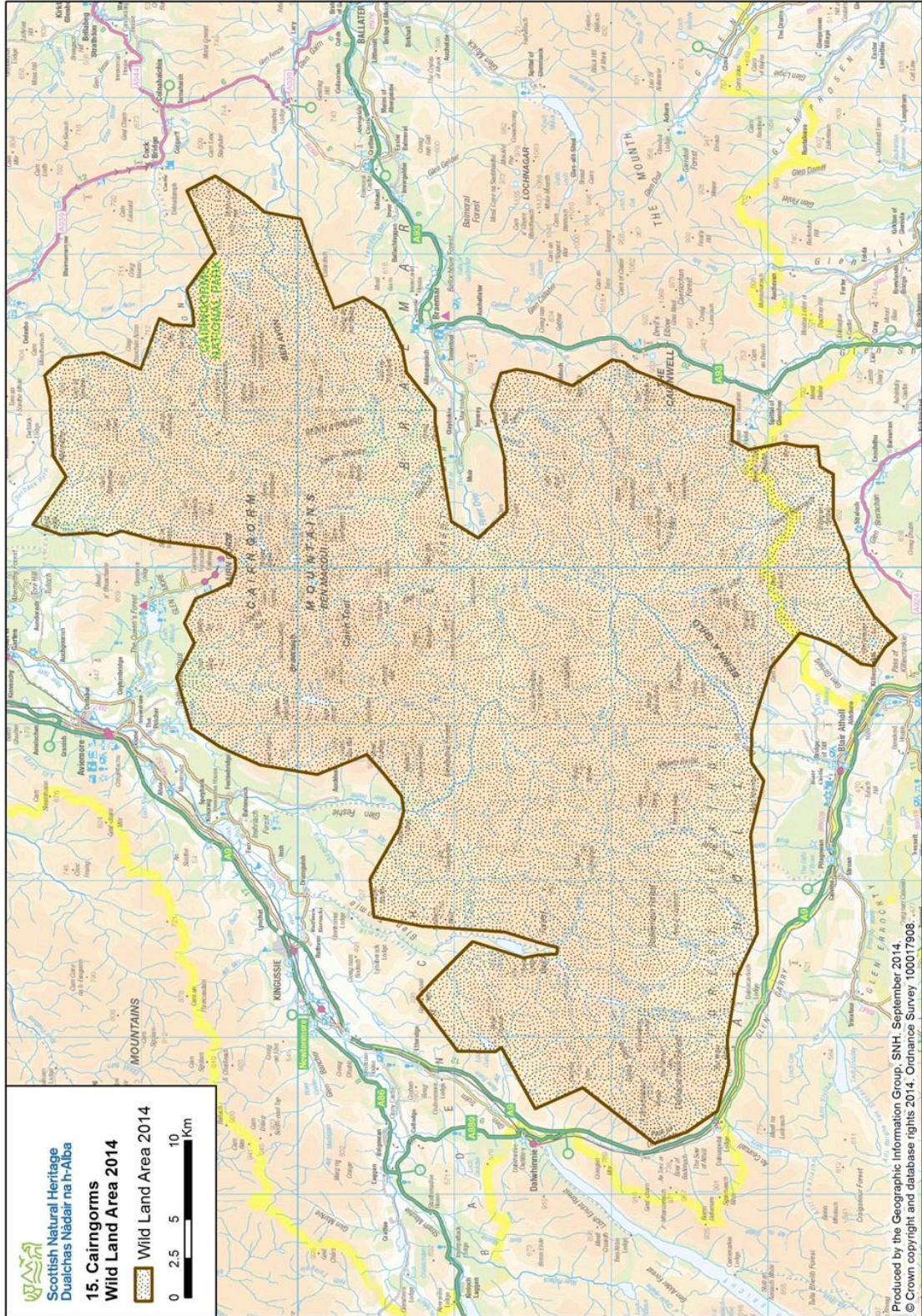


Cairngorms Wild Land Area



Context

This Wild Land Area (WLA) lies within the Grampian mountains and includes parts of Highland, Aberdeenshire and Perth and Kinross regions. It forms a very broad 'C' shape, extending to Drumochter in the west and with an indent along the River Dee in the east. A consequence of this shape and its very large area of 1572 km² is that the interior is extensive and remote.

The WLA comprises a large range of hills and plateaux that are of high altitude, typically between 600m and 1300m AOD, often highlighted by snow on the tops. These hills and plateaux vary in character, including the colossal Cairngorm massif, the extensive 'whale-back' plateaux and tors of Ben Avon, and a series of less prominent and smaller interlocking hills and ridges in the south. Nonetheless, these are consistently open and of simple landform, reflecting in part the underlying geology of intrusive, hard graniteⁱ which has been eroded and weathered. The hills and plateaux also tend to be simple in their landcover, comprising mainly heather, grasses and exposed rock, although there are some remarkable areas of native woodland within and around some of the glens.

