

CICERONE

WALKING IN TORRIDON, FISHERFIELD, FANNICHS AND AN TEALLACH

Including the ridges of Beinn Alligin,
Liathach and Beinn Eighe



Chris Townsend

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Updates to this guide

While every effort is made by our authors to ensure the accuracy of guidebooks as they go to print, changes can occur during the lifetime of an edition. This guidebook was researched and written during the Covid-19 pandemic. While we are not aware of any significant changes to routes or facilities at the time of printing, it is likely that the current situation will give rise to more changes than would usually be expected. Any updates that we know of for this guide will be on the Cicerone website (www.cicerone.co.uk/1028/updates), so please check before planning your trip. We also advise that you check information about such things as transport, accommodation and shops locally. Even rights of way can be altered over time.

We are always grateful for information about any discrepancies between a guidebook and the facts on the ground, sent by email to updates@cicerone.co.uk or by post to Cicerone, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Road, Kendal, LA9 7RL.

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Front cover: Walker on the ascent of Beinn na h-Eaglaise with Beinn Alligin in the background

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Route symbols on OS map extracts

(for OS legend see printed OS maps)

-  route
-  alternative route
-  start/finish point
-  start point
-  finish point
-  route direction

Features on the overview map

	>800m
	600m
	400m
	200m
	75m
	0m

SCALE: 1:50,000

0 kilometres 0.5 1
0 miles 0.5

GPX files for all routes can be downloaded free at www.cicerone.co.uk/1028/GPX.



View over Lochan Coire na Poite to Beinn Bhàn (Route 1)

INTRODUCTION



View over Loch an Foin to the Torridon hills from Maol Chean-dearg (Route 5)

When I first visited this region over 40 years ago on a walk from Land's End to John o' Groats I was so entranced by the hills that I deviated from my low-level route to traverse Beinn Eighe, a favourite ever since. I'd never seen such magnificent and unusual mountains before, and I was instantly hooked. I've been back to the area many times over the decades and was delighted to have an excuse for several more trips to check routes and take photographs for this book.

The Highlands from Glen Carron northwards really are different to those to the south. There is more rock here and it is a different type of rock, forming steep mountains that rise

above a wild landscape of low boggy moorland dotted with lochs and laced with rivers and streams. There is a strong sense of an ancient land here, its bones exposed to the sky.

While the highest and most dramatic mountains – An Teallach, Liathach, Beinn Eighe – dominate, there are many other hills well worth attention. Some are just as impressive though not quite as high – Slioch and A' Mhaighdean, for example – while others, such as Beinn Bhàn and Beinn Làir, give wonderful wild and remote walks that are much quieter than the popular Munros. Then there are little-visited smaller hills with interesting rock formations and spectacular

views, such as Ben Shieldaig and Beinn na h-Eaglaise. Every hill in the area has something to offer.

Some 27 of the hills are classified as Munros (3000ft/914.4m+), 20 are Corbetts (2500–3000ft/762–914.4m), and 15 are Grahams (2000–2500ft/610–762m). The imperial heights are given here as they make sense of the metric ones (who would ever compile a list of hills higher than 914.4m?) but the routes in this book use metric figures, as these accord with current maps.

The book covers the great wedge of mountainous land between the A835 road to the north and the A832 and A890 roads to the south. As well as the Torridon, Fisherfield and An Teallach hills, this area also includes the Fannichs on the eastern side, so they are covered here although geologically and visually they are very different.

The region makes up the area of north-west Scotland called Wester Ross. (George RR Martin apparently used this as Westeros in *Game of Thrones*. The real Wester Ross may lack dragons but it's just as marvellous and magical as the fictional one – and it does exist.) The area is designated the Wester Ross National Scenic Area for its special qualities including scenic splendour, spectacular mountains, and great tracts of wild and remote land. The area covered by this book also makes up a large part of the UNESCO Wester Ross Biosphere Reserve (www.wrb.scot). This really is a special place.

The region is remote and sparsely populated. The only town of any size is Ullapool on the northern edge, which has 1500 inhabitants. Other settlements have populations numbered in the low hundreds or below. This is a land for those who love open spaces, vast horizons, and the domination of nature.

