New life takes root in the desert

As the sand continued to threaten land and homes, the Forestry Commission took over Culbin between 1952 and 1957, and began stabilising the sand by tree planting. Many early attempts failed as branch wood was brought in from other forests to hold the sand enough for the young plants to gain a footing. Somehow both trees and foresters struggled on, and by 1960 the massive task was largely complete.

Today the huge forest of Scots and Corsican pine, birches, alder and more is a complete and interdependent world. It is home to birds, mammals, insects and over 500 types of plants, fungi and lichens. Trees are felled only in small areas at a time and new seedlings replace them naturally. What started as a planted forest is becoming more and more natural.

The seeds may appear still as with all life on Earth, Culbin is ever-changing...
This route is ideal for first-time visitors. Still lead you along sandy paths, through forest and mucky clearings. The route up to Hill 99 and in its ‘squawky’ viewpoint is well worth it. It’s suitable for nearly all abilities and take a gentle gradient. Why Hill 99? Probably named by early foresters, this is Culbin’s tallest dune at 99 feet high.

The circular route onwards from the summit has a few steeper sections that less able visitors might avoid by going back down the way they came. For others, the firm, waymarked path completes a circuit back to the car park.

Take your time - allow two hours or more. Relax and enjoy.

Along the way...

Look up to life in the rolling tree canopy. Listen... Look down on carpets of moss and lichen speckled with fungi in autumn, wood-ant hills and flowering plants. Culbin is constantly changing. Look round: raised ridges of pebbles - driven inshore over 5000 years ago by storm and tide.

Maviston Dunes - The highest of these sculpted dunes is more than 15 m tall - and all created by sand grains no bigger than the head of a pin. The makings of these ancient dunes has eroded away to create waves of U-shaped dunes facing west.

The birds migrating over Culbin must get a fine view of Maviston's beautiful curves.

Gravel-pit Ponds - A great place for the Forestry Commission ranger to lead school pond-dipping visits, these ponds were dug to provide a source of fresh water for birds, mammals and insects. Although man-made, all Culbin ponds and channels now play a critical part in the natural balance of life here. Take a seat on the benches and relax. Look out for yellow flag iris, chesnut-tipped waterlily and some unusual moorland, too.

Hidden History - See over the page for Culbin’s amazing story!

Sandlife - See section on the other side of this leaflet.

At high tide and with storm-force winds behind it, the sea can crash over the first few dunes of Buckie Loch and into its sandy graveyard beyond. Only the toughest plants and animals can survive here, so look for very healthy and sky-blue seaweed. Once this was an inlet, but then the sand cut it off from the sea. Look at it from the shore and you’ll see that the tide by tide, the sea is winning back the sand. Its salt spray kills the trees before the waves claim them. Floating tree-trunks are a hazard for diving, so trees along the edge are often removed before they fall.

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Otter Pool - Without man-made sources of water, Culbin would not have as many birds, mammals and insects. This secluded pool was created in the late 1980s to encourage wildlife. Dawn is the best time to catch a glimpse - or hear the splash - of a vanishing otter. And it's also a good place to watch roe deer drinking at dusk. Be still... Even if you don't see any wildlife, you can be sure that some creature will be keeping its eyes on you...