

Transcript: Wild for Scotland Podcast
Season 3, Episode 7: 'Uisge' - Outdoor Swimming in Perthshire
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[main theme tune]

Hello there and welcome to Wild for Scotland,

a podcast full of inspiring stories from Scotland.

I'm your host, Kathi Kamleitner.

Wild for Scotland helps you connect with Scotland
and dream about future adventures.

I'll tell you immersive stories to whisk you away,
Share some of my top tips for your own Scotland trip,
And introduce you to inspiring locals and their stories.

So, lean back and enjoy -
Let's travel to Scotland!

[main theme tune end]

Hello and welcome! Today, I have a story for you from a recent trip to the beautiful
countryside of Perthshire.

This region is a little bit of a hidden gem, especially among visitors who travel to Scotland
from a bit further afield. It's in the Highlands, although it's not quite the Highlands. Wedged
between the mountain ranges on the west coast and the Cairngorms National Park, the
landscapes here are a little different. There are huge woodlands, dotted with freshwater
lochs. The mountains are tall, but the glens aren't quite as dramatic as they are over on the
west coast.

Nevertheless, Perthshire is an incredibly scenic place to visit and a real treasure trove for
adventurers like myself.

And that's what today's story is all about, an adventure in the heart of Perthshire.

This is 'Uisge'

[jingle]

Some things sound like they're an amazing idea. But then when it comes to executing that idea, it turns out, it's not quite that easy.

Swimming in Scotland is one of these things for me.

[sound effects]

I love the idea of jumping into a Highland loch or swimming in the Scottish sea. For years, I've brought a swimsuit with me on my trips, hoping that I'll come across a particularly pretty beach or a nice stretch of loch, that is perfect for a plunge.

And oftentimes, I've actually found such a place, put on my swimsuit and started making my way towards the water.

But more than once, there was a moment when my idea of swimming in Scotland got confronted with the reality of swimming in Scotland. The cold, cold truth hit me like a slap in the face.

Swimming in Scotland sounds like a lot of fun, but if you're anything like me, getting yourself to actually submerge yourself in the ice-cold water of a Scottish loch or the sea, is an entirely different thing.

And so, I became a wannabe swimmer. Always ready with my swimsuit in my bag, but never quite brave enough to actually go for it.

That is until a friend told me about the benefits of outdoor swimming in cold water and slowly I started to warm up to the idea.

In the last couple of years, more and more opportunities have presented themselves to me that made taking the plunge a little easier. First, I bought a paddleboard and all of a sudden I was near the water on a regular basis. I took a dip here and there - sometimes voluntarily - other times not so much - but I was always wearing a warm wetsuit which gave me an extra layer of protection from the cold.

Last summer, I stayed in a shepherd's hut in Ayrshire during a heatwave, and since there was no actual shower, I opted for the refreshing waters of a nearby river.

Then, I booked a swim session with an open water coach in the Galloway Forest. Went snorkelling near the Outer Hebrides. Gorge walking at Loch Lomond in the middle of winter.

And by the time Spring came, I didn't even bat an eye-lid at the idea of an open water swim session in the sea near Oban. As long as I could wear my wetsuit, that is.

I still wouldn't consider myself a swimmer, but with every plunge I took, I remembered the pure joy I felt when I first learnt to swim as a child.

And so, it was with great excitement that I accepted an invitation to join my friend Calum Maclean for an outdoor swim in Perthshire.

[car driving]

Our journey begins on the road. I leave Glasgow early in the morning, hitting the motorway before most people would make their way to work. The M8 and M80 fly by and soon after Stirling, I leave the A9 to follow the road through a succession of scenic villages that get smaller and smaller.

And so does the road.

[fade away driving sounds]

The quickest way to get from Crieff to Loch Tay is via the Glen Quaich road. It is one of the highest roads in Scotland and climbs high into the heathery moor via countless twists and turns. It's a scenic route to follow, but a treacherous drive nevertheless.

[fade driving sounds back in]

Nervously, I cross stone bridges, labelled weak, rattle across cattle grids, and master the challenge of steep hairpin bends. Luckily, I don't meet another car until I'm higher up, where the road flattens out and I can see far ahead.

In the distance, I can see the peaks of the Lawers Range, still covered in patches of snow.

