

Beinn Eighe

National Nature Reserve



Mountain Trail



NatureScot

Scotland's Nature Agency
Buidheann Nàdair na h-Alba



Scotland's
National Nature
Reserves



Touching the wild

Mountain. Even in mist, you know it's there. The force of burn water rushing downhill, over rocks of many kinds, hints at height and power. A glimpse of a crag, seen when clouds shift, then screened again, confirms it.

A mountain with many arms, many peaks, is at the core of this place. Beinn Eighe (File Mountain) is one of those. So are Ruadh-stac Mor (the Greater Steep Red Hill), Sail Mhor (the Great Heel) and Sgurr Ban (the White Peak). The walk you make on the mountain trail can only hint at the hugeness of the wider Beinn Eighe uplands. But it will allow you to enjoy a taste of those wilds, within a circuit that can challenge but not overstretch you.

Beinn Eighe is Britain's oldest National Nature Reserve. It was established in 1951 in recognition of its huge importance for wildlife, scenery and geology. By taking the mountain trail, you will experience aspects of all these features.

But, although this booklet can guide you, it cannot predict exactly what the mountain, woods and waters will reveal. Perhaps a dragonfly will whirr across the path as you pass, or an eagle will soar in silhouette by a distant ridge. Perhaps the white quartzite pebbles on the high ground will dazzle you in sunshine or show weirdly pale through mist.

Perhaps. What is certain is that the trail will open up experiences for you if you are open to its possibilities. That's the way of it, with a mountain.

Fast track to the Arctic

Don't fret about cheap flights and carbon footprints. Your own feet can take you to something like the far north of the world along this trail. That's because the temperature drops (on average) and the plants change as you go up the mountain.

To be precise: for every 305 m (1,000 feet) you climb, there are changes akin to those you'd find by travelling 965 km (600 miles) north. This trail starts roughly at sea level, beside Loch Maree, and peaks at 550 m. By that height, you'll be in the vegetation and temperature equivalent of northern Greenland or central Spitsbergen, far above the Arctic Circle.

All the more reason to pack sensibly for the trail. But also all the more changes to enjoy.





Mountain Trail ---

Explore the heart of the Beinn Eighe reserve from pine woodland to the Arctic heights. Discover fascinating stories of the geology, history and wildlife. Allow time to admire the views and recover from the steep climbs.

Narrow path with a steep climb for the first two kilometres. Path surface is very rough with stone pitching (steps), roots, and loose gravel. Can be slippery when wet or icy. Two stream crossings. Care needed with route selection, though cairns do show the way.



4 miles /
6.5 km.
Allow 4-5
hours.

Layers of warm and waterproof clothing are important. Leaving the start point in sunshine does not mean that it will be warm or dry at the trail summit. Mountain conditions can change very rapidly.

Remember the Scottish Outdoor Access Code. Respect other people's privacy and their need for quiet enjoyment. Keep dogs under control and treat Beinn Eighe with care, leaving it undisturbed and free of litter.

Getting started

There's no rush, so take time to get your bearings in the car park. The plinths here have useful information about local geology, history and birdlife and you can look at a map in the open-sided shelter before using the one in this booklet.

Start the trail by going alongside the burn just west of the car park and under the road. Don't cross the burn at the footbridge, but continue on the trail at the left of the channel and on up the gentle slope through birch trees.

The Allt na h-Airighe (Burn of the Sheiling) has a Gaelic name suggesting that past inhabitants of the area linked it to summer pastures. Women and children, especially, would take livestock up to grazings on the mountainsides. This both expanded the amount of fodder available to cattle, goats and some sheep and kept the animals away from the crops grown on the more fertile low ground near the loch.



Woodland

Grey slope, green wood

At the bench beside the cairn, pause to take in the scene. Breathe deeply and you might just catch a tang of pine: Scots pine. That's the tree that forms the abiding fabric of this Coille na Glas-Leitire (Wood of the Grey Slope).

People have written about pines (or 'firrs' in old Scots speech) here for centuries. But these trees have much deeper roots.

Birch trees and junipers would have been the first tall vegetation to re-colonise Beinn Eighe after the last glaciers melted, around 11,500 years ago. Pines arrived later, at least 9,300 years ago. One possibility is that their seeds could have blown in from the west, at a time when the sea level was much lower than it is now.



Pines

Caledonian connections

It has been nine millennia (and counting) since Scots pines arrived here. Think what this means in terms of human generations. The time seems vast. But pines are long lived. Some growing in Scotland today are more than 600 years old, and they could still have a hundred years or more of life left.

