

Expedition to South Uist provided a character-building mix of fun, foraging and adventure

Cockles, muscles, midges, murder...

In his final feature on his expeditions with the Schools Hebridean Society, NICK SMITH recounts looks back on a memorable trip to South Uist in 1975 where the great outdoors and life under canvas made a lasting impression.

In the 1975 Schools Hebridean Society prospectus the expedition for my age group was to the island of Rum. However during a reconnaissance visit there by the leader to be, Alan Evison, a mix-up was discovered and that trip was not going to be possible.

The alternative of South Uist was quickly arranged and the members notified. I have no idea whether I was disappointed or not, but ultimately it turned out very well as I went to Rum the following year anyway.

Now a seasoned visitor to the Hebrides I had, albeit briefly, been to South Uist during my first trip in 1972 to North Uist.

On that expedition, as with this one, we stayed at the schoolhouse in Lochboisdale at the start and/or end of the expeditions, with the kind permission of Mr MacKinnon who was duly thanked in the annual report. I was sent a photograph a while ago showing that sadly the schoolhouse was closed and boarded up.

Our campsite on South Uist was to be on a patch of fairly level ground just below the freshwater Loch nam Faoileann on an offshoot of Loch Aineort.

Dominating the scene was the island's highest peak, Beinn Mhor at 620 metres (which I wasn't really surprised to find out translates as Big Mountain).

It was just a couple of kilometres to the north and because of its close proximity represented a challenge that most of us took up at some stage of the expedition.

Owing to the passage of time, now unbelievably over 40 years, I'd forgotten aspects of these trips, but fortunately much had been recorded in the annual reports to which I have often referred. On re-

reading them for this article, I see we had to carry the SHS black boxes the 1½ km from the end of the road to the campsite.

These boxes were about the size of a blanket box (or Ottoman) and had rope handles to carry them by. They were each numbered and packed with various essential items – cooking utensils, plates, cups and cutlery, climbing gear (ropes, helmets and harnesses) some basic carpentry equipment and tools. The contents were packed and listed at the SHS repository in Fort William.

So although I have no recollection of carrying these boxes to the campsite, they would have been heavy and it wouldn't have been a pleasurable task – we also had our own personal rucksack and equipment to carry. This had been necessary because we had missed the high tide and the sea loch would have drained of water. The bulk of the heavy equipment, things like tents, marquee, gas bottles and canoes, had already been ferried there by islanders Donald and John Joseph McDonald – who deserve special mention as without their help the expedition would have been impossible.

Once the campsite had been established the explorations could begin. Beinn Mhor was a popular choice, being so close to base, as was the neighbouring peak of Hecla or Thacla as it is also known. Looking at the map now I'm surprised I climbed Hecla, it is a round trip of at least 10 miles and would have involved quite a lot of steep hill-walking.

However, I have the photos I took of Loch Corrodale from the summit, so I must have done it!

I have mentioned in the previous articles that various projects were carried out,



Near the end of the road to campsite. Airigh nam Ban on north shores of Loch Aineort.

Picture: Alan Evison

Our campsite on South Uist was just below the freshwater Loch nam Faoileann on an offshoot of Loch Aineort. Dominating the scene was the island's highest peak, Beinn Mhor at 620 metres

often designed or inspired by the supervisors – or officers as they were called (everyone was on first name terms; it was very informal).

On this expedition, owing to the late change of island, the expedition leader Alan had lost nearly all of the previously recruited officers for one reason or another. The replacements weren't identified until very shortly before the expedition. Consequently little project material had been pre-planned. However, due to the range of people's interests, several projects evolved on site.

One officer had an interest in identifying seaweed species and its preferred growing location; others joined in with a botanical survey; and, as usual, there were many keen ornithologists on the trip so bird sightings were recorded. In fact, before four days were up, more species had been seen than on any previous SHS expedition to the site.

A friend and I decided to map Loch nam Faoileann just above the campsite.

This involved the use of the canoes, a knotted length of string with a stone tied to the end and a scaled plan taken from the OS map.

We made measurements of the depth every couple of metres and marked them on

the plan, something I think we could have done in quite a short time had it not been for the fun we were having with the canoes and generally larking about.

Most people went on a bivouac away from the main camp. Two parties of ornithologists went to Balranald RSPB reserve on North Uist. A further two went to Glen Hellisdale (Gleann Heileasdail), the dramatic scenery leaving the participants with vivid memories.

Below is a passage taken from the annual report by one of the participants which I think beautifully sums up so many of our feelings while we were in the Hebrides:

"But on this bivvy to Glen Hellisdale it was the first time that I had been able to go for

a walk and know that I would come across no roads, buildings, or any sign of modern existence. Never before had I known for so long that there was just us and creation."

I went on a bivouac with a friend. We started by getting the expedition Avon inflatable dinghy to take us across Loch Aineort. It was a two-night stay away from camp and I remember on the first night, pitching our little tent by the side of a freshwater loch and fishing for our supper. The idea of freshly caught trout cooking slowly over a small campfire was very appealing but somewhat harder in reality than we'd imagined, and after admitting defeat we resorted to the usual dehydrated rations we carried with us – nowhere near as romantic, or tasty.

The second night we camped on a small area of grass in Lochboisdale itself.

When I recalled this bivouac many years afterwards, I checked the maps and satellite views on the computer to see if this was indeed probable and I am pretty certain we set our tents on a patch of grass which has more recently been converted into a public garden and play area close to the pier.

