

In brief

Category: moderate walk

Walking Distance: 3.5km / 2 miles

Time: a leisurely 2 hours

Map Reference: OS Landranger 8
and Pathfinder 69 NB14 / 24

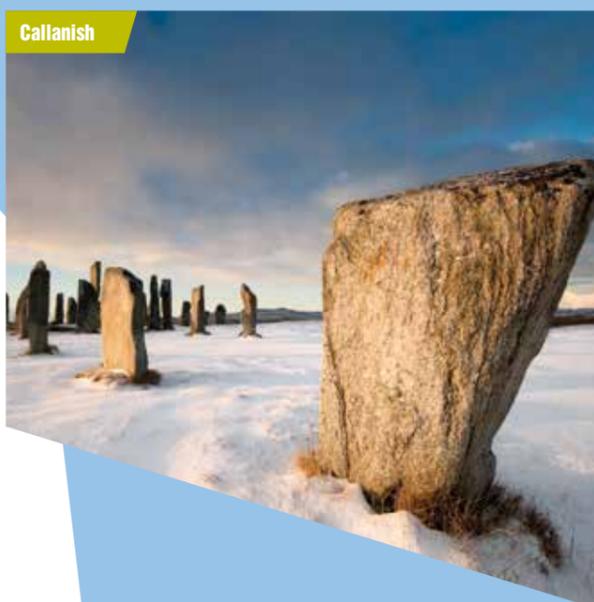
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How to get there?

By Car

Parking is available at the start of the walk in the Calanais Stones Visitor car park, 750m off the A858. You can also begin this walk from either of the small parking areas marked on the map at Calanais II or Calanais III.

By Bus

Local buses travel from Stornoway to Calanais daily except Sunday.

For details contact the Stornoway bus station.
Tel: 01851 704327 or the Tourist Information
Centre Tel: 01851 703088.

Follow the Crofting Code

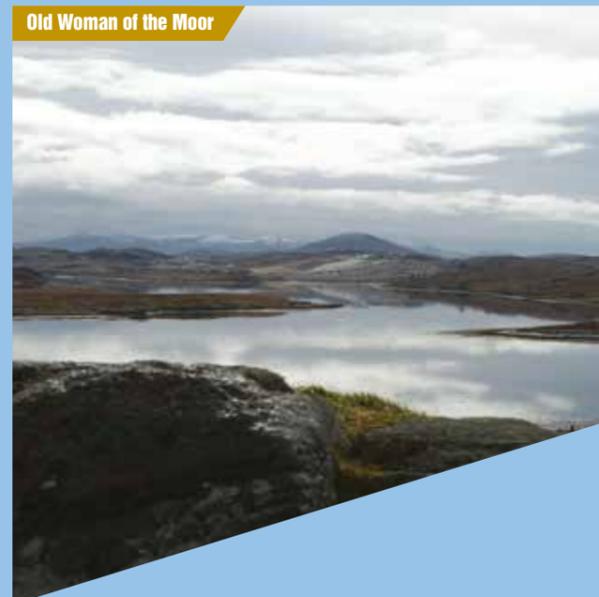
- Please leave dogs behind, or ensure they are on a leash as they can be a danger to livestock.
- Park your car without blocking access for other vehicles.
- Please fasten gates.
- Leave no litter.
- Do not disturb breeding birds.
- Protect wildlife and plants.
- Avoid damaging archaeological sites.

For your safety

- Remember the weather here can be unpredictable!
- Wear sensible clothing and footwear.
- Take an OS map and a compass.
- Tell someone where you are going or leave a note visible on the dashboard of your car – stating your destination and estimated time of return.

“Both the visitor centre and old farmhouse are dedicated to exploring the history of this fascinating place.”

Old Woman of the Moor



Skylark



Explore...

From the visitor car park, follow the coast road, turning right along the A858 for a short distance, then divert south along a cul-de-sac to visit the first satellite circle, Calanais II (Cnoc Ceann a' Garraidh), with magnificent views of the main site at Calanais (Calanais I) and of East Loch Roag.

