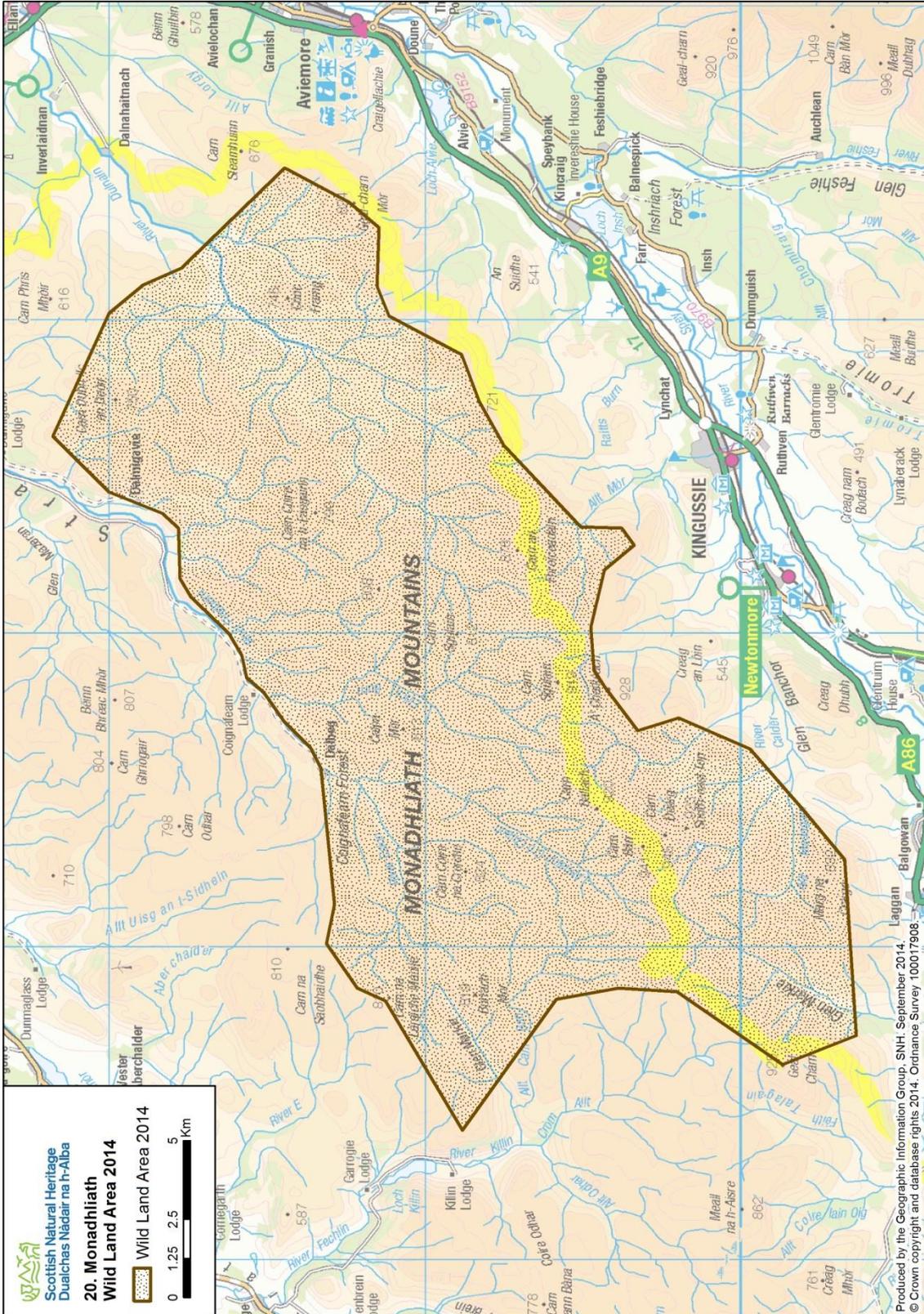


Monadhliath Wild Land Area



Context

This WLA extends 340 km² across south Inverness-shire and Badenoch and Strathspey. Flanked to the south east by a major road that provides a link to the south and north, otherwise only its northern and western tips are accessible via minor single track roads. To the west open moorland and the Corrieyairack Pass separate it from the Braeroy – Glenshirra – Creag Meagaidh WLA (19)

The Monadhliath comprises a long range of large rolling moorland hills and plateaux, most of which rise above 600m AOD. The hills appear stunning in their simplicity, openness and immense scale, offering from their tops elevated views across a succession of sweeping landform horizons that often seem to continue infinitely in every direction. A network of estate tracks penetrate the area from its edges and enable access, with a several nearby Strathspey settlements popular with visitors.

