broaden travel, and shops were allowed to re-open, it was mandatory to wear a mask in all shops and social distancing was required. Unlike what we saw on the news from many countries, people here followed the rules closely, and worked together to minimize the spread of infection.

Although draconian, these measures kept the Covid19 infection rate remarkably low here in the far-north. As of the end of July, Caithness had only 1 death, and Scotland had only had one death in the last 20 days. Frankly, folks here were very grateful for the way it has all been handled, as we continued to watch daily numbers in the thousands in other parts of the world.

However, as a consequence of the virus, our planned trip to the Canaries was cancelled, as was a trip to attend a meeting and do some touring in Northern Ireland. And our planned trip to America this summer to include Aeron’s wedding and seeing many old friends was impossible, due to the USA being on the “red list” of countries with rapidly rising infection rates. Since the UK government advises against travel to red listed countries, therefore our UK health coverage, our private insurance policy, and our travel insurance policy would

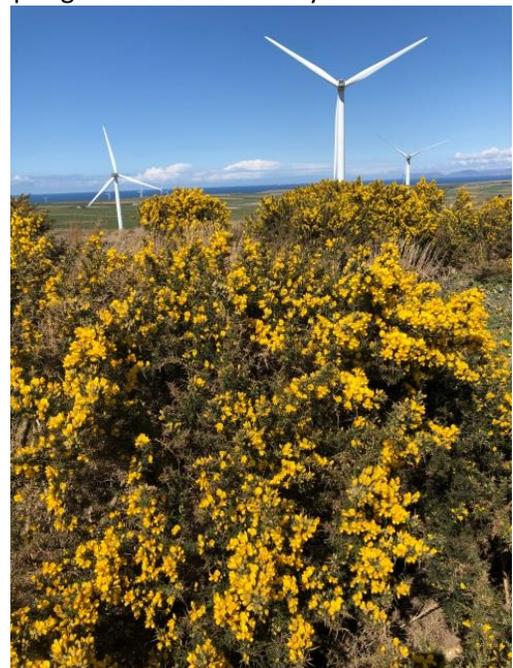
all be invalidated if we landed in America, and we would be subject to a 14 day quarantine going both ways. Given American infection numbers, we could not risk being stranded in the USA with no health care coverage.

On the positive side, all of the restrictions have forced us to some positive changes in lifestyle. The dog and I have spent many pleasant afternoons walking the trails of the nearby windfarm, and have watched Caithness move from its spring flowers (mostly yellow) to its summer flowers (mostly purple). And the slower pace has allowed us to spot some wildlife that we don’t normally see. When things opened up in July, we managed some walks further afield. So, although not as exciting as the photos that I normally send back, these may give you a taste of the slower pace of lockdown life here in Caithness at the top of Scotland.

Here are some of the views from my wind farm walks.



Yellow is the color of Caithness when it blooms in the spring. Gorse covers many of our hillsides.



Bog Iris grows in the low boggy areas.



The infamous Scottish Thistle is beautiful. But don't touch!!!!



As spring moves to summer, the Caithness wild flowers move from yellow to purple.

More purple





The green ferns and moss are growing like crazy in the woods.



We have fields of purple foxglove, with a few of the more rare white version. Some of them grow even taller than me at 6 foot 3.

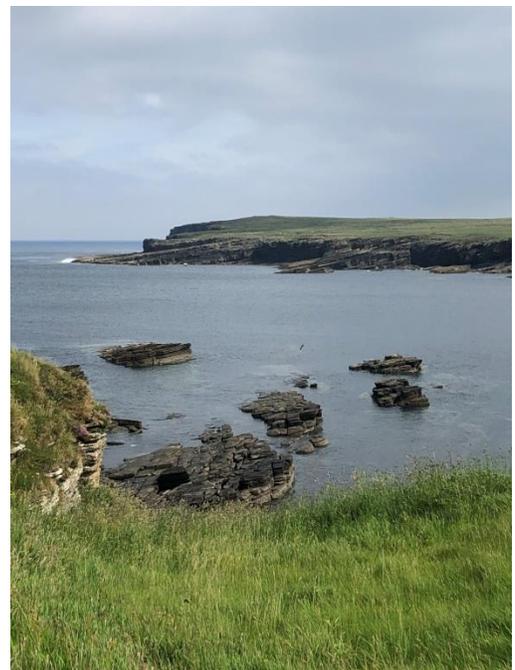


We have a few other colors thrown in, like these poppies.

These are the photos from a walk along the Oykel River.



Walks along the Caithness coast are always beautiful.





On our nearly daily walks at the wind farm, the cows got to know dog and I.



I guess the Scottish Thistle isn't too sharp for the butterflies.



There is a nest of Oyster Catchers at the wind farm, and they squawked a lot whenever we got too close.



And the Dippers entertained us along the coast.



Every village in the Highlands seems to have its own memorial to those lost fighting in the two world wars. Most have a Celtic Cross, but the one overlooking the loch at Lairg is a more unique broken granite pillar draped with a cloth, to represent the fallen cut off by death. These villages were nearly devastated by the wars. In the First World War, tiny Lairg village alone lost three MacRae brothers, three MacLean brothers, and three MacKenzie brothers plus their sister who was a nurse, and 45 other men. The devastation of the Highlands population in the great wars goes way beyond what we Americans generally understand.



We visited a rather unique little place in the middle of sparsely populated Sutherland. It is the Crask Inn Episcopal Church of Scotland and Beer Garden.



During lockdown we were unable to travel back to visit the kids in Indiana. So we started having weekly on-line pub quizzes, taking turns being quiz master. Quite fun. And as you can tell from the facial expression, intensely competitive.



If you have read my other newsletters, you will be aware that the wee property that we purchased here in Caithness, turned out to be a snail ranch. The climate and soil is perfect for them, and we encounter the little things every time we move a pot, or weed the flowers, or add to the compost. They do not eat Wendy's flowers or vegetables, so we peacefully co-exist.



I have spent a fair amount of time observing the wee beasties (back to that slower pace of life here in the far north) and Wendy claims that this picture proves



It is a 200 year old Drover's Inn, where men stayed while driving livestock south from Caithness and Sutherland to markets in Inverness. It existed before there were any roads through the area. Today it is owned by the Episcopal Church of Scotland and it is used for occasional services, and operated by one of the church elders as a pub in between. Here is photo of the sanctuary and bar room. This is NOT a joke.

that I have not only welcomed them, but taught some of them to read.



In this coronavirus world, it is the little things that can keep us sane.

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



If you recall the movie ET from several decades ago, you may recall the "finger-tip" photo which was used in posters for the film. Well, in my attempts to study the wee beasties in our yard, I developed a bit of a relationship with one of them, who would reach out an antenna and touch me the same way. Reminding me of another movie of that era.....Close Encounters of the Snail Kind.

