

Tides around the Orkney Isles

We hope you find these notes helpful and of interest to you while planning your sailing trip to Orkney. Please note they are not intended to be used for navigation

As any almanac will tell you the main tidal stream on the flood runs east and the ebb runs west around these isles with many deviations and anomalies amongst the isles.

Through the main channels, Pentland Firth, Westray Firth and North Ronaldsay Firth the tide changes approximately one hour after Kirkwall. Off shore to the north of Orkney you can add maybe another hour whilst inshore it would be the same or sooner than Kirkwall.

When approaching Orkney from the east it is desirable to approach on the ebb, especially if the wind is from anywhere in the easterly quadrant likewise when approach from the west the sea conditions can be quite turbulent in the mouths of the various firths and sounds if the wind and tide are against each other especially if swell is also involved. At the springs these areas should be avoided in adverse weather when you have wind over tide bearing in mind that the tide runs in excess of 8 knots at certain places and times.

It would take a great deal of time to explain all the twists and turns of the tides amongst these islands and one would still probably get it wrong as some places are different at neaps as opposed to spring tides,

One fact that is worth bearing in mind especially for slow moving craft is that, if there is a fast flowing tide across or past a headland there is usually a back eddy tide inshore on the lee side which can help you along quite a lot.