

Context

This is the most southerly of only three WLAs to the south of the Highland Boundary Fault, all of which are relatively isolated and small in extent (Merrick is 82 km²). It includes the central part of Forestry Commission Scotland's (FCS) Galloway Forest Park, and consists of a range of steep hills, including Merrick (a Corbett) which at 843 metres is the highest mainland hill in the south of Scotland. Together with several other hills over 600 metres in height, it forms a ridge with spurs between the tops of Shalloch on Minnoch (another Corbett) and Benyellary, collectively known as 'The Awful Hand'. To the east of this, the rocky Dungeon Hills form a slightly lower ridge to the south of the more rounded hill of Mullwharchar. The hills are predominantly open, rolling moorland, but contain some exposed and craggy peaks.

These ridges enclose a central swathe of lower-lying, undulating ground containing several natural lochs, forming a corridor that rises over 400 m from Loch Trool to Loch Enoch and providing some rugged and sometimes boggy walking. The entire WLA lies within FCS ownership and is surrounded on all sides by extensive forest plantations, predominantly of Sitka spruce.

The WLA is within 2 hours of the Central Belt. It is located 14 km to the north of Newton Stewart and the nearest major road is the A714, which lies 7.5 km to the south-west of the area at its closest point. A network of minor roads as well as un-surfaced roads, promoted as 'forest drives', provide vehicle access to the Forest Park from the south, west and north and there are several designated car parks located around the periphery, the closest of which is less than 2 km from the WLA. The Forest Park contains three visitor centres, attracting 150,000 visitors annually who generally experience the WLA as a rugged moorland backdrop, glimpsed mainly amongst trees and forestry as they move around the Forest Park.ⁱ FCS has published a leaflet showing walkers trails, but the paths shown do not penetrate the WLA, whilst the Southern Upland Way skirts its southern edge.ⁱⁱ

The WLA lies within the Galloway Dark Sky Park, the first area in the UK to be so recognised by the International Dark Sky Association and also forms part of the Galloway Hills Regional Scenic Area (RSA), designated by Dumfries and Galloway Council.

The WLA also lies within the Merrick Kells Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Silver Flowe-Merrick Kells Biosphere Reserve. Silver Flowe, an extensive blanket bog lying below the Dungeon Hills, is one of the least interrupted undisturbed mire systems in Europe and is also designated as a Ramsar site. Merrick Kells is the largest remaining un-afforested area of upland in Galloway and contains three habitats of European interest: blanket bog, montane acid grasslands and wet heath.ⁱⁱⁱ Aspirations for the Biosphere Reserve include enhancing the priority habitats of native woodland and peatlands, whilst FCS is committed to creating a more gradual transition between forestry and open moorland by the introduction of moorland fringe habitat.

From the tops, the *extent* of the WLA is generally evident by the transition from moorland to the surrounding forest plantations. Hills to the north and east beyond the WLA have a rugged character and, despite the intervening forestry, the *extent* is less well defined in this direction. From the central swathe of lower-lying moorland and lochs, outward views are restricted by the adjacent hills and the limits of the WLA are much less obvious.

Key attributes and qualities of the wild land area

- **A relatively small wild land area but with a strong perception of naturalness, few human artefacts and little contemporary land use**

There is a strong *sense of naturalness* across much of this WLA, especially within the interior, where the influence of the surrounding forest plantations is smaller. The uplands contain extensive tracts of grass and heather moorland with areas of exposed rock and montane vegetation evident on the tops. Lower areas are generally poorly drained, with clumps of distinctive white moor grass and large areas of blanket bog, including Silver Flowe. The contrast between the rocky uplands and the horizontal expanse of the lower-lying areas highlights the *naturalness* and *awe-inspiring* qualities of these hills.



Most watercourses and lochs appear to be very natural in character, forming an intricate pattern of vegetation and open water that emphasises the *sense of sanctuary and solitude* provided by the lower-lying areas.

There are few signs of *human artefacts* or *contemporary land use* within the WLA, which is uninhabited, with no roads and very few tracks. Some stone dykes cross the area, but there is a noticeable absence of internal fence lines. A few bothies, marked on the FCS Walkers Trails leaflet, are located around the margins, but these impose less on the wild land qualities due to their small scale in relation to that of the open landscape.

