

RUNNING ADVENTURES SCOTLAND

25 INSPIRATIONAL
RUNS IN SCOTLAND'S
WILD PLACES



ROSS BRANNIGAN

RUNNING 25 INSPIRATIONAL **ADVENTURES** RUNS IN SCOTLAND'S **SCOTLAND** WILD PLACES

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Vertebrate Publishing, Sheffield
www.adventurebooks.com

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 First published in 2022 by Vertebrate Publishing.

Vertebrate Publishing, Omega Court, 352 Cemetery Road, Sheffield S11 8FT, United Kingdom.
www.adventurebooks.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-83981-068-8 (Paperback)
ISBN 978-1-83981-166-1 (Ebook)

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Front cover *Dougie Harvey on Cir Mhòr, Arran, in morning light above a cloud inversion after a high bivvy (route 22).* © Finlay Wild.

Back cover (L–R) *River crossing in Glen Coe (route 05), Bothy on Loch Lomond (route 25), Skirting Sgùrr Beag looking west to Creag nan Damh (route 08), Looking over Loch Tay from Meall Greigh (route 18), On the West Highland Way near Tyndrum (route 25), Views across the Trossachs (route 15).*

Opposite page *Snow slope (route 14).*

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Cartography by Richard Ross, Active Maps Ltd. – www.activemaps.co.uk

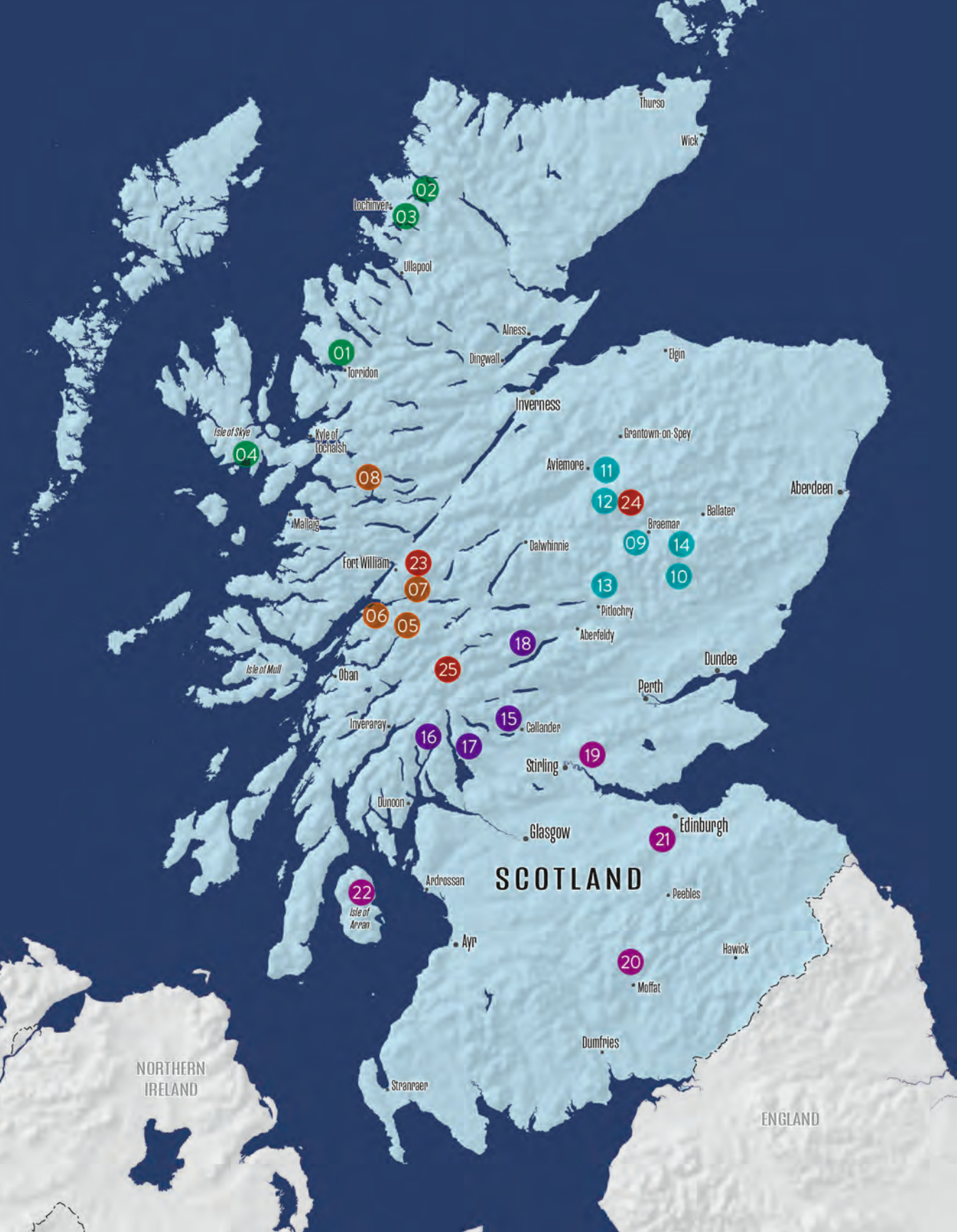
Edited by Helen Parry, cover design by Jane Beagley, internal layout and production by Rosie Edwards.
www.adventurebooks.com

