

Mythical Creatures
of the sea
& other coastal folklore



Cailleach



Cailleach – old woman

Although the Cailleach lives in various mountain homes every year she comes to the Coire Bhreacain (Cauldren of the Plaid) to wash her massive yellow plaid in the swirling waters in order to summon the cold winds as Scotia's Winter goddess.

During archeological excavations in 1880 a figure of an ancient goddess was discovered in the peat bogs of Scotland, a figure who 2,500 years ago stood near the shore of Loch Leven as a symbol of an ancient religion or deity that has now been lost to time. .

Today she is known as the Ballachulish Woman & is a figure who stands at almost five feet tall & carved from a single piece of alder wood, her eyes are two quartz pebbles which even today, have a remarkable ability to draw the attention to the face of this mysterious relic. .

Although the identity of the Ballachulish Woman still remains a mystery many have speculated as to who this figure represented, there are some who believe that she is a depiction of a deity known as the Cailleach Bheithir, an ancient goddess of winds &

storms, also known as the Winter Hag, who had associations with a nearby mountain called Beinn a'Bheithir. (Hill of the thunderbolt) Another theory is that she could represent a goddess of the straits, this is due to the figures location near the straits where Loch Levan meets the sea, & was a deity that prehistoric travellers would make offerings too in an attempt to secure their safety while travelling dangerous waters. .

Though the Ballachulish Woman is a figure unique to Scotland she is just one of many similar wooden figures found across Europe, many of which were found in special or sacred places associated with water, which we know were once seen as places that linked the Otherworlds with this one. She may also have been a central figure of an area of worship, the Roman poet Lucan, when writing of the religious practises of the ancient Gauls, made mention of wooden images of gods standing in sacred groves so it is possible that the figure of the Ballachulish Woman may have been the focus of worship in a sacred place.

Shelleycoat



Shellycoats are considered to be relatively harmless; they may mislead wanderers, particularly those they think are trespassing upon the creature's territory, but without malice. A common tactic of a shellycoat would be to cry out as if drowning and then laugh at the distracted victim. There is a famous Shellycoat in the port of Leith.

Morag of Mordhobhar



In the depths of Loch Morar, the deepest loch in Scotland dwells a creature of considerable age. Morag of Mordhobhar. Morag a serpent like creature is said to move through the water as a 'cnap dubh' – a black heap. When the full moon hits the loch her streaming red eyes illuminate the waves and she often sleeps on one of the Loch's islands Eilean nam Bhreac.(speckled island) Sightings date back to 1500. Legend has it that Morag can also take the form of a 'lady of the loch'. An omen of death for the old macdonalds of Morar, when she can be heard wailing. Dugall MacDonald of Clanranald spotted the monster in 1510 and vowed to rid the land of the terrible beast.

Lady of Sandwood Bay



Unlike most mermaids which draw sailors to their fate on the rocks. Isabella of Sandwood is a shy and gentle creature but she will raise the seas if you disturb the peace of her bay. It is believed that if a maid of the waves is ever caught she will grant three wishes. Isabella is most often seen singing ancient melodies at the foot of the bays large sea stack Am Buachaille

Selkie



Many of the folk-tales on selkie folk have been collected from the Orkney and Shetland.

In Orkney lore, *selkie* is said to denote various seals of greater size than the grey seal; only these large seals are credited with the ability to shapeshift into humans, and are called "selkie folk". The type of large seals that might have been seen on the islands include the Greenland seal (aka Harp seal) and the Crested Seal (aka Hooded Seal)

A typical folk-tale is that of a man who steals a female selkie's skin, finds her naked on the sea shore, and compels her to become his wife. But the wife will spend her time in captivity longing for the sea, her true home, and will often be seen gazing longingly at the ocean. She may bear several children by her human husband, but once she discovers her skin, she will immediately return to the sea and abandon the children she loved. Sometimes, one of her children discovers or knows the whereabouts of the skin. Sometimes it is revealed she already had a first husband of her own kind. Although in some children's story versions, the selkie revisits her family on land once a year, in the typical folktale she is never seen again by them. In one version, the selkie wife was never seen again (at least in human form) by the family, but the children would witness a large seal approach them and "greet" them plaintively. Male selkies are described as being very handsome in their human form, and having

great seductive powers over human women. They typically seek those who are dissatisfied with their lives, such as married women waiting for their fisherman husbands. In one popular version about a certain "Ursilla" of Orkney (a pseudonym), it was rumoured that when she wished to make contact with her male selkie she would shed seven tears into the sea.