So only ten or so long-surviving, long-decaying pines (like the one standing dead near this cairn, perhaps) could take you way, way back. Back to when the first pine seedlings sprouted here; back to the Mesolithic period (Middle Stone Age) when the people of Scotland were few and lived as roving groups of hunter-gatherers and fishers.

Over the thousands of years since then, many kinds of wildlife have benefited from the pines. One is the Scottish crossbill, a small bird that uses its crossed mandibles to tweak pine seeds from cones. You might hear its low, chirruping calls as it flies above the trees.



Take stock

On the bridge over the rushing burn, pause for great views over the pines, north across the loch and east to the delta of the river that feeds it. This is also a good place to take stock.

Beyond this point, the trail rises steeply for a while. You will soon leave the woodland and enter the mid-levels of the mountain. By doing this, you are committing yourself to an upland hike. So if you have any doubts now about equipment, stamina or weather, this could be a good point to return to the start. Otherwise, walk on and enjoy the ascent.





Tansley Bog

Down in the valley

The wood is fading now, with the few trees still growing at this level small and stunted by the challenges of exposure and thinner soil. Things are very different way down on the low ground, where you can see deeper, richer soils.

Look back to the foot of the hill. If you have them, use binoculars to focus on the details. There are trees, of course. But there's also an open area, threaded with channels and pools of water that can show bright against darker, low vegetation.

That vegetation is bog moss, sprinkled with some shrubs and small trees. Named after a pioneering ecologist, Sir Arthur Tansley, who studied it, the bog has several species of Sphagnum moss that give it form and keep it moist. That benefits some other bogland plants and small creatures, including the many kinds of dragonflies for which Beinn Eighe is an important breeding place.

Geology

Going up, grinding down

Look north, across Loch Maree, to where another mountain heaves skywards above the woods and higher slopes. That's Slioch, from the Gaelic word Sleagh (Spear). The spear is topped with red-brown Torridonian sandstone. Laid down as sandy outwash from huge rivers at the fringe of a now-vanished continent, it settled to a depth of some 5 km about 800 million years ago.

Torridonian sandstone also forms much of the lower slopes of Beinn Eighe. But on Beinn Eighe the sandstone is hidden. That is because Ice Age glaciers, which covered Scotland many times between 2.4 million and 11,500 years ago, spread blankets of debris over those lower slopes.

The glaciers' past losses have been vegetation's gain, since soils form more readily on this dumped material than on bare rock. On Beinn Eighe's upper slopes, the glacial deposits peter out and soils are thinner. Bare white 'Cambrian' quartzite rock rises to scree-covered peaks. This is the landscape you are now entering.



Trumpet rock

Meet the ancestors

Don't expect a fanfare. Whatever organic sounds last issued from what are now quartzite rocks here fell silent around 540 million years ago. They would have come from the surfaces stippled with lumps, some circular, which look a bit like a freeze-frame of bubbling porridge.

Those marks show where tube-dwelling, wormlike creatures burrowed in the white sands of an ancient, tropical ocean. The round marks are burrow tops, or slices through a tube, so the rock is generally known as 'pipe rock'. Where a stone has sheared along the length of a tube, the 'pipes' can also be seen as pink or white stripes. Because the tubes flare at the top, this rock has also been called 'trumpet rock'.

Small pops of released gas are about as loud as these creatures would have got. But on Earth as a whole in the Cambrian period (542 – 488 million years ago), life was in overdrive, with a glorious diversity of forms and species bursting onto the global scene. That's the real blast of trumpets in the Cambrian, when the ancestors of everything alive today really began to take shape.



Heather

Life on the edge

At first glance, there's precious little heather close to this cairn. A few plants of this small, woody shrub cling to the mountainside among the bare rock. They share the gravelly ground with mosses, some grasses and a sedge that is often called 'deer grass' because its autumn colour is as orange-brown as deer hair.

You're at a point where the plants of the grassy heaths at the mid-levels of the mountain are giving way to different vegetation, more suited to the exposure at higher altitude. Look east, and the slope below has a fuller head of heather. There's just enough to support a few red grouse. And each autumn, before the first snows, that heather purples its patch of hill with its small, nectar-rich flowers.

Soil sense: from here onwards on the high-level part of the trail, soils become much shallower, with very little nutrient in them to sustain plants. These fragile soils are easily damaged by erosion and trampling. So please help to protect them by staying on the path.



