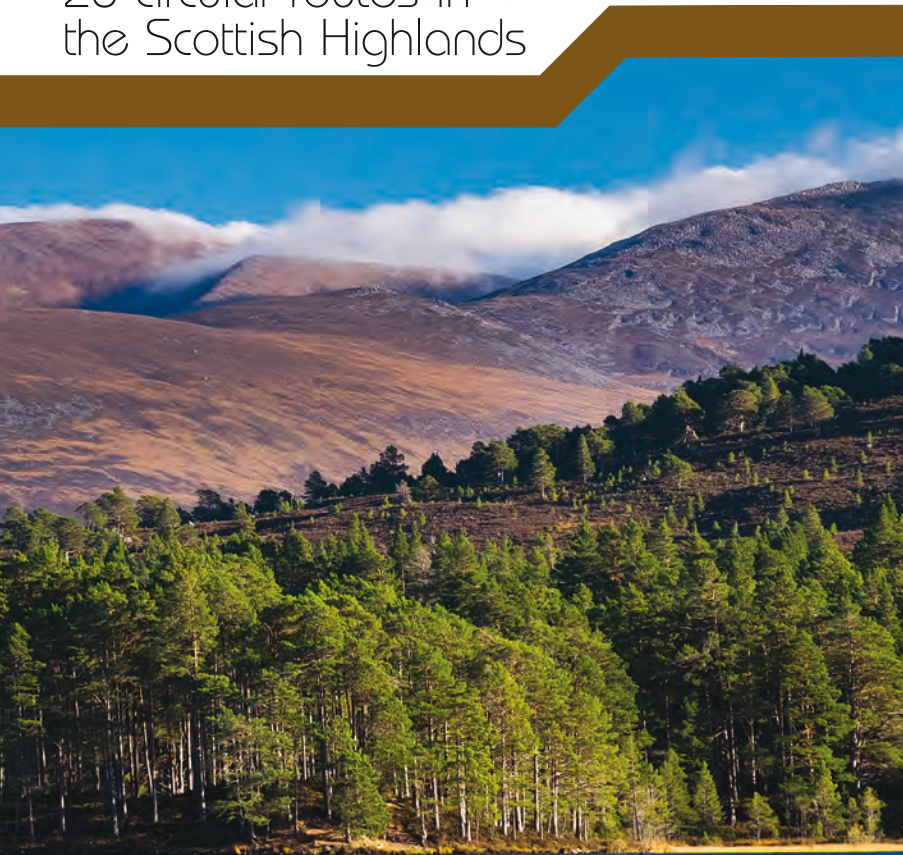


Day Walks in the Cairngorms

20 circular routes in
the Scottish Highlands



Helen & Paul Webster

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Back cover: Glen Quoich (route 17).

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* Shortcut available



Introduction

The Cairngorms is the largest national park in Great Britain, offering a huge variety of landscapes and habitats with endless opportunities for exploring on foot. They include five of the six highest Munros, rising above a vast granite plateau, scoured by winds and encircled by a spectacular array of craggy, glacier-scooped corries. Up here only a handful of specialised animals and birds can survive – including snow bunting, mountain hare and ptarmigan. For hillwalkers the plateau offers a true sense of remote wildness, with challenging navigation and often ferocious weather conditions.

Around this mountain core the landscapes are more accessible yet no less stunning. The Cairngorms include the extensive remains of the vast and ancient Caledonian pinewoods that once swathed much of the Highlands. This is the largest area of native forest surviving in the UK, home to the crested tit, the red squirrel, the crossbill and the endangered capercaillie. After years of decline due to overgrazing, the forests are expanding once more.

The waterscapes too are remarkable. The sparkling, fast-flowing rivers of the Spey and the Dee are legendary for their salmon fishing, and there is an array of beautiful forest lochs and lochans. Here too are the Insh marshes, one of the UK's most important wetlands. Keep an eye out for golden eagles, osprey, hen harriers and buzzards as well as waders such as curlew, lapwings and oyster-catchers who thrive on the rich insect life of the area.

The Cairngorms is very much a living landscape; there is a long and rich heritage and many people are drawn to live and work here by the natural environment. The elemental and restorative power of this landscape is celebrated in Nan Shepherd's evocative book *The Living Mountain* and her face now graces the back of a Scottish £5 note. Today people visit the National Park to walk, climb, mountain bike and ski or to wildlife watch. Ecotourism is often claimed to have started with the return of the ospreys to Loch Garten, and today tourism – including walking and nature watching – is the main driver of the local economy, providing almost half of employment, supported by farming, forestry and the service sector. Whilst large-scale sporting estates still dominate much of the uplands and are managed for grouse and red deer shooting, an increasing amount of the Cairngorms are now managed for conservation. A huge long-term rewilding project, Cairngorms Connect, spans much of the northern flank of the mountains and aims to increase biodiversity and natural forest cover, at the same time as boosting responsible tourism and providing sustainable jobs for the future.