Finfolk



In Orkney Foklore, **Finfolk** (sometimes Finnfolk) are sorceros shapeshifters of the sea, the dark mysterious race from Finfolkaheem who regularly make an amphibious journey from the depths of the Finfolk ocean home to the Orkney Islands. They wade, swim or sometimes row in the spring and summer months, searching for human captives. The Finfolk (both Finman and Finwife) kidnap unsuspecting fishermen, or children, near the shore and force them into lifelong servitude as a spouse.

Finfolk are neither romantic nor friendly. Instead of courting the prospective spouse, Finfolk simply abduct them. Regarded as territorial and greedy, the Finfolk, in addition to their lust for humans, have a weakness for silver, including silver coins and jewelry. According to legend, a possible way to escape abduction is to exploit this Finfolk weakness by tossing silver coins away from oneself. The motivation for the amphibious abductions are inspired, in part, because marriage to a human is preferred over other Finfolk.

To capture the unsuspecting human bride or groom, the Orkney Finfolk cunningly disguise themselves and their fins as other sea animals, plants or even as floating clothes. The Finfolk kidnapping attempt begins by approaching the prospective mate cautiously, floating ever closer, until it is possible to leap up and grab the victim.

The Finmen often use another tactic, appearing in human form disguised as fishermen in a row boat or a fishing boat propelled by oars.

The Finwife prefers a more natural form, and often appears as a mermaid with long, flowing golden hair, snow-white skin, incredible beauty, and, sometimes, a long fish tail. In some stories, she has a beautiful voice like that of the Greek Sirens.

Nuklelavee



The nuckelavee is a mythical sea creature that appears as a horse-like demon when it ventures onto land. A unique and solitary creature possessing extensive evil powers, its malevolent behaviour can influence events throughout the islands. Islanders were terrified of the creature and would not speak its name without immediately saying a prayer. It was often found in the vicinity of a beach, but would never come ashore if it was raining.

In common with many other sea monsters it is unable to tolerate fresh water, therefore those it is pursuing have only to cross a river or stream to be rid of it. The nuckelavee is kept in confinement during the summer months by the Mither o' the Sea, an ancient Orcadian spirit, and the only one able to control it.

The nuckelavee's breath was thought to wilt crops and sicken livestock, and it was considered responsible for epidemics and drought. Seaweed burning to create soda ash began on Stronsay in 1722. The pungent smoke emitted during the process was believed to enrage the nuckelavee, resulting in a wild rampage of plague, the deaths of cattle and the destruction of crops. The nuckelavee was said to have infected horses on Stronsay with the deadly disease known as mortasheen, to demonstrate its fury and exact its revenge against the islanders for burning seaweed; the infection

subsequently spread to all the other islands involved in the industry. The creature was also blamed for prolonged periods of abnormally low rainfall, leading to water shortages and poor harvests.

Other coastal folklore

Coastal Witches

Blue men of the Minch

Hirta St Kilda



Coastal witches in many accounts as described by Lizanne Henderson are much more destructive and malign than inland witches.

The blue men of the Minch, also known as storm kelpies (Scottish Gaelic: *na fir ghorma*), are mythological creatures inhabiting the stretch of water between the northern Outer Hebrides and mainland Scotland, looking for sailors to drown and stricken boats to sink. They are mostly found located in the Minch, and they do not seem to have counterparts in any other country of the world. The Minch has also been called *Sruth nam Fear Gorm*, "Stream of the Blue Men"

Apart from their blue colour, these creatures look a lot like normal humans, and are about the same size. Most of the time the Blue Men swim the seas, but sometimes sleep in underwater caves. While the Blue Men sleep the weather could be fine and the seas calm, but if they wake up...They can create storms whenever they want.

