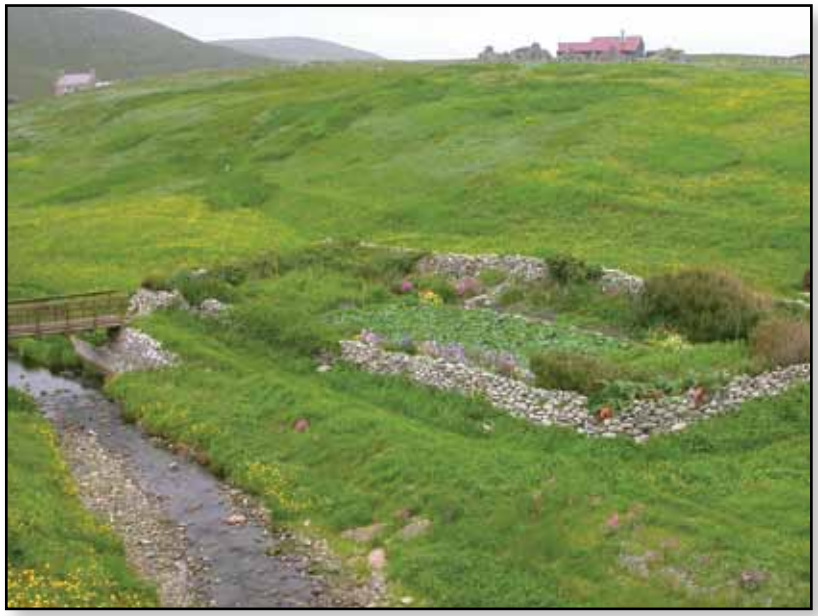
FOULA HERITAGE
Ranger service

Pier to Airstrip
(early summer)



Ham valley

Guided Walk No. 1

Distance **2.4km**
Difficulty **Easy**

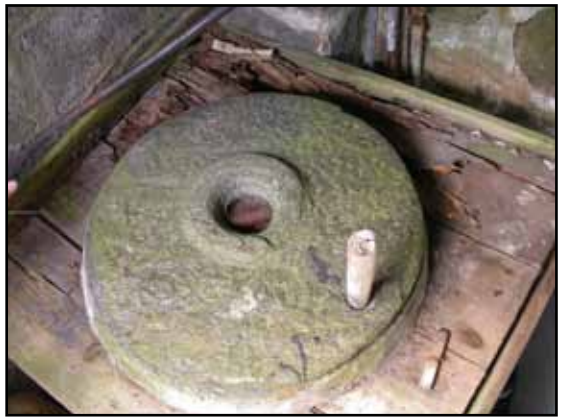
Go up the road towards the hills. Look in the drain on the upper side of the road for tiny white star shaped flowers of Lesser Stitchwort, and of Blinks in June and July, and the small purple pink flowers of Marsh Willowherb and yellow sprays of Marsh Ragwort (Foula name Gowans) in July and August. The grasses, Marsh Foxtail and Floating Sweetgrass can be found in the wetter sections. Red Clover flowers along the side of the road in July and August. On the south side of the road just up above Ham are clumps of Meadow Pea, a vetch with yellow flowers. In August the flowers of Foula's commonest grass, Yorkshire Fog tint the grassland pinky purple.

In June, there are usually Shetland ponies with foals on upper side of road. There are about 30 mares on the Isle and three stallion. The mares carry their foals for eleven months. The foals are sold in the autumn in Lerwick for breeding, children's pets and for riding and driving. Some go abroad to Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden etc. the ones in Foula measure 28 to 38 inches at the shoulder. They live on the hills most of the year.

During May, cross the head of the small burn (da Peerie Burn) which runs under the road just up from the pier and walk slowly down to the edge of the sea above where the seals lie. Stop before you scare them off. From June-August, the common seals have usually dispersed along the coast but one or two may be seen swimming in the Voe. In September they may have returned to their lying up place at the side of the Voe. Around 100 Common Seals lie up here through the winter, with occasional Grey Seals. They are mainly young seals from the Shetland Mainland. Common Seals rarely breed on Foula. They have pups in June.

