



# GRAVEL RIDES SCOTLAND

28 gravel bike  
adventures in  
the wilds of  
Scotland

ED SHOOTE





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**Front cover** *The northern end of Loch Shiel (route 24).*

**Back cover (L–R)** *The Kinesis Tripster ATR in its natural environment looking towards the Balmoral Estate (route 17); The long gravel stretch alongside Loch Ericht (route 20); Fantastic gravel riding in the shadow of Lochnagar (route 17); The river crossing at the upper end of Glen Quoich – not one for wet weather (route 16).*

**Opposite** *Bikepacking just south of Fort William.*

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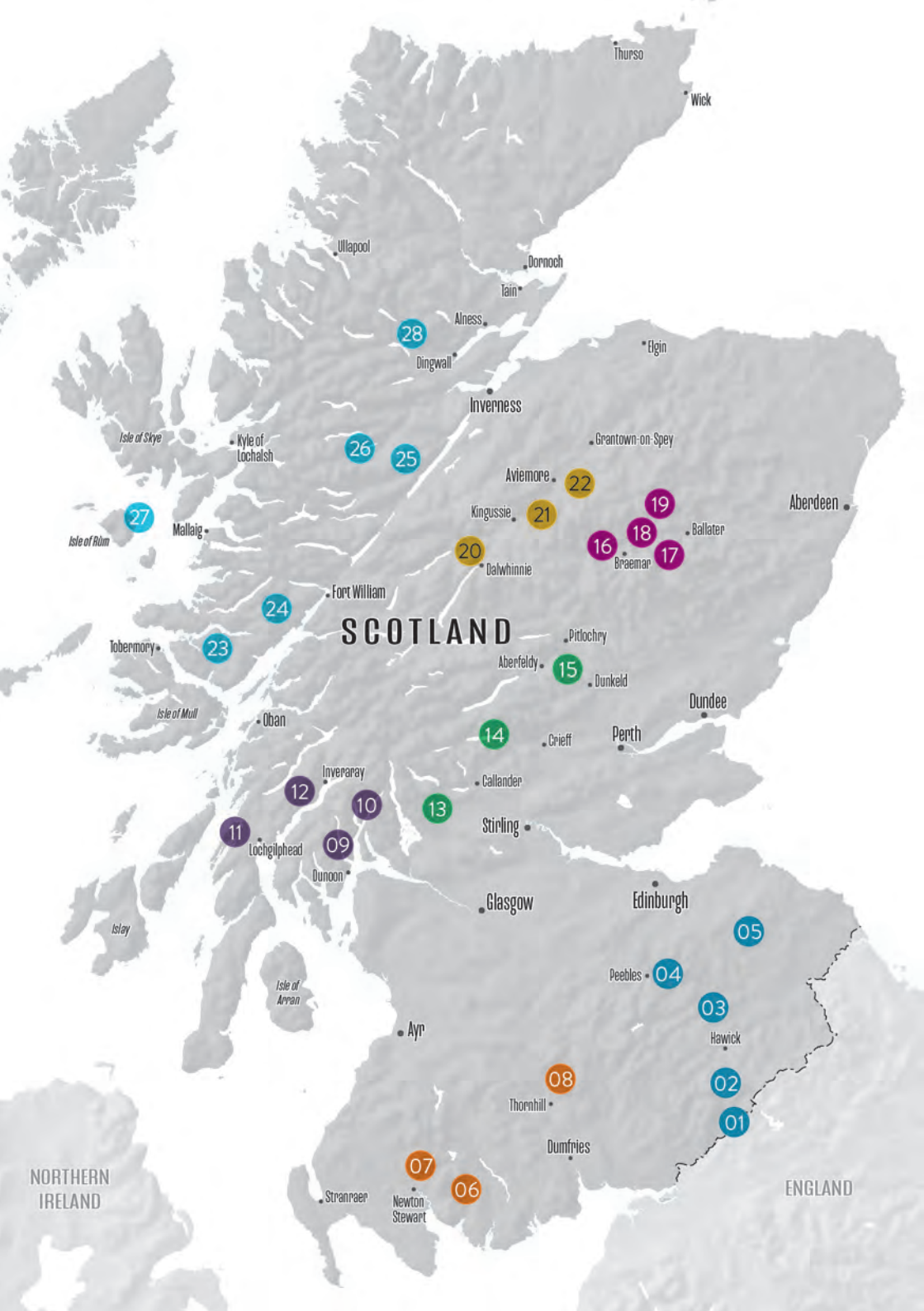
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# SCOTLAND

Isle of Skye

Kyle of Lochalsh

Isle of Rum

Isle of Mull

Islay

Isle of Arran

NORTHERN IRELAND

ENGLAND

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## Introduction

The word 'gravel' is likely to be of Celtic origin, which is appropriate because Scotland is certainly one of the best places to ride bikes on gravel.

