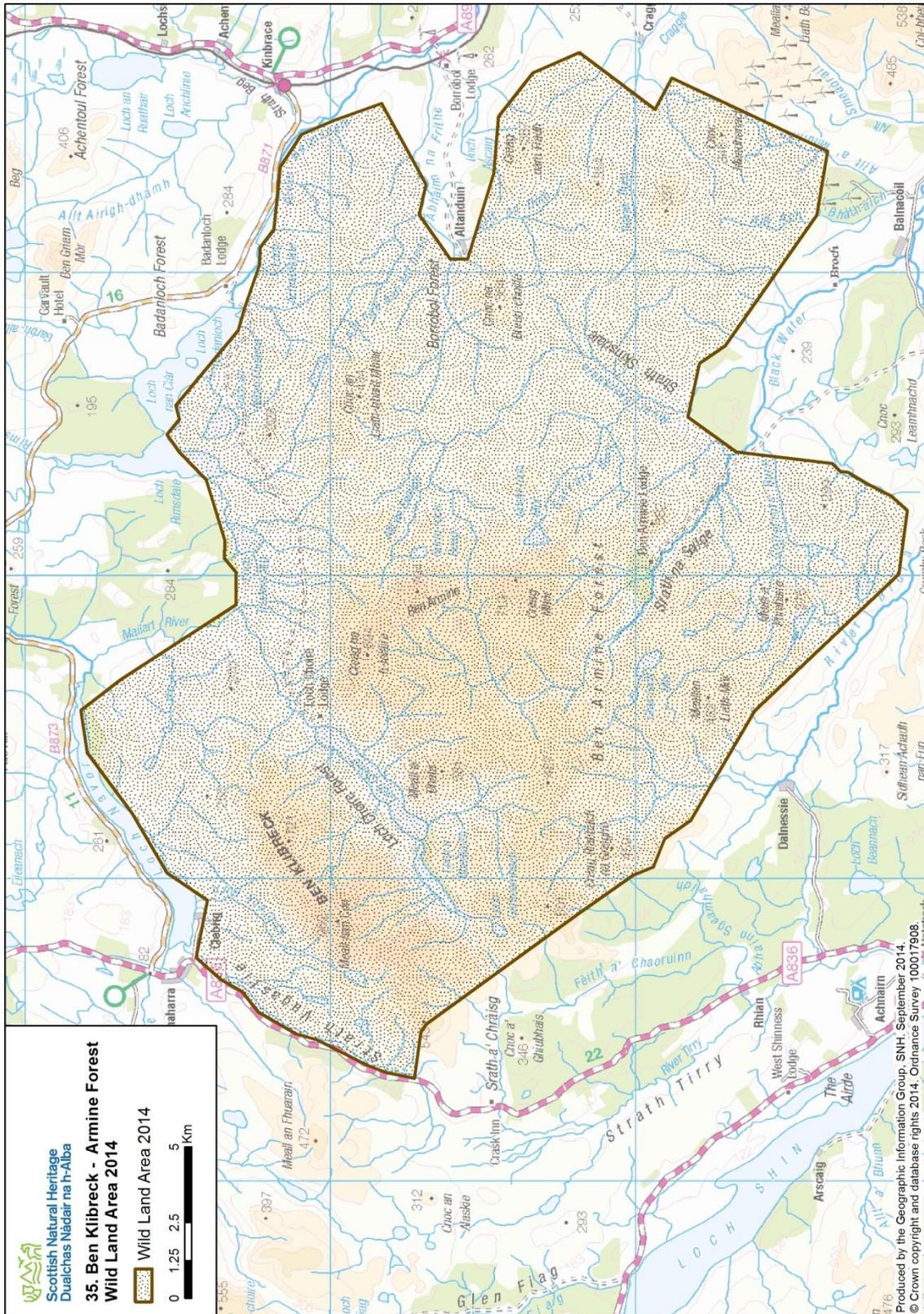


# Ben Klibreck - Armine Forest Wild Land Area



## Context

This large Wild Land Area (WLA) extends 530 km<sup>2</sup> across central Sutherland between the settlements of Lairg, Altnaharra and Kinbrace. In its north west corner Ben Klibreck and the adjacent deep and linear glen of Loch Choire are prominent, although most of the area mainly comprises a series of round-topped hills and plateaux and an extensive area of undulating peatland and lochans whose strikingly simple form reflect the hardness of the underlying Moinian rocks and the effects of glaciation. It is one of a group of three areas distinguished by extensive low lying peatland, in contrast to many of the more mountainous WLAs. It is partly flanked by main (single track) roads to the north east, north and north west, but is otherwise relatively distant from large population centres.