After a while, the road drops down again as steeply as it rose before. Hairpin bends bring me into the woodlands that cover the shore of Loch Tay. The ground is covered in bluebells and even though my windows are closed, I notice the intense smell of wild garlic.

I drive through Kenmore, past the Scottish Crannog Centre and continue for another mile or so, until I reach a car park, where I meet Calum. And together we're setting out on the trail.

[Sound of walking on a path]

Calum has chosen to show me one of his favourite swim spots in Perthshire. A river that thunders down a lush green gorge and forms a succession of pools before it reaches Loch Tay.

The sun is out, but the appearance is deceiving. It had been raining heavily last night, and the river seemed to be carrying a lot more water than usual.

But let's have a look and see what it's like, Calum reassures me.

The hike to the pools is short but steep. To my right, I can see sheep and lambs grazing on a grassy slope, basking in the sunshine. To my left, I can hear the water tumbling down the shady gorge, but it's hard to see through the fresh, young leaves on the trees.

As we continue walking, we spot a sign that points away from our path, and decide to follow it.

[Sound of walking on path]

CM: So we've got the first cool bit of a walk here. You see the wee sign Hermits cave, it's quite a weird little bit. So we're gonna go through a tunnel basically into complete darkness. So just watch your head and then, it turns left, and it pops out and I'm not gonna tell you, you're gonna get really cool view. So if you want to lead the way just watch your head.

Kathi: Cool, yeah, let's do it.

Back in the 18th century, wealthy landowners often created these caves as a way to turn the natural world into their own personal landscape gardens on a massive scale.

Victorian tourists were obsessed with the sublime - awe-inspiring sights of nature, moments of sheer powerlessness in the face of natural wonders. [Recording of Kathi entering the cave. KK: Whoa that is dark!] The hermit cave here at Loch Tay leads visitors through a dark, S-shaped tunnel, and opens up dramatically to the most beautiful vista.

[Sound of falling water fades in getting louder]

CM: Oh wow

KK: Oooohh woowooow! WOW!

Writers like William Wordsworth and Rabbin Burns have come here to draw inspiration for their poems and tales.

KK: There's a big waterfall. That's incredible.

CM: WOW

KK: That's a lot of water, it was raining all night wasn't it?

CM Yeah, there's actually way more water than I expected. I didn't think you'd be anything like that. I was here two days ago and it's like, half of that maybe -

KK: Oh my goodness

CM: - so yeah it's really been raining right up the hill and everything's all the streams are coming down. Pretty good view though eh!?

KK: It's absolutely incredible. And the colour of the water. That's the peat washing down, isn't it?

CM: Yeah. So there's just so much water coming up the hill. And it's all peaty land around here such as peat getting washed into a dark soil in Scotland. So that's what you're seeing there-

KK: Stunning

[Sound of the waterfall starts to fade away]

We stand here for a while, watching the waterfall thundering down the gorge.

Nevertheless, we continue our walk to the top of the path. We reach the main pool where Calum normally likes to swim and if there was any doubt left before, now there is absolutely no question that we wouldn't swim in this river today.

[Sound of water fades in]

The water is relentlessly tumbling down the rocky edge of a small waterfall and is swirling around in the pool. There is not one spot in the pool where the water isn't moving, which Calum tells me, is a sure sign that it's not safe to go in. There is no shelter in the water, and if the current catches you, it would be too hard to fight against it.

But that is the thing with outdoor swimming. The conditions can change and it's important to assess what's safe and what isn't. Maybe that's why some call it wild swimming.

[Sound of waterfall starts to fade out]

We start making our way down again and follow a wooden walkway along the gorge. It crosses the river at its narrowest point. The gap between the rocks is just wider than a metre and the water is shooting down a slippery spout, carving out yet another pool.

The path leads us back to the road on the other side of the gorge. Through the leaves we spot the viewing platform at the hermit's cave on the other side, and below our feet, we hear the rumbling sound of a thundering waterfall. But our view is obstructed by the trees.

Back in the village, the river meanders through a woodland and towards the edge of the loch. The ground is covered in wild garlic and little footpaths lead left and right of the main trail. The scent of the white flowers is mesmerising.