Or you can turn off to the left at the Ham house and walk down the path to the beach.
On your left hand side, you will pass a little building shaped like a boat because a boat (lost in a fishing disaster and salvaged off the north end) was used for the roof. Wood was valuable and hard to get.

On your right hand side, outside the old, ruined Ham workhouse, you will see a sandstone knocking stane, which was used to grind grain using a heavy wooden mallet. You will also see the remains of a handmill stone made of mica schist. The knocking stanes fell out of use at the end of the 19th century, but the hand mills were still being used in the first half of the last century, mainly for making burstin (meal made from roasted barley). It was said that the landlords encouraged



Handmill stone

the building of watermills and then charged a tax on islanders using them. To force the islanders to use the mills, they broke the knocking stanes. Sometimes the islanders built them into a dyke to hide them. At the lower side of the l Ham yard near the stone seat there is half of a big trough quern turned upside down. You can feel the hollow underneath with their hand. There are several of these trough querns on the island and they date back to the bronze Age. There is half of another smaller one on the bank of the burn just below the Leraback fence. They were used to grind grain using a rubbing stone.

In May, celandines, Foula name Buttercups, are very common all over the crofts. The flowers only open in the sun.
Silver weed, Foula name Muriks, is found on the sandy croft land near the sea. The roots are edible.

Below the house grow patches of Reed Canary Grass, known as Ruir. It was used extensively for thatching in the past because it has a strong stalk. There is only one thatched roof left in Foula (Edith's laamus).
Tarred felt replaced it as a roofing material. It had to be re-tarred every summer. Now Decra tiles are popular. There are very few roofs with real slates because of wind damage.

The path down past Ham is overgrown with Lesser Stitchwort, Blinks, White Clover and Toadrush.

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Fulmars nest on the cliff face opposite. They are known as Maalies and only colonised Foula in 1878. They are resident all the year round. A member of the petrel family, they can be distinguished from gulls by their straight wings and their tube shaped nostrils. Individuals can be recognised by the shape and colour of their beaks and nostrils. They defend themselves by spitting a foul smelling oil at intruders, so if you come across one inland, take care, because the smell does not wash off. They lay one egg in May, which takes about 50 days to hatch. The chicks fledge at the end of August. They feed on plankton and fish offal.

Go down to the beach and you will see where the boats used to be kept in noosts, where they were pulled up for the winter, and the remains of the boathouse (used for keeping fishing gear). The ferry boat or mailboat, as it was called, used to be kept on the beach. The mail service started in 1879 after Robert Gear wrote to Queen Victoria asking for a mail service to be extended to Foula. The landlord's factors, The Garriocks, first got the contract and then when it became fortnightly, it was awarded to Johnie Jarmson of Walls. In 1892 the contract was awarded to the Foula men, Magnie Manson and Laurie Gray and it ran weekly in the summer and fortnightly in the winter. The Foula

men sailed or rowed across to Walls before the days of engines. The total trip often took 24 hours from first launching the boat to pulling the boat up again. The fastest they could row across was four hours if the boat was light and conditions were favourable. There were six oarsmen and this type of boat was called a saxern.

Look for Fulmars nesting in the old boat. Watch you do not get spat on.

At head of the beach near the yard look for Silverweed flowers and Red Campion, called Sweet Williams in Foula. It is a subspecies known as Zetlandica, with flowers more vivid in colour, sometimes pink or even white, a thicker stem and sometimes more downy. It is also found in Scandinavia. This is a good place to look for Couchgrass and Perennial Ryegrass. They look alike but there is an easy way to tell the difference. Couchgrass flowers are set facing the stem, ryegrass flowers are set out at an angle. You will also find the delicate feathery flowers of Common Bent and Meadow Grass.