The land is used mainly for deer stalking and fishing and, except for some isolated estate buildings, is uninhabited. Nonetheless the hills and ridges contribute significantly to the visual backcloth of several settlements lying outside the WLA. These include: Lairg and Shinness to the south west; Balnacoil, West Langwell and Knockarthur to the south; Borrobol to the east; and Badanloch to the north east.

The WLA is viewed by many visitors from outside its edge, for example whilst travelling along the A836 between Lairg and Altnaharra, and along Loch Naver and through Badanloch on the B873 and B871. This includes a relatively high number of motorcyclists and cyclists – the latter attracted by the A836 forming part of a national and European cycle route<sup>i</sup>. Within the WLA itself, Ben Klibreck attracts a high number of hillwalkers, partly due to its Munro status and landmark qualities, whilst others penetrate further into the interior, such as to Loch Choire and the Grahams of Ben Armine and Creag Mhòr. The interior is also visited by those partaking in deer stalking and fishing.

The Ben Klibreck and Loch Choire Special Landscape Area (SLA) is located within the WLA, recognising its scenic value. The description for the SLA<sup>ii</sup> highlights the distinctiveness of the mountains and the glen of Loch Choire, together with extensive views available from the hill summits.

The edge of the WLA varies in its character, being marked sharply by the presence of Ben Klibreck and Ben Armine in the north, and a ridge of hills on the western side running between Meall Meadhonach and Meall a' Chaise. However, its south and eastern margins are less clearly defined, with a gradual transition between the area and an increasing prevalence and influence of human elements, such as forest blocks, wind farms and telecom masts.

Given the openness of the landscape surrounding this WLA, there are a number of distant mountain ranges visible from the area that lie within other WLAs, such as the peaks of Ben Loyal and Ben Hope (WLA 35), Morven (WLA 37) and Ben More Assynt (WLA 32). However, this area has a closer relationship with the Foinaven – Ben Hee WLA (33), whose peatland and hills extend from the opposite side of Strath Vagastie and the A836. This means, where human elements within the intervening strath are screened by the landform, this WLA can seem to extend uninterrupted to the north west and towards Ben Hee.

## Key attributes and qualities of the wild land area

- **An awe-inspiring simplicity of landform and landcover and a perception of ‘emptiness’, so that the extent of the peatland often seems greater than it is**

This WLA comprises peatland and hills that, at a broad level, seem very simple in both their form and ground cover. Given these extend over a large area, there is an impression of extreme simplicity and openness which results in a strong *sense of awe*, as well as a perception of ‘emptiness’ and *solitude* across the interior.



The openness of the landscape means it is very exposed. Views of dynamic weather conditions unobstructed by human elements emphasise the *naturalness* of the landscape, while also increasing the perceived *sense of risk*.

The simplicity of the peatland landcover and landform means it is difficult to perceive scale and distance, so that the wild land qualities often appear more *extensive* than warranted by the actual size of the area.

There are few dominant foci within the area, apart from the isolated mountains and occasional lodges and forest blocks (discussed below). This means that attention tends to alternate between the skyline and foreground details, for example the vegetation, peat hags and bogs that contribute to the *perceived naturalness* of the area.



- **Arresting, isolated mountains rise up in stark contrast to surrounding peatland and glens, amplifying the awe-inspiring qualities of each**

Ben Klibreck forms a dominant focal feature within this WLA in addition to a distinctive arc of hills that extends around the south side of Loch Choire to Ben Armine and Creag Mhòr. The steepness, elevation and prominence of these hills appears amplified in contrast to the lower-lying and horizontal reference provided by surrounding peatland, lochs and the glen of Loch Choire, resulting in a strong *sense of awe*. While these hills seem fairly regular in shape at a broad scale, some have steep crags on one side that are *arresting* and create ‘hidden’ edges and glens that harbour a strong *sense of sanctuary*.



The high elevation and openness of the hills means that their peaks are extremely exposed, as well as these offering panoramic views of the surrounding landscape. This exposure increases the *sense of risk* upon the hill tops.

Elevated views from the tops reveal *human artefacts* and *contemporary land use* within surrounding glens and around the edge of the WLA. These are particularly prominent where these contrast in colour, form or line to the peatland or hill backcloth.

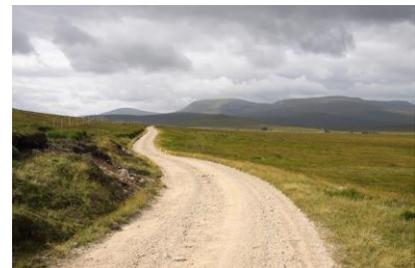
In addition to the isolated mountains and hills, the *arresting* wild land qualities of the area are influenced by views to other hills outside the WLA, facilitated by the openness of the surrounding peatland. These include Morven (WLA 36) and the Bens Griam to the north east, Bens Hope and Loyal (WLA 36) to the north, Ben Hee (WLA 37) to the north west and Ben More Assynt to the west (WLA 34).



