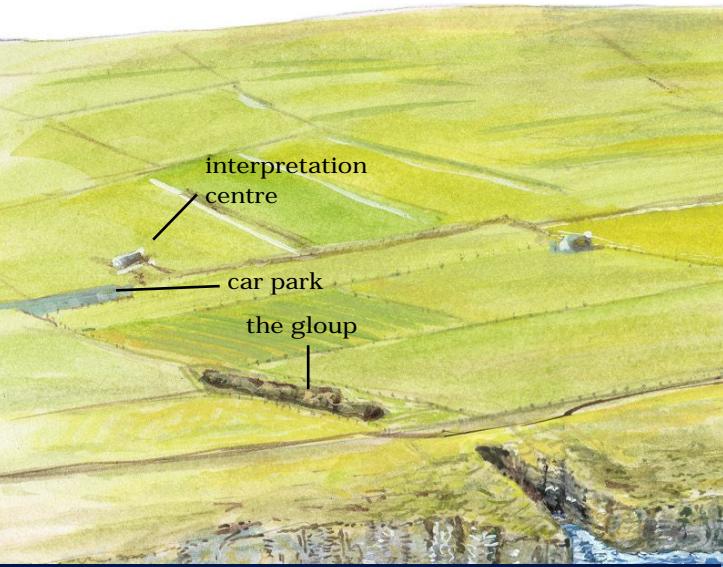
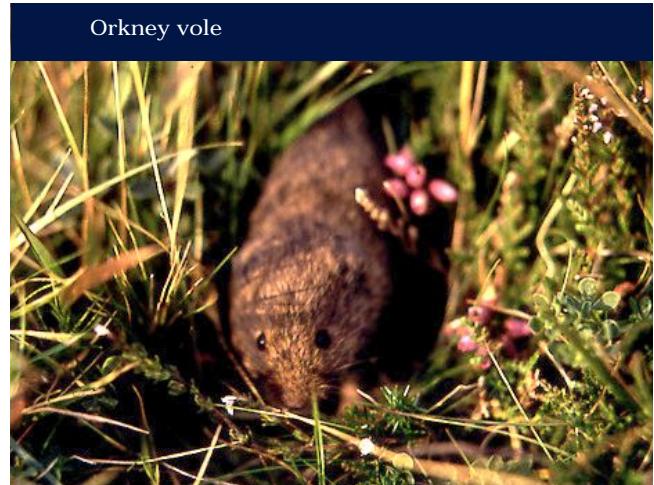




## *the mammals*

Looking out to sea from Mull Head you stand a good chance of spotting sea mammals. Inquisitive seals often follow your progress along the cliffs and sharp eyed visitors may spot dolphins, porpoises or even whales. The very fortunate walker may even spot an otter.

On land mammals are much smaller – Orkney voles are common on the reserve. Their runs can be seen criss-crossing the coastal grassland. They are an important source of food for short-eared owls.