I have ridden bikes in many amazing places all around the world, but I am lucky to call Scotland my home and it has been an amazing experience to explore its hidden corners while putting this book together.

Despite Scotland's amazing gravel cycling, my love of this type of riding began a long time ago when living in Canada. I took a Kona-branded Jake the Snake cyclo-cross bike, fitted the widest tyres I could, then explored endless miles of gravel logging roads, deep into the British Columbia wilderness. I loved getting lost in such beautiful places, but there were just a few too many grizzly bear encounters for comfort. What really sealed my love of gravel riding was being lent one of the very first Kinesis Tripster ATR (adventure, tour, race) bikes for a big trip. This bike was so comfortable on longer rides I rode it heading east all the way to Istanbul twice and then on to China and beyond, taking in a lot of gravel tracks on the way. Back in Scotland, I became obsessed with exploring the glens, mountains and forests by gravel bike.

This book is intended to be a collection of adventure rides that fit my take on the modern genre of gravel bikes. I have always had a love of 'type 2 fun' when riding; this is a sense of wanting to ride further and higher which I think is reflected in these routes. Don't let this put you off because it is these challenges that you'll remember the best.

I wanted to focus on Scotland as it has so much riding and is one of the best places in the world to ride gravel bikes. Not only does it have stunning scenery but unlike other parts of the UK you are not limited to a few rights of way; the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (SOAC) essentially means that if you see a track in the hills and it is *responsible, safe and sustainable*

to ride it, then you can usually do so (save for certain exemptions). There are many off-road tracks in Scotland, built for many reasons – from military roads in the eighteenth century through to constructing wind farms in the twenty-first century. From stalking paths on Highland estates to private roads heading to ruined cottages and castles, each trail has a story and hopefully this book tells a few and answers some questions you might find yourself asking along the way.

With so many gravel options in Scotland it can be hard to know where to start, so this book showcases seven of the very best graveling regions in the country. It focuses on areas that are perfect for weekends away or linking longer routes together for bikepacking. Partly these clusters are an environmental consideration so you can stay in one location for a few days and reduce your driving. Quite a few of the routes are accessible by train; the book indicates if there is a train station nearby and also suggests ways to use the train to access some great linear rides.

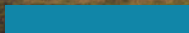
Enjoy this book and the adventures it will inspire – there will be hard climbs and long days but there will also be perfect gravel descents, well-deserved cafe stops, quick dips in a loch on a sunny day and an abundance of fresh air (and rain) in your face. Ride faster, ride further and ride gravel.