Eventually, we reach the loch. There is a fine gravel beach and a short pier. A boat is tied to it and in the distance, we can see the village Kenmore. The shore on the far side is covered in woodlands. The sun plays catch behind the clouds, but when it emerges, the loch and the trees light up and the colours are glorious.

[Sounds of water and birds singing]

The water is sheltered and barely moving, but further away, I can see waves and ripples forming on the water surface.

'We won't go out far,' Calum reassures me. Loch Tay is one of the largest lochs in Scotland. It is narrow, long and deep, [Callums speaks in the background] nearly 15 miles long and up to 150 metres [sound of water moving starts] at its deepest point. And a body of water of those dimensions, can only mean one thing: Cold water.

We take off our clothes until all I wear is my green swimsuit and a bright woollen hat. Your head is where you lose most of your body heat, I remember reading. I take a few steps towards the water's edge. The rough sand is cold and wet. [KK and CM laugh in the background]

Slowly we move forwards. The soles of my feet are the first to feel the biting cold of the water. [KK: Oooohh] Then my ankles, my shins, my calves and my knees. Ironically, it feels like my legs are on fire. We stop for a few breaths and allow our bodies to acclimatise.

Focusing on your breath is one of the most important things you can do when you swim in cold water. Every year, people die from cold water shock. They jump or fall into the cold water and like an involuntary reflex, they take a big gulp of air - only that they're submerged, filling their lungs with water.

Entering the water slowly and controlling your breathing, is one of the best ways to avoid this kind of reaction.

Next, we submerge our thighs and hips. The cold water is reaching my belly and the lower end of my back. We stop again and breathe.

I look over at Calum, knowing exactly what the next step will be. I spot a moment of hesitation in his eyes, but that actually reassures me. At least I'm not the only one who thinks this is crazy.

CM: Are you ready for this?

KK: I think so....

CM: You don't have to stick your face in,

KK: No, I won't stick my face in, but erm I will -

CM: A big deep in and exhale as you [blows out] get the shoulders under always helps. And then pop the shoulders straight back out after two strokes. Then you'll be like. oh It's not so bad. Do you want a count down?

Together, we count, 1 - 2 - 3 [recording of both KK and CM saying: 3] - and just like that, I leap forwards.

[Sound of being under water]

KK: Woooo, that is very cold!!

CM: That's freezing! Wow that is actually colder than expected.

Colder than expected. Now that's reassuring.

I stretch out my arms and kick my legs, the movement takes my mind off the biting cold on my skin. Instead, I focus on taking short breaths in and long breaths out, pushing air from my lungs through my teeth and out my mouth.

In my peripheral vision, I notice Calum putting on his goggles and checking the ground below the pier for rocks or other obstructing objects. But really, I've got my hands full with focusing on myself.

How my skin feels. What I'm thinking, what the hell I was thinking.

But then after a few seconds, my mind calms down.

The water isn't biting my skin anymore and my limbs start slowing down. I'm moving more gracefully or at least I feel like I do.

This... is actually quite nice.

No, in fact, it's amazing. The water is still cold, but with every stroke I do, my body seems to acclimatise to it more. My breathing is calming down and I start paying attention to the world around me again.

We spend a few more minutes like this in the water, laughing at the cold, but in a weird way also enjoying it.

And then, just as quickly as our adventure began, we decide to get out. I swim back to shore, find the soft ground below my feet, and step outside.

My skin is red and goosebumps cover my thighs.

I dry myself off and put my clothes back on. Warm socks, an extra layer, and the woolly hat that I kept on the entire time I was in the water.

Calum is getting ready for round two. After having checked the ground underwater [sound of water fades in] with his goggles before, he leaps off [loud splash of water] the pier just as the sun comes out. [CM: Woo!] [Kathi: Laugh and shouts: Well done!] He stays in for a little while longer, while I warm up with a cup of tea by the shore.

Our swim turned out a little colder than planned, but I'm filled with pride that I actually managed to go in.

After all, if you do it right, it's really good to take the plunge.

Maybe I'm an outdoor swimmer after all.

[jingle]

I hope you enjoyed this story about my outdoor swim in rural Perthshire. And just in case you were wondering, the title of the story, “uisge”, actually means water in Scottish Gaelic.

If you feel inspired to take the plunge and go swimming in a Scottish loch or the sea, it's important that you know how to do it safely. In this week's newsletter, I'm sharing some resources and books that are not only full of inspiring swim spots in Scotland, but also lots of tips to make it easier and safer to go for a swim here.