The A9 main road corridor forms a hard edge to the western side of the WLA and includes vehicle activity and noise as well as high voltage powerlines and coniferous plantations that have cumulative effects. In addition, the Cairngorm ski centre forms an elevated edge on the north side (although its visibility is limited from within the WLA as it is located on slopes that face mainly outwards). In contrast, the other boundaries mark a more gradual transition of increasing amounts of managed forest (such as around Glenmore and Atholl) and human elements and activity (such as within Glens Tromie, Dee and Tilt).

The WLA is largely uninhabited, although it contains some isolated bothies and estate buildings. Furthermore, the character of some areas is influenced strongly by estate management practices, for example estate tracks, fences and areas of muirburn.

This WLA is very popular for recreation, including for hillwalking, climbing, fell-running, skiing, mountain biking, shooting and fishing. Its large extent means there are both marginal areas that are easily accessible to large numbers of people as well as remote interior areas that are visited by few and in which there is a strong sense of solitude and sanctuary. Within this context, the Munros, ridges and corries are often targeted by people as well as a number of through-paths, particularly where served by bothies.

The landscape and scenic qualities of the WLA are recognised by most of it lying within the Cairngorms National Parkⁱⁱ and a small part in the far south within the Ben Vrackie SLA (Perth and Kinross Council).

This WLA is sandwiched in-between the Lochnagar – Mount Keen WLA (16) to the east (separated by Glens Beag and Clunie) and the Rannoch, Nevis, Mamores and Alder WLA (14) to the west (separated by the A9 corridor and the Drumochter Pass). In addition, the Monadhliath WLA (20) and Braeroy, Glenshirra and Creag Meagaidh WLA (19) lie to the north west, separated by the wider expanse of Strathspey.

Key attributes and qualities of the wild land area

- **Extensive, open, remote mountain and moorland interior containing few human artefacts or evidence of contemporary land use, and possessing a strong sense of sanctuary and solitude**

This WLA includes an *extensive, remote* interior of mountains and moorland that lacks obvious *human artefacts*, activity or *contemporary land use*, contributing to a strong *sense of sanctuary and solitude*. The landscape seems colossal in scale in the vertical and/or horizontal dimension and there are superlative qualities of openness which appear *arresting*. A lack of access tracks or paths within the flatter parts of the interior heightens the perception of openness and extensive distances. This is amplified by movement through these areas being indirect to avoid local hags, bogs and rough vegetation as well as to cross watercourses.



There is a strong *sense of naturalness* across much of the mountain and moorland interior, due in part to the strong influence of the landform and water, especially where this highlights the dynamic nature of the landscape, such as with scree, glacial and fluvial deposits, rivers and waterfalls. The weather also contributes to this attribute, being ever-changing and its importance amplified within the interior due to the high exposure and prevailing lack of shelter.

- **Massive, rounded hills and plateaux that appear awe-inspiring due to their superlative scale, openness and elevation, and which offer extensive, panoramic views**

This WLA comprises an extensive range of rounded hills and plateaux whose immense scale, simplicity of landform, similar altitude and openness appears *awe-inspiring*. From the tops, these hills and plateaux appear to form a collective platform of interlocking ridges, with lower areas screened due to the convexity of slopes. This means that views tend to pass over a succession of sweeping, landform horizons upon the tops, uninterrupted by human artefacts and leading into the distance and the sky. This contributes to an exhilarating experience of seeming 'on top of the world'.



These views also contribute to the perceived large *extent* of the WLA and, consequently, a strong *sense of sanctuary* and *remoteness*. They include mountains and ridges within other WLAs such as the Lochnagar – Mount Keen WLA (16) to the east, the Monadhliath WLA (20) to the north west, and the Braeroy, Glenshirra and Creag Meagaidh WLA (19) and Rannoch, Nevis, Mamores and Alder WLA (14) to the west and south west.

The massive scale of the hills and plateaux makes these *physically challenging* to ascend, descend or cross, even where the ground surface is relatively smooth. It can be difficult to appreciate their high altitude because the surrounding glens are also relatively high and there is a lack of a sea-level reference. Nonetheless their altitude is highlighted by snow cover at times and their alpine vegetation. Furthermore,



features such as frost and ground-ice shattered rocks, wind-sculptured tors and solifluction terracesⁱⁱⁱ upon the tops highlight weather conditions associated with high altitudes and *naturalness*.