The possibilities in the Cairngorms for an enthusiastic walker are inexhaustible. This book presents an introduction, with 20 stunning circular walks including everything from low-level explorations of the forests and lochs to moorland walks and ascents on to the high plateau to visit the great summits. Enjoy!

Helen & Paul Webster



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SECTION 1

Badenoch & the Western Cairngorms

The A9 leads down from the bare Drumochter Pass into Badenoch – the uppermost part of the River Spey catchment. The hills either side of the pass, and the Monadhliath to the north, are mostly rounded but offer superb views towards the main Cairngorm peaks and vast skies.

The strath itself is full of interest; the huge ruins of Ruthven Barracks guarding the entrance to the bird haven of the Insh Marshes and the nearby lively villages of Kingussie and Newtonmore. To the east is Glen Feshie, to many the finest of all Cairngorm glens – a nature lover’s dream, and the heart of a vast rewilding project.





VIEW OVER BADENOCH FROM CREAGAN AN FHITHICH





LOOKING OVER NEWTONMORE FROM CREAG BHEAG

01 Creag Bheag & the Wildcat Trail 18.8km/11.7miles

This satisfying loop explores the wee rocky hill of Creag Bheag above Kingussie taking in a loch, open moorland and a beautiful stretch of riverside.

Kingussie » Creag Bheag » Loch Gynack » Allt Lارايدh » Calder Path » River Spey » Highland Folk Museum » Kingussie

Start

Ardvonie car park, Kingussie.

GR: NH 755007.

The Walk

This exploration of the rivers and moorland sandwiched between the high mountains of the Cairngorms and Monadhliath combines a surprising variety of landscapes around the two villages of Newtonmore and Kingussie. There is also a chance to visit the superb Highland Folk Museum.

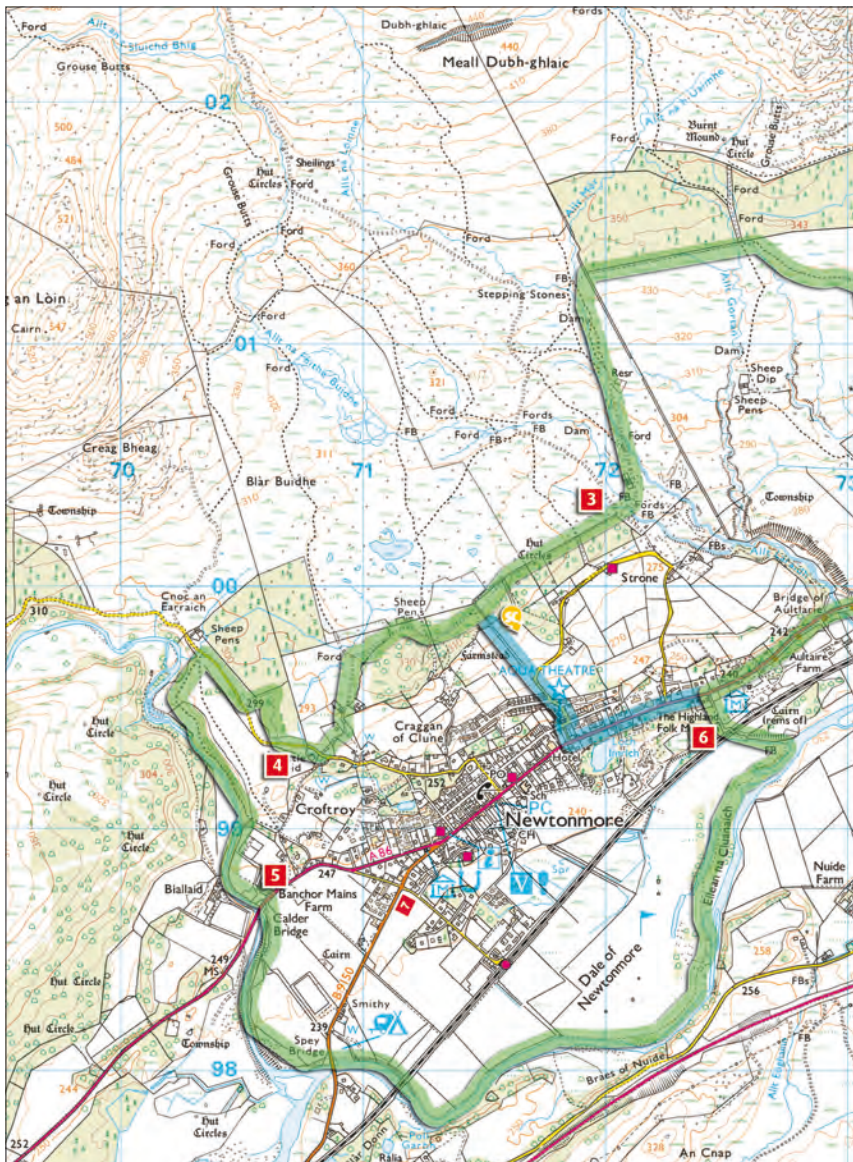
The route starts from Kingussie, which has a mix of shops, cafes and galleries. It crosses a park and climbs past some impressive Victorian villas before taking a path up through pinewoods and out on to the moors. The heather-clad ridge of Creag Bheag has great character, and the summit itself is marked with a large cairn and stone seat providing fine views over much of Badenoch and towards the Cairngorms. The hill is a much-loved part of the Highland community, its crags popular with climbers, and its summit the objective of a hill race held every September.