You can sign up via the link in the show notes.

Now, let's take a quick break and hear more about our sponsors.

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And we're back. Now, it's time for the practical part of the show. Here are five travel tips for a journey to Loch Tay in Perthshire.

Tip Number 1) Take plenty of time

Like I said in the story, Loch Tay is one of the largest freshwater lochs in Scotland and as such, there is a lot to do and see in the area. Try water activities in Kenmore, visit the Scottish Crannog Centre, hike in the Lawers Range, see the Falls of Dochart in Killin, visit a distillery in Aberfeldy or walk in the footsteps of Robert Burns.

You can easily spend a week in the Loch Tay area.

That said, it's just a two-hour drive from Glasgow or Edinburgh, so it's also a great place for a weekend getaway.

Tip Number 2) Visit in Autumn

Perthshire is also known as Scotland's Big Tree Country and is one of my favourite regions to visit in autumn when all the trees are turning yellow, orange and red. Calum assures me that the Falls of Acharn are even more spectacular at that time of the year - and if you're going for a swim, at least the water might have warmed up a little over the summer.

Tip Number 3) Stay safe if you go swimming

Safety should be your number one concern when it comes to outdoor swimming. It's important to educate yourself about water safety and preventative measures, and know how to avoid cold water shock. If you're new to swimming or a specific area, try to join a local swimming group or hire a swim coach - many people have started outdoor swimming in the past few years which means there are more experts around who can guide you.

Tip Number 4) Take care on the Glen Quaich road

The road I describe at the beginning of my story is the Glen Quaich road to Kenmore. Take great care if you decide to drive it. It's not suitable for large vehicles like campervans or motorhomes, and beginner drivers should think about whether they're up for the challenge. The road has many narrow bends, is super steep at points and there are very few passing places. Luckily the alternative roads are also scenic, so you won't miss out.

If you're intrigued though, I'll link to a video from the road in the show notes.

Glen Quaich road videos: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gYweEHSirnI>,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jnE898oTDEQ>

Tip Number 5) Stop by the Watermill in Aberfeldy

I'll link to my Perthshire travel guide in the show notes, but I'd love to give a shout-out to the Watermill book shop in Aberfeldy. They have a great cafe downstairs which is just the perfect spot to visit after a swim and warm up with a pot of tea and a piece of cake. And afterwards, you can browse their bookshop which includes a big selection of non-fiction books about adventures and activities like outdoor swimming. It's a great wee business to visit while you're in the area. You'll find more in my Perthshire guide.

<https://watchmesee.com/blog/perthshire-autumn-in-scotland/>

[main theme tune]

And with this, I send you off to dream about your own trip to Perthshire to drive down scenic roads, hike to charming waterfalls or take a plunge in a freshwater loch.

Next week, we're speaking with Calum Maclean, who is an experienced outdoor swimmer, talented broadcaster and Scottish Gaelic speaker.

We'll hear about his journey to outdoor swimming, what it was like growing up with Gaelic as a first language, how that has impacted his perception of Scottish landscapes and where to turn if you want to learn a bit of Gaelic yourself. Plus, you'll hear me make a fool of myself, trying to pronounce some common phrases.

I hope you'll tune in again.

Thank you so much for listening to Wild for Scotland. If you liked today's story, I'd be over the moon if you could leave a rating or a review on Apple Podcasts.

Before I let you go, here's a fun story. The other day I asked our followers on Instagram about where they listen to the podcast and it's been amazing to hear all the responses - someone even said they like to save multiple episodes and then binge-listen over the

weekend. That just made my day. If you'd like to share your answer, connect with us on Instagram @wildforscotland and let me know when, how or where you listen to the show. I can't wait to hear from you!

Wild for Scotland is part of the Tremula Network - adventure and outdoor podcasts off the beaten path. The show is written and hosted by me, Kathi Kamleitner. Thanks to Fran Turauskis who is the co-producer and editor, and does the sound design. And to Michelle Payne who helps with transcripts and social media. Podcast art is by Lizzie Vaughan-Knight, the Tartan Trailburner and all original music is composed by Bruce Wallace.

Until next time, when we travel to a different place in Scotland.

[main theme tune end]