

Rhiddoroch – Beinn Dearg – Ben Wyvis Wild Land Area



Context

This WLA is one of the most extensive nationally, extending 905 km² across the north west of Ross-shire and south Sutherland, one of a cluster of seven in the north west of Scotland. It comprises a long oval-shaped area extending between Ullapool in the north west to the mountain of Ben Wyvis in the south east. Main roads flank it to the west and south, the latter to nearby Inverness and population centres of Easter Ross, and separating it from the similarly extensive Fisherfield – Letterewe – Fannichs WLA (28) to the south west, .

From the north and east, cnochan and open peatland hills extend into a complex composition of high and steep mountains within the central section, and then into simpler rounded hills and plateaux in the south. These landforms mainly comprise hard metamorphic Moine schists, which were later eroded during glaciation and then fluvial activity, including the carving of a series of deep penetrating glens.

The area is used mainly for deer stalking, fishing and hydro-electric generation and is largely uninhabited, although there are some isolated estate buildings and stock grazing within some of the glens, as well as forestry activity within a number of large conifer plantations outside the edge. The WLA is enjoyed by many people who view it from outside its edge, for example along the A835 in the south and west, the A837 in the north, and across the Black Isle. Where seen from outside the area, the outward slopes form a fairly simple visual backdrop, but the interior mountains and plateaux are less easy to see due to screening by the intervening landform.

Within the WLA itself, seven Munros and five Corbetts attract hillwalkers, with Ben Wyvis being particularly popularⁱ. Some people also penetrate far into the interior via a number of tracks and paths to enjoy activities such as mountain biking, stalking, walking or fishing.

The landscape and scenic qualities of the WLA are recognised by the inclusion of its central part within the Fannichs, Beinn Dearg and Glencalvie Special Landscape Area (SLA) and its southern end within the Ben Wyvis SLA. The descriptionsⁱⁱ for these areas note '*...a powerful sense of isolation and wildness amidst physically challenging terrain...*' and a '*...series of quiet, uninhabited glens ... where solitude and isolation are key characteristics*'.

The WLA lies adjacent to other WLAs and, where intervening human elements are screened, it appears to extend uninterrupted into these. This relationship with adjacent mountain and peatland areas is particularly close with the Fisherfield – Letterewe - Fannichs WLA (28) to the west and the Inverpolly – Glencanisp WLA (32) to the north west. In contrast, extensive conifer plantations and settlement forms an arc around from the north to the east and south, creating a more defined edge in these directions. There are also some distant views to the open sea to the north west.

Key attributes and qualities of the wild land area

- **A range of awe-inspiring massive, high rounded hills and plateaux, as well as steep rocky peaks and ridges, offering elevated panoramas**

This WLA contains a stunning variety of mountains, comprising both massive and rounded landforms, as well as rockier peaks and ridges. All the hills are high, open, and *physically challenging* to ascend or traverse, with a resulting perception of *risk* and exposure. The large size of the WLA and the need for lengthy *access* to reach some parts of the interior, also mean that many of the hills are very *remote*. Away from the more popular Munro and Corbett peaks, there are few visitors and thus a strong sense of *sanctuary and solitude*.

The simple form and massive scale of the rounded hills and plateaux appears *awe-inspiring*. Their convex slopes can be very steep and *physically challenging* to ascend but, once climbed, offer wide open gentle slopes and plateau tops that offer a feeling of being ‘on top of the world’, with panoramic views in all directions.



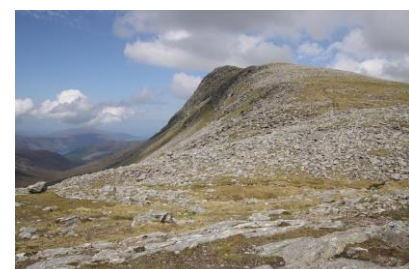
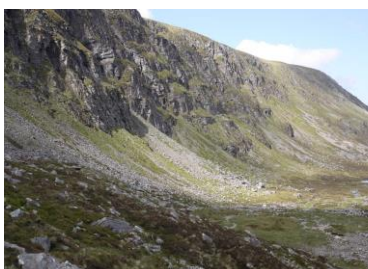
The rounded hill and plateau tops are mostly covered by a short mat of vegetation and/or exposed rock which emphasises the underlying shape of the landform and promotes open movement. As a result, there are few worn paths (except on Ben Wyvis) as evidence of human activity and thus a greater *sense of solitude*.

The convex landform makes it difficult to see the hill and plateau tops from below; but, equally, adjacent glens or low-lying areas are mostly hidden from the tops. This results in the screening of *human artefacts and contemporary land use* within adjacent low-lying areas, reducing the effects of these and increasing the *sense of remoteness*. It also means that the eye tends to be drawn from one top to the other, so there is less appreciation of the vertical dimension of the landform and a stronger emphasis of the horizontal, albeit elevated, aspect. Views of a series of retreating rolling horizons also appear *awe-inspiring* in their vast scale, openness and ‘wide skies’.