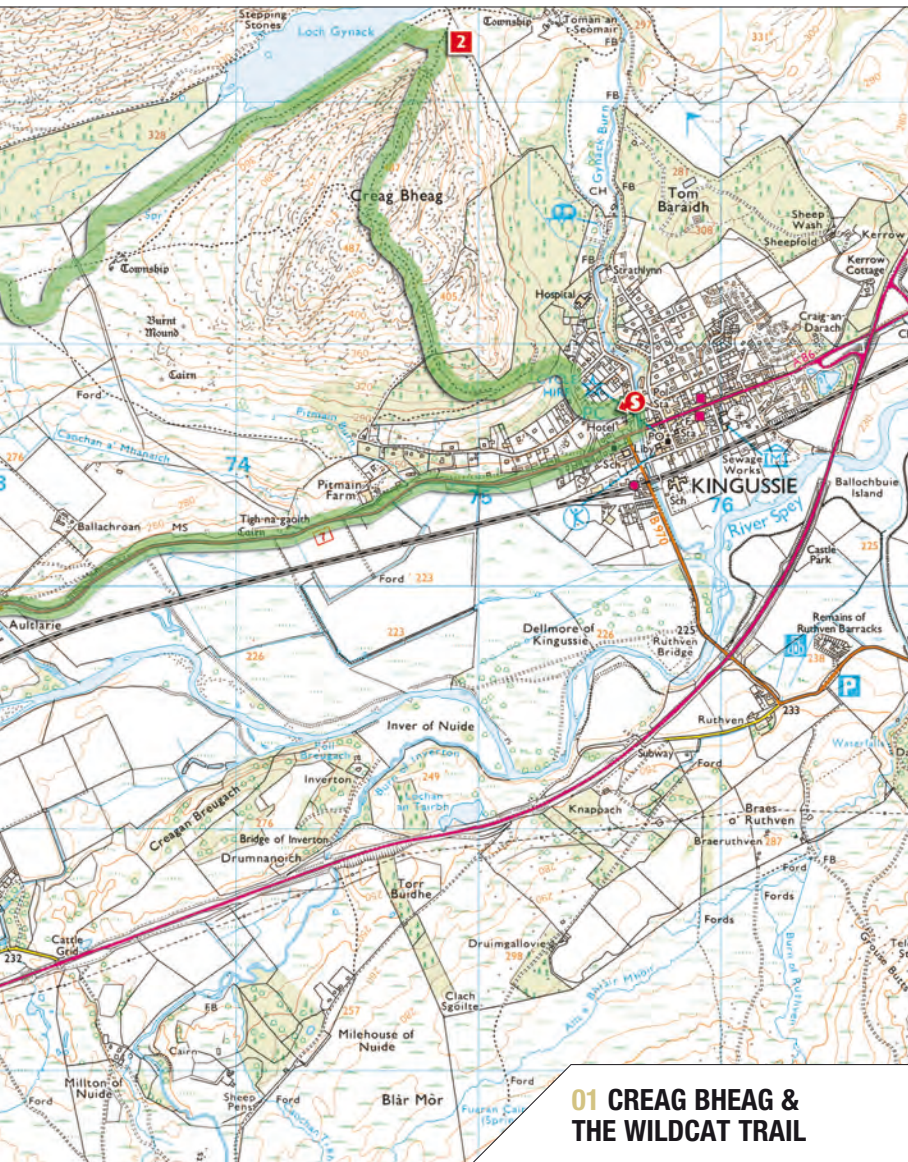
A steep and rough descent path leads down to the trees above Loch Gynack. The route then turns west, following a track through open moorland with expansive views to the Monadhliath mountains. This is a good place to spot birds of prey including buzzards, golden eagles and the rare hen harrier.

The walk then joins the Wildcat Trail, a circular route enclosing the neighbouring settlement of Newtonmore. Keeping high above the village, a series of paths lead through mixed woodland to reach a stunning stretch of path overlooking the River Calder. At this point it is possible to detour into Newtonmore where there are shops, cafes and pubs. The walk itself follows the Calder downstream to reach the mighty River Spey, eventually skirting the golf course to head through the edge of the Highland Folk Museum, based in a series of relocated historic buildings. Entrance is free and it is well worth allowing time to explore. Finally, a shared cycleway leads back to Kingussie and the start of the walk.