Printed and bound in Europe by Latitude Press.

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Thurso

Wick

02

Lochmaben

03

Ullapool

01

Torrif

Alness

Dingwall

Inverness

Elgin

Isle of Skye

04

Kyle of Lochalsh

Grantown-on-Spey

08

Aviemore

11

Aberdeen

Mallaig

12

24

Ballater

Fort William

23

Dalwhinnie

09

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07

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Pitlochry

Isle of Mull

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Aberfeldy

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Download the
Running Adventures
Scotland GPX files from
www.adventurebooks.com/RAS-GPX



INTRODUCTION

Scotland: the land of myths and legends, mountains and glens, lochs and rivers. It is home to some of the last remaining wilderness in the UK, with dramatic landscapes and fascinating wildlife.

This book is your running guide to Scotland's wild places. Each route will take you on an adventure; whether that is over a mountain (or several), through remote glens, or as part of a longer journey – each of them will stay with you.

You will learn more about what makes Scotland such an incredible place to visit, find out about local history and culture, and see some beautiful places.

Scotland has a long history of hill running. Once used by kings as a test of fitness, the sport of hill running has evolved over the years and is now comprised of a close community of like-minded folks who love nothing more than a boggy day out on these incredible hills.

Each route has been carefully selected. One might be host to a classic Scottish hill race; another could be part of a 'round' or 'fastest known time' route; another may have a cultural significance; and many are simply absolute bangers that are adored by runners across Scotland. In fact, they are so loved that you will find quotes from some of these runners at the start of each route.

I have picked out what I feel are the iconic routes you just *have* to run. There are sublime ridges, amazing trails and, in every direction, sensational views (when they aren't obscured by cloud, of course).

What I hope you find as you follow this guide is that Scotland is a beautiful place. However, it is under threat. The climate and biodiversity crises are taking their toll on this landscape, as are the increasing visitor numbers.

So, wherever you go, make sure to leave no trace, keep to paths as much as you can and consider giving back to help protect and enhance this amazing landscape for future generations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are a few people I would like to acknowledge in the writing of this book. First and foremost, despite the times my brother and I moaned our way up yet another sodden Munro on yet another caravan trip to the deepest depths of Scotland, I have to thank my parents. Without them, I would not have grown up with the passion for the hills and the country that I have now, and so this book would not have existed. In the same vein, I have to thank the rest of my family, who you will more than likely come across if you go into the Ochil Hills. They have been nothing but encouraging. In particular, Gran and Pops, who have spent many, many hours sat at the kitchen table over tea and baking, listening to my tall tales, and who have always pushed me to take every opportunity and have read every piece of writing I produce.

