

= Flannan Isles =

The Flannan Isles ( Scottish Gaelic : Na h @-@ Eileanan Flannach , pronounced [ n? ?helan?n ?fl? ? an ? ??x ] ) or alternatively , the Seven Hunters are a small island group in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland , approximately 32 kilometres ( 20 mi ) west of the Isle of Lewis . They may take their name from Saint Flannan , the seventh @-@ century Irish preacher and abbot .

The islands have been devoid of permanent residents since the automation of Flannan Isles Lighthouse in 1971 . They are the location of an enduring mystery that occurred in December 1900 , when all three lighthouse keepers vanished without trace .

= = Geography = =

The islands are split into three groups : the main cluster of rocks that lie to the northeast include the two principal islands of Eilean Mòr ( Big Isle ) , which is approximately 17 @.@ 5 hectares ( 43 acres ) in extent , and Eilean Taighe ( House Isle ) ; to the south lie Soray ( Eastward Isle ) and Sgeir Tomain ; while the main western outcrops are Eilean a ' Gobha ( Isle of the Blacksmith ) , Roaireim ( which has a natural rock arch ) , and Bròna Cleit ( Sad Sunk Rock ) . The total land area amounts to approximately 50 hectares ( 120 acres ) and the highest point is 88 metres ( 289 ft ) above sea level on Eilean Mòr .

The geology consists of a dark breccia of gabbros and dolerites intruding Archaean gneiss . In prehistoric times , the area was covered by ice sheets that spread from Scotland out into the Atlantic Ocean . After the last retreat of the ice circa 20 @,@ 000 years BP , sea levels were as much as 122 metres ( 400 ft ) lower than at present and it is likely that the existing islands were part of a much larger land mass , although still separated from the Outer Hebrides by many miles of open water . Steadily rising sea levels thereafter would have reduced the land remaining above sea level to its present extent .

There are two possible landing places for yachts visiting Eilean Mòr to the east and west , although this may be hazardous given the regular heavy swells .

= = History = =

As the name implies , Eilean Taighe hosts a ruined stone shelter . Eilean Mòr is home to the lighthouse and a ruined chapel dedicated to St. Flannan , which the lighthouse keepers referred to as the " dog kennel " because of its small size . These ruined bothies were described collectively by the Ancient Monuments Commission as The Bothies of the Clan McPhail , or Bothain Chlann ? ic Phaill . It is not entirely clear which St. Flannan the chapel honours . It is likely that the honoree was either the seventh century Abbot of Killaloe in County Clare or alternatively , the half brother of the eighth century St. Ronan who gave his name to the nearby island of North Rona . There was also a certain Flann , son of an Abbot of Iona , called Maol @-@ duine , who died in 890 and may have loaned his name to these isolated isles .

The archipelago also is known as ' The Seven Hunters ' . During the Middle Ages they also may have been called the ' Seven Haley ( Holy ) Isles ' . Martin Martin ( 1703 ) lists a number of unusual customs associated with regular pilgrimages to Eilean Mòr , such as removing one 's hat and making a sunwise turn when reaching the plateau . It is possible that the saint or his acolytes lived on Eilean Mòr and perhaps , on Eilean Taighe as well . It is unlikely , however , that there were permanent residents on the islands once the Celtic Church fell into decline in the Hebrides ( as a result of ninth century Viking invasions ) , until the construction of the lighthouse and its occupation very shortly before the dawn of the twentieth century .

Flannan Isles Lighthouse was built near the highest point on Eilean Mòr for the Northern Lighthouse Board between 1895 and 1899 . In 1900 , its three keepers disappeared without trace , causing much public attention and speculation . The lighthouse is no longer occupied after it was automated in 1971 .

= = Wildlife = =

The isles provide nesting for a population of seabirds , including Atlantic puffins , northern fulmars , European storm @-@ petrels , Leach 's petrels , common shag , and black @-@ legged kittiwakes . There is a gannetry on Roaireim . From the late Middle Ages on , Lewismen regularly raided these nests for eggs , birds , and feathers . There is a population of rabbits , brought to the islands by the lighthouse keepers , and crofters from Bernera graze sheep on the most fertile islands . Minke and pilot whales , as well as Risso 's and other species of dolphin are commonly observed in the vicinity .

The islands became a Site of Special Scientific Interest in December 1983 .

= = In fiction = =

The Flannan Isles , Eilean Mòr in particular , feature prominently as the location of a murder central to the plot of Coffin Road , a 2016 novel by Peter May . They also feature in Neil Gunn 's epic novel The Silver Darlings .