The idea behind going on one of these bivouacs was probably twofold: one to enable you to visit somewhere



Carrying the Avon inflatable out to the water (the author with the blue top/yellow life-jacket).

Picture: Alan Evison



The morning after the flood threat in the marquee. Picture: Alan Evison



The 'game' of Murder Ball in progress. Picture: Alan Evison



An SHS constructed bridge over the burn by campsite with people meeting the Avon inflatable in background, Loch Aineort Picture: Alan Evison

that was further than could be accessed in one day (like the trips to Balranald for example) and secondly, to give us some independence and self-reliance.

The younger age-group bivouacs would have at least one officer with them to make sure it was safe, but the older groups often went without supervision.

We had to record our proposed route, estimated time of arrival at each overnight stay and return to main camp. We always had to carry a first aid kit with us and emergency rations which were to be left untouched unless required.

I'm not aware that any stay away from camp ever required the use of the safety equipment, barring perhaps a sticking plaster for a blister – of which I remember quite a few.

Our bivouac didn't seem to have had a specific purpose that I can recall now, but I'm certain that sales of chocolate and fizzy drinks would have peaked during our stay in Lochboisdale.

The fishermen of the group managed on one occasion to catch sufficient mackerel for us all to have some (I'm assuming mackerel are much easier to catch than trout?)

Continuing the fishy theme, the leader, Alan, in his expedition report mentions:

We found a few cockles in the sand at low tide which we cooked and ate. They were very tasty; in fact any fresh food seemed really tasty as most of the expedition meals came originally from cans and packets.

"Various activities of which I claim to have no knowledge included the cockle-boiling sweepstake, 'jump the fire', and very coarse fishing".

The very coarse fishing refers to an incident that happened regarding the catching of a large salmon, the description for which I've used the words sent to me many years later by my friend Richard Owen:

"The tide range in the loch was several feet so it would go from no water in front of the camp site to a brimming loch on high tide. One afternoon there was a salmon jumping in the loch and getting close to the burn that ran past the camp site. There was talk that salmon jump like this to get rid of sea-lice prior to running upstream to spawn. Later in the evening (they are long evenings at that latitude) a guy who had gone upstream to sit and read came rushing into the campsite and excitedly told

us there was a huge fish in the pool he had been sitting next to. We mobilised to investigate and yes there was a salmon in the burn. This fish had to be caught. The burn was tiny. You could jump across it without a run-up so the challenge of getting this fish seemed easy. Some people jumped in and tried to grab it and we then saw the explosive power of the salmon as it bolted for cover. It ended up in a long and relatively deep pool right next to the camp site. This pool had a deep undercut bank and the salmon sought refuge under this. I [Richard] was in the stream with Paddy as he ran his hands under the bank feeling for the fish. We had talked about tickling trout and this was going to be the tickle to end all tickles. He found the fish with his hands and proceeded to slowly work his way along its body until he could get a grip through the gills. Once you have a fish gripped like this it's all over. However, this was

a big fish and Paddy was a small person. It bucked and at one point Paddy was close to being submerged before he found the strength to heave it out from under the bank on to the grass. The estimate was that it was a 10lb fish and it certainly fed us all."

As for the cockle-boiling sweepstake, we had found a few cockles in the sand at low tide which we cooked and ate. They were very tasty. In fact, any fresh food seemed really tasty, as most of the expedition meals came originally from cans and packets.

The cockles were few and far between but we hatched a plan for a bit of profitable entertainment.

With our catch of fresh cockles, people were invited to purchase one each for the princely sum of 10p and they marked the shell with their initials. A batch of 10 of these were then dropped into a pan of boiling water, the last cockle to open was deemed to be the winner and the lucky owner paid 50p.

At the end, you got to eat the cockles.

As a money making scheme it wasn't hugely profitable, we soon ran out of cockles and within a cou-

ple of days some other daft entertainment had been dreamt up.

I don't remember 'jump the fire' but another 'entertainment' which wasn't mentioned was 'midge menace'.

On the last day, as we broke camp, the weather was incredibly still and sunny which brought the midges out in their millions.

We'd not had too much trouble with them until this last day.

So, for a small joining fee the lucky participants had to stand with their arms by their sides allowing the midges to feast freely – the last to react to wipe them off their face collected the pooled entrance fee. The midges were so irritating that few of us lasted much more than a minute and I was one of the first to give in, losing most of my cockle-boiling fortune!

Loosely under the heading of entertainment was a game of murder ball – not the modern wheelchair rugby version but a variant of British Bulldog.

A sort of rugby with very few rules, I think it involved two teams trying to get a ball from one base to another by any means, while the other team tried to prevent it – by any means! It was very physical and at the end we all collapsed at the campsite to get our breath back.

Half of the accommodation tents were on one side of the stream where the salmon had been caught; the others were with the marquee and store tent on the other side.

Late one night, after steady rain for most of the day, it was noticed that the small burn was no longer a small burn. With a disparity between the ground heights either side of the stream it was feared that it may burst its banks and quite a few people would be flooded out. A decision was made to evacuate at least three of the Icelandic tents, into the marquee where they spent the night. The flood never really occurred but it was a close call.

This was my last visit to the Outer Hebrides with the SHS; I did one further expedition with them – during the drought of 1976 to the island of Rum. However, I did return to the Outer Isles with a friend in his Volkswagen Caravanette in 1980, but I have wanted to go back ever since! Reliving my experiences through these articles has put the idea of that visit very high on my 'must do' list.

For more tales from South Uist and other islands visit the website <http://www.schools-hebridean-society.co.uk>