IMAGE: ROBERT HARDING

THE **WILD** ZONE **BEYOND** THE **WALL**

The sparsely populated stretch of Northumberland north of Hadrian's Wall is a place where creatures of feather and fin vastly outnumber people, where dark skies, ancient holy lands and mysterious cairns put human existence into a humbled perspective

WORDS **DAVID WHITLEY**

There's no timid tippy-toeing for the gung-ho Jack Russell. It bounds into the North Sea without so much as a flinch, channelling its energy and enthusiasm into chasing the same tennis ball it's already retrieved several times. His owner wears a raincoat despite the mellow afternoon sun — you can never be too careful — and seems quite content to keep throwing.

To the left, seagulls stomp about in the rock pools. To the right, wisps of seaweed decorate the beach, and the ruins of Dunstanburgh Castle act as a siren call to muddy booters who regard not being able to get there by car as an integral part of its appeal.

Idyllic contentment laps over Low Newton-by-the-Sea. It's a tiny place, dominated by a grand horseshoe of whitewashed buildings that appear to have gone AWOL from a town square. Among them is The Ship Inn, where the bar queue snakes to the door over uncompromisingly unvarnished wooden floors. The pub brews 26 beers, including Dolly Daydream, a bitter, and Sea Coal, a dark wheat beer, and serves up lobster without the fine dining frippery. It's very Northumberland — a penchant for the good things in life, combined with an active disdain for tarting them up.

This no-nonsense simplicity extends to the Newton Pool Nature Reserve, a short squelch along the path. Here, two spartan wooden hides look out over the wetlands. Elsewhere, the idea of just sitting down for an hour looking at what birdlife flies by might seem phenomenally dull. Here, where mobile

phones rarely have reception, it starts to seem oddly appealing. My previous protestations of not giving a damn which bird is which suddenly morph into painstaking debate over whether the one gliding across the water is a European white-fronted goose or a Greenland white-fronted goose.

Two ponies peer in as they shamble past. They're allowed to stay because they do a fine job of deterring predators. And a swallow busily flits through the hide window to the nest it's built, cheekily, beneath the roof. But otherwise, it's as if anyone cooped up in the shed is invisible to the unfolding ecosystem being nosily gazed upon.

Going unnoticed is quite a common theme in Northumberland. It's the bit skipped through between Newcastle and Edinburgh, a journey everyone living further south assumes should take about 45 minutes. It's realistically two hours, even if you don't get stuck behind a tractor on the A1.

In the south of the county, there's a handful of towns along the River Tyne, largely following the path taken by Hadrian's Wall. But north of the wall, population density drops to a half-hearted dribble, inviting all manner of lazy *Game of Thrones* comparisons. A patchwork of pastures, national park moorland, conifer forest and straightforwardly lovely coastal scenery takes over.

There's about six miles of thistle-lined Coastal Path to take in from Low Newton to Seahouses, seemingly built on gargantuan fish and chip restaurants. Here, as with everywhere else in Northumberland, virtually every human is being walked by a dog. This town — surely the Pedigree Chum capital of Europe — presents a tremendous array of padding Labradors, strutting beagles and tottering Airedale terriers; a never-ending distraction for the sort of giddy reprobate who can't resist bounding up to fuss other people's dogs.

But the real wildlife lies just offshore on the Farne Islands, rocky clumps that have given sailors the cold sweats over the centuries, now liberally dotted with lighthouses. No one can quite agree how many of them there are. "There are 28 or 14, depending on the tide," Bobby Pearson, skipper of the *Glad Tidings VI*, tells me. He speaks with an incongruously cheery gruffness that appears to be the default setting in Northumberland. It suffers no fools and not a word is wasted but is pulled off in a sing-song manner that borders on jolly.

The iconic bird of the Farne Islands — 39,362 pairs of puffins were clocked in the most recent breeding season — have already departed for the winter. The puffins return to the same nests each year, having spent seven or eight months at sea, taking a buffeting from the North Atlantic winds. They may look adorable, but they're seriously hardcore battlers. And the same applies to

PREVIOUS PAGES: Puffin with a beakful of sand eels, Farne Islands
FROM LEFT: Puffins on a clifftop, Inner Farne; Dunstanburgh Castle

IMAGES: ROBERT HARDING; SUPERSTOCK

ONCE THE SEALS ARE IN THE WATER, CUTE TAKES OVER FROM CLUMSY. HEADS POP UP EVERY NOW AND THEN, SCOPING OUT WHAT'S GOING ON AROUND THEM LIKE CURIOUS LABRADORS

IMAGES: ROBERT HARDING; ALAMY

FROM LEFT: Longstone Lighthouse, Longstone Rock, Farne Islands; common seals, Farne Islands

the other feathered residents of the Farnes. Arctic terns, for example, cover between 25,000 and 49,000 miles during each annual migration. Guillemots, meanwhile, indulge in the sort of parenting that, in the human world, would result in a swift visit from social services. When chicks are ready to fledge, the parent birds will wait in the sea, hundreds of feet below and call encouragement to their jumpling. The little 'un then has to take a massive fly-or-die leap of faith from the cliff.

