

The Special Qualities of the Loch Shiel National Scenic Area

- A fine long loch, leading into the heart of remote and rugged mountains
- A rich cover of woodland, forest and trees
- Variety and interest from the ever-changing topography and shore line
- The hidden glens
- One of the largest undisturbed lochs in Scotland and a haven for wildlife
- The nationally recognisable landmark and enduring cultural icon

Special Quality	Further information
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>A fine, long loch, leading into the heart of remote and rugged mountains</i> 	
<p>The narrow waters of Loch Shiel lead the eye from the iconic monument at the head of the loch down into a remote, wild and rugged countryside, nowadays far distant from centres of population.</p> <p>Steep-sided and fjord-like in appearance, the remoteness and inaccessibility is reinforced by the fact that the loch has no roads or tracks along the north side, only accessible by boat. The south side is only accessible by a private track.</p>	<p>Queen Victoria in 1873 described the remote scene: <i>'We suddenly came upon Loch Shiel. The fine long loch and the rugged mountains, which were about 3000 feet high, were rising all around, no habitation or building to be seen except the house of Glenaladale.'</i></p> <p>A large area of the north shore and surrounding hills is one of SNH's Wild Land Search Areas, as is some of the land on the eastern side.</p> <p>Settlement is sparse with only isolated houses – apart from Polloch, a remote settlement of mainly forestry workers; and Glenfinnan on the A830 Fort William to Mallaig Road and the West Highland Railway.</p> <p>Although today much of the area is wild and remote, it once hosted a larger human population and contains a scatter of now deserted townships. Eilean Fhianain at the southern end of the NSA is significant in Highland history, containing the first Scottish home of St. Finnan (a teacher of St. Columba), a small chapel, and is also the burial place of the Clan MacDonald.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>A rich cover of woodland, forest and trees</i> 	
<p>Trees and woods of many different types, textures and hues clothe the steep sides of the loch and the few small islands. They soften the harsh, highland landscape, but also add interest and variety as one ventures down the loch.</p>	<p>Woodland types include large areas of Atlantic oak woodland, varying from areas of dense canopy, to more open canopy especially on the north shore. The woods are also characterised by stands of holly and hazel.</p> <p>These were once working woodlands, with evidence of charcoal burning in the woods; the charcoal was shipped out by boat.</p> <p>Alder woodland can be seen on some of the fluvial plains where the burns meet the loch. Birch woodland has regenerated naturally in areas of low deer grazing. Steep sided ravines and gullies are also wooded with wych elm and ash.</p> <p>There are small areas of Caledonian pine forest on the loch isle, such as Eilean Camas and Eilean Ghleann Fhoinainn</p>

	<p>and on the precipitous sides of Meall na h-Airigh.</p> <p>The native woodlands have a rich bryophyte flora and are designated SSSI for their conservation importance.</p> <p>Large areas of commercial, coniferous forest cover the south east of the NSA, including most of Glen Hurich. Implementation of a forest design plan will add further interest to the forest landscape.</p>
<p>• <i>Variety and interest from the ever-changing topography and shore line</i></p>	
<p>The rich variation in topography results in exciting scenery. There are rugged massifs, interlocking peaks, linear ridges, extensive areas of moorland, rough pasture and a complex shoreline.</p> <p>The loch itself presents a grand prospect, being long and narrow, continually and subtly twisting and turning along its whole length. The scale of the view varies from small, intimate lochside beaches surrounded by trees, to the loch receding into the distance surrounded by large, steep-sided mountains.</p>	<p>At the northeast end of the NSA, both sides of Loch Shiel exhibit fjord-like topography. Steep precipitous sides form part of a rugged massif rising to stepped hills, with interlocking, sweeping peaks, separated by high corries; and with long, flat, linear ridges. At the southwest end in contrast, is a large area of extensive, lowland mossland, dominated by Claish Moss National Nature Reserve (outside the NSA).</p> <p>The complex topography of the surrounding hills is matched by that of the loch shore: steep-sided, narrow and enclosed in places, but also with long spurs and promontories of various sizes ('rubha' or 'ceann' in Gaelic), interspersed with small bays and beaches; and the loch itself with many small isles. Some areas of the loch have an open, pool-like feel, such as around Camas Bhlathain, whereas others feel narrow and enclosed, such as around Eilean Fhianian.</p>
<p>• <i>The hidden glens</i></p>	
<p>Glens Aladale and Hurich, which feed into Loch Shiel, feel remote, almost secretive, hidden by the tree cover at the mouth of the glens and also by the subtle twisting and turning of the loch side.</p>	<p>Glen Aladale rises northwards from the centre of the loch, with the River Aladale in the middle of a steep sided glen; it extends beyond the NSA and is enclosed by various peaks which reach a height of 869m on the ridge Druim Fiaclach.</p> <p>Glen Hurich is a long sinuous, glen stretching east to northeast from Loch Shiel. It consists of the complex curiously shaped wetlands where the River Polloch (Gaelic for 'bog by loch') meets Loch Shiel, the sinuous sides of Loch Doilet, and the steep-sided, forested head of the glen, surrounded by the mountains of Ardgour –Sgorr an Tarmachain (756m) and Beinn Mheadhoin (786m).</p>
<p>• <i>One of the largest undisturbed lochs in Scotland and a haven for wildlife</i></p>	
<p>Loch Shiel remains one of the largest lochs in Scotland to have retained its natural form, its water levels fluctuating to the whim of nature rather than under human influence.</p> <p>The loch waters are clean and unpolluted, which, together with the surrounding natural vegetation, has created a haven for wildlife: from damselflies and otters, to birds such as elegant black-throated divers swimming</p>	<p>Loch Shiel at 28km is the fourth longest loch in Scotland. Importantly it has a natural outflow into the sea via the River Shiel (through the Morar, Moidart and Ardnamurchan NSA); in contrast, the other lochs of this length in Scotland have human regulation of water flow (e.g. Lochs Awe, Lomond, Ness and Shin).</p> <p>There is a rich juxtaposition of semi-natural habitats: the loch itself and its variable shore, woodland (Caledonian pine and oak), moorland, grassland and peat bog.</p> <p>The waters of the loch are oligotrophic (nutrient poor), and have become home to large populations of breeding birds, notably black-throated divers, and otters.</p>

the waters and golden eagles soaring overhead.	
<i>Location-specific quality</i>	
• Nationally recognisable landmark and enduring cultural icon	
<p>Bonnie Prince Charlie raising the royal standard on the banks of Loch Shiel at Glenfinnan in 1745 is an iconic event in Scotland's history.</p> <p>Glenfinnan Monument, built to celebrate this, has become a national landmark, standing out in evocative contrast to the impressive landscape of the loch and mountains behind.</p>	<p>Bonnie Prince Charlie was rowed down Loch Shiel having landed on mainland Scotland at Loch nan Uamh. Although the exact spot where he arrived in Glenfinnan is not exactly known for certain, it was a wet a misty August day. He was met by the McDonalds, strong supporters of the Jacobite cause, and later that day by other clans.</p> <p>The Glenfinnan Monument was designed by James Gillespie Graham and was built in 1815 by Alexander Macdonald of Glenaladale. The lone highlander at the top of the monument was added later.</p> <p>The monument with Loch Shiel behind has become one of the most famous images of the Scottish Highlands, even appearing on bank notes. It has a backdrop composed of Scots pine forested isles; wooded lochsides; fjord-like topography; and with the sweeping interlocking peaks overlapping and coming down into the water - the waters leading off into the horizon.</p>

Selected bibliography

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