

Wild Skies Shetland

About the Project

Wild Skies Shetland is a volunteer-run charity which has brought over £100,000 worth of investment to the small island of Unst, where the population is c.650. The project aims to generate local economic benefit by showcasing the wonders of Unst's ever-changing skies – this includes the northern lights, midnight sun, clear dark skies and dramatic storms.

The charity organises a rich variety of sky-related events. So far this has included bringing a large inflatable planetarium to Unst, theatre shows for children, photography exhibitions, a celebration of an eclipse and various presentations by science communicators. Two unique visitor trails have been created in Unst – the Sky Trail (all year round) and the Planetary Trail (seasonal).

The Sky Trail guides visitors to 13 beautiful locations around the island with each stop offering interpretations of a different aspect of the sky – for example the effect of the moon on tides (near a tidal energy turbine) and Viking names for stars and constellations (by a replica longhouse and longship). The trail features music, dialect and poems through 'talking' benches, and Virtual Reality headsets displaying the northern lights.

For the Planetary Trail, each planet was interpreted creatively by a local person or group. Artwork includes a collage of the sun by the nursery school, Neptune made in deep blue glass, and a knitted Mercury.

Unst is honoured to have an asteroid named after it – Asteroid 394445 Unst. This was so exciting that a short film was made about it, with extensive involvement by local volunteers.

Local people: getting involved and having fun

Local community involvement is central to the way Wild Skies operates – it is important that activities are enjoyable for both locals and visitors. In the words of one Trustee: "Find as many ways to involve folk as you can. Involve the school. Involve the grazing committee. Involve shops. Ask people to paint, fund-raise, sing, act, write or build. Local buy-in and love for your project is key."

"I see two main benefits from Wild Skies Shetland. One is economic – we hope to generate income and employment from more visitors staying for longer. The other is how we humans connect with nature. The natural world around us, however tiny or spectacularly huge, is both therapeutic and life enhancing. Watching and marvelling at our ever-changing skies is, put simply, good for us."

Jane Macaulay, co-founder,
Wild Skies Shetland

UPDATED: 2026



Location: Unst, Shetland

Type: Do

When Set Up: 2018

How Funded: Primarily through grants, donations, income from sale of merchandise, event tickets and in 2026 a new 'Friends of' scheme was launched.

Beneficiaries: Locals and visitors who enjoy memorable experiences; secondary economic benefits

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