The simplicity of the rounded hills and plateaux often make it difficult to distinguish between individual tops and hard to orientate and estimate scale, increasing the sense of *risk*. Nonetheless, there are some cliffs and corries carved into the hill sides that aid navigation locally as well as appearing *arresting* as distinct features.



The WLA also contains some *rugged*, angular and rocky hills that are more variable individually. These are massive in scale too, but tend to have steeper peaks that appear very imposing from below, contributing to a *sense of awe*.



The crags, cliffs, corries, lochans and waterfalls within these hills seem jumbled together in a chaotic way which, combined with a predominance of exposed rock and geological features, give the landscape an ‘elemental’ quality that contributes to the perception of *naturalness*.

- **Long and deep penetrating glens with steep, arresting side slopes that limit views, some containing access routes and clearly influenced by estate management**

Several deep glens cut through the hills, creating semi-enclosed corridors within the wider, open and larger scale landform. Most of these glens have very steep sides which seem *arresting* and imposing from below, for example Gleann Mòr and Gleann Beag. These towering slopes can seem almost impenetrable, which contributes to a strong *sense of sanctuary*, especially within the more remote upper glens.



The exposed rock, cliffs and scree on the steepest glen slopes, as well as dynamic rivers and waterfalls, contribute to the *sense of naturalness*. Within some glens, this attribute can be diminished, however, with river engineering and hydro-electric structures.



The glens contain the majority of access routes within the WLA. Some are through-routes, which tend to result in a lower *sense of sanctuary*, as there is through traffic and their grade does not typically reduce with increased *remoteness*.

Estate activity and management within the WLA is focused within the glens and some contain a range of *human artefacts and evidence of contemporary land use* such as tracks, fences and isolated buildings. The activity of people and vehicles is also apparent through some glens, although typically intermittent, as well as evidence of management practises such as muirburn. Where isolated, small in scale, and low-key in siting and character, these elements tend to have localised effects; but where more extensive or numerous and resulting in cumulative effects, they may diminish the *sense of remoteness* and *sanctuary*. The extent of effects is also limited where elements appear contained within the glen floors, but appear more imposing where extending up side slopes and onto surrounding hills, and they are more prominent when of contrasting colour or form.



- **A very large interior with a strong sense of remoteness and sanctuary that seems even more extensive where appearing to continue into neighbouring wild land areas**

The interior of this WLA is very large and, from its elevated ground, there are open views across a series of landform horizons that seem to continue far into the distance, influencing its perceived *extent* as well as the sense of *remoteness*. This is influenced by views extending into neighbouring hill areas, where intervening human elements just outside the WLA cannot be seen, including to the Fisherfield – Letterewe – Fannichs WLA (28) to the west, the Inverpolly – Glencanisp WLA (30) to the north west and the Reay – Cassley WLA (32) to the north east.

In contrast, from the WLA margins (including the outer ‘lobes’ of the area in the south east), extensive areas of *human elements and contemporary land use* can be seen around the

outside edge of the WLA in all directions except to the north west, including main roads, hydro-electric development and conifer plantations. These elements indicate the edge of the area, but their effects on wild land qualities within the WLA itself are limited where they appear concentrated within neighbouring low-lying strath floors.

Conversely, elements that extend up onto elevated slopes or tops are more prominent and can appear to encroach more directly upon the experience of the WLA where intervening development within the straths is screened. This may be the case even if the elements themselves lie outside the WLA; for example wind farms, masts, conifer plantations and fences. If cumulative effects occur, these may also appear more encroaching, especially if they seem to collectively encircle part of the wild land area.



- **Rocky hills, cnocan and peatland slopes that appear simple and awe-inspiring at a broad scale, but harbour intricate features at a local level, as well as a strong sense of sanctuary and solitude**

There are extensive areas of rocky hills, cnocan and peatland across parts of this WLA. These do not possess the massive form, vertical imposition or focal qualities of the mountains, but they are *awe-inspiring* in their openness and simplicity at a broad level, as well as their perceived ‘emptiness’, *sanctuary* and *solitude* within the interior due to few *human artefacts* or visitors. The variable landform at a local level also contains rivers and waterfalls and harbours some native woodland, which all contribute to the *sense of naturalness*.



The irregular landform at a local level also means these areas are *physically challenging* to access. Within the cnocan, this is mainly because of the very rugged and convoluted slopes with rock outcrops; whilst it is peat hags and bogs that prove more difficult to traverse upon the simpler peatland. Throughout, the *sense of remoteness* and *risk* is amplified by the consistent land cover which makes it more difficult to navigate, apart from where landmark mountains can be seen rising up above the distant horizon.



It is also difficult to perceive distance within most of the interior, where there is an *absence of human artefacts* to provide scale indicators. This means that these areas often appear more *extensive* than their actual dimensions.

Endnotes and select references

ⁱ Over 4000 visitors to the NNR each year quoted within: SNH. The Story of Ben Wyvis National Nature Reserve. Available at www.snh.org.uk/pdfs/publications/nnr/The_Story_of_Ben_Wyvis_National_Nature_Reserve.pdf

ⁱⁱ The Highland Council. 2011. *Assessment of Highland Special Landscape Areas*. Inverness, The Highland Council.

Site assessment carried out May and June 2014