Thanks as well to the friends who have come out on adventures with me, regularly to bleak places in miserable weather, but also many stunning days. Thanks to you all – you know who you are. Particular mention needs to go to Finlay Wild, who provided the exceptional cover artwork for the book, and to all the incredible runners who provided quotes for each of the routes.

Thank you to the team at Vertebrate Publishing, particularly Kirsty Reade who gave me a commission that I could only dream of having.

Finally, a massive thank you to my partner, Bo. Without complaint, she followed me across the country, exploring the mountains, being a model for most of the photography, listening to my doubts and fears, and for convincing me that a day is never complete without a *lekker kopje koffie en cake*. Thank you.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

In each of the routes, you will find a quick overview of the main statistics (distance, ascent, time), along with some insights on the terrain. Each route is graded out of five for difficulty (with 1/5 denoting a straightforward route and 5/5 indicating a



MAOL CHINN-DEARG LOOKING TOWARDS AONACH AIR CHRITH (ROUTE 08)

technical route) and for the amount of bogs you may encounter (with 1/5 meaning you may still have dry feet at the end of the route but if it's a 5/5 there is no chance your feet will stay dry). I will tell you a bit about why this route is 'ace', 'superb' or 'cracking', before providing step-by-step directions for the route. There is also loads of useful information on public transport, parking, ways to shorten or extend the route and details of the best cafes and pubs to enjoy after your run.

NAVIGATION

Directions are provided for each route, along with a map of the route to give you a good sense of orientation. GPX files for the routes can be downloaded (see page VII); they can then be uploaded on to a GPS device to aid navigation.

GPS devices are a great navigational aid, but you should always carry a paper map and compass, and know how to use them. I have recommended a map for each route. There are some great apps to use on your phone, including OS Locate from Ordnance Survey, which are helpful to position yourself, but be aware that phone batteries can perish quickly in the cold, and you might find that you have no signal in many remote areas of Scotland.

While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy within the directions and descriptions in this book, things change and we are unable

to guarantee that every detail will be correct. For this reason, the routes in this book are guides only and must be planned and run with care. Treat the stated distance and ascent as guidelines and exercise caution if part of a GPX file or some information in the text appears at odds with the route on the ground. A comparison between the GPX file and map should see you on the right track.

TRANSPORT

Where possible, I have included public transport links for the routes. Bus and train timetables are available at www.travelinescotland.com Details about car parking are also provided.

FITNESS

I won't beat about the bush: you will be going up hills. And down them.

I have kept the routes as varied as possible, with some shorter days and some epic routes, helping you have fun and find something at your level. Nevertheless, be prepared to go up and down some big lumps and, occasionally, over some rough ground.

Where I say 'rough', think rocks hidden under thick grass and lots of heather. Where I say 'technical' this often refers to rocky, sometimes exposed places, such as narrow ridges.

I would suggest you have experience of walking in the hills before taking on some of the more



technical routes in this book. Trail running isn't immediately transferable to hill running either, so do make sure you've got some experience of being in the hills before heading out.

ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

As you follow the routes in this book through the awe-inspiring landscape that is Scotland, it is important to be mindful of your behaviour and the environment around you so that people can continue to enjoy these places in the future.

As hill runners, the lure of a bog, bouncy castle of heather or scree slope is often difficult to resist. While in many cases you should certainly go out and enjoy yourself, keep an eye out for any signs that it might not be a great idea. Here are some pointers to help you enjoy running in Scotland responsibly.

Stick to paths and trods where possible

There are a few reasons for this. Firstly, erosion in areas of high visitor numbers can see multiple scars appear on the hillside instead of a single track. Not only is this ugly to look at, but it also causes soil degradation and can cause rocks and soil to wash away in heavy rain, adding to the problem. Peat is one of the biggest carbon capture systems on the planet, so protecting it is vitally important to the environment.

Secondly, small flora suffer from being repeatedly stomped on, so help our little alpine plants by sticking to the path.