Ath nan Ceann

Best not to lose it

By now, your head might literally be in the clouds. But if the weather allows, look back north-east from here, to where the river meets the loch. Near that delta, to the right, sit the buildings of the reserve headquarters at Anancaun Field Station.

And in that name hangs a tale. In the mid-1300s, followers of the Leod MacGilleandreis (part of the Macleod Clan) did battle around Kinlochewe with members of the Clan MacKenzie. The MacKenzies won, and on the order of Black Murdo of the Cave, they decapitated the losers and threw their heads in the river. Those heads washed ashore at Ath nan Ceann (the Ford of the Heads), upstream of what later became known as a good fishing pool.

So take a deep breath and, perhaps with relief, turn away from that scene and story to continue up to the plateau.





An t-Allt

Lunar Loch

Loch Allt
an Daraich

Conservation Cairn
and Summit

Ath nan Ceann

Heather

Trumpet Rock

Geology

Tansley Bog

Alltan Leacach

Cadh' a'
Mheanbh-chruidh



Choc na Gaoithe

Trail Fault

Fossils

Lone Pine

Gorge

Ice Age

Forest

Woodland Trail

Allt na h-Airighe

Pines

Woodland

P Lochside car park

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Loch Maree



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Conservation cairn and summit

Heart of brightness

The shrubs you've been passing among the pale quartzite rocks still include some heather. But there's much more crowberry now (named for its jet-black berries) and prostrate juniper. Soils are even thinner here and are called 'alpine soil'. Cold weather at this altitude means that soil forms much more slowly than in the valley. Both plants and soil are signs that you've reached an 'arctic-alpine' level.

You've also made it to the highest point on the trail. So congratulations: it's along and downhill from here onwards. But before you keep going, look around you, especially south-west into the rocky heart of Beinn Eighe.

In the foreground, across the valley, the twin arms of Ruadh-stac Beag (Smaller Red Hill) and Creag Dubh (Black Crag) stretch towards you from beyond Sgurr Ban (White Peak). Ruadh-stac Mor (Large Red Hill), highest of the Beinn Eighe range, sits at the right of the main ridge. Grey and white are the main shades of those high slopes and screes, covered with crumbly pale quartzite. It was once sand on a shallow sea floor. Now it can touch the clouds.

Looking to the core of the reserve, you can get more of a sense of its scale. NatureScot has 48 square km in its care here, which it manages for qualities that are internationally valued.

As you go north-west from here, across the plateau and heading towards Meall a' Ghiubhais (Hill of the Pine), the way is shown by small cairns. It will take some time before you reach the next named cairn, at Lunar Loch. So as you go, look over to Meall a' Ghiubhais. It's a hill that holds a surprise.

Rock the ages

Appropriately enough, for a reserve centred on a mountain, Beinn Eighe's rocks are of major importance for unravelling the ancient history of Scotland. The geology is particularly fascinating around Meall a' Ghiubhais.

The arrangement of rocks is unusual here. It reverses the sequence in most of Beinn Eighe, where younger Cambrian quartzites sit on top of older Torridonian sandstones. Those sandstones give the upper levels of the hill their brown colour.

The reason for the shift from the normal progression is that a major earth movement, around 430 million years ago, pushed the sandstones up and over the quartzites, along a fault. The fault is called the Kinlochewe Thrust (but don't try it as a dance move at the next ceilidh!).



Lunar Loch

A sense of space

Sometimes this part of the plateau can seem other worldly. When the air is still and the cloud-base low, the pale stones reflect in shallow water. Plants hug the ground. You know they do this to keep heat loss to a minimum, but their aspect can't help but suggest something alien.

It's the stuff of sci-fi, though the loch was named to commemorate the reality of the first moon landing, on 21 July 1969. And the plants and rocks here aren't extra terrestrial. They're very much of this Earth.

It's just that we humans tend only to dip a toe in such high places, not survive long-term up here. It's best if we leave that to the experts. Like the plants of the dwarf shrub heath community that grows here; like the ptarmigan that croak in the corries; like the lichens on the stones or the eagle that soars across the summits.



An t-Allt

Fast waters run deep

The descent has become steep, but the views, near and far, are worth it. There's a down-to-earth simplicity about the Gaelic for the water that plunges downstream here. An t-Allt, (the burn); no nonsense, that's it.

But sometimes, less is more. For who needs to embellish what the burn, over thousands of years, has been fashioning here? The cleft it still carves is its constant craft, the gorge below a masterwork to which it contributes.