- **Long, deep, steep-sided glens that cut into the massive hills and plateaux and possess qualities of remoteness whilst also facilitating access**

The hills and plateaux of this WLA are penetrated by a large number of glens that provide a strong contrast of experience. Some of these glens are v-shaped, some u-shaped and some include lochs, highlighting their *naturalness* in response to different geological and hydrological processes. This attribute is emphasised even further where the glens appear remarkably regular in line, for example the Lairig Ghru.



Where the glens contain a wide, open floor or loch, these emphasise the *awe-inspiring* scale and form of the adjacent mountains. Furthermore, steep side slopes or cliffs may appear *arresting* in their own right, especially when seen from directly above or below or where waterfalls or scree highlight their vertical scale and steepness.

The long lengths of the glens result in a gradual increase of *remoteness* and perceived *sanctuary* as they penetrate further into the hills and plateaux. Nonetheless, by cutting through these, the glens also facilitate access, especially where they include tracks or paths which may diminish these attributes and *physical challenge* and *risk*.

From the base of the glens, the surrounding steep slopes screen views of the hill tops and plateaux above, so the wider *extent* of the WLA is not apparent. Nonetheless, these side slopes may also screen views of *human artefacts* or *contemporary land use* within surrounding areas and thus contribute to the *sense of sanctuary*.

Historic features occur within some of the glens, for example ruined buildings, bothies and old enclosures. These appear as obvious *human artefacts* or land use, although their effects tend to be localised where they are isolated and low-key in siting and design. By acting as scale indicators within an otherwise simple landscape, they may also emphasise the *arresting* dimensions of their surroundings.



- **Corries and gorges carved into the hills and plateaux appear arresting in their vertical form and include features such as cliffs and waterfalls that contribute to perceived naturalness.**

Corries and gorges create isolated focal features carved within the broader, rounded hills and plateaux (whose massiveness they emphasise in contrast). These features vary in scale, with gorges tending to be smaller and their effects more localised, but both tending to be encountered unexpectedly due to the screening effect of the surrounding slopes and their irregular



distribution, so heightening the perceived *naturalness*. Their vertical dimensions and faces appear imposing and *arresting*, particularly where seen in contrast to the horizontal aspect of a corrie floor or loch.

These attributes can seem particularly strong when experienced directly from above or below. In contrast to the prevailing openness of the surrounding landscape, gorges and corries may also offer shelter and contained spaces that contribute to a *sense of sanctuary*. Furthermore, rock cliffs and debris as well as waterfalls associated with these features contribute to the perceived *naturalness* and *ruggedness* of the landscape and the *physical challenge* and *risk* when moving through these areas.

- **Dynamic rivers form key visual and physical features, influence access and contribute to the sense of naturalness, whilst watersheds and bealachs form notable crossing points**

There is a network of rivers throughout the WLA that form key visual and physical features and influence access, whilst their dynamic characters contribute to the *sense of naturalness*. This attribute is amplified where there are waterfalls, braided and/or shifting channels with riparian woodland, evidence of redundant river channels and landslips (that also increase *ruggedness*).

Some of the watercourses can be difficult to cross and water levels can rise quickly following rainfall or snow melt (due in part to the underlying impervious rock). This can limit access significantly across the WLA, thereby contributing to *remoteness* and increasing *risk* (if rivers are waded). Alternatively, where bridges or fords exist, there can be a focus of people and activity that may diminish the perceived *sense of sanctuary* within the local area.



Rivers snaking through gently sloped moorland areas are difficult to see from a distance where these are at a similar elevation to the viewer, although they are more prominent from elevated areas nearby and thus can aid orientation from these places. The movement and sounds of watercourses in these areas, that otherwise tend to seem fairly inactive and quiet, highlight their presence and thereby the attribute of *naturalness*.



Watersheds, bealachs and glen intersections form important landmarks, confluences and crossing places within this WLA. They provide vantage points and mark changes in orientation between different glens and river systems, thereby highlighting the *arresting* qualities of these and their different surroundings. An absence of moving water at these points can make them remarkably quiet and tranquil in character, contributing to the *sense of sanctuary*. Furthermore, this attribute is amplified within some wide open basins that contain the sources of rivers within a wide amphitheatre of surrounding hills.



- **Simple landforms and landcover that contribute to the awe-inspiring qualities of the area, and exposed rock that influences strongly the sense of naturalness**

The prevailing simplicity of the landform and land cover within the hills and plateaux appears *arresting*, albeit reducing *ruggedness*. Furthermore, in combination with an absence of scale indicators, this simplicity may contribute to a difficulty to navigate or to perceive the size of features or distances within the landscape, increasing *risk*, especially during low cloud.

In some areas, there is a simple vegetation cover of heather, whilst elsewhere the groundcover comprises exposed rock, scree, crags or boulder fields (which increases *ruggedness* at a local level), and in other places there is open water: all of which contribute to the *sense of naturalness*. This attribute is, nonetheless, diminished in some areas by management practices and estate activity, particularly within and surrounding some glens and where numerous features or activities occur.



