

The Special Qualities of the Glen Affric National Scenic Area

- One of the most beautiful glens in Scotland
- A glen of transition, from dense forest to exposed moorland
- A journey into wildness
- The prominence of water
- A glen for all seasons
- A historic and popular route through the Highlands
- Venerable pine forest
- Beautiful Loch Affric
- The baronial Affric Lodge

Special Quality	Further Information
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>One of the most beautiful glens in Scotland</i> 	
<p>Glen Affric has frequently been described as the most beautiful glen in Scotland, representing the romantic, iconic, image of the Highland landscape. Its appeal arises through a combination of:</p> <p>Dramatic mountains with high corries rising above a narrow glen.</p> <p>Ancient Caledonian forest of beautiful trees and deep heather, grading to open moorland in the west.</p> <p>Lochs with rocky shores, small bays and promontories, occasional beaches and wooded isles.</p> <p>Fast flowing and broad rivers, tumbling burns with falls.</p>	<p><i>‘A unique combination of mountains, lochs, rivers and ancient forest.’</i> A. Watson Featherstone(2004)</p> <p>The glen passes through a highland mountainous landscape with extensive ridges, peaks and high corries. Side glens branch off the main glen. Carn Eige (1183m) is the highest mountain north of the Great Glen.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>A glen of transition, from dense forest to exposed moorland</i> 	
<p>Travelling westwards, at first the glen is heavily wooded, with stands of pine and birch interspersed with glades of deep heather, but by the time Loch Affric is reached the trees are thinning. Open, exposed moorland and bog soon comes to the fore, with the high and pointed mountains of Kintail providing a spectacular backdrop. At the far end of Glen Affric, three glens open up, each leading deeper into the hills.</p>	<p>Aligned east-west, the glen experiences significant changes in climate and topography along its length. Woodland is dense on the lower slopes around Loch Beinn a’Mheadhoin at the east end, consisting of both original native pinewood and plantations. Tree cover starts to decrease westwards once Loch Affric is reached.</p> <p>Heather is common in the east of the NSA, on the forest floor and the hill slopes, whereas it is rare in the west where wet heath and bog dominate the lower slopes.</p> <p>The transition to a wooded landscape previously began along Loch Affric, although this transition in recent years has been heavily modified by extensive native woodland</p>

	planting to the west of the loch along the lower slopes of the glen.
<p>• <i>A journey into wildness</i></p>	
<p>This long glen leads one further from the inhabited lowlands of the east into the heart of the wild mountains of the west. Travelling westwards gives a strong feeling of leaving civilisation and moving into a harsh environment where nature and natural forces dominate. Roads give way to tracks, which in turn give way to paths. There is often a strong wind funnelling down the upper glen, with the western peaks enveloped in cloud and rain.</p> <p>In contrast, it can at the same time be calm and sheltered amongst the trees of the eastern glen, with the surrounding mountains clearly visible in the sunshine.</p> <p>The general absence of buildings and other obvious man-made features, other than occasional, single-storey cottages, lends a sense of remoteness to the whole length of the glen.</p>	<p>From leaving Cannich and Fasnakyle power station, the landscape becomes remoter, along a single track road past Loch Beinn a'Mheadhoin to the car park at the road end. Then one continues on along the forest track (south side), or footpath (north side), to the head of Loch Affric and on to the old settlement of Athnamulloch and Strawberry Cottage Bothy. Here it feels wild and remote, reinforced as one passes the isolated Altbeithe Youth Hostel and into the heart of the open mountains, and within one of SNH's a Wild Land Search Areas.</p> <p>In the west the weather is wetter and the ground rockier with few trees in evidence. The landscape feels open, harsh and exposed.</p> <p>Recent plantations in fenced enclosures on the lower slopes along the length of the NSA have resulted in many fences now being visible, although the plan is to remove these in the long-term. It should be noted that the signs of previous human settlement illustrate that the glen was once less wild, with a long history of summer grazing and sheep farming and timber extraction.</p>
<p>• <i>The prominence of water</i></p>	
<p>In the east the valley floor is filled by Lochs Affric and Beinn a'Mheadhoin, in the west the glens contain fast-flowing rivers with their pools and riffles. Numerous rocky burns tumble down the mountainsides from the high corries.</p> <p>The often-present rain, drizzle, mist or snow adds another dimension, emphasising the prominence of water within this landscape.</p>	<p>The glen contains two linear lochs in the east, Loch Affric and Loch Beinn a'Mheadhoin, characterised by rocky shores, occasional beaches, isles and wooded sides, and a 'bay and promontory' topography.</p> <p>The River Affric, which connects the lochs, is broad and meandering in the west, in contrast to the steep and rocky burns such as Abhainn Gleann nam Fiadh that fall off the mountains.</p>
<p>• <i>A glen for all seasons</i></p>	
<p>The tranquillity of the lochs and woods, and the wildness of the surrounding mountains have drawn visitors to the area since Victorian times. The continual changes in mood and colour provide a feast of sensory experiences throughout the year:</p>	<p>A Forestry Commission leaflet (2008) describes the eastern glen as the '<i>glen of a thousand whispers, the glen of alluring of aromas, the glen of countless colours.</i>'</p> <p>The glen is a possible location for background of Landseer's famous painting Monarch of the Glen (1851).</p>