One possible origin of the blue men of the Minch may alternatively lie with the Picts, whose Latin name *picti* means "painted people". If they were seen crossing the water in boats resembling the kayaks of the Fin-men they may have given simple islanders and mariners the impression of the upper part of the body rising out of the water.

Another suggested origin of the Blue Men comes from John Gregorson Campbell's *Superstitions of the Highlands & Islands of Scotland* (1900).

"The fallen angels were driven out of Paradise in three divisions, one became the Faeries on the land, one the Blue Men in the sea and one...the Northern Streamers or Merry Dancers in the sky."

The 'Merry Dancers' is a name for the Northern Lights, imagined here as luminous air-dwellers.

Fishermen from St Kilda would never say the name Hirta while out fishing, for fear of misfortune.

Fishermen's folklore

8 seafaring myths in Scotland

Bloodstone

Hawthorn



SCOTTISH seafaring is steeped in myth and superstition with fishermen up and down the coast traditionally observing a potent mix of omens " both good and bad " as they set sail.

1. Don't mention a pig, a rabbit or a salmon

Mention a pig in a fisherman's pub and it may well fall painfully silent, with the animal often strictly referred to as a 'curly tail'.

A rabbit is similarly known as a bob tail, a fower fitter or a mappin.

Salmon too are equally feared as bringers of bad luck and are known as the 'reid fish'.

Little is known as to the roots of these superstitions, but one possible explanation is that all these animals were powerful Celtic symbols of the old gods. Such as the wise old father Salmon

2. Go back home if you see a minister – or a woman – on the way to your boat

Ian Balgowan, 71, of Stonehaven, Aberdeenshire, a North Sea sailor for more than 50 years, said that seeing a minister on the walk down to your boat was considered

extremely bad luck. The same was true for a woman.

He said: "If you met a minister on the way to your boat, it was a case of about turn, go home, and start your journey again."

It has also been suggested that no mention of the church, a minister or a manse would be made on a fishing boat, particularly amongst men working the Moray Firth. In J.M McPherson's book *Primitive Beliefs of the North East of Scotland*, it said: "*Any utterance suggestive of the new faith would be displeasing to the ancient god of the ocean, and might bring disaster onto the boat.*"

3. Don't Save a Man at Sea

McPherson also claims that hundreds of years ago it was forbidden to save anyone from drowning, so firm was the belief that the spirit of the sea must have his sacrifice according to folklore in Shetland, Orkney and some parts of the North East.

According to an old saying from Peterhead, which dates to the 19th Century: "*The sea takes the saver of life instead of the saved. The sea maun hae it's nummer*".

It was also considered 'ill luckit' to touch the corpse of a dead fisherman as it was a gift to the sea god. Such superstitions still seemed to endure until the days of the whaling trade in the 1800s. However, it is impossible to imagine these beliefs would endure today.

4. Wear a single gold earring

Morag Skene, in her essay for the North East Folk Archive, suggests that while some fisherman saw the earring merely as a good luck charm, others believe it was a form of insurance policy to give enough silver to bury you, in case you died in a strange port.

5. A bit of metal will bring luck

Ms Skene, in her research, found evidence that fishermen's wives put a coin in their husband's socks before setting sail.

Iron was also thought to be lucky and horse-shoes nailed to the mast were a common protection from bad luck, bad spirits and even witches.

6. When you come out the harbour always turn right

Mr Balgowan said he had seen of relatively recent examples of fishermen doing a turn out at sea to correct a left-turn out a harbour.

"You always have to do a swing to the starboard if this happens," he said.

7. Don't whistle in the direction of the wind.

Thought to relate to sailing ships, it was claimed whistling in the wrong direction could stem the strength of the wind – or even bring about a storm.

8. A woman should not comb her hair at night I

If she had a father, brother or husband at sea, she would not comb her hair for fear that the hairs would find him in the dark and entangle their boat.

Fishermen would carry a piece of bloodstone as a charm to prevent drowning.

Another account described hawthorn in a similar vein. Fisherman carrying a bundle of hawthorn twigs to prevent drowning.