Thirdly, particularly in spring and summer, watch out for ground-nesting birds. These are birds who – as the name suggests – lay their eggs in the tall grasses and heath of the hillsides. It can be difficult to spot a nest, but there are a few signs to watch out for:

- adult birds feigning injury to draw you away from the nest (notable for grouse or ptarmigan);
- loud alarm calls or even dive-bombing;
- birds circling above you to draw you away.

Lastly, scree is excellent fun, but many scree slopes are home to birds or fragile plants. A lot of the popular scree slopes are run-out now, but it is better to stick to the used ones rather than fresh ones as the latter could be home to a number of plants and animals.

Follow the Scottish Outdoor Access Code

We will look in detail at the Scottish Outdoor Access Code overleaf, but the key things to bear in mind here are:

- leave no trace;
- respect the environment.

Leaving no trace simply means leaving no sign of your being there. Take your litter home or put it in a bin. If you are camping, do not light fires or move stones around that are in the ground, and make sure you only stay a night or two. If you need to 'go', dig a little hole in the ground, cover it up and put your loo roll in a bin (this might require using a sandwich bag). Wet wipes (or baby wipes) do not decompose, so we will all be reminded of your business for the rest of time – take them home.

Respecting the environment means following the advice above about paths, avoiding disturbance of plants and animals and protecting geological features. You are visiting these areas because of their natural beauty, so make sure you leave them the way you found them.

If you run with a dog, keep them under control around farm animals and breeding birds. Farmers have the right to shoot a dog if they feel it is worrying their livestock.

Consider giving back to the places you visit

Throughout this book, I draw your attention to various groups and charities who care for the areas you are visiting. If you enjoyed visiting, do consider making a donation to the charity mentioned in association with the route, or perhaps returning to carry out voluntary work.

Scotland's environment is not immune to the impact of the climate emergency, ecological imbalances and issues caused by visitors. Anything we can do to help protect these landscapes is vital to ensuring more people can experience wild places, while helping to conserve and restore them.

SCOTTISH OUTDOOR ACCESS CODE

You are in luck! Scotland has some of the best access rights in the entire world. The only condition is that you don't behave like an eejit, as we say. In general, you are free to go where you wish in Scotland and camp where you like, so long as you use common sense and act responsibly.

There are three basic rules forming the Scottish Outdoor Access Code:

- Take responsibility for your own actions.
- Respect the interests of others.
- Care for the environment.

Be mindful of shooting activities on the hills and moors. Read more at www.outdooraccess-scotland.scot

CAMPING AND CAMPERVANS

CAMPING

The responsibilities and sustainability aspects of wild camping are covered within the Scottish Outdoor Access Code; more information is available at www.outdooraccess-scotland.scot

CAMPERVANS

For more and more people, a campervan is the go-to accommodation for outdoor trips – they are becoming an increasingly frequent sight on Scotland's roads. There are a few things to remember as you take your campervan around Scotland:

- Leave no trace of your being there.
- Arrive late, leave early.
- You are allowed to park in lay-bys (small bays next to a road), but technically not allowed to stay overnight in car parks without permission from the landowner.
- Do *not* camp in passing places – these are spaces on single-track roads that people use to pass cars coming in the opposite direction. They will often have a sign designating it as a passing place. Parking in these is very much frowned upon, especially in the Highlands where they are essential for locals to get around.
- Do not block gates or access points – you could stop locals or farmers getting around or, at worst, prevent access for emergency service vehicles.
- Be prepared to do some reversing on single-track roads. There are quite a few narrow roads in Scotland, so be aware of this if you have a larger campervan.

SAFETY

Scotland is a beautiful place, but it is infamous for its rapidly changing weather. What might start out as a shorts and t-shirt kind of day can quickly turn into a full-blown winter storm. Remember that, although the hills you are heading up might be smaller than those in mainland Europe, they are still high and very exposed to the elements.

Always pack with safety in mind, especially in any months which have an 'r' in them. Take an extra layer and a waterproof, as well as an emergency blanket at a minimum, plus some emergency rations in case a short day becomes much longer. From September to March, it is also best to take a head torch – just in case.