This includes frequent use of vehicles, sheep grazing and trampling, muirburn and the presence of fences and estate tracks which appear as *human artefacts* and *evidence of contemporary land use*. These elements are particularly prominent where they contrast in line, colour or pattern to the simple landform or landcover backdrop. Whilst their effects may be limited where small in scale, concentrated within glen floors and seen as isolated elements, they diminish the *sense of naturalness*, *remoteness* and *sanctuary* where they are large or numerous, or where cumulative effects occur and/or features extend into remoter upland and/or interior areas.

- **A variety of recreation activities, including those that are focused, dispersed or occur along through-routes, allowing different wild land attributes and qualities to be experienced**

This WLA is very popular for outdoor recreation such as hillwalking, shooting, fishing, climbing, wildlife-watching, skiing and mountain-biking. These activities are facilitated by a range of different access points and tracks or paths that enter the area from its edges. Many hillwalkers target the Munros and Corbetts as well as a number of through-paths that are also popular with mountain bikers. These routes tend to follow rivers and traverse hill passes, for example through the Lairig Ghru between Rothiemurchus and Linn of Dee, or between the latter and Blair Atholl, offering the experience of a variety of different wildness attributes and qualities along the way. Many people who wish to explore the remoter areas and enjoy *solitude and sanctuary* choose to wild camp within the interior. In addition, there are a number of bothies located throughout the WLA which are popular for overnight stays, especially where located next to through-paths.



It is possible to walk off-path over much of the WLA interior and to experience very *remote* areas where there is a lack of *human artefacts* and *contemporary land use* and a strong sense of *solitude* and *sanctuary*. This is facilitated by the area's openness, relatively dry ground conditions, gradual hill slopes and short vegetation, albeit that this access remains *physically challenging* due to the need to negotiate obstacles, high exposure and because long distances tend to be involved because of the massiveness of the landform. This open access also contributes to the popularity of hillwalking, ice-climbing and skiing in winter and/or when snow-covered.

The variety of paths and tracks within the landscape reflects different levels of use, construction or maintenance. These include low-key worn paths that expose the underlying sand, rock or peat, routes over boulder fields marked by cairns, and constructed paths or estate tracks with associated ditches, cross drains and/or borrow pits. Both constructed paths and estate tracks appear as *human artefacts* and diminish the sense of *remoteness* and/or *sanctuary* as well as the *physical challenge* and *risk* when moving through the landscape, although these effects are greatest for estate tracks due to added vehicular activity and noise. Furthermore, constructed paths and tracks may have cumulative effects where numerous routes are present within an area or where these are seen in combination with other evidence of human activity and/or intervention, such as muirburn.

- **Open native woodlands of diverse spatial and visual characteristics that respond directly to the underlying physical conditions, contributing strongly to the sense of naturalness**

Native woodlands occur around the fringes and within some of the glens of this WLA. Where unfenced and comprising trees of varied age and spacing as well as native species, the woodlands contribute strongly to the *sense of naturalness*, for example as found in Glen Feshie. This is particularly strong where natural regeneration is also evident in combination with other dynamic landscape processes, such as river deposition, and where open woodland edges allow unrestricted access and appear to respond directly to physical conditions (rather than, for example, grazing or muirburn that indicate human intervention). Within these woodlands, there is a diverse mix of spatial and visual characteristics, including foci such as ‘granny pines’ that appear *arresting* at a local level. Generally, the woodland trees also provide shelter and amplify the *sense of sanctuary* and *solitude* (in some areas, partly by screening visually and audibly *human artefacts, contemporary land use* or human activity).



In contrast to native woodlands, forest plantations indicate human intervention and *contemporary land use* (even if comprising native species) and diminish the sense of *naturalness* and *sanctuary*, particularly where these are fenced, of dense tree spacing, of single species or age composition, and/or show evidence of ground modification. Furthermore, extensive forest plantations outside the WLA can be seen from some of the hills within the area and appear particularly prominent as a *contemporary land use*, especially where these indicate ongoing human intervention, activity or the use of machines.

Endnotes and select references

ⁱ Scottish Natural Heritage (2006) *Cairngorms: A landscape fashioned by geology*. Redgorton, Scottish Natural Heritage.

ⁱⁱ Information available at: <http://cairngorms.co.uk/landscape-toolkit/special-landscape-qualities> and http://www.snh.org.uk/pdfs/publications/commissioned_reports/375.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Scottish Natural Heritage (2006) *Cairngorms: A landscape fashioned by geology*. Redgorton, Scottish Natural Heritage.

Site assessment carried out April, August and September 2016