

Wildlife Photography in the Firth of Lorn

The Firth of Lorn is a sea area off the west coast of Scotland in Argyll and Bute, stretching between the Isle of Mull in the east, and the mainland on the west; loch Linnhe and the Sound of Mull are to the north, and the slate islands and Corryvreckan whirlpool are to the south. The best way to get the most out of this region is to visit it by boat, although there is plenty you can see from the land if you can't get out on the water.

This region is host to a tremendous amount of marine life, thanks in no small part to the powerful tides that sweep through the Firth, and between its many islands, fuelling the Corryvreckan itself, and other tidal races, such as the Pass of the Grey Dogs (between Scarba and Lunga) and the Falls of Lora (Connel). These tides continuously mix the water column, helping to bring nutrients from the seabed back up to the surface waters where they fuel a rich community of organisms from jellyfish and lobsters to gannets and dolphins. Because of the diversity of marine life found on the underwater rocky reefs here (which is second only to St. Kilda in the UK), the Firth of Lorn is also a designated Special Area of Conservation (SAC) under EU legislation.

The Wildlife

On Land: In areas such as the Ballahuan hazel wood (Seil island) and the Isle of Luing you can expect to see otters around the shoreline, particularly around dawn and dusk, and may see Roe deer in the woods. Red deer and feral goats are common sights around the larger islands of Jura and Scarba and at the Garvellachs, as are grey and common seals, which have haul outs on several skerries and in bays around the Corryvreckan itself.

In the air, the Corryvreckan and Garvellachs are excellent places to look out for white-tailed sea eagles, as they have been moving into this area following their reintroduction to Mull in the 1990s. Golden eagles are also commonly seen in this area and around Easdale and the Slate islands.

At Sea: Thanks to the strong tides, the Firth of Lorn is an excellent feeding ground for a huge range of animals, from the otters, seals and sea eagles already mentioned, to dolphin, porpoise, whales and seabirds. Porpoise are extremely common, particularly around the Gulf of Corryvreckan, and can often be seen feeding at the edges of the tides where two currents meet. During the times I've been there, we have also had occasional encounters with bottlenose dolphins, which are always great to see because they are so playful around boats. Minke whales are also frequently seen through the summer months further offshore when they come north to feed, before returning to the southern oceans for the winter months.



The view from a wildlife boat looking out to the Garvellachs islands



Harbour porpoise are extremely common in the Firth of Lorn, and will be seen on virtually every wildlife-watching trip in the area

The Firth of Lorn is also a good area to see seabirds, and although there aren't the same numbers that you would see at some of the larger breeding colonies (for example at the Isle of May or the Farne Islands), there is still a great diversity of birds coming here to feed, such as gannets, razorbills, guillemots and gulls. Small, local colonies of arctic and common terns and black-legged kittiwakes ensure these species are also commonly seen, feeding and resting.

Photography

Being a sea area, the best way to explore the Firth of Lorn is by boat, as you will be able to cover a much larger area, and are much more likely to see a range of wildlife relatively easily. Boats also have the advantage of acting like moving wildlife hides (much like cars can), in that the animals are often less likely to associate boats with people, and will often happily continue with their business in full view. Many of the islands are accessible by ferry if you prefer to explore on foot, but most of the smaller ones, such as the Garvellachs, Scarba and Lunga are inaccessible.

When I'm photographing animals from the sea in this area, I'll typically have two camera bodies – one with a short telephoto zoom (Canon 70-200mm F4 IS), and one with a longer prime (Canon 300mm F4 IS, possibly with 1.4x teleconverter). This allows me to easily shoot animals on the shore, and those that come closer to the boat. Having this set up before a trip means that I don't have to switch lenses at sea, and risk dust, salt spray, or moisture getting inside the cameras. I can also carry both cameras on my shoulders comfortably and shoot them handheld.

Underwater: The Firth of Lorn has exceptionally diverse underwater rocky reefs, which has earned its designation as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC). Once again, this is related to the strong currents that wash through the area, keeping the water column relatively free from silt and bringing food particles and nutrients into the reefs. As a result, many of the dive sites in the tidal areas are blanketed with stunningly colourful anemones, jewel anemones, hydroids, soft corals and sea fans, all of which filter food out of the water column, and some of which (including the sea fan anemone, *Amphianthus dohrnii*) are British Action Plan (BAP) species.



A bloody Henry starfish on a sponge bed in the Sound of Luing

Underwater Photography: As I keep mentioning, the tides in the Firth of Lorn are what fuels the ecosystem and make it such a special place for marine life. However, this also means that great care must be taken when diving this area, and should not be attempted without excellent knowledge of the currents and tides. Dive charters are available locally, and you should seek advice before planning a dive trip to this region. This also means that anyone wanting to photograph these sites must be a competent diver first, and photographer second.

That said, once underwater, there is no shortage of subject matter for macro work, and the visibility is often >15m, providing excellent opportunities for wide angle seascapes as well. As you may guess, the subject matter is largely scenic reefs and wildlife, but if this is your interest, you won't be disappointed.