

## An Litir Bheag le Ruairidh MacIlleathain

An Litir Bheag is a shortened and simplified version of Ruairidh's Litir do Luchd-ionnsachaidh (also available on the BBC website), designed for those who are at an earlier stage of learning Gaelic. The topic each week is the same as Litir do Luchd-ionnsachaidh so that, once the Litir Bheag is mastered, a student of the language might wish to try the full Litir. This is Litir Bheag 399 (which corresponds to Litir 703). Ruairidh can be contacted at [rodny.maclean@bbc.co.uk](mailto:rodny.maclean@bbc.co.uk).

*Bones were found in a cave in Inchnadamph in Assynt. The animals died a long time ago. Scotland was cold at the time. What animals were they? Well, the list is interesting. The lynx, the reindeer, the wolf, the Arctic fox and the bear. Today, none of those creatures are alive in Scotland.*

*Well, that's not entirely true. Reindeer live in the Cairngorms. But they came from Sweden in the 1950s. They became extinct in Scotland a long time ago.*

*The wolf lived on for a long time, however. Up until the eighteenth century. But, when madadh is in a place name, does it mean a wolf? That's not so clear.*

*Sometimes there is ruadh [red-brown] in the name. For example – Allt a' Mhadaidh-ruaidh near Lairg, Càrn a' Mhadaidh-ruaidh in Strathconon and Sgùrr a' Mhadaidh-ruaidh in Knoydart. In those examples we are certain that it is the fox that is named. But allaidh does not appear on the maps, as far as I'm aware. Neither does lioncs – or lugh, the old Gaelic name for*

*Chaidh cnàmhan a lorg ann an uamh ann an Innis nan Damh ann an Asainte. Bhàsaich na beathaichean o chionn fhada. Bha Alba fuar aig an àm. Dè na beathaichean a bha ann? Uill, tha an liosta inntinneach. An lioncs, am fiadh-sneachda, am madadh-allaidh, am madadh-beag (no madadh Artach) agus am mathan. An-diugh, chan eil gin de na creutairean sin beò ann an Alba.*

*Uill, chan eil sin buileach fìor. Tha fèidh-shneachda beò anns a' Mhonadh Ruadh. Ach thàinig iad bhon t-Suain anns na caogadan dhen linn a dh'fhalbh. Chaidh iad à bith ann an Alba fada air ais.*

*Bha am madadh-allaidh beò fada, ge-tà. Suas chun an ochdamh linn deug. Ach, nuair a tha madadh ann an ainm-àite, a bheil e a' ciallachadh madadh-allaidh? Chan eil sin cho soilleir.*

*Uaireannan tha ruadh anns an ainm. Mar eisimpleir – Allt a' Mhadaidh-ruaidh faisg air an Luirg, Càrn a' Mhadaidh-ruaidh ann an Srath Chonain agus Sgùrr a' Mhadaidh-ruaidh ann an Cnòideart. Anns na h-eisimpleirean sin, tha sinn cinnteach gur e am madadh-ruadh, no sionnach, a tha air ainmeachadh. Ge-tà, chan eil allaidh a' nochdadh air na mapaichean, fhad 's as aithne dhomh. Chan eil no lioncs – no lugh, an seann ainm Gàidhlig airson lioncs.*

lynx.

*That leaves another creature – the bear. I found two place names in which the bear is named in Gaelic, perhaps.*

*One of them is Eilean Math-ghamhna. That's on the shore of Loch Fyne in Argyll. Why is that name on that small island? Its shape, perhaps? Or is there a story about it? I'm afraid I don't know.*

*The other place is Allt Mhathain. That burn flows out of Loch na Bà Brice [‘the loch of the speckled cow’] in Assynt. That's right, Assynt. A few miles away from a cave in which a bear died a long time ago.*

*Is there a link between the two? I don't think so. The bear of the bones died more than twenty thousand years ago. But what bear, if it was a bear, gave its name to the burn?*

Tha sin a' fàgail creutair eile – am mathan no math-ghamhainn. Lorg mi dà ainm-àite anns a bheil am mathan air ainmeachadh ann an Gàidhlig, 's dòcha.

'S e fear dhiubh *Eilean Math-ghamhna*. Tha sin air cladach Loch Fìne ann an Earra-Ghàidheal. Carson a tha an t-ainm sin air an eilean bheag sin? A chumadh, 's dòcha? No a bheil sgeulachd ann mu dheidhinn? Tha eagal orm nach aithne dhomh.

'S e an t-àite eile – *Allt Mhathain*. Tha an t-allt sin a' sruthadh a-mach à Loch na Bà Brice ann an Asainte. Seadh, Asainte. Beagan mhìltean air falbh bho uamh anns an d' fhuair mathan bàs o chionn fhada.

A bheil ceangal ann eadar na dhà? Cha chreid mi gu bheil. Bhàsaich mathan nan cnàmhan còrr is fichead mìle bliadhna air ais. Ach dè am mathan, mas e mathan a bha ann, a thug ainm don allt?