Even if you have a GPS device with you, always take a paper map and a compass and have the skills to use them. Some of the routes have a shorter option provided in the text, but always have a plan B if things change and you want to cut your run short.

IN THE EVENT OF AN ACCIDENT

If you do require emergency assistance, dial **999** or **112** and ask for the **Police** and then **Mountain Rescue**. Make sure you are able to tell the call handler where you are either using map coordinates or using an app on your phone. If you have intermittent phone signal, an SMS message may send when a call will not connect.

Remember, you will at times be heading into remote areas which can take a long time for emergency services to access, so you will need those extra layers and an emergency blanket. More information can be found at www.mountaineering.scot

WEATHER AND AVALANCHE

As I mentioned above, Scotland is infamous for its constantly changing weather. Thankfully, there are a number of excellent resources at your fingertips to keep you informed.

The Mountain Weather Information Service provides simple information to keep you safe in the UK hills. Broken down regionally, you will

find information on rain, wind, visibility and temperature: mwis.org.uk

Scotland in winter can be fierce, but also beautiful. If you do find yourself heading to Scotland in winter, it is good to understand the risk of avalanches. The Scottish Avalanche Information Service provides the details you need to stay safe in winter, with an avalanche forecasting system for popular areas. There is also an app available to download: www.sais.gov.uk





MIDGES AND TICKS

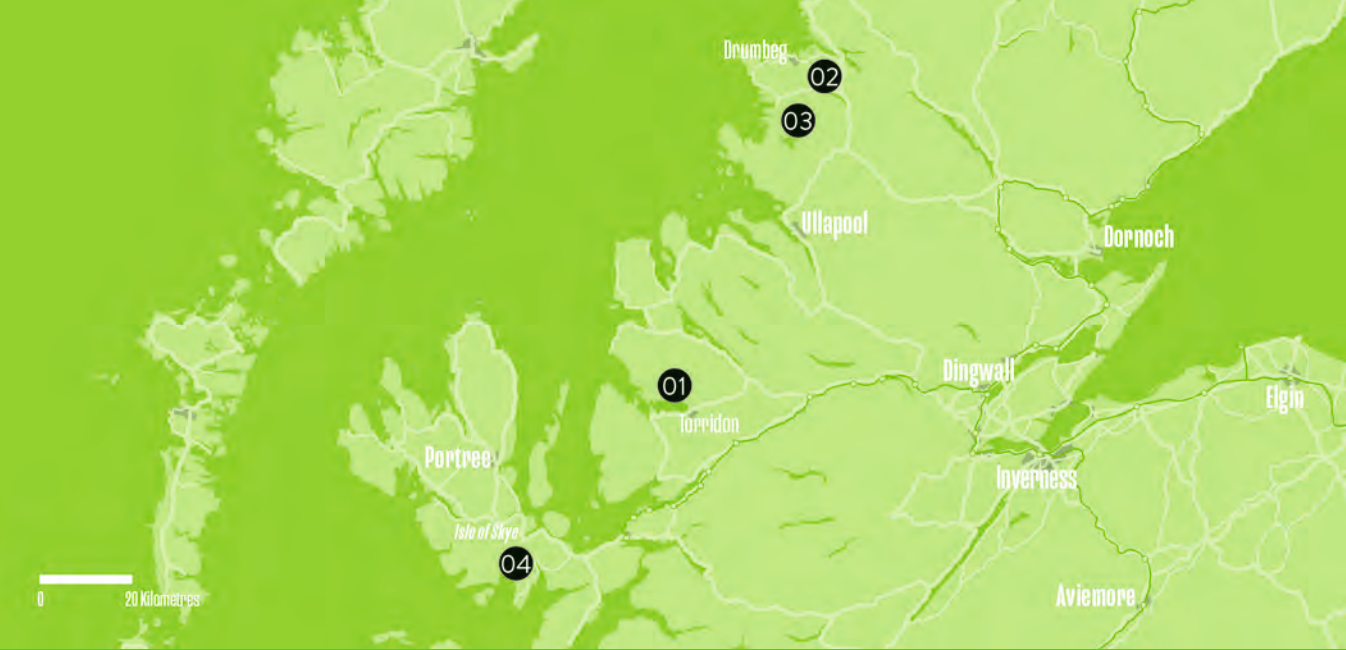
Midges are the necessary evil of enjoying the outdoors in Scotland. These are tiny insects that come out in summer, nibbling you and causing impromptu dances around the tent as people attempt to avoid them. Thankfully, all they cause is a bite and irritation, so I recommend some insect repellent and a midge-net to keep them off.