In breeding season, the sheer numbers of birds jostling for the good spots on the islands are astounding. One rock face can have up to 5,000 guillemots on it at any one time. And once you know that, you can understand why some cliffs are almost entirely covered by a giant white guano carpet.

It's not just about the birds, though. Bobby wrangles the boat round to South Wamses, an island that an awful lot of Atlantic grey seals call home. It's difficult to tire of watching seals. They're such consistent, unstinting entertainers. As the sea washes onto the rocks, providing a temporary grey-blue laminate blanket, one attempts to shuffle down into the water. This is not a graceful process. It pushes its weight down on its front flippers, then drags its body along, heaving away until it can finally splosh off the edge. Once in the water, cute takes over from clumsy. Heads pop up every now and then, scoping out what's going on around them like curious Labradors.

MONKS, MEAD & MONARCHS

Humans haven't just left the Farne Islands to the wildlife, though. Inner Farne, the nettle-covered main island where the National Trust rangers are based, is home to a gorgeous old stone chapel. It's named in honour of Saint Cuthbert, one of the first hermit monks to set up a base on the island in the seventh century. Cuthbert became quite the celebrity — pilgrims still flock to Durham Cathedral to see his relics. But it was his predecessor, Saint Aidan, who played the pioneering role. In 634, he was summoned from the Scottish island of Iona by Oswald, King of Northumbria to spread Christianity throughout the land. His base? Lindisfarne, also known as Holy Island and — more ambitiously — the cradle of Christianity in England.

There's a certain romance about Lindisfarne that stems from its relative isolation. Access is determined by the tides, with countless warning signs hammering home what tragedies could befall anyone who attempts to cross the causeway outside the published safe times. As a result of this, and the history of the island, there's an expectation that Lindisfarne will be a deeply spiritual, mist-shrouded place, permanently soundtracked by The Very Best Of Enya and inhabited by monks who only break prayer to make prodigious quantities of mead.

Well, the mead part's true. Rock up to St Aidan's Winery on the island and you can taste plenty of it. The darker version,

made with honey from hives on the banks of the River Tweed, is the less sickly-sweet incarnation. It's not made by monks, though. Henry VIII saw to that with the 16th-century dissolution of the monasteries. But the fact that there's no monastic community on the island is less surprising than the fact that there's a village where people's everyday lives are at the mercy of the tides. There's no shortage of work available, either — pubs, cafes, hotels and B&Bs seem to do a roaring trade, while fruit, veg and crab meat sandwiches are sold from ramshackle stalls near the giant car park at the entrance to the village. It's all very... normal.

Those in search of Enyaness will find adequate doses at the Lindisfarne Priory. The current version dates back to the 12th century, but it's located on the site where Saint Aidan set up the initial monastery and unknown artists created the Lindisfarne Gospels — an eighth-century masterpiece regarded as one of the most beautiful books ever created. The priory is now a ruin, but a mighty evocative one. Arched windows fight the ravages of time that claimed the vaulted roofs. Foundation stones peep through grassy lawns while above them, elegant, ornate columns reach for the heavens.

Slowly exploring Lindisfarne — browsing the English Heritage hub next to the Priory, mooching through the Lindisfarne Centre's history exhibits, walking away from the village towards the fishing boats marooned on the harbour mudflats — starts to give answers to a puzzle that's been nagging away. Why on earth would such a remote place be chosen as the springboard for the exciting product launch of the Christian faith?

The peace-and-solitude thing makes sense but surely there are places that provide such monastic brain space that aren't so awkwardly far away from anywhere else?

The view from the harbour reveals the truth. Here, the retreating tide flows like river rapids through channels created by islets and, standing above one of the finest beaches you'll see anywhere in the world, let alone Northumberland, is Bamburgh Castle.

Nowadays, the Duchy of Northumberland has its seat at Alnwick Castle, a lavish, art-packed behemoth that doubled as Hogwarts in the Harry Potter films and crowns the honey-coloured market town of Alnwick. But back in the seventh century, Northumberland was a kingdom much larger than the current county — the name basically means 'land north of the Humber' — and the king lived at Bamburgh Castle.

Aidan wasn't based at Lindisfarne because it was remote — he was based there because it was pretty close to the centre of the action, and in sight of the king. It was only when William the Conqueror arrived and systematically depopulated northern England that Northumbria went back to being the largely uninhabited wild zone beyond the Wall.