Look in the kale yard. Every house had a kale yard because kale was a very important part of the economy. Before potatoes came to Shetland towards the end of the 18th century, people preserved kale in barrels of salt, similar to sourkraut in Germany. They also fed it to livestock through the winter. Only five kale yards are still in use in Foula. The kale is a special variety known as Shetland Kale and it is very slow growing, only hearting in the second winter. It is slightly more bitter than cabbage. One or two of the best hearts are kept for seed. The seeds are grown in special stone structures called plantie crubs and the seedlings planted out the following spring in the kale yards.

You may smell mint as you walk past the yard. Ginger Mint, a hybrid, escaped from the kale yard and now grows wild.

The Sycamore 'tree', against the back wall of the yard, is almost 50 years old, but gets pruned off to the height of the wall by the wind each winter.

Look out for Wrens singing – a Shetland sub-species, larger and lighter in colour and Starlings also a distinct race bigger than Starlings down south.

In May-June and Sept, the Ham Yard and valley is also a good place to see various warblers and other migrants, as well as Swallows which breed on Foula.

Throughout the summer, you may see Shetland Bumble Bees, orange with a buffy white or yellowish tail. They nest in clumps of dead grass, dry cracks in rocks and under old bits of wood and there are usually several nests along this walk.

In May and June you may also see a Northern bumble Bee, striped yellow, black and white. They disappear in July, but can be seen again in late summer

Stop on the Ham Brig and look for trout. These are burn trout. In late summer, and autumn you might see sea trout coming up to spawn. In the Mill Loch there

are Loch Leven Trout, a variety of Rainbow Trout with pink flesh. Trout were introduced to the isle at the beginning of the last century, by Willie Gear and Dodie Isbister. They fetched in a pail full of fry from two burns in Walls. Before that, there were only eels in the burn and lochs.

Along the burn grow clumps of Yellow Iris, known in Foula as Segs. The island children use the leaves to make a seggy boats. The other yellow flower is Mimulus, introduced to Foula in the 1950s and now spead right up the Ham Valley. You may also see the stocky stalks of Wild Angelica, called Spootie Drums in Foula, a relative of the angelica that used to be used for decorating cakes.

Go up the path. The steep side is in the shade and sometimes there are plants still flowering here that are over elsewhere, such as Squills, Marsh and Common Dog Violets. It is a good place to look at Liverworts.

Half way up the path is the well that was used by Ham and the Haa, from where they fetched pails of water. In fine weather they would do the washing at the side of the burn, building a bonfire and heating water in a big zinc tub. House sites had to be chosen where there was a water supply within carrying distance, until the water scheme was installed in Foula about twenty years ago.

Around the well grows Jointed Rush. If you run a leaf between finger and thumb you can feel the joints which otherwise are invisible. This is a good way to distinguish it from the similar looking Bulbous Rush.

Look for Hard Ferns – called Trowie Cairds because trows were said to use them for carding wool. Trows are a small Shetland version of the Norwegian trolls.

In May and June look outside the little gate at the top for the pretty blue squill flowers – called Grice's Onions because the pigs (grice) used to root them up to eat. Unfortunately, the Shetland pig has become extinct. It was small, coloured and hairy. Ribwort plantains are also in flower – called Rabbit's girse.

During late June and July, Ragged Robin flowers in a brilliant pink patch at the foot of the Groups. Here you will also find Heath Spotted Orchids, called Milldoories in Foula.

Go through the Brae gate on your left were it says Coastal Walk. Walk along the track towards the laamus. In July and August, you will find Eyebright and Yellow Rattle along side the path. There are 14 species, sub species and hybrids of Eyebright found in Foula, but it takes an expert to identify them. Yellow Rattle is called Money Grass in Foula because the seed heads, found in August, look like purses full of pennies. It is a parasite on grasses, its roots intertwining with theirs and stealing the nutrients.

During May and early June you can walk through a golden field of Marsh

Marigolds, called Blok in Foula. There are many variations – lemony ones, orangey ones, pointed petals, rounded petals, 5 petals are normal but some have up to 8 petals and you may even find double ones.

This area is cut for hay later on, so please do not walk through it once the Blok is over. Keep to the path. The crofts are mainly used for winter grazing and for fattening lambs in the autumn. The most important crop is grass or rather herb rich grassland.