Several isolated conifer blocks, typically located close to access tracks provide the most obvious human elements, contrasting with the *sense of naturalness* and diminishing the *arresting* qualities of the backdrop of rugged hills. There is some grazing by sheep but this is mostly on the fringes of the WLA and is not intensive. Deer and wild goats are free to roam throughout, although no stalking activity is evident.



A wild land area that contrasts with the adjacent Forest Park, especially in terms of human activity

There is a noticeable difference in terms of human activity between the WLA and the surrounding parts of the Forest Park. Whereas the Forest Park is popular as a recreational destination and contains numerous visitor facilities, the WLA is much more lightly used, with little obvious recreational provision, providing a relatively strong *sense of remoteness and solitude*.

Looking towards the WLA, the open moorland contrasts noticeably with the forest plantations that surround the WLA, so highlighting the *inspiring* qualities of the *rugged* mountain backdrop when experienced from the surrounding Forest Park.



The high level of recreational use within the Forest Park is generally screened from within the WLA and consequently has less effect on the *sense of remoteness, sanctuary and solitude*. There are very few obvious paths within the WLA, but the main path to the Merrick from the south is well-used and the scar that has resulted has a localised impact on the *sense of naturalness and sanctuary*.



Human elements are widely visible from the tops and outermost slopes but lower-lying areas have a much stronger sense of remoteness

The surrounding large-scale forest plantations of mostly Sitka spruce are widely visible from the tops and from outward-facing slopes, providing evidence of *contemporary land use*. The dark green of the conifers contrasts with the light coloured moorland hills, highlighting the limits of the WLA.

Recent felling coupes are visible, revealing extraction tracks that add to the perception of activity in this landscape, further reducing the *sense of remoteness and sanctuary*, whilst the non-native tree species also diminish the *sense of naturalness*.



Operational wind farms can also be seen from the Merrick and other tops. Although most of these are too distant to impose noticeably upon the wild land qualities, they appear as obvious *human artefacts* and some to the west are sufficiently close or extensive to be clearly visible, so reducing the *sense of sanctuary*. Other than the radio mast on Bennan, which lies just beyond the WLA to the south, there are very few other *human artefacts* evident.

There is little visibility of *human artefacts* or *contemporary land use* from the central swathe of lower-lying moorland and lochs, which consequently has a strong *sense of remoteness and sanctuary*. The surrounding hills enclose these areas, so obscuring the limited *extent* of the WLA, which is more evident from the adjacent higher areas.



A rugged landscape that provides a surprisingly high degree of physical challenge

These hills are very *rugged* and *awe inspiring* with steep slopes, areas of exposed rock and some crags, more akin to a Highland landscape, but within a lowland context. The limited number of access tracks or formal footpaths and the *physical challenge* required to reach parts of the interior results in a strong *sense of remoteness and sanctuary*.



Photo © John Biggar

There are steep climbs and big drops along the 'Awful Hand', especially around Kirrieroch and the Merrick and it is some 4 km walk to either Shalloch on Minnoch or Benyellary from any public road, so providing a relatively high *degree of physical challenge* and *sense of remoteness*. The Dungeon Hills are very rocky, providing more challenging opportunities for climbing and scrambling. Elevated and exposed, both ridges offer little shelter, so heightening the *sense of risk*.

Although comparatively sheltered, the lower-lying areas between and around the main ridges are mostly rough and poorly drained, with lochans, river crossings, tussocky moor grass, boulders and few paths, making these surprisingly challenging to cross on foot.

Silver Flowe is an extensive raised bog, dissected by open water channels with numerous deep pools that is time consuming and potentially hazardous to cross, increasing the *sense of risk*. Areas such as Silver Flowe are accessed by long forest tracks that are closed to vehicles. This has the effect of increasing the time taken to reach some parts of the interior, so enhancing the *sense of remoteness*.



Endnotes

ⁱ Taken from www.gallowayforestpark.com accessed December 2014

ⁱⁱ Forestry Commission Scotland (2008) Galloway Forest Park Walkers Trails

ⁱⁱⁱ Taken from www.unesco.org/mabdb/br/brdir/directory/biores.asp?mode=gen&code=UKM+10 accessed February 2015

Site assessment carried out May 2013 and May 2014