<p>The light and airy birchwoods along the road at Loch Beinn a'Mheadhoin; the darker pine woods, enlivened by the orange of their bark; the beautiful ancient trees, the horizontals of old pines contrasting with the rounded birch; the purples of the heather, the greens of the blaeberry, the oranges of the bracken in autumn.</p> <p>The wind whipping up the waters of the lochs, or bringing rain down the glen; the mountains reflected in Loch Affric on a beautiful day; distant panoramas of inaccessible mountains; a glimpse of a deer, the hope of an otter, an eagle soaring overhead; the peace of a landscape where the motor car does not dominate.</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>A historic and popular route through the Highlands</i> 	
<p>Once a drove road, the glen is still popular with walkers of all descriptions: from those out for a day's stroll, to serious hillwalkers and those wishing to traverse the width of Scotland.</p>	<p>Historically it was a drove route for cattle herdsmen taking the cattle from the highland pastures on the west coast to the east coast livestock markets such as the Muir of Ord or Falkirk. Today most long distance journeys are for recreation, either by hillwalkers for access to the surrounding hills; or as a backpacking route from Kintail through Glen Affric and Strathglass to Beaully, many breaking their walk in the remote Altbeithe Youth Hostel (only accessible on foot).</p>
<p><i>Location-specific qualities</i></p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Venerable pine forest</i> 	
<p>The eastern end of Glen Affric is famous for its stands of ancient Caledonian pine trees, containing as it does the third largest remnant in Scotland.</p> <p>The mature trees, with their horizontal crowns, orange bark and their dark blue-green foliage are particularly beautiful, especially when in small clumps or emerging singly above the heather. They add a sense of timelessness to the dramatic setting of loch and mountain. In places the dark of the pines is enlivened by the lighter foliage of the birch.</p>	<p>Glen Affric translates from the Gaelic Gleann Afaraig '<i>the glen of the dappled woodlands</i>', or possibly '<i>the speckled glen</i>' (Forestry Commission 2008). There is great variation in the tree and canopy cover: closed canopy woodlands and forests, including stands of birch, with heather and blaeberry dominated glades; wider spaced trees with a heather and blaeberry ground flora; and isolated 'granny' pines.</p> <p>Much of Glen Affric was bought by the Forestry Commission in 1951, with subsequent pioneering conservation work on the core Caledonian pine forest led by the forester Findlay MacRae. This conservation effort has continued to the present day, with planting of native trees within fenced enclosures now extending to the western march of the NSA and beyond.</p> <p>Although the woods are now managed primarily for conservation, there has been a long history of multi-use in the glen, including timber extraction, sheep farming and deer stalking.</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beautiful Loch Affric 	
<p>Loch Affric is the key to the beauty of this glen. Ancient pine trees, single or in groups, emerge from deep heather to surround the loch, providing a foreground to the dramatic backdrop of Carn Eige and Mam Sodhail. These mountains, with their steep and rocky slopes and burns falling out of the high corries, tower above the water.</p> <p>Views eastward over this long and narrow loch are towards a gentler landscape of rolling hills, westward the eye is led over a sandy beach into a panorama of narrow peaks.</p>	<p>Because it has long been recognised as an iconic loch, it escaped hydro-electric modification. Hence it maintains a natural inflow, outflow and water levels so that, unlike Loch Beinn a'Mheadhoin, it never has a wide, unvegetated draw-down zone</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The baronial Affric Lodge 	
<p>The baronial Affric Lodge, and its surrounding buildings, brings a sense of human order into the heart of a landscape dominated by nature.</p>	<p>There are few buildings in the NSA, and Affric Lodge, with its associated buildings, surrounded by mature pine, stands out as a focal point. It is located on a small peninsula at the eastern end of Loch Affric and has uninterrupted views towards the mountains of Kintail.</p> <p>It was built in 1864 in the Victorian baronial style as a hunting lodge by the first Lord Tweedmouth. It is still in use as a shooting lodge. Edwin Landseer the landscape painter visited the Glen in the 19th century.</p>

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