Ticks, on the other hand, can be problematic. Ticks are small, blood-sucking insects that tend to emerge in late spring and can hang around until late autumn. They look like tiny beetles, with a round body, small head and grippy legs. Ticks can carry Lyme disease – a particularly debilitating disease if not treated.

After each run, check yourself (and your pals) for ticks. Don't be shy, they can hide anywhere! Ideally remove them with a tick remover, or a pair of tweezers. Look out for a red 'bullseye' mark that can appear on the body after a tick bite. This can be an early sign of Lyme disease and you should seek medical attention as soon as possible: www.lymediseaseaction.org.uk

Map key

-  Route line
-  Start
-  Route marker
-  Route direction



This is an ancient land. Here, some of the oldest rocks in the world can be found, with grumbling mountains seemingly still emerging from the last ice age.

The North West Highlands encompass the wild lands of Assynt, Sutherland, Wester Ross and part of Caithness. It contains some of Scotland's last remaining wilderness, and some of its most remote Munros, such as the Fannichs and the Fisherfield Munros. It is also home to some of the best rock climbing in the country, with the Torriddon hills of Beinn Eighe and Liathach famous for their scrambling and steep cliffs.

In recent years, the North Coast 500 has made the area busier, with all the pressures that come from increasing tourist numbers. However, it remains a resolutely rural place, with small towns and shops that close at odd hours, and 'main roads' with just one lane.

It is also a solemn place. The glens were not always this quiet. Not just this area but the whole of the Highlands were witness to the Highland Clearances in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when people were moved off the land to make way for sheep and deer.

I have never quite put my finger on how this landscape makes me feel: it is wonder and awe, but also an awareness of how wild it can be here, especially in bad weather, and how insignificant I am compared to these ancient hills.

Part of that wildness comes from the ever-present Atlantic Ocean, whose depths provide some exquisite local seafood that you find throughout this area. There are also plenty of secluded beaches to discover after a day running around the mountains.

To give you a picture of all this region has to offer, the routes in this book cover a wide area, featuring Torriddon's dramatic ridges, a windswept peak on the Isle of Skye, the unique geology of Quinag and the iconic Suilven. Naturally, there is lots to explore beyond these too.

NORTH WEST HIGHLANDS





'I may be biased, but the north-west coast of Scotland is one of the most scenic areas in the world. Beinn Alligin offers breathtaking views of the other Torridon Munros and across the sea to the islands of Rassay and Skye. On a nice day, you can see the Cuillin mountain range and even out to the Outer Hebrides.' DONNIE CAMPBELL

Donnie is one of Scotland's top mountain runners and coaches, with an incredible racing *palmarès*. In 2020, he set the record for the fastest time to summit each of Scotland's 282 Munros – in just 31 days and 23 hours.