GEOLOGY AND LANDSCAPE

The mountains from Torridon north have a very distinctive appearance due to two types of rock – dark, reddish Torridonian sandstone and shining silvery Cambrian quartzite. The sandstone forms tiers of rock, like the layers of a cake, while the quartzite is more shattered, often forming areas of scree and splintered rocks, and sometimes capping the sandstone as on the Triple Buttress of Beinn Eighe and Spidean a' Choire Lèith on Liathach. Below these dramatic rocks lies one of the oldest rocks on earth: 3-billion-year-old Lewisian gneiss. This is a metamorphic rock – changed by intense pressure and extreme heat. Grey in colour overall, it often features stripes of colour from other rocks that have intruded into it.

The join between Lewisian gneiss and Torridonian sandstone stands out clearly in the view across Loch Maree to Slioch, encountered on Route 23, where you can see the undulating outline of the gentle landscape that was at the surface before the sandstone arrived. The sandstone is



Sandstone terraces below the summit of Beinn Damh (Route 10)

much more recent in geological time, formed from sands deposited on top of the gneiss by rivers between 1100 and 900 mya (million years ago) and then compressed over the millennia by its own weight. Then, around 540 mya, the quartzite was deposited in the form of white sand on top of the sandstone. At this time the Cambrian explosion in which life took off was happening and the quartzite is where fossils can be found, especially the burrows of marine worm-like creatures which form tubular blisters or pale stripes. These are known as pipe rock and can be seen on the Mountain Trail (Route 23).

All this was taking place long before Scotland became Scotland as we know it. Back then the land that would become Scotland was part of

the now long-gone continent called Laurentia. A key event in the formation of Wester Ross came 430–400 mya when continental drift caused the continent of Baltica to push into Laurentia from the east, causing the formation of a huge mountain range – the Caledonian Mountains. As the continents collided a large area of rock called Moine Schist was driven eastwards, sometimes riding over younger rocks in the process. This is called the Moine Thrust and its edge runs down Wester Ross roughly from Ullapool to Kinlochewe. It's one of Scotland's major geological features and explains why the mountains to its west are so different from those to the east.

Of course, the edge of the Moine Thrust is not a neat line and the geology is complex, with some effects of

the Thrust seen on hills further west such as Beinn a' Mhùinidh.

Scotland itself began to come into being some 65 mya as the Atlantic Ocean started to form and widen and the Caledonian Mountains disintegrated. Its current form came about when the ice ages sculpted the mountains into the shapes we know today.

The geology of the area is fascinating. Even if you don't find it so, it's worth remembering that the dark reddish-brown rough Torridonian sandstone gives good grip even when wet, while the smoother pale Cambrian quartzite does not – after rain it can be very slippery.

PLANTS AND WILDLIFE

Forests and moors

Seeing wildlife is part of the joy of being in the hills. In Wester Ross the sight of a golden eagle or raven soaring overhead, ptarmigan scuttling over rocks, or divers calling from a lochan will always bring a shiver of delight. These birds are iconic symbols of the wild.

While the region has some splendid wildlife and impressive tracts of ancient woodland, it has to be said that overall the area has poor biodiversity, with too many over-grazed treeless glens and too many species exterminated or reduced to tiny numbers by sporting estates. Reading of the wealth of wildlife found in the 19th century is sobering as it shows

just how much has been lost. Osgood Mackenzie, whose estate was at Gairloch and who created the famous Inverewe Gardens near Poolewe, recounts the slaughter of vast amounts of wildlife by himself and his gamekeepers in his 1921 book *A Hundred Years in the Highlands*. He boasts that in 1868 he himself killed 1900 birds and animals. Scottish author and mountaineer Ian R Mitchell describes him as a 'one-man ecological disaster, responsible for wiping out several native species on his lands and virtually eradicating others' (*Scotland's Mountains Before the Mountaineers*). He was not alone.

This is slowly changing as estates start to fence areas to keep out deer and allow the forest to regenerate (or plant trees where there are none). Fences are not ideal – they create often unsightly, artificial straight-line divisions between healthy forest and overgrazed moorland, and are barriers for walkers, channelling people to gates or stiles. However, at present they are necessary in many areas. The intention is to remove many of these fences once the forest has grown enough to resist browsing.

