



COUNTRY LIVING

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COVER PHOTOGRAPH JANE GIFFORD INSET/TIM GRAHAM



Inset photo, page 36



THRIFT, SPRING SQUILL AND OYSTERPLANTS ALL LIKE TO BE BESIDE THE SEASIDE. TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY JANE GIFFORD

SHORE SURVIVORS

Main picture Chalk cliffs and windswept grasslands draw back from the sea at Warbarrow Bay in Dorset. Elsewhere along the coastline, sandstone, limestone and granite all contribute their own differing colours and contours. **Top left** Away from trampling feet, sea peas take root in shingle. They grow around the coast from Cornwall to Suffolk. **Bottom left** Yellow horned poppies at Blakeney Point in Norfolk, managing to survive only where the shingle is most stable

The plants that survive alongside Britain's 6,000 miles of coastline aren't generally ones you might want in your garden. Some are slimy, many spiky and scratchy, few manage more than token flourishes of colour. Their names alone – sea holly, sea bindweed, bladderwrack, sea buckthorn, eelgrass, gorse – serve as a warning of what to expect.

Growing on thin ribbons of rock, among shingle, boulders and windswept dunes, their roughness and ruggedness is perfectly in keeping with their surroundings. By one of nature's neater ironies, the bleakness of their locations has so far protected some against the interference of agriculture and urbanisation afflicting other, more accessible, flora.

On shingle beaches, plants depend for their survival on long roots that reach between the pebbles for meagre amounts of soil trapped there. Blue-flowered oysterplants and purple sea peas cling to ridges; yellow horned poppies form colonies nearby and sea kales produce huge rosettes of blue-green leaves and white flowers in summer.

Fringing sandy beaches in early summer, green cushions of fescue are crowned with pink thrift – a flower that flourishes almost everywhere on the British coast. Along cliff tops, pale blue spring squill and tiny green-winged orchids carpet grazing pastures and the sea carrot grows on cliffs in the south where livestock keep the gorse at bay. In ➔







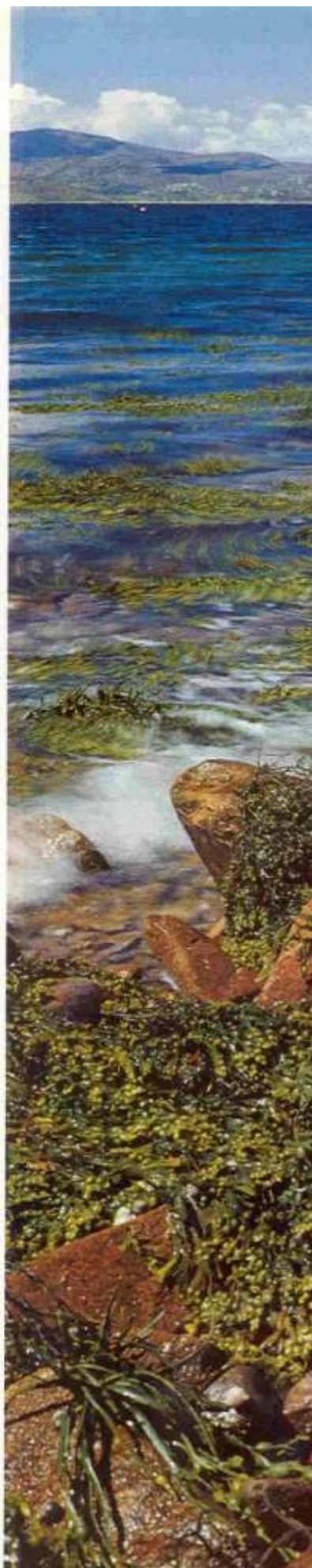
Clockwise from top left Sea carrot (a subspecies of the wild carrot) on the rich grasslands along the Lizard, Cornwall. More than 100 types of seaweed grow around our coasts: green seaweeds are generally found higher up the shore, as they need more light than browns and reds, but identifying which is which isn't always easy – some "brown" seaweeds also look green. Sea holly flowering on a Norfolk dune. A green-winged orchid on a Cornish cliff pasture. Coastal grasses still provide useful grazing for cattle in Scotland