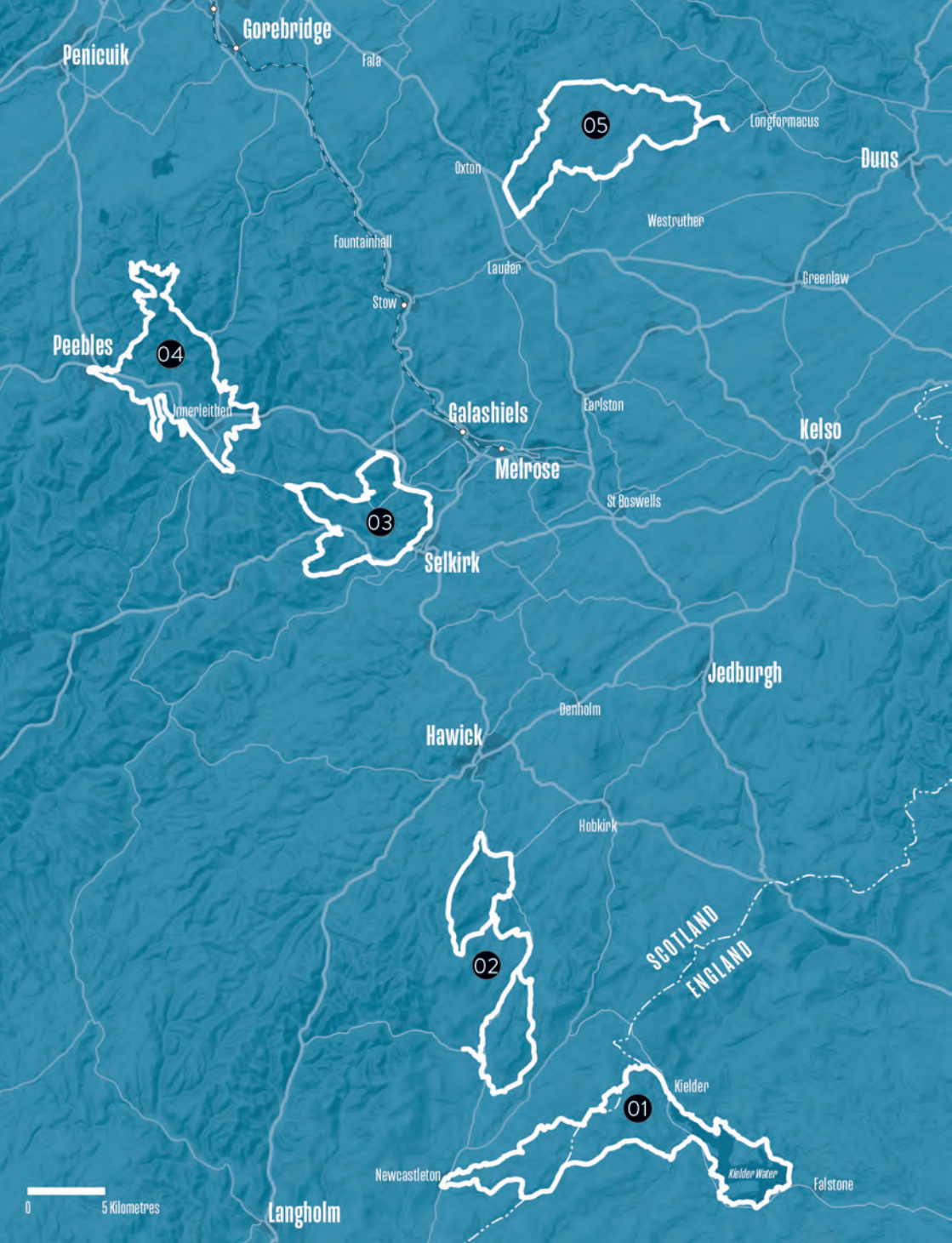
OPPOSITE PLAYING ON THE BEACH NEAR GATEHOUSE OF FLEET.



RIDGETOP RIDING NEAR THE THREE BROTHERS (ROUTE 03).

# SCOTTISH BORDERS

A wide-angle, high-angle photograph of a cyclist riding a mountain bike on a narrow dirt path that winds through a vast, rolling landscape. The terrain is covered in dense, low-lying vegetation, likely heather or moorland, in shades of green and brown. In the distance, rolling hills and valleys are visible under a dramatic sky with soft, wispy clouds, suggesting a sunrise or sunset. The overall mood is serene and adventurous.



# SCOTTISH BORDERS

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The first selection of routes is mostly in the Scottish Borders – one route crosses the border into England and another traverses a section of the border with neighbouring East Lothian. This large, sparsely inhabited region offers some of the wildest and least explored places in the UK, and with this comes a feeling of genuine isolation and pioneering adventure along these routes. The Southern Uplands are rolling, but deceptively big, hills; they are blanketed in heather but punctuated by large plantation forests and pockets of native woodland too. This all rolls down to the mighty lowland rivers fabled for trout and salmon fishing but which also powered the first hydro textile mills of Scotland.

The Tweed Valley in the Borders is probably the best place in the UK for mountain biking. However, few will know this area for its out-

standing, quiet road riding and of course the endless unexplored gravel routes on ancient drove roads, forest roads, new wind farm access tracks and farm tracks. There are also fewer midges than most parts of Scotland, making summer here even more attractive.

Broad Law is the highest peak in the region; at 840 metres it is below Munro height, which helps to preserve its solitude as it does not attract Munro baggers. There is also a gravel track that rises to the summit – it's a brutal, relentless climb up to the summit's radar station which, on a misty day, leaves you wondering whether a UFO has landed.

Castles and large stately homes, such as Sir Walter Scott's Abbotsford or historic Traquair House, dot the landscape. It is a playground for adventure and getting away from it all.



# 01 NEWCASTLETON TO KIELDER CROSS-BORDER RIDE

72KM/45 MILES

## Introduction

This gravel ride uses the very best tracks in this gravel riding Mecca. Starting in the lovely little village of Newcastleton, the route also offers options to ride some easy mountain bike trails to spice things up. The evocatively named Bloody Bush MTB Trail over the moors is a techy gravel highlight.

## The local area

This cross-border gravel route feels a good place to start the book. Although this route starts in Scotland, it crosses the English border early on and actually covers more ground in England. In the area around Kielder it is hard to choose a route because there are just so many gravel tracks; it's home to the Dirty Reiver (a famous 200-kilometre gravel riding event) for a reason!