You'll meet waters from here again in the lower, softer part of the woods. But for now, hear the rough splash of water on stone. Meet the burn.



Fault

Slowly does it

Close to this point, the chasm that bites deep into the hill is another indication of both geological and water-powered forces. There's a fault along the gorge. It's small, but has been enough of a weakness for the burn to work on, eroding stone and deepening the space, millimetre by rocky millimetre. Now a sixteen-storey building could sit within this abyss.

The old earth-shakings that produced the fault ceased long ago. But the cliffs should still make you tremble.





Fossils

Drops in the ocean of time

By now, with luck, you'll have seen some good traces of ancient life, in the form of pipe rock exposed along the trail. But some of the oldest, hard-bodied fossil creatures in Scotland are also preserved in Beinn Eighe's rocks.

Above the pipe rock lie the 'Furoid Beds'. Formed in deep water from mud in a tropical Cambrian sea, this layer is rusty brown (which you might notice in rocks close to this point). There are similarities between fossils in the Furoid Beds and some found in Greenland, Spitsbergen and Arctic Canada. This gives an important clue to the geography of 540 million years ago.

At that time, long before the Atlantic formed, the land of what became Scotland lay close to that of those other places. England and Wales were far to the south, on the other side of a now-vanished ocean.

The Furoid Beds are rich in potash and lime, so the soils that form on them are a natural source of these plant-boosting compounds. Many kinds of plants benefit, including globeflowers and primroses, that don't grow on more acidic soils. The calcium-rich lime also helps deer that feed on local grasses, sedges and heather to grow strong bones and antlers.



Lone pine

Standing proud

This tree was a seedling more than 300 years ago, before Scotland and England united their parliaments in 1707. But, given future good fortune with weather and health, it's only middle-aged, in Scots pine terms. Wait a few more centuries, and then you can call it old.

This pine is an outlier. But, as you'll see again on the lower part of the trail, the native woods of pine and birch are in good heart in the reserve. It wasn't always so across wider parts of the Highlands. By the 1900s, 'Caledonian' forest such as this had been reduced to a few dozen fragments, many in poor shape due to overgrazing.

Beinn Eighe's woods have been more fortunate in recent decades, thanks to protection of the area as a National Nature Reserve. The fortunes of native trees in Scotland as a whole have also improved greatly from the late 20th century onwards. Under the care of national bodies, community groups and private estates such as Gairloch, many old woods are expanding and new forests of native trees are being created.

This reserve set an early example. Now many other places are following.

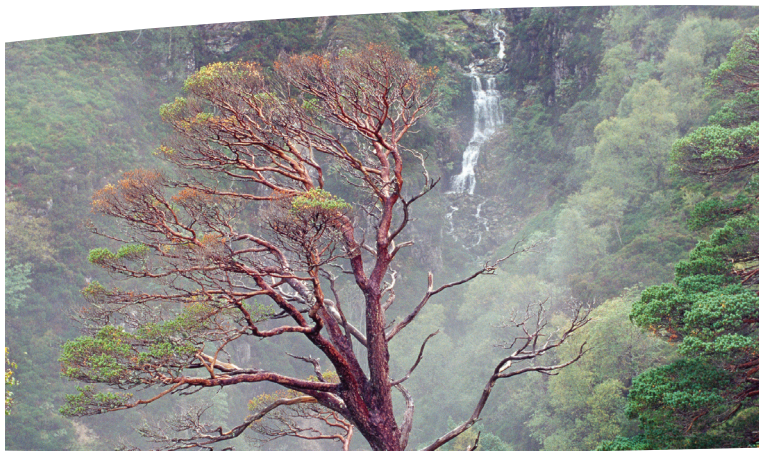
Gorge

Light and shade

The slopes are very steep here and the ground can be unstable. So don't go too near the dizzying drops at this point. In any case, you can get a better impression of the scene from further back.

Looking across the gorge of the Allt na h-Airighe (Burn of the Sheiling) you can see the colours and shapes of different kinds of trees, including Scots pines, birches and rowans. The effects of sun slanting through the gorge on particular groups of trees can be breathtaking.

In autumn, the tints of birch and rowan here, holding a hundred shades of yellow, gold, green and scarlet, are among the finest in the whole reserve. But even on a grey day in winter, there is much to admire, including the statuesque grey shapes of standing dead pines and the ribbon of white burn water laced down the dark of the hill.



Ice Age

Heavy chill

Some 22,000 years ago and more, you wouldn't have been able to stand here, or to live anywhere in Scotland. Hundreds of metres of ice would have pressed down overhead. In this area, the ice sheet was as high as Slioch, and as deep as the trench where Loch Maree now glistens.