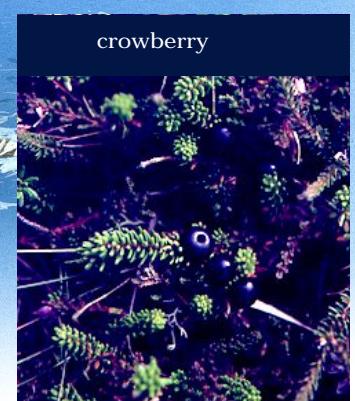
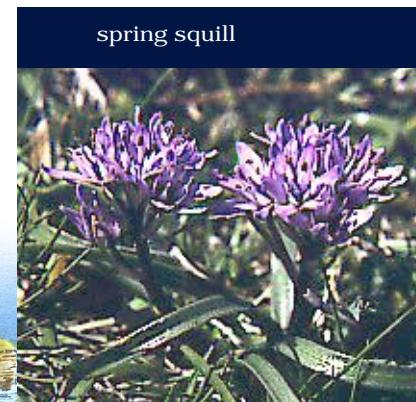
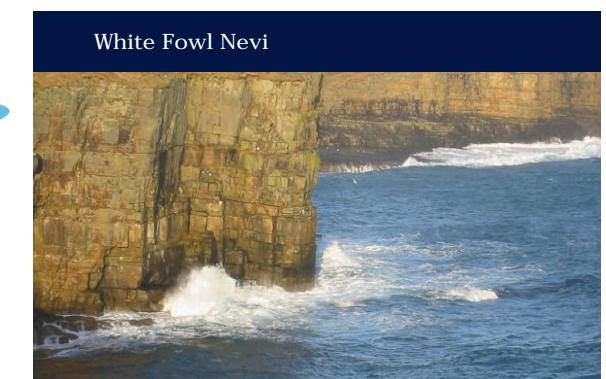
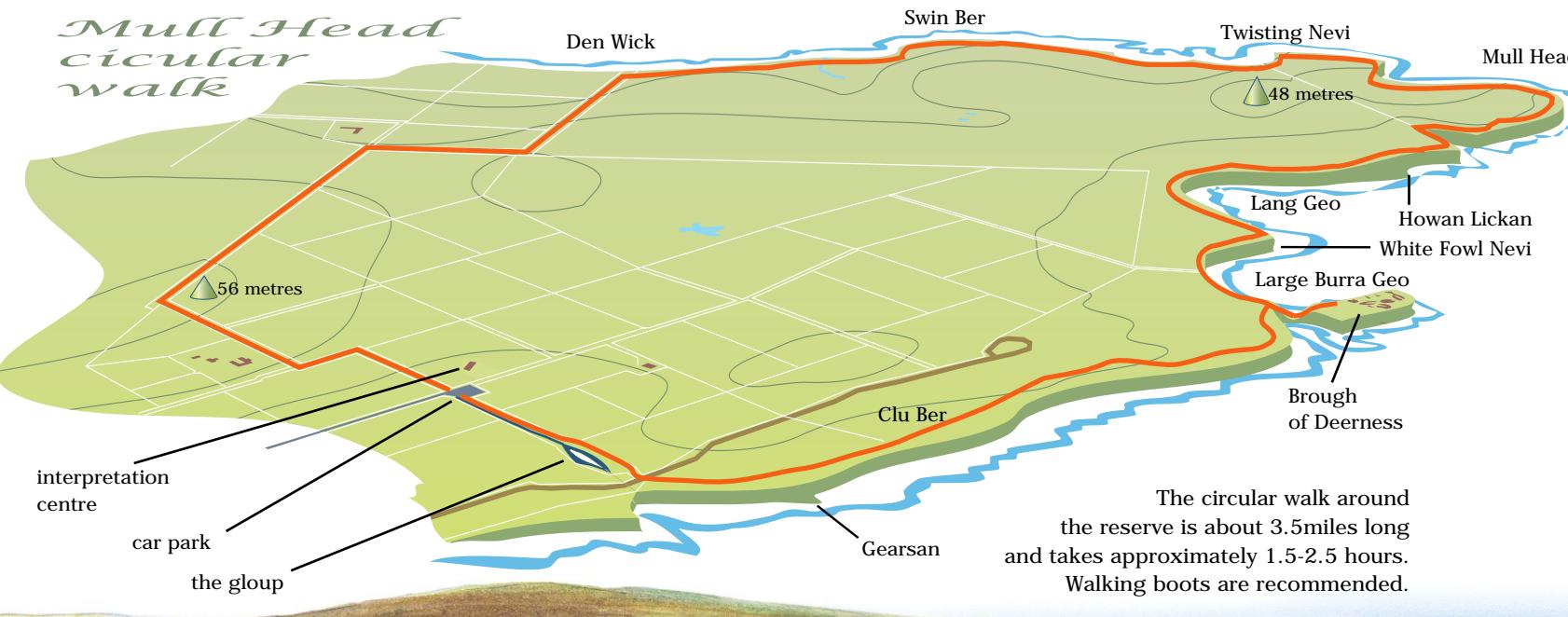
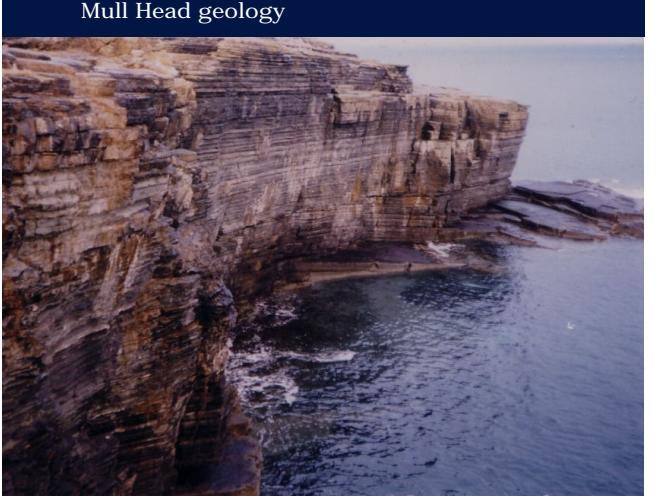
## ragged robin



## *the plants*

Mull Head is a tapestry of different plant communities, varying according to the closeness of the sea, the soil, the water table and the influence of man.

The effect of the sea is felt throughout the reserve but only plants such as thrift, spring squill and sea plantain that can tolerate salt spray live right on the cliff tops.



Further inland other factors become more important. The grassland areas of the reserve are the result of agricultural improvements in the 19th century, but they have not been subjected to modern agricultural practices and this has allowed a variety of attractive flowers to flourish. A colourful summer display of grass of parnassus, eyebright and bird's-foot trefoil can be seen as you walk around the reserve.