Ironically, the most magnificent wild animal is also a main cause of the problems. Red deer are the largest and most impressive mammal found in the hills. With wolves and bears long exterminated they have no natural predators and there are far too many of them, eating every tree seedling that pokes its head out

of the ground. For the forest to return over a wide area, and not be fenced into restricted enclaves, deer numbers need to be significantly reduced, which means shooting them (unless and until wolves are reintroduced – but that looks like being a long way off). Again ironically, conservation organisations are doing this but many shooting estates aren't, as they want plenty of deer for their clients.

Where there are old forests, the richness of life is astonishing. In some forests Scots pine dominates; in others it's oak. But these old forests, unlike plantations, are not monocultures and many other trees are found – birch, rowan, aspen, willow and more – while below them is a rich understory of shrubs and wildflowers, including blueberry, heather, wood anemones and primroses. Many birds

also live in the forests, including the unusual Scottish crossbill – with its crossed beak for twisting seeds from pinecones – and predators like sparrowhawks and peregrine falcons. Rare forest mammals – unlikely to be seen but they are here – include pine martens and Scottish wildcats.

The ancient pine forests of the Beinn Eighe Nature Reserve on the south shore of Loch Maree and the ancient oakwoods on the Letterewe Estate on the north shore, both now regenerating, are luxurious. Similar are two smaller ancient woods – one pine, one birch – on the lower slopes of Ben Shieldaig, which are owned by the Woodland Trust. New woods are starting to appear in other areas, such as along the road between Kinlochewe and Torridon, which is very heartening.

Beinn Alligin and Upper Loch Torridon, as seen on the approach to Beinn Damh (Route 20)



More common than the ancient forests are commercial plantations, usually of Sitka spruce. These are generally dark and gloomy, with the trees packed together in rows, and bereft of wildlife.

Away from the forests, the vegetation is usually a mix of heather in dry areas and grasses, rushes and mosses in wet areas in the glens and on the lower slopes of the hills, with coarse grasses higher up. Heavy grazing by deer, and in some places sheep, means only those plant species that can survive this will flourish, so overall the flora is impoverished. Blanket bog is common, and many areas are wet except in long dry spells. Despite the overgrazing there are flowers in places – often low and small so you need to look to find them.

Mammals

Apart from the red deer, most of the mammals found in Wester Ross are

quite shy, many being nocturnal. Some are only found in the forests. One that may be seen high in the hills is the mountain hare, which turns white in winter. They're nothing like as common as in the eastern Highlands, but a sighting is certainly not out of the question. There's the chance of glimpsing a fox or badger out in the open too, although such sightings also tend to be few and far between. On the coast and by rivers you might be lucky enough to see an otter.

Birds of mountain and moorland

Of the many birds found in the area, the magnificent golden eagle is the outstanding example. Wester Ross is a stronghold of this species and there's a good chance that if you spend much time in the hills here you'll see one or two circling high above. You may also see the even bigger white-tailed eagle, which has been slowly reintroduced to the West

Highlands and the Hebrides since 1975. The much smaller buzzard is also fairly common, usually frequenting lower areas – it may be seen perched on telegraph poles.

More common and more often seen than either of the eagles is the raven. This huge black member of the crow family has astonishing flying abilities, swooping, twisting and diving in the air. Its harsh 'crark, crark' call is one of the distinctive sounds of the mountains.

Above the forests, two types of grouse can often be seen. Red grouse are found on heather moorland; their loud harsh cry as they burst from the ground as you approach can be quite startling. High in the hills lives the red grouse's smaller relative, the ptarmigan. This arctic/alpine species turns white in winter. Its call is less guttural than that of the red grouse. When seen, ptarmigan often run across the ground rather than fly, and if they do fly they usually stay low.

On the same moors as red grouse can be found the lovely golden plover, often first located by its thin monotonous piping. Golden plovers are speckled black and gold with black fronts, a white border separating the two.

Perhaps the commonest bird seen, and one mostly unremarked upon, is the meadow pipit, a small brown bird found everywhere outside of woodlands. Its presence is important for another bird, a summer visitor, that is very prominent:

the cuckoo, which lays its eggs in meadow pipits' nests. The loud call of the cuckoo is a common sound in May and June, sometimes to the bane of campers when it starts in the early hours of the morning and continues monotonously on and on and on. Other summer visitors often seen on the lower slopes are the wheatear, stonechat, and ring ouzel.