The area is influenced strongly by its geology, with the Great Glen lying to the north west, and the wide glaciated corridor of Strathspey to the south east. Lying in-between the massive rounded hills and plateaux are formed of hard, intrusive igneous and metamorphic rocksⁱ which were eroded during glaciation and later fluvial activity, including the carving of a series of deep penetrating glens. It is one of only a few inland mountain areas within Scotland whose extent is unbroken by large lochs, and has been described the area as *“rather like the back of a hand, with several long fingers running on from a great central plateau”*ⁱⁱ.

The WLA is largely uninhabited, although it contains some isolated bothies and land is managed by estates for deer and game shooting and for fishing, with a few areas of stock grazing and forestry around the margins. With four Munros and two Corbetts the area is popular for hillwalkers and skiers, as well as mountain biking and bird-watching.

The linear shape of the WLA means it is more extensive in a south west – north east direction; but this is difficult to appreciate from the area’s interior because the surrounding glens and straths that create the area’s edges are screened by the convex landform. In reverse, when looking into the area from outside, the outward-facing slopes form a fairly simple visual backdrop, with the interior tops beyond hidden.

The landscape and scenic qualities of the WLA are recognised by the inclusion of its southern fringe within the Cairngorms National Parkⁱⁱⁱ and its south western part within the Ben Alder, Laggan and Glen Banchor Special Landscape Area^{iv}.

The WLA lies near other areas of wild land and, from the elevated interior from where surrounding glens are screened, it often appears to extend uninterrupted into these. This relationship is particularly strong with the Braeroy, Glenshirra and Creag Meagaidh WLA (19) and the Rannoch, Nevis, Mamores and Alder WLA (14) to the south west and the Cairngorms WLA (15) to the south east. The higher peaks within these surrounding areas can often be seen above and beyond the convex landform horizons of the Monadhliath tops, contributing directly to the awe-inspiring qualities of the area. At a more local level, the WLA margins are more clearly marked on the south east side by the features of Strathspey and Badenoch, whilst the edge is less clear on the northern side due to a more gradual transition onto the elevated ground around Stratherrick and Strathdearn.

Key attributes and qualities of the wild land area

- **A range of massive rounded hills and plateaux that are awe-inspiring in their simplicity, openness and immense scale, and offer panoramic views to distant mountain ranges**

This WLA comprises an extensive range of high, rounded hills and plateaux, whose massive scale, simplicity and openness appears *awe-inspiring*. The hills and plateaux tend to be of similar elevation, with none appearing as a dominant focus, so they seem at a broad level to form a single collective group with a fairly horizontal platform top.

It is difficult to appreciate the actual dimensions of the hills, due to the simplicity of the landform and vegetation and a lack of size indicators; but this can be clearer to discern where local features occur that provide a scale reference, such as rivers and waterfalls. In addition, the altitude of the hills is often emphasised by snow upon the tops.

There is a disparity of scale and exposure between the massive hills and plateaux with some intricate deep-cut glens and rivers that penetrate these, accentuating the *arresting* qualities of each. Furthermore, the rolling nature of the landform is emphasised where, in contrast, occasional vertical or horizontal features occur, such as cliffs, corries, gullies and lochans.

The convexity of the landform limits visibility and there is a strong contrast of experience between the hills or plateaux and the straths or glens below.

From the tops, where the adjacent straths and glens are screened by the landform, there is a strong sense of *remoteness* and views pass over an *arresting* succession of sweeping, elevated hill horizons that seem to extend far into the distance with no obvious interruption or limits. These views include mountains and ridges within other wild land areas such as the Cairngorms WLA (15) to the south east and the Braeroy, Glenshirra and Creag Meagaidh WLA (19) and Rannoch, Nevis, Mamores and Alder WLA (14) to the south west.

In contrast, from the glens and straths, there are striking views of the adjacent hill slopes that tower above and appear *arresting*, but it is not usually possible to see beyond these into the far hills and plateaux. Passing between the strath or glen floors and the tops, there is a striking contrast of experience, with ascent or descent of very steep and *physically challenging* side slopes from which views are limited, to the wide open and elevated exposure of the rolling tops.

- **An extensive, simple interior with few human artefacts, contributing to a perceived 'emptiness' and a strong sense of naturalness, remoteness and sanctuary**

The simplicity of the landform and vegetation across the hill and plateaux interior, combined with a lack of dominant foci, conveys a sense of 'emptiness'. This simplicity, and the vast extent over which it occurs, appears *awe-inspiring*, and means it is very difficult to navigate within the landscape or perceive size or distances, increasing the *sense of risk*.



Furthermore, these qualities are heightened within the interior where there is an absence of access tracks, as movement over the area tends to be extremely indirect, with a need to weave around and over localised hags, bogs and rough vegetation which are difficult to spot far ahead. These features not only contribute to the local *ruggedness* of the ground, but the increased distance of indirect movement can amplify the *sense of remoteness*.

