Cumbria Canoeists Sea Kayak Coaching on the Moray Coast

22-26 September 2025

Coaches: Marie C, Shel R

Attendees: Mark L, Mike M, Barry C, Nicola H, Annette M, Sally C, Penny R, Jack G

The north-facing Moray coast is almost 100 miles in length, stretching east between Inverness and Fraserburgh. It's a beautiful coastline and despite the fact that it gets a lot of sunshine and has low rainfall, it's much less visited than the west coast. Its understated charm is hard to resist and there's some wonderful sea kayaking.

An area new to Cumbria Canoeists, it well deserves its reputation for rock architecture, beaches, surf, dramatic cliffs, historic sites and authentic coastal fishing villages and harbours. It's a really interesting coastline to paddle but requires reasonable conditions as it's exposed to wind and waves from the wide expanse of the Moray Firth to the north.

Seabirds were numerous including gannets, curlews, herons, guillemots, terns and great skuas. There are resident pods of bottle-nosed dolphins in the Firth and the likelihood of seeing them at close range is high. We saw pods of 5-10 dolphins on each of our paddling days.

On a clear day, the huge windfarms on the northern fringes of the Moray Firth are visible in the distance, along with the faint but impressive outlines of some of the most northerly mountains in the UK, which lie west of Wick and include Morven, Scaraben and Beinn Dhorain.

A note on the local geology: the coastline comprises some of the earliest sedimentary rocks in the UK. They accumulated in the Iapetus ocean on the south-eastern fringe of a continent that split away from an even bigger landmass located near the South Pole around 600Ma and moved northwards. As the ocean widened, great thicknesses of sandstone, limestone and shale were deposited and, as the ocean later closed during the Caledonian orogeny, these were subject to uplift, heat and pressure, producing the metamorphic quartzite and metapelites seen today. There is also some green marble (serpentine) in the area.

Our base for the week was Sandend Holiday Park – a clean, tidy, well-equipped site with pitches for tents and campervans. It also has several comfortable static caravans for rental. There is direct access from the campsite to a beautiful, sweeping sandy beach, popular with surfers and kayak surfers. It's possible to launch from the beach, but if the surf's too big, launching from the relative shelter of the harbour is an option. It's also possible to paddle from the nearby harbours of Portsoy, Cullen and Buckie.

During our stay, we explored a 15-mile section of coastline between Buckie in the west and Boyne Bay, east of Portsoy, in the east. There is much more to explore and further trips are recommended.

Day 1, 22/10: No paddling due to high winds

Winds were westerly: F4 gusting 5-6. The idea of paddling/dolphin-spotting in relative shelter at Rosemarkie was mooted but rejected as we considered 1hr 45mins too far to drive from Sandend. Instead, the group split – Sally, Nic, Annette and Mike walked the spectacular coastal path from Sandend to Cullen, past the vertiginous ruins of Findlater Castle, besieged in 1562 by Mary, Queen of

Scot's forces during the Gordon clan's rebellion. Arriving in Cullen, we visited the Heritage Centre (featuring a memorably grotesque dog buoy) and Lily's Café to sample the famed local soup - Cullen Skink - a smoked haddock and potato chowder.

The rest of the team explored Portsoy & the local surroundings. Portsoy has a historic old harbour with a great café. There's a second, larger harbour with an excellent Fish Shop in a wooden building at the back of the harbour – check out the local hot smoked salmon. Every year, Portsoy hosts a Scottish Tradtitional Boat Festival when a flotilla of heritage boats drop anchor here and there's a weekend of celebrations and entertainments. Worth a visit: 12-14 June 2026. Public loos available in the harbour.

Sandend beach

Findlater Castle

Sunnyside beach

Birdwatching, Sunnyside

Cullen Skink

Seatown, Cullen

Day 2, 23/10: Sandend Bay to Cullen

At a campsite briefing at 0930, a decision was made to try launching from Sandend beach. There was a northerly wind, F3-4, and an impressive swell breaking on the beach. We stood assessing the surf. It was challenging. Some paddlers opted to head for the relative shelter of Sandend harbour in order to launch from there, while others braved the surf. Sometime and at least 1 capsize later, we re-grouped outside the harbour and set off across Sandend Bay in an easterly direction. Conditions

were still challenging and, as we neared the rocky headland at the eastern end of the Bay, Marie took the decision to head back to Sandend harbour where we lunched, glad of the sun and shelter.