Birds of lochs and burns

Sometimes as you approach a lochan high in the hills, a long eerie wailing cry echoes across the water. Scan the lochan and you may see a long dark bird sitting low in the water: a red-throated or black-throated diver. Their presence is another sign you are in a wild place.

Two much smaller waterbirds are quite common and easy to see. Dippers – small dumpy brown birds with a white bib – live along fast-flowing streams and can be seen bobbing up and down on rocks out in the water. Along the shores of streams and lochs in summer you will often hear a thin, high-pitched piping call. Scan the shoreline, especially any stony areas, and you may see a small wading bird, brown with white underparts, running over the shingle. This is a common sandpiper.

There are many other birds in Wester Ross of course, including many in the forests and on the coast. Keen birdwatchers will find it worthwhile to carry a small pair of binoculars.



Walkers on Beinn Damh (Route 10)



Beinn Damh from Maol Chean-dearg (Route 5)

SOUTHERN TORRIDON – APPLECROSS AND COULIN FOREST

South of Loch Torridon and Glen Torridon lie two areas which, although not quite as high or as dramatic as those further north, give an excellent taste of the nature of the whole region and how different it is to the rest of the Highlands. In the west of this region lies the Applecross peninsula between Lochs Kishorn and Torridon. This great wedge of land is crossed by the notoriously steep Bealach na Bà road, which gives easy access from its high point of 625m to the two magnificent Corbetts in the area: Sgùrr a' Chaorachain and Beinn Bhàn, both built of layers of Torridonian sandstone.

Applecross is separated from the Coulin Forest and nearby hills to the west by the A896 road which runs from Loch Kishorn to Loch Shildaig and Upper Loch Torridon. The Coulin area is threaded by a network of excellent old stalking paths that give good access to its three Munros, five Corbetts and four Grahams. The hills can be approached from either Glen Carron or Glen Torridon; the more southerly ones are arguably best climbed from the former and the more northerly from the latter.

The nearest to a central base for this section and the one with the most facilities is Lochcarron, a scenic village spread along the side of the loch of the same name. Applecross, on the coast to the west of the Bealach na Bà road, is fine for the western hills and Achnasheen for the eastern ones. For approaches from the north, Torridon makes a good base. These villages are small and their facilities limited, but they all have accommodation and cafés/restaurants.

ROUTE 1

Beinn Bhàn

Start/Finish	Bridge over the River Kishorn at the head of Loch Kishorn on the Bealach na Bà road (NG 834 423)
Distance	12km
Ascent	1100m
Approx. time	4–6hr
Terrain	Good path at first; rough path at start of ascent; rough and steep stony and boggy pathless slopes; grass on summit ridge
Highest point	896m
Parking	Beside the road at the bridge

Beinn Bhàn (white hill) is a long, massive mountain that towers over the River Kishorn and the A896 road. It can be easily ascended from the south-west via the Bealach na Bà road via Bealach nan Arr, but this is to miss the finest aspects of the mountain, which are the huge cliff-buttressed corries ranged along its eastern side. To see these tremendous corries requires more time and effort but makes for a vastly superior walk.

View over Loch Kishorn to Sgùrr a' Chaorachain and Beinn Bhàn





- 50 hillwalks and scrambles • Liathach, An Teallach, Beinn Eighe, Beinn Alligin and Slioch • bases include Lochcarron, Torridon, Kinlochewe, Gairloch, Poolewe and Ullapool

The landscape from Strathcarron to Little Loch Broom is one of the most spectacular and beautiful in Scotland. It is also one of the most distinctive, with steep-sided rocky mountains rising above long, winding sea and freshwater lochs. From the hills there are vast views across to the Hebrides, while majestic mountains stretch out to the north, south and east.

For many mountain connoisseurs, Torridon offers Highlands walking at its best. This hand-picked selection of 50 routes will allow hillwalkers to explore this awe-inspiring landscape of water and rock and includes ascents of many of the summits, from well-known Munros like Liathach to little-visited gems. Most of the routes are challenging and call for good fitness and competence in remote mountain environments.



- includes 27 Munros, 20 Corbetts and 14 Grahams
- suitable for walking from spring to autumn or as mountaineering routes in winter
- experience, fitness, navigation skills and self-reliance essential

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