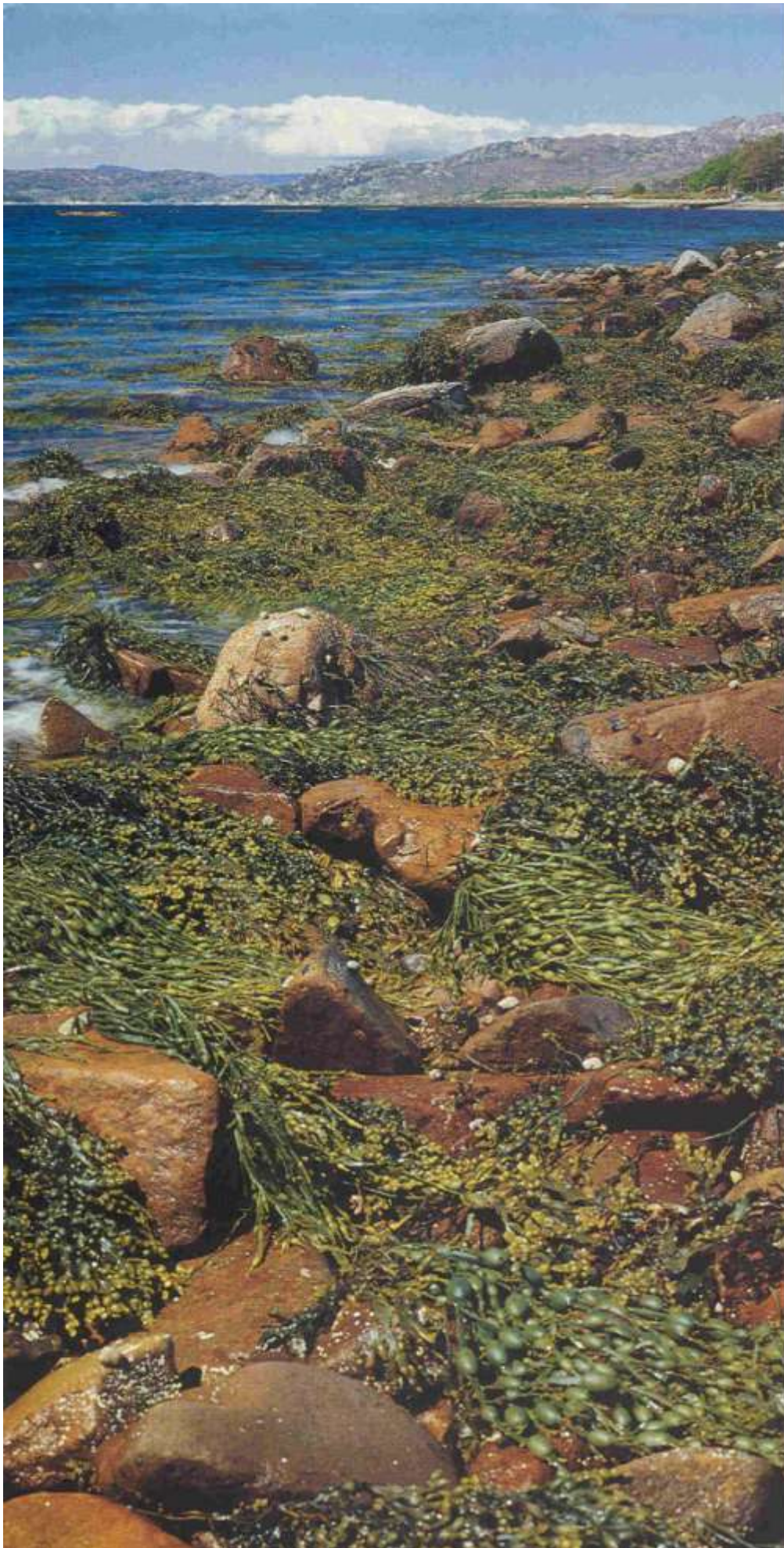


summer, cliff ledges are often a mass of sea campion, roseroot, woolly kidney vetch and sky-blue sheep's bit.

Where sand, cliffs and shingle yield to tidal rocks and boulders, seaweeds take over. Seaweeds make up in abundance and diversity what they lack in looks (more than a hundred varieties exist around the British Isles), and all have their preferred locations. While red and green seaweeds occupy rockpools above the low tide, brown seaweeds gather in bands further down the shore. It's tempting to think of our coastal flora remaining unchanged over thousands of years. Inevitably, this hasn't quite happened. In the south, escaped garden flowers already monopolise some areas. The thick fleshy leaves and yellow star-like flowers of the Hottentot fig now swamp parts of the Lizard in Cornwall, where they displace native species and deprive wildlife of food.

