

# The Mack Walks: Short Walks in Scotland Under 10 km

## St Mary's Chapel-Rattray Head Lighthouse (Return)

### Route Summary

An easy rural walk from an 800 year old ruined chapel near the Loch of Strathbeg, a Special Protection Area for wildlife conservation, to the seashore at Rattray Head, with its imposing lighthouse. The nearby sand dunes can be 30 m high, providing a good all round viewpoint.

Duration: 2.75 hours



### Route Overview

**Duration:** 2.75 hours.

**Transport/Parking:** No public transport nearby. Walking from a bus-stop on the A90 main road would double the length of the walk. There is a small parking area beside the walk start/end point.

**Length:** 7.420 km / 4.64 mi

**Height Gain:** 85 meter **Height Loss:** 85 meter

**Max Height:** 28 meter **Min Height:** 0 meter

**Surface:** Moderate. Tarmac, good hard tracks, soft dunes and beach.

**Child Friendly:** Yes, if children are used to walks of this distance.

**Difficulty:** Easy.

**Dog Friendly:** Yes, but keep dogs on lead on the public road and near to any livestock.

**Refreshments:** Ban-Car in Lonmay. Tufted Duck in St. Combs. Options in Peterhead and Fraserburgh.



### Description

This easy walk, mostly on the flat, starts and finishes at the ruin of St. Mary's Chapel of Rattray and follows a narrow access road through fields to the coast. The church was constructed in the 13thC, although the site was probably associated with the spread of Christianity in Buchan from the 6thC. It is thought to have been erected by the Earl of Buchan, William Comyn.

Following the Reformation, use of the Chapel probably ended, and, after the great storm of 1720, the whole area was abandoned as a settlement. The village of Rattray was small when belatedly made a royal burgh in the late 16thC, and by 1696 it was occupied by only 4 fisher households.

Rattray Castle, now disappeared from the landscape, was once the focal point of the small coastal community. It was constructed in the late 12thC on a large sand dune now marked on maps as Castle Hill, between the Chapel and the former harbour at Sarnakeppie on the then Bay of Strathbeg. The tidal bay supported a harbour until the storm of 1720, when persistent problems with access to the sea being blocked by shifting sands finally came to a head. The tidal inlet flooded to become the Loch of Strathbeg, now Britain's largest coastal lagoon, and a seasonal haven for up to a fifth of the world's pink-footed geese. The loch, maintained by the RSPB, is a site of international ecological importance as home to a wide variety of wetland wildlife, such as breeding terns and gulls, as well as migrating waders and wintering geese (there is a RSBP visitor centre accessed from Crimond). At the mid-point on the walk we arrive at the windblown beach on the headland overlooking the Rattray Head Lighthouse, built on a rock tower and surrounded by sea water except at low tide. Listed as a building of architectural/historical interest, the light was established in 1895 by the famous Stevenson family. The innovative design made it the first rock lighthouse to have an inbuilt fog siren. From here, the walking route circles around the headland and climbs into the high sand dunes, part of a dunes system that stretches almost 30 km from St Combs to Peterhead.



## Waypoints

### (1) Start walk at St. Mary's Chapel, Old Rattray

(57.60797; -1.85904) <https://w3w.co/bucket.sensibly.gold>

Start the walk by exploring the old kirkyard at St. Mary's Chapel\* which dates from the 13thC. There is an information board in the SW corner of the old graveyard. When you are ready to move on, start walking up the narrow dead-end road, heading in the direction of the coast, with the Loch of Strathbeg\*\* on your left side.

\*Note: for information about the old church

see: <https://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/media/3993/stmaryrattrayleaflet.pdf>

\*\*Note: for information about the Loch of Strathbeg

see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loch\\_of\\_Strathbeg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loch_of_Strathbeg)



### (2) Veer right for access road to lighthouse cottages

(57.61149; -1.85071) <https://w3w.co/connector.grading.evenly>

In 700 m, or so, from the church, after passing Castle Hill farm, veer right at the fork in the road to take the route to the lighthouse cottages and buildings (the left fork is for a row of old coastguard cottages). The tarred surface is increasingly broken up as you proceed. (811 m)



### (3) Through gap in barriers after lighthouse buildings

(57.60964; -1.82931) <https://w3w.co/poodle.tomato.abundance>

In 1.5 km, after passing the old lighthouse cottages and outbuildings on your right (now a B&B/hostel), go through a gap in barriers to the right of a steel gate. Follow the track towards the coast. (2.3 km)



### (4) Take right fork for sand dunes

(57.60998; -1.82733) <https://w3w.co/surfed.thread.pets>

In just another 100 m, or so, take the right fork in the path into the sand dunes. From this point you can take whatever route you wish to see the lighthouse. As reflected in our route map, we chose to take a path climbing into the sand dunes on the right-hand side for the views before descending to the level of the beach. (2.4 km)



### (5) Rattray Head lighthouse

(57.60959; -1.82194) <https://w3w.co/culling.bachelor.question>

We then passed the lighthouse (surrounded by water except at a low tide) and continued beyond a headland looking towards St. Combs in the distance. We then veered left to enter the sand dunes again at an obvious gap, and followed a path through a canyon of high dunes to a grassy area on the other side. The path then veered left and climbed to re-enter the dunes. From a high point we identified an obvious track out of the dunes back towards the lighthouse cottages. (3.2 km)



### (6) Pass lighthouse buildings and then re-trace steps

(57.61012; -1.82699) <https://w3w.co/wool.fired.clockwork>

After exploring the beach, headland and sand dunes at Rattray Head, go through the barriers by the gate, and pass the lighthouse buildings on your left side before re-tracing your steps on the road back to St. Mary's Chapel where you started the walk. (5.2 km)



### (7) End walk back at car-park by St Mary's Chapel

(57.60806; -1.85891) <https://w3w.co/bucket.sensibly.gold>

In 2.2 km you will have returned to your start-point at St. Mary's Chapel. (7.4 km)



## Route Map



### Links:

[Photos from walk](#)

[Download Route Guide](#) (PDF with illustrated Waypoints)

[Download GPX file](#) (GPS Exchange Format)

[Access Walk on OutdoorActive](#)

[Access Walk on OSMaps](#)

[Access Walk on AllTrails](#)

[Access Walk on Wikiloc](#)