- **A remote interior where access involves long distances and lengthy time via penetrating glens or crossing over and around rugged landforms and waterbodies**

The WLA interior possesses a strong *sense of remoteness*, related to its large extent over which access requires lengthy time and is *physically challenging*. Within interior areas, most access is limited to stalkers' paths or walking off-path and involves traversing a very *rugged* landform of peat hags, pools and burns. This contributes to relatively few people accessing the interior and a strong *sense of sanctuary, solitude* and *risk*.

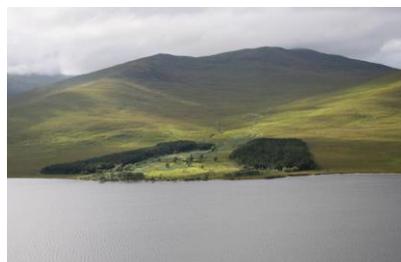
There are a few long, penetrating glens through the interior along which access routes pass. Most of these routes are old and fairly discrete, for example over the Bealach Easach and along Loch a' Bhealaich and Loch Choire. There are some, however, that are higher grade in construction, such as between Badanloch and Loch Choire House, and between Sciberscross and Ben Armine Lodge. Although these private tracks still seem *remote* and possess qualities of *sanctuary* due to being no-through routes and requiring long distances and times to travel along them from the nearest public roads, they nonetheless diminish the wild land qualities. This is partly because they are obvious *human artefacts*, but also due to the associated activity (including lights at night) and noise of vehicles. Some also have cumulative effects with adjacent human elements such as fences and woodland plantations.



- **An extensive area of peatland with a prevailing strong sense of naturalness**

A prevailing *sense of naturalness* occurs across the peatland, primarily because of its very large extent of rough vegetation and the seemingly random landform undulations and pattern of pools, lochs and peat hags. Within the interior, there tends to be infrequent activity and a corresponding strong sense of tranquillity, *sanctuary* and *solitude*.

Associated with past and present land management, there are a number of estate buildings and historic structures within the area. These are obvious *human artefacts*, but tend to appear isolated and low-key in siting and character, with localised effects. Conversely, a number of forest plantations appear more obvious as *contemporary land use* and are of greater extent and prominence, particularly when seen from elevated viewpoints. There are also some extensive fenced enclosures around native woodlands and, although the trees within these contribute to perceived *naturalness*, this is diminished by the fences which indicate human intervention in grazing regimes as well as being a *human artefact*.



- **A secluded, elevated and remote interior plateau shielded by an outer rim of hills, in which there is a strong sense of solitude, sanctuary and risk**

Within the interior lies an elevated plateau of rolling peatland slopes. The outer lip of this is formed by hills and ridges that shield the area from its wider surroundings; yet it is large enough in itself to seem exposed and extensive. The plateau is simple at a broad level with few landmarks, whilst it includes undulations at a local level whose screening and lack of regular pattern means you can ‘lose yourself’ within the area. This results in a strong *perception of solitude, sanctuary and risk*.



There are few *human artefacts* and little *evidence of contemporary land use* within the interior plateau, contributing to its *sense of remoteness* and *sanctuary*. Furthermore, because of the screening effect of the outer lip of the plateau, views of distant human elements are limited.



In contrast, from the tops of the hills and ridges that make up the outer lip of the plateau, outward views include numerous *human artefacts and evidence of contemporary land use* extending across the lower-lying ground outside the WLA; for example, forest plantations, wind farms, tracks, roads and houses.

Whilst these elements can be clearly seen from the margins of the WLA, they do not greatly impose upon the wild land qualities if sufficiently distant, low-lying and discrete in siting and character. Conversely, human elements appear more encroaching upon the WLA where they are close, large in size or extent, are located upon elevated ground, or where there are cumulative effects; whilst their prominence is also increased where they contrast in colour, line or form to the backdrop.

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#### Endnotes and select references

<sup>i</sup> Forming part of three distinct long distance routes: The Sustrans National Route 1 (Dover – Shetland Isles); The North Sea Cycle Route (6000km route between Bergen and the Shetland Isles that passes through Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and the UK); and the EuroVelo 12.

<sup>ii</sup> The Highland Council (2011) *Assessment of Highland Special Landscape Areas*. Inverness, The Highland Council.

**Site assessment carried out August and September 2013**