After lunch, the wind had dropped a bit and we decided to head west in the direction of Cullen, enjoying the rocky coastline and the birds on and above the water. On making Cullen, we paddled into the pretty harbour for a break in the sunshine. Loos available (£1 – card-operated).

Then we paddled back to Sandend, enjoying the coastal scenery and a good sighting of a pod of bottle-nosed dolphins. On reaching Sandend, the coaches helped some people to surf onto the beach while others played safe and chose to land at the harbour and trolley back to the campsite.

Launching at Cullen Harbour

Sea Kayaks, Cullen Harbour

Bow Fiddle Rock from the Cliffs

Seatown, Cullen

Seatown, Cullen

Bow Fiddle Paddling

Day 3, 24/10: Cullen to Buckie

The day began with a briefing and we decided to load the boats on the cars and drive to Cullen and paddle from there west towards Spey Bay. It was a superb day, sunny again and the wind had moved southerly F2-4, affording us some shelter as we paddled the north-facing coastline.

At the west end of Cullen beach lies an impressive sea arch made of quartzite: Bow Fiddle Rock. We were able to paddle both ways through the arch, northwards into the oncoming waves or southwards with a following sea – slightly more unnerving! It was fun and we played about there, building our confidence in the conditions.

Continuing west, we admired the impressive rocky coastline and the houses of Portknockie sitting atop a steep sea-cliff. We paddled round into the first of the two basins in the historic natural harbour and pulled out on the sand. Skirting a large, blue-painted concrete paddling pool, we sat on some benches for a drink & snack, just as a large dredger turned into the harbour. It went into the second basin, allowing us out.

The rock-hopping between Findochty and Buckie kept us entertained until we turned into the large harbour/marina and pulled up the boats on the beach to sit at handy picnic tables on the grass. It was a fine spot for lunch, handy loos too. Afterwards, we paddled a little further west to towards Spey Bay before turning to head back towards Cullen. Once again, we paddled Bow Fiddle Rock a few times before fighting our way back into Cullen harbour against a stiff southerly wind.

In the evening, we all enjoyed a meal out at the Station Hotel in Portsoy.

Bow Fiddle Rock from the North

Paddling Bow Fiddle Rock

Portknockie from the Sea

Paddling Pals

Portknockie Pool

Dredger Entering Portknockie Harbour

Landing at Buckie Harbour

Buckie Harbour Lunch Stop

Day 4, 25/10: Sandend to Portsoy and Beyond

Another sunny day – we were very lucky! The swell was still dropping off and we were able to launch comfortably through the surf from Sandend beach. We headed east for Portsoy, finding plenty of interesting rock-hopping and a lovely rock-arch feature. Taking our time, we passed Portsoy and continued to a rocky cove where we had lunch and watched another distant pod of dolphins as we ate. We continued eastwards after lunch as far as Boyne Bay where we stopped for a leg-stretch before returning to Portsoy to check out the old harbour and loos. We paddled back to Sandend, landing on the beach. Another fantastic day's paddling.

Rocks

More Rocks

And Arches

And channels

Shel – Ever Cool

Portsoy Harbour

Boyne Bay

Final day

Ready to Paddle

Barry Landing

Return to Sandend

Final Landing at Sandend. Still sunny!

Day 5, 26/10: Shore-based skills coaching

The wind was rising as we held our morning briefing and we decided to restrict today's coaching to a morning shore-based session on efficient forward paddling and land-based rolling practise, allowing for an early departure after lunch and sufficient time for the long drive home.

An excellent week on the Moray Coast. With thanks to Marie C and Shel Reason for leading and Mark L for assisting. Lovely company and fun times whilst learning paddle and rock-hopping skills in swell.

Sally C.