Look out for Meadow Pipits, Lapwings nesting, Skylarks singing. Shetland has one of the highest concentrations of Skylarks in Britain.

When the hay is being worked, it is built on hay racks designed to let the wind blow through the middle and dry it. This hay is still worked by hand. The ubiquitous black bale silage which has taken over from hay in the rest of Shetland, is not made here because the ground is too wet for the machinery and the hay rigs are very small. Heads of Ruir are used to keep the rain off the racks and coles. One rack or cole will feed one lamb through the winter. Only the lambs are kept in on this croft during the winter. They are housed in the lambhouse or laamus at night and fed hay. The ewes are left to fend for themselves on the hills and are only fed hay if it comes bad snow.

In late summer look at the Scabious and Autumnal Hawkbit, called Dandelions in Foula. Look for white and pale blue Scabious. There are some just past the gate opposite the pier.

Go to the big gate, opposite the pier. Look across at the seals, sometimes playing in the water, and the Eider Ducks, called Dunters (males black and white, females brown). Here there is a clump of Meadowsweet, growing down near the edge, called Yulegirss in Foula and used to make a black die.
Go through the gate. In May and June, look for flowering Common Sedge, the earliest sedge to flower. Its seed heads turn a neat black and green later in the summer. There is also Common Cotton Grass flowers (called Luk a Minnie's Oo i.e. grandmother's wool), Field Woodrush, and more Squills, not only blue but occasionally white and pink. The little yellow flower, Tormentil (Foula name, Bark) has red coloured roots that were used to make a tea to cure fevers and was also used for tanning. It is the plant with the longest flowering season in Foula. In June and late July, look for Sheeps Bit, in various shades of blue. In late summer, you can still find it flowering on the shady bank up from the Ham Brig.

In early summer, look in the drain on the upper side of the path and the old peat bank. Find Lesser Spearwort, (called Liver Girss because islanders thought it caused liver fluke) Lady's Smock (called Peppermint Floors – the flowers can be eaten), Field Horsetails and Lady Ferns.

In the middle of this croft is Blanket Bog, a common habitat over most of Shetland but rare worldwide and often under threat elsewhere from draining,

commercial peat cutting, forestry etc. Peat is only formed in cool damp climates on acid rocks. A big component is sphagnum moss of which there are about 20 species in Shetland. Compare the floppy wavy fronds of the species that grows in the water and the compact sturdy whitish or reddish species growing on the drier peat. The vegetation, that makes peat, does not break down and decay because it is anaerobic and waterlogged. Invertebrates and lesser organisms, that would break it down in normal soil, cannot survive. You will not find any earthworms in peat. It is therefore a nutrient poor environment.

On the back of the peat bank, there are some good specimens of tufted sedge, also known as deer grass, like giant green hedgehogs.

At the end of the old peat bank, if you go down on your hands and knees and look carefully at the sphagnum moss, you can find the red leaves of sundew plants. They trap insects on their sticky leaves to supplement the lack of nutrients. Look for its white flowers in July. You may also see the round leaves of marsh pennywort, like little green parasols and the leaves of marsh violet, called May Floors in Foula, because it is one of the earliest plants to flower. Look for the sticky, yellow green rosettes of Butterwort, another insectivorous plant, and its bright blue purple flowers, late June and July.

Walk down to the Fishermen's Bod. This was used by fishermen, coming from the mainland to fish during the 18th and 19th centuries. A boat from Walls was lost when the men were having a race with a Foula boat. They were wrecked on an underwater rock that lies just off here and were all drowned by the time the Foula men noticed they were not still following them. In those days, fishermen did not learn to swim. Go to the lower side of the bod and look across at the little stone cupboards built into the wall, common in the older Shetland houses.