The village of Newcastleton is a great place to start; this Victorian planned village is also known as Copshaw Holm and, just to confuse you, different maps do use the different names! It was founded in 1793 by the Duke of Buccleuch, whose estate still owns most of the south of Scotland as you'll read in the nearby route descriptions. Here, members of a community trust have raised funds and buy 750 acres of land to manage themselves. It might hardly make a dent in the 200,000 acres the Duke's estate owns, but it presents a huge opportunity for the community to take a fresh approach to land management.

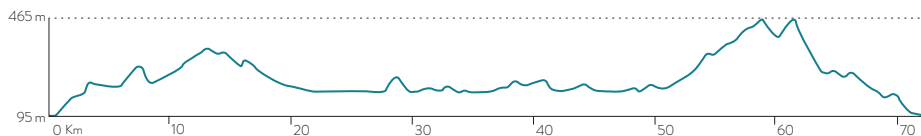
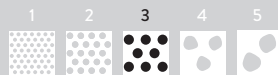
The route uses the waymarked Cross Border Trail; this border region has previously been a lot less peaceful than you'll find it today – from the Romans in the first century,



OPPOSITE CROSSING THE BORDER INTO ENGLAND VIA A SLIPPERY BRIDGE.

DISTANCE 72km/45 miles — ASCENT 950m/3,117ft — OFF-ROAD over 90%  
START/FINISH Newcastleton (also known as Copshaw Holm)  
START/FINISH GRID REF NY 483875 — SATNAV TD9 0QD  
GPS 55.1791, -2.8134 — MAP OS Landranger 79, Hawick & Eskdale;  
80, Cheviot Hills & Kielder Water (1:50,000)

### GRAVEL SCALE





A TECHY SECTION ALONG THE RED BLOODY BUSH MTB TRAIL

### Navigation

This route crosses some very remote and isolated forests and fells between Newcastleton and Kielder. Even the village centre of Kielder has no phone reception. However, most of it is waymarked, making navigation easier and helping out in what can be a confusing forest.

The route must be ridden anticlockwise as it uses some official mountain bike trails that must be ridden in this direction. Initially you follow the Cross Border Trail with its flags and purple waymarkers, then the Sustrans National Route 10 blue markers around Kielder Water, and finally it uses an optional section of the red Bloody Bush MTB Trail. The Cross Border Trail is not well used, and posts can be hidden when grass grows around the posts. There is one

through early Christian battles, to the invasion of the Normans after 1066 and the long conflicts between the English and the Scots. This ride is at the heart of what was the frontier zone and the Debatable Lands, where raids and counter raids took place for centuries with clashes across the wild moors. The legacy of the Border Reivers can be seen in the ruined towers, castles and ancient monuments.

The Bloody Bush MTB Trail goes past the site of the defeat and death of a party of Northumbrians returning from a foray into Liddesdale in the fifteenth century; they were resting in a thicket when slain. The monument you see today stands exactly on the border and is over 4 metres high.

The loop around Kielder Water is a brilliant section of the ride. Kielder Water is at the heart of a huge forest and is the largest man-made lake in Northern Europe; the multi-use path around the reservoir includes a crossing of Kielder Viaduct, a rare skewed-arch viaduct. The area is also an official Dark Sky Park, so it is worth staying overnight too.

### Route overview

The route mostly uses good quality commercial forest tracks and the well-surfaced Lakeside Way around Kielder Water. The route is pretty wild and committing – it doesn't have many sections on roads and there isn't a lot of mobile phone coverage. When you're away from the reservoir you'll most likely see no other people, so go prepared for a big day with potentially unpredictable weather.

The route is rated 3 for gravel mostly because of two sections





1 THE CLIMB BACK INTO SCOTLAND PAST THE BLOODY BUSH MONUMENT. 2 THE REMARKABLE SKEWED ARCHES OF KIELDER VIADUCT.

of rougher singletrack around Bloody Bush. A few sections of the Cross Border Trail along Kershope Burn are on quite coarse gravel and include some singletrack too.

A real highlight is the rollercoaster-like Kielder Water Lakeside Way path, which is smooth and fast, but it can be busy with walkers around Kielder village and the dam to the south. For this reason, the route detours on to forest road sections to avoid the busiest parts.

The return leg from Kielder to Newcastleton has a section of red mountain bike trail. It is rideable but very bumpy with large cobbles on the initial climb; the descent is smoother and lots of fun, although it is getting a bit overgrown. You can opt to stay on the track and detour around to the Bloody Bush monument climb. This climb is a very narrow gravel singletrack (nature has started to reclaim the trail); it isn't too technical but takes some concentration. This section is also very exposed to the wind and rain (or sunshine).