Mull Head itself however has never been ploughed or changed and is still largely heather clad. This

habitat, dominated by ling, bell heather and crowberry has disappeared from many parts of Orkney in recent decades and it is important that we conserve the remaining areas. These plants thrive on the underlying acidic soil which many other species could not tolerate. Waterlogging can occur and then other plants such as sphagnum moss predominate and the fluffy white heads of cotton grass can be seen. In damp, but not waterlogged conditions, a good variety of grasses, sedges and herbs develop including pennywort, wild angelica, ragged robin and cuckoo flower.



Mull Head Local Nature Reserve extends to about 160 ha of sea cliffs, maritime heath and grassland. It was designated as a local nature reserve by Orkney Islands Council in 1993, due to its ecological, archaeological and geological interest.

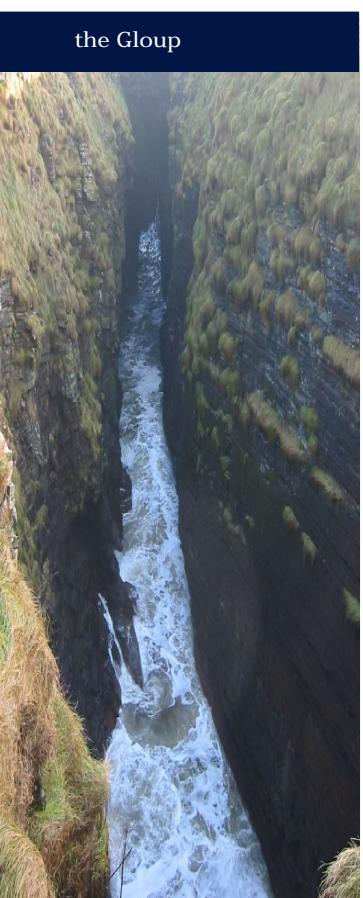
## *the geology*

The rocks exposed on the cliffs of the reserve allow you a glimpse back in time 350 million years. At this time Orkney was covered by a vast lake, now known as Lake Orcadie. In this lake layer upon layer of mud, silt and sand were laid down and gradually these layers became compressed into the solid rocks of the present day. The layering of the rock can be easily seen in the exposed rock faces.

The rocks of Mull Head belong to the Old Red Sandstones and two types are present, the Rousay Flags and the Eday Flags.

The cliffs of the Mull Head are constantly pounded by the sea, gradually eroding them and exploiting weak lines to form caves, stacks, geos and spectacular blow holes like the Glop. The Glop is a long cave which has collapsed on the landward side, leaving a large chasm still joined to the sea through an arch.

the Glop



## *man's influence*

Man's impact on the landscape of the reserve probably goes back to the Stone Age, when it is thought the early settlers began to clear and graze the shrub vegetation of willow, alder, birch and hazel which covered much of Orkney.

The grassed over foundations of many rectangular buildings and the remains of a small stone Norse chapel can be seen on the Brough of Deerness. The foundations are thought to be either the remains of a monastery or domestic houses of the Norse period. The site is only accessible by a steep narrow path and is almost cut off at high tide, but it nonetheless remained a site of pilgrimage until the 16th century.

The people from this settlement undoubtedly had an impact on the vegetation of the area, but more modern practices have obliterated any trace of how they may have used the land.

The character of the area owes much to the practice of 'paring' carried out in the 1800's. This involved removing the topsoil from coastal areas and carting it inland for spreading on the better land as a form of fertiliser. This leaves only the thinnest and poorest of soil. The effect of this can be seen near the Brough where the soil is too poor for agricultural grasses, but a variety of wild flowers grow.

Mull Head itself was not subjected to this practice, but it has been continuously grazed. This has led to the development of the dense heather heath that exists today. Current low level grazing by sheep maintains the balance of plants on the reserve.

the Broch of Deerness



cliff-top vegetation

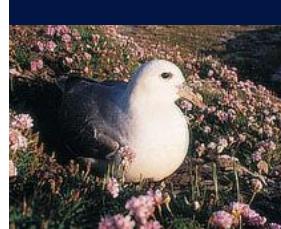


## *the birds*

The variety of habitats on the reserve provide homes and food for many bird species. The cliffs of Mull Head teem with bird life in the summer; sea birds that nest on the narrow ledges of the cliffs and feed on fish from the sea. This 'seabird city' has its own distinct neighbourhoods - fulmars nest near the top of the cliffs, kittiwakes, guillemots and razorbills in the middle and shags near the bottom.

Further inland the heathland is home to other bird colonies, some fish feeding birds but also scavengers and pirates. Arctic terns, common gulls and lesser black backed gulls are all dependent on the sea for food but prefer to nest away from the cliff edge where the long heather provides good cover for concealing chicks. Greater black-backed gulls and herring gulls are scavengers, taking refuse from the sea and stealing chicks and eggs when the opportunity arises. Great and arctic skuas are the pirates of the skies, preferring to rob other birds rather than fish themselves.

fulmar



kittiwakes



Mull Head is also home for some species who prefer to live alone, short-eared owls hunt over the grassland, while ravens and jackdaws are a common sight plundering in the seabird city.