Walk down to the rocks, or look at the stones in the bod wall. Look at mica schist. The east side of the isle consists of metamorphic rock, mainly mica schist, formed by the melting and reforming of older rocks. This happened before the sandstone, which forms the rest of the island, was laid down. Walk along the coast and point out the glacial moraine left behind as the ice melted at the end of the Ice Age. An ice cap covered Shetland and much of the rest of Britain and stretched out of Foula, piling up against the face of the hills and pushing out through the Daal (the big U shaped valley cutting across the south end of the island). You can find pebbles and bigger boulders, called glacial erratics, which are of types of rock that do not occur in Foula and were carried here by the ice from the Shetland Mainland. When the ice melted, the sea level rose, drowning the lower end of the valley to form the Voe.

Look out for rock pipits. Rock pipits are darker and bigger than the brighter marked meadow pipits. The Foula names are Banks Sparrow and Hill Sparrow. The rock pipit stays here all year round but the meadow pipit goes south for the winter. Oystercatchers, known as Shalders, and Redshanks can usually be seen here. A pair of oystercatchers may be nesting on the rocks.

July and August – in the short turf near the coast you will find pale green clumps of the tiny Allseed, Foula's smallest flowering plant. It is an annual, related to Flax., and its abundance varies from year to year.
May – At the corner of the far peat bank look for flowers of Chickweed Wintergreen, which are very stunted and usually pink in this spot.
Late August and Sept - this area of short turf has a very good show of Scabious.
End of July and early August – on the back of the peat banks are large mats of orange Bog Asphodel, called Clowie Floors because of the scent. It is poisonous to sheep and if they eat it, their lips and ears peel. In September the leaves are like tiny pink flames.

Walk along the cliff edge. Look for Shags, called Skarfs, which are resident all year round. Foula was one of the largest colonies in Europe with about two and a half thousand breeding pairs. Look for Puffins swimming at the entrance to Ham Little.

May – June. Squills, Birdsfoot Trefoil and Red Campion grow on the grassy slopes. Just 4 metres inside the little gate at the east side of the path is a good clump of Butterwort. Like the sundew, it catches small insects to obtain sufficient nutrients.

In the cliff face, just opposite the side of the gate, is a big stripe of a reddy pink rock called porphyyritic microgranite. This sort of feature is called a dyke and was formed by molten rock squooshing up through a crack. It is pink because it contains a lot of feldspar.

Through the gate, we leave the croft land behind and come into an apportionment, an area of hill land fenced in for the crofter's own use. Each croft is allowed 6 hectares. They are used in spring for the lambing. Here the grazing is poorer, with the big patches of Heath Rush, known as Burra, occasional Crowberry and Cotton Grass.

In May look for the flowering Cotton Grass, Common Sedge and Tufted Sedge.

In June look for flowering Sweet Vernal Grass and Purple Moor Grass. Sweet Vernal Grass gives hay its characteristic scent and you can also find it on the hay rigs.

From June – July look for white fluffy heads of Cotton Grass. If you are interested in plants, take them on a short detour into the upper part of the apportionment (you will have to untie one of the gates in the dividing fence) for the full experience of walking through the drifts of white. In September the leaves of the Cotton Grass turn reddish and it is called Red Burra. This is also a good place to find Viviperous Fescue with tiny new plants sprouting out from the flower heads and Wavy Hair Grass (the way the stems in the flower heads kink gives it its name).

Look for wheatears. They nest in old walls and dry cracks in the peat. They are

only here in the summer and spend the winter in Africa. There is usually a pair up from the head of Ham Little.

Look along the cliff faces on the north side of Ham Little, if it is in the shelter, for Puffins at the entrances to their burrows. Puffins are known as Tammie Nories in Shetland and this used to be the nickname for the Foula folk because there were so many puffins here. There are about 20-25 thousand pairs here now, mainly on the high cliffs on the west side. They are only here from April to August and spend the winter out at sea. They lay one egg (white and rounded) in May. The egg takes about 40 days to hatch. The reason you do not see many adults in May is because one bird is in the burrow sitting on its egg, while its partner is out at sea feeding. At this time of year you might see them digging out their burrows or plucking grass and carrying it for nest material or billing their partner or fighting with the neighbours. Later on through the summer, you may see the adults coming in with beakfuls of sandeel
They are able to carry a large number at once because the edges of the beak are serrated. The chicks leave their burrows at the end of August. The best time to see puffins is in the evenings when they come in and sit up on the cliff faces.