Then turn left, and head for Calanais III (Cnoc Fhillibhir Bheag). From this stone circle continue on the path to the A858 and return towards the Calanais car park. Before reaching it, detour up the steep lane to the main monument. Follow the path around the stones, returning to the car park via Cnoc an Tursa.



The Ancient Landscape

The circles on the walk are only part of a complex of standing stones and burial tombs, forming one of the most remarkable concentrations in the British Isles. This was probably begun about 3000 BC with the building of the Calanais I standing stones, while the satellite sites may be slightly later. The whole complex had been abandoned by 800 BC.

As Neolithic farmers had been living in the area for 1,000 years before they started to raise the stones, there may have been around 150 generations of people living here, continuously farming the land, worshipping, and developing this ritual landscape.

Looking out from Cnoc Ceann a' Gharraidh, imagine what the country looked like then. East Loch Roag would have been no more than a river, flowing with salmon, the centre of a prosperous agricultural

tribal homeland. The sea-level had been rising since the end of the last Ice Age 10,000 years ago, but had not yet created the lochs and drowned valleys of the Islands today. The climate was a little warmer.

The soil was more fertile – peat had not yet started to blanket the land – and would have supported crops such as early forms of wheat and barley. The land was not treeless; it is thought that birch and pine woodland did well in more sheltered areas.

There was rough grazing for red deer, sheep and cattle, and lush grazing on the valley floor, as well as rich marine resources near at hand. No wonder the settlers stayed.

The route now turns to the left for 300m until the next setting, Cnoc Fhillibhir Bheag. Here you can experience the typical modern acidic moorland environment, the vegetation consisting most commonly of Sphagnum mosses and Heather, although Butterwort and the carnivorous Sundew also thrive.

Cnoc Fhillibhir Bheag

Cnoc Fhillibhir Bheag today consists of 12 stones, up to three metres tall, which can be seen as a flattened ring with four stones inside it. A local tradition suggests that three of these might represent the ancient Celtic perception of the triple goddess; the whiter stone for the maiden, the redder one for the wife / mother; and the darker one for the cailleach, or old woman. The fourth stone opposite can be seen as their male consort – an intriguing idea!

Beyond the stones on the southern horizon, a group of hills resemble a recumbent

woman, known as Cailleach na Mointeach (Old Woman of the Moors). Some archaeologists believe that this "earth-mother figure" is one reason why the standing stones were built around Calanais.

As you continue along the path towards the gate and the road, if you stand in the small circle of low stones over to the left, you will see the figure of Cailleach na Mointeach framed in the stone ring. Is this more than a coincidence?

The delightful gate as you leave Cnoc Fhillibhir Bheag depicts the erection of the stones and the rising and setting of heavenly bodies behind them.



Calanais Standing Stones

The major site at Calanais has several elements. There are four radiating rows laid out almost at right angles. The northern row is double, creating a ceremonial avenue which narrows as it approaches the centre. There, 13 stones form a slightly flattened ring around a huge central stone. Finally, inside the ring is a small chambered tomb.

Since Sir James Matheson had the five feet of peat cleared away in 1857, more of the original form of the site has come to light. A missing stone at the end of the eastern row (located by careful probing by Margaret Curtis, a local archaeologist) was excavated and re-erected in its original socket. The tall stone at the end of the north avenue had lost its tip. She identified this built into a 19th century fieldwall; it has now been cemented back into its original position.

Archaeologists have now revealed the general sequence at the site. More than 5,000 years ago, a circular ditched enclosure was dug (no trace is visible above ground). Later, cultivation ridges were made, for growing crops. On top of these the first standing stones were erected – the ring and possibly the central monolith and the southern row, probably 5,000 years ago. Some time later the chambered tomb was built, and eventually the remaining arms and the avenue were added.

Inside the chambered tomb, vertical slabs divided up the corbelled chamber. This was used for communal burial for several centuries. Fragments of Beaker pottery dating to between 2500 and 1750 BC were found, along with stone arrowheads.

Stand where the path crosses the northern avenue.