01

BEINN ALLIGIN

10km

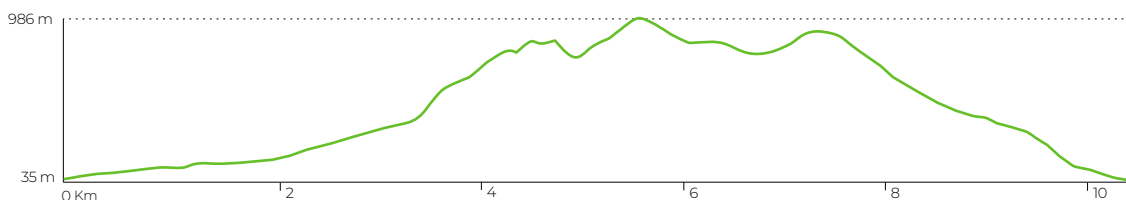
As you drive from the south towards the village of Torridon, you will come to a large lay-by overlooking the beautiful sea loch of Upper Loch Torridon. Straight ahead of you sit the majestic and formidable peaks that act as the guardians to this small village. Beinn Alligin (Jewelled Mountain) sits directly opposite, its three horns immediately recognisable. To the right are the jagged spires of Liathach (The Grey One), looming like an enormous castle.

The three Torridon mountain ridges of Beinn Alligin, Liathach and Beinn Eighe (File Mountain, due to its sharp edges) are magnificent playgrounds. Beinn Eighe sees runners taking part in the infamous Celtman Extreme Scottish Triathlon scale its sides on a gruelling marathon, after swimming in jellyfish-infested waters and a 200-kilometre bike ride.

Beinn Eighe is also home to the UK's oldest nature reserve, featuring an area of ancient Caledonian pine forest. If you're in the area, head to Kinlochewe and go for a walk around the reserve. Torridon is rich in wildlife – keep a look out for golden eagles that nest in the crags of Liathach, or even sea eagles.

The run over Beinn Alligin's two Munros – Sgùrr Mòr and Tom na Gruagaich – takes in a fine, grassy saddle, with unbeatable views over its neighbouring peaks and the Atlantic Ocean. The route is circular and can be done either clockwise or anticlockwise. Both are excellent; the directions and GPX file describe the anticlockwise version. It is mostly on trails or rocky ground, with the saddle (bealach) a little grassier.

Distance 10km **Ascent** 1,216m **Time** 3–5 hours **Start** Beinn Alligin car park **Start latitude/longitude** 57.5590, -5.5640 **Start grid reference** NG 869577 **Difficulty** 3/5 – Some light scrambling and exposure, but a manageable day out **Bogs** 1/5 – Not many bogs about up here! However, you can see lots from the top **Terrain** Paths, trails and rock **Map** Harvey Superwalker, Torridon (1:25,000)



OPPOSITE VIEW FROM THE SUMMIT OF BEINN ALLIGIN



DIRECTIONS

- 1** Leave the car park and turn right along the road, cross the bridge then turn left, following a Scottish Rights of Way Society signpost to *Coire Dubh* (Black Corrie). This path is particularly stunning; it can be followed all the way around the northern side of Liathach to the car park at its base. As you make your way along the path, take time to marvel at the old pines to your left, which eventually make way to birch trees. Ahead, the Corbett Beinn Dearg (Red Hill) can be seen, with Beinn Alligin and its distinctive horns on the left. Continue following the river, leaving the woodland behind.
- 2** After 2km, the path forks (the right fork continues on around the northern side of Liathach while the left fork begins the climb up Beinn Alligin). Take this left-hand fork, following the smaller river. The climbing proper now starts. Cross the river and keep heading towards the prominent rocky buttress up ahead.
- 3** Keep left at a faint split in the path. What comes next is some exciting but manageable scrambling. Once you have made your way up the face, you will reach another flat section with a big cairn and a great view up to the Horns of Alligin.
- 4** The path forks and you have a choice: fork right to go up and over the horns or fork left on to a bypass path. When I did it, I went around the side, more because I was in a hurry to get back for a hot chocolate than anything! The horns (which is the route marked on the map and in the GPX file) are straightforward enough – just some extra climbing! As for the ‘bypass’ route, what it lacks in ascent it makes up for in excitement. The bypass is a narrow trail, skirting the mountainside, with quite an exposed drop on your left. It is still possible to run it, as there aren’t any particularly scary parts that require scrambling, but just take care on one or two sections where there is some smooth rock on the path. Either way, you still get amazing views.