They aren't the only threat. When the





National Trust investigated 3,000 miles of coastline in the 1950s, it found only 900 of them unspoilt enough to warrant preservation. It has bought long stretches of the Cornish, North Yorkshire and North Norfolk coasts but, even here, human interference is beginning to impinge through oil spills, sewage and chemical discharges. If encroachment continues, the bleakness of the plants' locations may no longer be enough to save them. Donations to the National Trust help, but other action is vital, too. No one has launched a Society for the Protection of the Sea Carrot – how long before it becomes a necessity? 🐞

The National Trust is at 36 Queen Anne's Gate, London SW1H 9AS (071-222 9251). Text adapted and photographs taken from Wilderness Britain! by David Bellamy and Jane Gifford (Oxford Illustrated Press, £19.95). Call 0865-793553 to order a copy.

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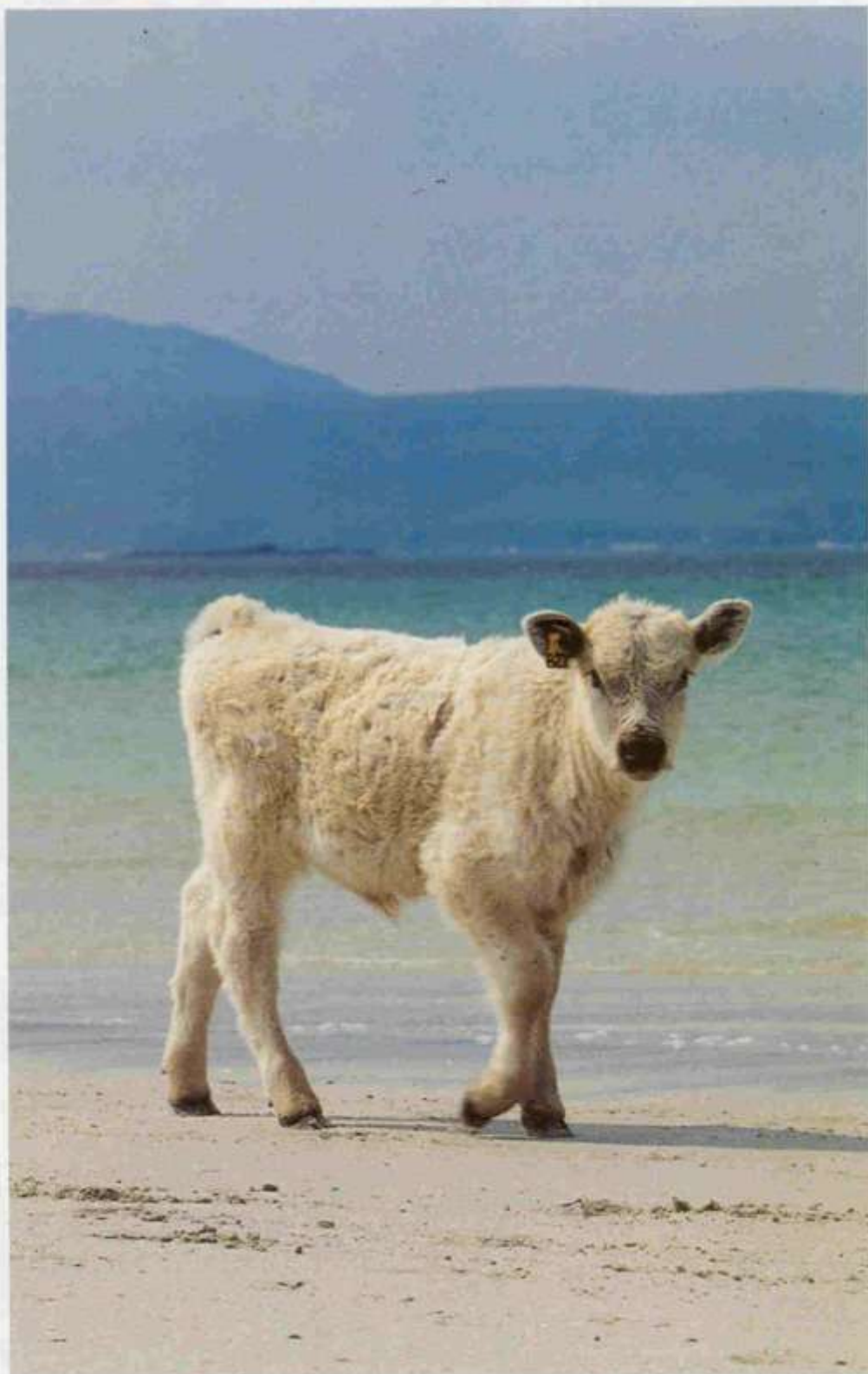
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