From here, at the extremes of its cycle once every 18.6 years, the moon barely rises above the horizon at the feet of Cailleach na Mointeach. It hovers low across her body, then sets into darkness, only to reappear, symbolically, in the circle, at the foot of the monolith. Is it possible to explain Calanais as a monument dedicated first and foremost to the moon?

Continue on the path through the gate to Cnoc an Tursa. At the foot of this natural rock outcrop, many small pit sand post-holes were once dug. This spot with its dramatic backdrop may thus have been the focus for ritual activities.

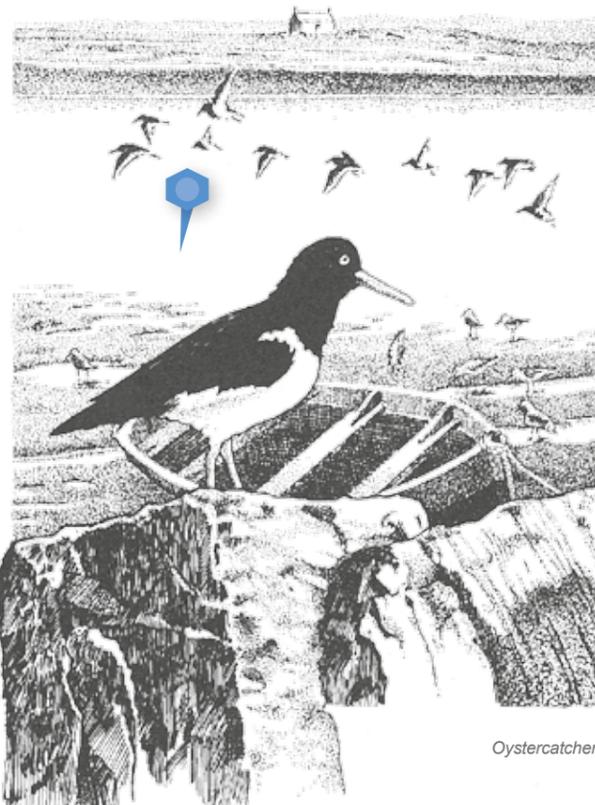
Below is the visitor centre with interpretative exhibition, next to the old farmhouse which is now used for local art exhibitions. Both are dedicated to exploring and illustrating the history of this fascinating place.

All of the archaeological sites on this walk are protected by law as scheduled ancient monuments. It is an offence to damage or alter them in any way.

Many of the ideas suggested here are a result of work by Margaret and Ron Curtis, local experts on the standing stones. Tel. 01851 621277.



Calanais Standing Stones



Oystercatcher

East Loch Roag

As you begin the walk, pause where the road goes closest to the shore, to gaze over East Loch Roag, Orasay Island, and the hills beyond. Wading birds such as Redshank, Oystercatcher and their close relative the Common Sandpipers can be observed here. The Redshank has been called the "sentinel of the marshes",

because of its habit of rising with hysterical calls when anyone approaches!

The walk now takes us to the main road and immediately right again up the lane towards Cnoc Ceann a' Gharraidh standing stones. At the end of the lane the route crosses some fine examples of lazybeds – feannagan – on which crofters once grew barley, potatoes or winter feed.

Calanais Township

Once back on the main road, turn left and return towards the main site. On your right in the distance you can see vertical faces of outcropping bedrock, the ubiquitous Lewisian Gneiss. People may have quarried the stones of Calanais from these rock faces. It would be relatively easy to lever off large blocks and pull them downhill on wooden rollers – not the same task as transporting the great Blue Stones for Stonehenge!

This terrain is ideal for birds such as Greenshank and Buzzards, and even two pairs of Golden Eagles hold territory nearby.

Calanais today is a crofting township of about 150 people, whose main crofting activity is the raising of sheep. In the village, you can see the remains of many "blackhouses" (some still preserved), dating from earlier periods, and the old crofting field pattern belonging to them. In these croftlands the increasingly rare Corncrake still rasps its way through the summer, although Lapwing, Skylark and Wheatear are more familiar. At the top of the hill follow the path around the standing stones.