FROM LEFT: Lookout Cottage, Low Newton; Lindisfarne Castle

IMAGES: ALAMY

THE KEY BORDERS HERE AREN'T PHYSICAL, THEY'RE CHRONOLOGICAL. THE WALLS AND NATIONAL BOUNDARIES DON'T CUT THE WORLD OFF FROM TRULY WILD NORTHUMBERLAND AS MUCH AS THE LACK OF WRITTEN RECORD DOES

IMAGE: ALAMY

ABOVE: The view from Brough Law looking down the Ingram Valley, Northumberland National Park
FOLLOWING PAGE: Freya's Cabin, Kielder Water & Forest Park

DAZZLING DARK SKIES

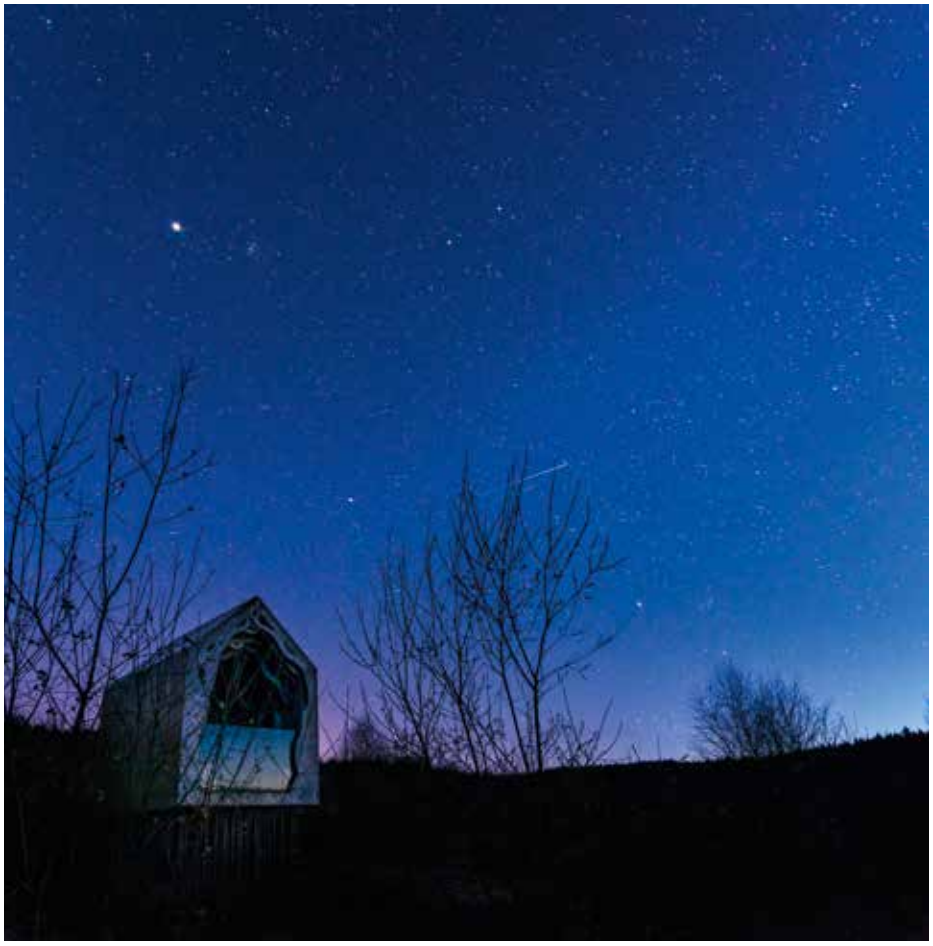
The Breamish Valley largely rests inside the sprawling Northumberland National Park, which butts heads with the Scottish border. Otherwise, it's largely defined by the fact no one has really got around to building houses there, and thus it may as well be cordoned off as a national park. The hills can't quite decide whether they're going to settle for gently rolling or up their game to be something more ambitious, while grazing sheep saunter around wherever the bracken isn't too out of hand.

It doesn't take too much puffing and panting along grassy tracks to the ridge line to discover that the sheep haven't always had the valley to themselves. At the top of the exposed, windy hill are a suspicious number of rocks. Either nature has contrived to organise them all into a ring shape, or man has been meddling. The Brough Law Hillfort is one of several in the valley. Look over to other hills and you can just about make out more. Each seems to sit in its own territory, with dykes and gullies marking boundaries, while faint circles on the ground are probably the remains of timber roundhouses. Some of the hillsides are clearly sculpted and cultivated, and further along there are piles of stones thought to be burial cairns. But aside from an estimated age — the Brough Law fort is thought to be around 2,300 years old — we know puzzlingly little about the ancient Britons who built it.