CREAG BHEAG & THE WILDCAT TRAIL

DISTANCE: 18.8KM/11.7 MILES » **TOTAL ASCENT:** 364M/1,194FT » **START GR:** NH 755007 » **TIME:** ALLOW 6.5 HOURS » **SATNAV:** PH21 1E2 » **MAP:** OS EXPLORER 56, BADENOCH & UPPER STRATHSPEY, 1:25,000 » **REFRESHMENTS:** SUGAR BOWL CAFE, KINGUSSIE, OR THE GLEN HOTEL, NEWTONMORE » **NAVIGATION:** STRAIGHTFORWARD ON MOSTLY CLEAR PATHS.






01 CREG BHEAG & THE WILDCAT TRAIL

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Directions – Creag Bheag & the Wildcat Trail



- 1** From the Ardvonie car park behind the Duke of Gordon Hotel, pass to the right of the toilets and cross the grass following the sign for *Creag Bheag Summit*. **Turn right** at the road and soon **bear left** on to a track. Go **straight ahead** through two gates and climb through pinewoods, ignoring paths on the left keeping on the waymarked path. **Go through a gate** to leave the woods and soon **turn right** to follow the moorland path eventually reaching the summit of Creag Bheag. After the final cairn and seat **keep ahead** as the path starts to descend, with a couple of rocky and steep sections.
 - 2** Lower down arrive at a signposted junction; **turn left** to follow a path above Loch Gynack signed *Newtonmore*. When the wide path reaches a track, **turn left** along it with the distant mountains of the Monadhliath visible ahead. At the next track junction **keep left** again and continue across the moor until a farm gate comes into view. Ignore a track off left, **keeping ahead** to pass through the gate. Follow the track towards a forestry plantation. Here, at a turning circle with a gate on the edge of the trees, **continue ahead on to a path** alongside the trees, **crossing a footbridge**. At the far corner of the plantation go through a gate and immediately **turn left** on to a path through the heather. The path eventually runs alongside a stream. **Keep straight ahead** when it joins a track and later **cross a footbridge** near a ford. Continue along the track until after a sheepfold, then **turn right** to cross another footbridge and **aim uphill** towards a gate at the corner of a wood.
 - 3** Go through the gate into the wood and **keep straight on** following the path along the edge of the trees. Cross a number of gates and stiles before a row of marker stones indicate where to **bear half-left** to a gate. Go through it and **keep straight on*** at a marker post, soon reaching another gate and joining an often-muddy track ahead through the trees. **Keep left** at a fork and go through a farm gate. Stay on the track as it curves left and then **go straight ahead** through another farm gate, soon passing a white cottage. **Keep straight ahead** at the cottage to reach a road. **Turn right** following the *Wildcat Trail* signs and head uphill on the road.
- SC** *SC: **Turn left** at the marker post to shortcut directly to Newtonmore where you can **turn left** along Main Street to pass the Highland Folk Museum and rejoin the route back to Kingussie.



4 A short way after a cattle grid **turn right** at a wildcat marker to reach woodland. **Climb the stile** and follow the path through birches and pine forestry. At a gate and track **turn left** along a wide break in the trees and go through a kissing gate to return to the road. **Turn right** along it. As views up Glen Banchor open up ahead **fork left** on to the *Calder Path*. The grassy path undulates and passes through a gate before a dramatic section high above the River Calder. Don't pass through the next gate but **turn right** downhill to soon run alongside the cemetery before climbing up to another gate and a small wood to reach a stile and bench at the A86.

5 **Go straight across** the road on to the track opposite. Go through the gate on the right to reach the riverside path. Follow the Calder until it meets the River Spey and **pass under the road bridge** after a stile. The path keeps to the riverbank passing under the railway; go through a number of gates and stiles **keeping on the path near the river**. Eventually the route passes the golf course and the path **bears left** away from the river. **Cross a footbridge** and then another and **bear left to climb uphill** to go over the railway.



If the Calder is in flood and the riverbank path is impassable, where the Calder meets the Spey **take the high stile on the left** and then **bear right** to cross fields before **another stile on the right** brings you back to the riverbank beyond the flood-prone section.

6 At a junction **continue straight ahead** to reach Main Street. **Turn right**, soon passing the main entrance to the Highland Folk Museum. This is well worth a visit and it can easily take two hours to explore all the reconstructed buildings which include a thatched black-house village. Otherwise, continue for a short distance and then **bear right** on to the shared cycle path. Follow this all the way into Kingussie. **Turn left** to cross the road after the Duke of Gordon Hotel and **turn left** again to return to the car park at the start.