After the Bloody Bush MTB Trail the gravel track descent is fast, but look carefully for a left-hand turn as the Cross Border Trail waymarker is almost hidden by vegetation. After the waymarker, the next section is around 100 metres of eroded singletrack.

The ride finishes with options for gravel-bike-friendly descents on the blue (or red) mountain bike trails at Newcastleton, which is one of the 7stanes mountain bike trail centres which range across the south of Scotland. Once on the trails they are waymarked back to the start.

post in particular that is on the fast, penultimate descent after the Bloody Bush section that can be easily missed. If you do miss it, you'll miss some good riding and end up on the road back to Newcastleton.

### Facilities and refreshments

Newcastleton is a great place to start with a range of shops, cafes and plenty of parking in the village centre. **The Olive Tree** is a great place for coffee while **Copshaw Kitchen** serves up standard, hearty cafe food. There are no other facilities along the route except at Kielder Water. There are cafes around the reservoir itself, but the best option is **Kielder Castle Cafe** (just off-route at Kielder village), it also has Wi-Fi which might be useful due to the lack of phone reception.







THE STARTING SIGNPOST ON THE CROSS BORDER TRAIL.

### Bike shops

The nearest bike shop is some distance away in Hawick, appropriately called **Hawick Cycles** (T: 01450 372 631), with some spares and most repairs.

### Public transport and access

There are no practical public transport options. Newcastleton has a campsite, shops and cafes and parking available. Kielder village also has a campsite and there are lakeside cabins at Kielder Water that make a nice overnight stop.

## The route

- ➊ From the centre of Newcastleton village head south before turning left over Liddel Water. Carry on along the tarmac until the first purple Cross Border Trail marker points up a gravel track.
- ➋ Follow the gravel track. After 500m the Cross Border Trail turns off right; ignore this overgrown singletrack and keep on the main gravel track.
- ➌ You rejoin the Cross Border Trail markers after a fast descent. A steady climb follows Kershope Burn, which is also the border line. Finally, a wooden bridge takes you over the burn and into England on a narrow gravel path. Keep following the Cross Border Trail and Sustrans National Route 10 until you reach Kielder Water.
- ➍ When you reach the reservoir, to the left is an impressive modern arching pedestrian bridge that goes to Kielder village; keep right to follow the route around the reservoir. The full loop initially uses the waymarked Lakeside Way path, with Sustrans National Route 10 also signposted until you reach the dam at the southern end of the reservoir.
- ➎ Cross the dam. After the dam either stay on our route by following a forest track (called North Haul Road on OS maps), which moves away from the reservoir for a time, or follow the Lakeside Way path (which can be busy). Halfway along the reservoir turn left to leave the North Haul Road to join the Lakeside Way, which is now much quieter.



RIDING ON TOP OF KIELDER VIADUCT.

- 6 At the end of the lake the trail heads over Kielder Viaduct. This stunning skewed-arch viaduct takes you into Kielder village itself. From Kielder village follow the main road north for less than 1km before reaching an obvious gravel track just before a church building.
- 7 Turn left on to the track – it heads up and up with wide open views. The navigation isn't waymarked for this section, but it is pretty straightforward to follow the main track.
- 8 Look out for signposts for the Bloody Bush MTB Trail. Nature is trying its best to reclaim this remote trail and the cobbled rocks will vibrate your fillings out; you can detour around on a track but the MTB trail adds some fun smooth berms down to the Bloody Bush monument.
- 9 The singletrack climb after the monument is very narrow, down to almost a tyre width in places, but it is gravel under-tyre and a good challenge. The climbing is almost over when you see a phone mast appear ahead. On the fast gravel descent that follows, keep your eyes peeled – you don't want to miss the Cross Border Trail waymarker post pointing to the left.
- 10 After this turn off on to singletrack, there is 100m of trail which is badly eroded and has a nasty, steep stream crossing, before it joins a perfect gravel track. Follow the Cross Border Trail signs back to Newcastleton. There are options to take red or blue trails back down; they all end at the same place.

### Other routes or attractions in the area

The route does have an option to shorten it – head north, rather than south, when you reach Kielder Water to avoid a full lap of the reservoir.

The potential for quality gravel riding is endless in this area, but looking at the Dirty Reiver event and route is a good start. The gravel is usually smooth here on the plantation forest tracks and in the rolling foothills of the Scottish Borders and Cheviots. This route is designed to link into **02 Hawick castles and railways loop** (pages 13–19).