This place feels far more mysterious than Lindisfarne. Continuing the walk, taking many wrong turns and getting dirty looks from grandstanding Limousin cattle, throws up more questions than answers. The key borders here aren't physical — they're chronological. The walls and national boundaries don't cut the world off from truly wild Northumberland as much as the lack of written record does.

Kielder Water is a far more recent addition to the local landscape. The largest man-made lake in the UK, it was created in the 1970s as a giant reservoir and hydroelectric provider for Northern England. It's surrounded by tightly packed Sitka spruce forest, much of which is grown, managed, then chopped down for timber. For somewhere that's become a family-friendly beauty spot, it's weirdly industrial. Infrastructural necessity and money-making may be why Kielder Water and the Kielder Forest exist, but this Machiavellianism is well hidden.

The place is a great, big playground. Mountain bike trails of varying savagery are shrouded by groves of supersized Christmas trees. Trout fishermen putter around in little boats. Walking tracks lead to hides where red squirrels can be observed, thriving in one of their last bastions against the relentless onward march of the invading greys. But once the sun goes down, it all goes dark. Very, very dark.



The area is part of the 572sq-mile Northumberland International Dark Sky Park, an honour bestowed because the lack of development means there's hardly any artificial light from street lights and buildings to get in the way. For the astronomers at the Kielder Observatory, this is marvellous news. The hillside observatory, which opened in 2008, looks like a Bond villain lair designed by an ardent environmentalist. It's slender, elevated and made almost entirely out of wood. On the deck are telescopes trained on the Moon, showing it off in all its pockmarked glory.

The evening stargazing sessions here are complemented by presentations; during my visit, a chap called Hayden Goodfellow talks about the Northern Lights, which, if you get really lucky, can be seen from Kielder. He starts off with some bad news — aurora borealis events can only be predicted a couple of days in advance, and most photos of vivid green lights have been heavily Photoshopped. Oh, and don't expect to see the lights with the naked eye. But then the talk morphs into something more wide-ranging, explaining how the light show starts with solar winds ejected from spots on the Sun.

"The Sun is 109 times the diameter of the Earth," says Hayden. "The Apollo 13 mission is the furthest man has ever been from Earth. Take that flight path, and it would still fit three and a half times within the Sun."

What follows is an expansive, awe-provoking journey into distances and temperatures that seem unfathomable set against the average human experience. The monumental ferocity of the Sun seems a far, far cry from the horizon-prettying effects it can have far, far away. The talk has a jolting, perception-altering effect. Leaving the warm room for a shivering huddle next to the telescopes to look at the night sky, the darkness is accompanied by silence. Each of us is lost in galloping thought, our brains whirring like they've not whirred for years. Then, looking up, the whole Dark Sky Park advantage reveals itself — there's a canopy of stars, thousands in view, and many billions beyond.

The scale and complexity of the night sky is overwhelming, and the thought that we're alone in the universe suddenly seems absolutely absurd. Out there, among the loose band of zodiac signs, there's almost certainly someone throwing his tennis ball into the sea for whatever the Cassiopeian equivalent of an excitable Jack Russell is. And he too will be revelling in the moment of utterly blissful simplicity.

ESSENTIALS

Getting there & around

East coast mainline train services to Edinburgh stop at Newcastle, Morpeth, Alnmouth and Berwick-upon-Tweed. Local bus services can deliver you to most places of interest.
jplanner.travelinenortheast.info

When to go

The summer months bring average highs of 18C and longer daylight hours, but also crowded car parks near the coastal highlights.

Places mentioned

Newton Pool and Dunstanburgh Castle. *nationaltrust.co.uk*
The Ship Inn, Low Newton by-the-Sea. *shipinnnewton.co.uk*
Billy Shiel's Farne Island Boat Tours. *farne-islands.com*
Alnwick Castle. *alnwickcastle.com*
Bamburgh Castle. *bamburghcastle.com*
Lindisfarne. *lindisfarne.org.uk*
lindisfarne-centre.com
Kielder Water & Forest Park. *visitkielder.com*
Kielder Observatory. *kielderobservatory.org*
Visit Northumberland. *visitnorthumberland.com*

Where to stay

Greycroft, Alnwick. *greycroftalnwick.co.uk*
Riverdale Hall Hotel, Bellingham. *riverdalehallhotel.co.uk*

How to do it

HF HOLIDAYS offers a seven-day Northumberland tour, taking in Lindisfarne, the coast, Hadrian's Wall and the Northumberland National Park, for £890 per person. Accommodation is in the harbour town of Alnmouth. *hfholidays.co.uk*

IMAGE: ALAMY. ILLUSTRATION: JOHN PLUMER