There had been many other big freezes since the start of the Ice Age, some 2.4 million years earlier. The crushing, grinding power of all that frozen water was immense. It scoured mountains, deepened glens and widened loch basins. Come the thaw after each freeze, the forces of meltwater took over, carrying hill-loads of rubble and sediment downhill.

You can see some of the shapes carved by ice in the curves and lines of the landscape. Deep ice in gradual motion scoured the trench along an ancient fault where Loch Maree sits, the 'hanging valley' of Gleann Bianasdail to the south of Slioch and the rocky corries of Beinn Eighe itself. Right beside you, scratches and grooves on rocks show the direction that ice moved over this very spot.

Ice still works the landscape, shattering stone by freeze and thaw. It's the faintest of echoes of a process that would once have moved mountains.

Forest

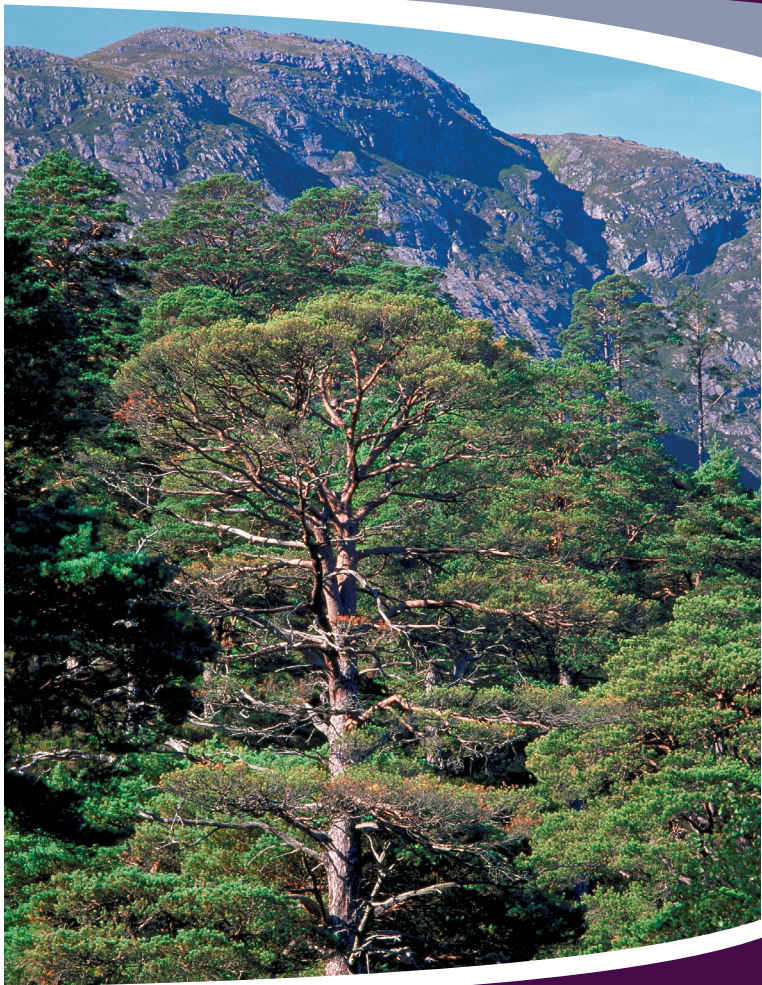
Closing the loop

Now you've reached the relative shelter of the woods. Not far from here, the trail joins the top of the Woodland Trail. Take the left fork and continue down, past numbered waymark points.

Each of these numbers refers to a stop on the Woodland Trail, which also loops in a shorter route out and back to the car park. You might want to come back another day to use the booklet for that trail to guide you along it.

Whether you decide to do that, or simply want to stroll back through these lower woods without many pauses (taking perhaps 20 minutes to return to the car park), the trees and other vegetation here give an interesting contrast to the scenes at higher altitude. Gone are the mountain barrens, the shattered quartzite and the ground-hugging plants. Now you can look up and see branches above, green and brown against the sky.

But you've been up just a bit closer to the heavens today. To something like the Arctic. To a slice of natural heritage magic, lodged here in Torridon. Hold that in mind, until you next visit this very special place.



Enjoy Scotland's outdoors responsibly

- take responsibility for your own actions
- respect the interests of other people
- care for the environment.



**KNOW THE CODE
BEFORE YOU GO**

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