There is a *sense of naturalness* across much of the interior of this WLA. This is due partly to the prominence of landform and geological features, such as corries and rock outcrops; but it is also influenced by features that highlight the dynamic nature of the landscape, such as scree, glacial and fluvial deposits, landslips, deep gorges, rivers and waterfalls. The weather also contributes to this attribute, being ever-changing and having heightened importance within this WLA due to high 'exposure to the elements' and a prevalent lack of shelter, which also increases the *sense of risk*. Within some areas, riparian trees and native woodland also contribute to the *sense of naturalness*; whilst, in contrast, this attribute is diminished in other places where there is clear evidence of human intervention, for example as a result of muirburn or fences (highlighted by a strong difference of vegetation despite similar ground conditions).



Across most of the interior hills and plateaux, there are few *human artefacts or evidence of contemporary land use*, reinforcing the sense of *remoteness* and contributing to a strong *sense of sanctuary*. Nonetheless, human elements such as estate tracks, muirburn and shooting butts exist within some parts of the WLA, for example around the margins of the area and within some of the glens penetrating in from these. These elements diminish the wild land qualities individually and cumulatively and are particularly prominent where seen against the simple landform and vegetation cover if contrasting in line, colour or pattern. Additionally, access tracks tend to be most imposing where they cross steep slopes, extend over long distances and/or where numerous tracks have cumulative effects, particularly where these include cuttings, embankments and/or large ditches and there are associated borrow pits.

- **A hill range in which many types of recreation take place, but its large, remote interior maintains a sense of sanctuary, challenge and risk**

A combination of *rugged* landforms and elevated tops with a wide range of access points and tracks or paths entering the area, encourages various types of outdoor recreation, such as shooting, fishing, hillwalking, ski-mountaineering, and mountain-biking. Many of these take place around the margins of the WLA (both within and outside the boundary) and upon the many Munros and Corbetts; recreational activity also tends to be most popular upon the south eastern side of the Monadhliath, particularly north of Glen Banchor.

Although there is a relatively large number of access tracks penetrating the area from its edges, none cross the WLA (although The Burma Road^v cuts across the far north eastern corner). This means that, away from the main recreation foci and tracks, there is an extensive interior area which is visited by few people and in which there is little activity, resulting in a strong *sense of sanctuary* and *solitude*.



The openness of the landscape means there tends to be few obstructions to walking off-path across the interior hill slopes. Nonetheless, this kind of walking is *physically challenging* and takes a long time due to the burns, bogs and peat hags that have to be negotiated, increasing the *sense of risk*.

- **Long, narrow glens cutting into the hill and plateau edges which are remote, but facilitate access**

The hills and plateaux are penetrated by a large number of narrow and steep-sided glens, some of which lead ultimately to deep corries. Many of the glens include paths or tracks which facilitate access; but their very long lengths mean that they can still maintain strong qualities of *remoteness*.

From the glen floors, the surrounding slopes screen views onto the hill tops and plateaux above, so the wider *extent* of the WLA is not apparent; but these side slopes also create shelter and can contribute to a strong *sense of sanctuary*.

Historic features occur within some of the *remote* glens within the area, for example shielings and bothies. These may create prominent foci as *human artefacts*, but tend to have localised effects where appearing isolated and low-key in siting and design.

Many of the glen and strath floors just outside the WLA contain *human artefacts* or *evidence of contemporary land use* such as estate settlements, forest plantation blocks and access tracks or roads. These are prominent from the slopes around the edges of the WLA, although their effects on the wild land qualities tend to be limited where they appear small in scale, and contained within the glen floor. In contrast, the effects of human elements tend to be more imposing upon the WLA where these are large or extensive in scale, or are seen to extend up onto the elevated hill and plateau slopes.



Endnotes and select references

ⁱ Scottish Natural Heritage (2006) *Cairngorms – A landscape fashioned by geology*. Redgorton, Scottish Natural Heritage.

ⁱⁱ Cameron McNeish (2002) *The Munros*. Lomond Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ Information available at: <http://cairngorms.co.uk/landscape-toolkit/special-landscape-qualities> and http://www.snh.org.uk/pdfs/publications/commissioned_reports/375.pdf

^{iv} The Highland Council (2011) *Assessment of Highland Special Landscape Areas*. Inverness, The Highland Council.

^v Information available at:

http://www.mtbtrails.info/Trail_Venue_Map_TrailViewer.aspx?VenueNumber=29&TrailNumber=40&Unique=635749972391851622

Site assessment carried out May and June 2013, March and May 2014 and July and August 2015