Walk across to the War Memorial. If you are tired and want to sit down, you can always find shelter on one side or another. The Memorial was built after the first World War. The landlord, Ian Holbourn, designed it and the Foula men built it. At the time, the population was over 100 and the six men who died represented a high loss of young men. Others were injured and did not return to Foula after the war. RNRT stands for Royal Naval Reserve Trawler Section.

The men killed were :
John W Henry of Gossameadow who died in hospital of bronchitis.
George Robertson who died of wounds received in Ruen.
Cedric Robertson who died at Poona, Bombay.
John Henry of Quinister who was blown up on HMS Bulwark when she was in harbour
John Henry of Niggards who died in hospital in Gosport.

Only one Foula man was killed in the second World War and he had moved to Scalloway shortly before. He was Bobs Umphray and he was killed when trying to carry an injured friend to safety.

Walk to Shobul. This is where the fault line runs from, that divides the two types of rock on the island, the metamorphic rock from the sandstone. The other end of the fault is at Wirwick. The rock is altered and fractured at the fault by the heat. The sea has cut away a small cave. The Foula men fetched some of the shingle used in the pier extension (1946-49) from here in small open boats. The original pier was built in 1913 with shingle fetched from the Smell Geo and the Mid Shooting Geo.

There may be Puffins on the grass slope or at the rocky inner end of the grass slope. Look for a herring gull nesting near the foot of the cliffs opposite.

May – June. Just inside the gate look back at the cliff face for sea pinks and scurvy grass flowering in the shelter and out of reach of the sheep. Pinks will also be flowering on the grassy slope of Shobul, if it has not been too dry and caused a draught.

Go through the small gate, not the big one, and check that the bolt closes properly afterwards as it is inclined to stick.
Now we are on the hill ground. This is Common Grazings, known as Scattald in Shetland, used by all the crofters and close cropped by the sheep.

You may see sheep here. These are the native Foula Sheep, the old original type of Shetland sheep. They belong to the Northern Short Tailed sheep, which are found in the north of Europe and have tails with less than 18 bones. The Foula ones have 13-15 tail bones. (The Southern Long Tailed sheep have 22 tail bones or more.) The Foula sheep come in many colours, the commonest of which is moorit (or brown). The dark lambs you may see will fade to moorit as they grow older. Many of them have markings on their faces and sometimes white feet and tails. Some are the same colour as Soay sheep on St Kilda. They often loose their wool naturally and may have no fleece left by the time it is time to clip. The wool is very soft and weatherproof. Some female sheep have small standing horns. Most of the rams tend to live in small bachelor groups up in the hills. The sheep's ears have different notches cut in them to show who they belong to. They are very nimble footed and climb down through the grassy slopes in the cliffs. Sometimes they fall and are killed.

Walk out to the edge of the cliff opposite the Lumpa Stacks and look down at the skerries. Some days there are large groups of Grey Seals lying up on the skerries.

Sit down at the north end of Headlicliv near the corner. From here you can look down at the Guillemots, Razorbills, Shags and Fulmars at the foot of the cliff and hopefully also some Puffins. Guillemots have narrow pointed beaks, Razorbills have heavy blunt ones with a white stripe.

Guillemots are called Lungwees in Foula and there are about 40 thousand birds on the island, mainly on the west side. They like to nest close together in big gatherings usually on cliff ledges. They lay one egg, very pretty turquoise with brown squiggles, which takes a month to hatch. The chicks go to sea when they are only three weeks old and just one quarter adult size. The adults feed them mainly on sandeel which they carry, one at a time, lengthwise in their bills with the tail sticking out. Some birds have a white eye-ring and a white stripe back from the eye and are known as "Bridled" Guillemots and the percentage of them in a population increases as you go north. They are only here in the summer and spend the winter out at sea. They arrive back in February.