ABOVE BYPASS PATH BELOW HORNS OF ALLIGIN **BELOW** HORNS OF ALLIGIN AND LIATHACH



ABOVE VIEW TOWARDS LIATHACH **BELOW** LIATHACH AND UPPER LOCH TORRIDON





THE SECOND SUMMIT

The bypass path gives a cracking view to the first summit ahead, with the ridge line elegantly snaking up towards it.

- 5 Once you are over the horns (or through the bypass), make the final ascent up Sgùrr Mòr and take it all in! This is probably one of the most remarkable views I have ever seen. I have written a lot in this book about how amazing the Scottish landscape is, and it is not without reason. Now, this all hinges on you being able to see something. If you can't, then you must come back. Once you have filled your phone's memory with photographs (or quietly stored them in your brain), follow the path heading south-west. The mountain's character now changes. After the steep, rough and, at times, airy climbing, the ridge becomes softer and grassier.
- 6 You might notice, as you drop into the bealach, that there is a lot of rope strewn across the hillside. From what I have read, this appears to be a historic attempt to stop erosion of the hill's soil – a sign that erosion and environmental damage is not a new thing. The path slowly bends to point south at the bottom of the bealach, starting to climb again towards the summit of Tom na Gruagaich. Make your way over the large boulders that litter the path up the ridge, which flattens out slightly to keep

giving awesome views to the summit (trust me, it is getting closer). Continue climbing on a very good path all the way to the summit at 922m.

- 7 Once you have spent some time at the summit with its large cairn, head in a westerly direction towards a very shallow bealach. Once there, turn left (south) to reach the head of a steep gully. The gully is stepped almost the entire way; it descends steeply down with steep crags rising high on either side. You get a really ace view down to where you started the route, near the shore of the loch. Strangely, OS paper maps don't show this very obvious path down the hill, whereas Harvey maps do. Keep descending, heading south-south-east; the path eventually joins a thin patch of trees and undergrowth. A few steps later, and you pop out right across from the car park, ready to head off for the next adventure.



BEINN ALLIGIN

POINTS OF INTEREST

- **Munro** Sgùrr Mòr (Big Peak), 986m
- **Munro** Tom na Gruagaich (Hill of the Damsel), 922m

HIGHLIGHTS

- Horns of Alligin
- Airy heights of the bypass route
- Views from Sgùrr Mòr and Tom na Gruagaich
- The beautiful woodland at the start and end of the route

GETTING THERE

There are no practical public transport options for this route.

The car park is located on the road heading west out of Torridon village. Around 4 kilometres after the village you cross a stone bridge; the car park is on your left just afterwards. (The road continues on towards Diabaig, which is excellent for climbing.)

TOP TIP

Don't be fooled by the distance. It may be 'only' 10 kilometres but there are over 100 metres climbed per kilometre in this run and there are some steep ascents and descents to be covered.

OTHER OPTIONS

The Corbett next to Beinn Alligin, Beinn Dearg, is an understated mountain among its larger neighbours. Following the trail to the foot of

Beinn Alligin, go left as though heading up to Beinn Alligin. Where the trail forks, bear right, going into Bealach a' Chòmhla. Beinn Dearg is along a stunning ridge with some tricky boulders that require attention (15km; 1,008m ascent).

If you haven't brought your hill legs today, don't worry about it. The trail around the Diabaig peninsula makes for a fun day out. Diabaig is home to some great climbing, too! Starting from Alligin Shuas, follow the shoreline around to Diabaig. The return is on and off the road at times, but is a great alternative day out (12km; 569m ascent).

WHERE TO REFUEL

It would be a crime to go to Torridon and not visit the **Wee Whistle Stop Cafe**, which is inside the Loch Torridon Community Centre. The cafe is community-run, with local people bringing their own recipes and hospitality with them. The scones, which are often accompanied by homemade jam, are incredible.

LOVED THIS ROUTE?

Much of this area is owned by the National Trust for Scotland; learn more at www.nts.org.uk