Razorbills are known as Welkies in Foula and there are far fewer of them – about four thousand individuals. This is probably because they like to nest on their own under rocks or in cracks. They lay one egg, white with dark brown

blotches, which is incubated for 35days. The chicks leave when they are only three weeks old and one quarter adult size. Razorbills are heavier and more aggressive than the guillemots and sometimes mug the guillemots for the fish they are carrying. They often carry their fish across their beak and can carry several at a time like puffins. They are also only summer visitors and spend the winter out at sea.

Look out for bonxies hunting or killing birds on the surface of the sea.

Look out for arctic skuas chasing other birds to get them to drop their fish.

Look out for gannets flying offshore or diving for fish. Gannets only nest on the West side of the island. They are known as Solans in Foula. You may see dark immature birds.

Look at the pools back from the edge. You may see Shoreweed, flowering in July, Marsh Pennywort, Pondweed and Bulbous Rush, which looks similar to Jointed Rush. It can easily be distinguished from it because the leaves are smooth when felt between finger and thumb.

Walk to the remains of the hen house. In the spring when crops were sown, the hens used to be banished to out of the way places to stop them scratching up the seed. This one was last used in the 1950s by folk in Mornington.

Look at a stone in the wall. Sandstone is made of grains of sand stuck together to make rock. It was laid down in the Devonian, or Old Red Sandstone period, about 360 – 400 million years ago. At that time Shetland was part of a continent in the southern hemisphere, which had a desert climate. Its mountains were eroded to form sand, which was washed down rivers to the edge of an inland sea. In Foula there are only a few fossils of simple plants, but in Orkney there are many fish fossils from this era.

Walk to the plantie crub. This was used for growing kale seedlings. The seed was sown in August and the plants were transplanted to the kaleyards the following spring.

Just before and below the crub you can look north along the cliffs to see guillemots, razorbills, possibly puffins and closer views of shags.

In May and June, you can see some shags on their nests of seaweed. Look for ones with their crests up and shiny dark green, ones flying in with more seaweed and immature shags (dull brownish coloured). They lay several pale bluish white eggs and nest both on cliff ledges and among jumbles of rocks. The eggs take about thirty days to hatch. June - you should be able to spot Shag chicks at the small naked stage, still in their nests. In July they are covered with fluffy down and have grown too big for their nests. They take about eight weeks to fledge. They are fed sandeel and other small fish. Shags live around Foula all year round.

Walk further on to the mooldie cooses. In the summer, dry peat dust was scraped up and used for bedding under cows in the byres in the winter. It was stored in stone covered heaps called cooses and fetched when needed, by barrow or kishie (a basket carried on your back). Good earth was also scraped off and carried onto the croft land to improve it. This was known as scalping and large areas of the south east part of the island were scalped. The last of the scalping stopped about 40 years ago and the bare areas are growing over again.

Look for Crowberry, called Berry Heather in Foula. In May look for the insignificant greenish flowers between the bases of the tiny leaves. In June small green berries will have formed and at the end of July and August, they will have ripened black and can be eaten. In June you can find blue, pink or white flowers of Milkwort. In July you may find the prickly looking yellowy green seed heads of Yellow Sedge and Glaucous Sedge with blue green leaves, paler underneath.

Make your way towards the airstrip through the Arctic Skuas or go on and cross to the fire engine road, and admire the different colour phases - dark, pale and intermediate. There is a higher proportion of pale ones the further north you go. Arctic Skuas are called Aalens in Foula. They are here from April to August and there are usually about 60 pairs. They winter south off Africa. They feed by chasing and swooping at other seabirds, forcing them to drop their food. Occasionally they kill small birds such as pipits or eat their eggs. They lay two greeny brown, spotted eggs but bonxies kill most of their chicks. They defend their territories from intruders by swooping at them so they may hit you on the head.

Check there are no planes or helicopters coming in to land before stepping onto the airstrip. There are toilets here. From here you can make your way back along the road to the pier.

This walk takes 2-3 hours from the pier and back, depending on your interests.