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WALKING BEN LAWERS, RANNOCH AND ATHOLL

Mountains and glens of Highland
Perthshire



Ronald Turnbull

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BEN LAWERS, RANNOCH
AND ATHOLL**

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**MOUNTAINS AND GLENS
OF HIGHLAND PERTHSHIRE**

by Ronald Turnbull

CICERONE

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www.cicerone.co.uk

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 Second edition 2021
 ISBN: 978 1 78631 107 8
 First edition (as *Walking Highland Perthshire*) 2013



Printed in Singapore by KHL Printing on responsibly sourced paper.
 A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.
 All photographs are by the author except the one on the back flap, which is by Thomas Turnbull.



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Front cover: Crossing the Tarmachans: Meall Garbh summit ridge (Route 12)

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Route symbols on all maps

-  route 1
-  variant/short cut
-  route 2
-  variant
-  adjacent route (from another map)
-  start/finish point
-  start point
-  finish point
-  alternative start/finish point
-  route direction

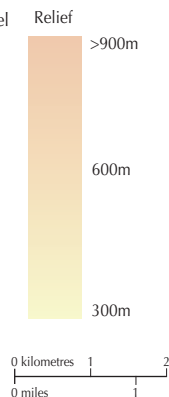
For OS symbols key for 1:50,000 maps see OS maps

Route symbols on 1:100,000 map extracts

-  bothy/youth hostel
-  peak
-  campsite
-  house/castle
-  railway
-  path
-  vehicle track
-  tarmac road

Contour lines are drawn at 50m intervals and labelled at 100m intervals.

SCALE: 1:100,000



Route rating

The type of walk in terms of landscape encountered – low-, mid- or high-level – length and difficulty is shown by icons (shown below) which appear at the start of each route description. See also ‘Using this guide’ in the Introduction.

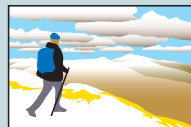
TYPE OF WALK



Low
Forest and riverside walks, below 600m



Mid
Moorland and hills, 600m–900m



Mountain
Mountain walks, above 900m



On the ridge to Beinn Bheoil, with Loch a' Bhealach Bheithe and Loch Ericht (Route 53)

INTRODUCTION

For the Atholl highlander of 400 years ago there were two ways of treating any passing hillwalker. Arrive at teatime, and it would be a stool in front of the peat fire, eggs still warm from the midden, a glass of heather ale and a wee skirl on the pipes. That tradition continues in the main street of Pitlochry, perhaps the world capital of the nice cup of tea and slab of shortbread.

But meet him on a winter night, in his filthy old kilt and a thieving chill in his eye – you're about to lose all your livestock and maybe also your life.

The south-eastern chunk of the Grampians, filling the wide space between the Cairngorms and the Lomond-Trossach National Park, forms part of the ancient county of Perthshire. But if you think of Perthshire as little tea-shop towns like Crieff and Aberfeldy, think again. At the back of Blair Atholl you can walk

over the tops for four or five days, and when your feet next touch tarmac you're somewhere north of Aberdeen. In the wilds of Rannoch Moor, your only foothold is a bleached limb of pine, bog-preserved over tens of centuries. No longer ago than 1980, a Mr J C Donaldson discovered in an old guidebook an unlisted and unrecorded Munro. It was called Ben Feskineth. At 3530ft, this secret summit was by no means a marginal Munro. And where was it? Ben Feskineth lay undiscovered in deepest, peatiest Perthshire.

JOLLY GREEN GIANTS

In the event, Feskineth turned out to be a misspelling of Beinn Heasgarnich (now, amusingly, respelled again on the Explorer map as Sheasgarnaich). Heasgarnich's high grassy sides are steep, but not unpleasantly so, and



hold snow even in unpromising winters. Perthshire's grassy, pebbly plateaus and rounded ridges are places to relax after the rigours of Scotland's rocky north and west. But relaxation is relative, when Scottish hills are concerned. These mountains may be softened and noted for their wildflowers. But easy they aren't.

These hills are jolly green giants. And from Schiehallion to Atholl, from Rannoch to Ben Vrackie, there are a lot of them. Soggy grass slopes drop to peaty cols. Cross five or six brown streams, hop in and out of a hag, and get back to grips with another of the long grass slopes. In March and April that grass becomes crisp snow, ready for the kick of a stiff four-season boot or the snick of a crampon. The boggy cols freeze over, the lonely curlew comes back from the seaside, and Ben Lawers and Meall nan Tarmachan look all alpine against the sky.

If Perthshire's slogan is 'the Perfect Centre', then the centre of Perthshire is Schiehallion. Standing atop its tall tent shape of off-white quartzite, you look west along Loch Rannoch to Rannoch Moor, Argyll and Ben Nevis. Northwest, Ben Alder bulges big and serious, but is just 66m too low to be the highpoint of the former Perthshire. It's also a couple of miles outside the boundary – but included in this book for its approaches from Loch Rannoch.

Northwards lie the heather humps of Drumochter. Northeast is Atholl, and the dinosaur ridgeback of Beinn a' Ghlo – with the Cairngorms a snowy white line behind.

Eastwards, it's Loch Tummel of the bright birches and the red rowan. It's Ben Vrackie, a quick up and back from Pitlochry in time for a nice cup of tea and some shortbread. Ben Chonzie rises green and yellow like a ripening avocado. To the

south, beyond Ben Lawers, Loch Tay lies grey in its long hollow. Hidden within the green moorland are the ancient shielings (summer sheep pastures), bright streams and little waterfalls, and woodlands of oak and of birch.

TREES, PLEASE!



Golden saxifrage and thyme, Loch Lyon

In this bleakest of peat, brown heather and grey stones, the civilised green of the lowlands reaches in along the rivers. Saxifrage and thyme are bright along the banks of Glen Tilt. The River Garry runs brown in autumn spate while the trees overhead are still late summer green. Glen Lyon, Scotland's longest, is where the river winds below oaks and birches, with primroses dangling above the water. And the silvery Tay runs big and surprising at the back of Aberfeldy, even bigger by the time it's got down to Dunkeld.

At the eastern side of the Highlands, these eastern Grampians have slightly more sunshine and a bit

less rain. So its valleys can be pleasingly bog-free. Green trackways from Blair Atholl, and made paths around Pitlochry or the Black Wood of Rannoch, offer low-level walking as good as any in the Highlands.

And on stormy mornings, it's time to take advantage of Perthshire's other promotional slogan: this is 'Big Tree Country'. The Douglas fir at Dunkeld's Hermitage could be Britain's tallest tree and is named after Mr Douglas from Scone, in Perthshire – although it takes its Latin name (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) from Mr Archibald Menzies of Weem, also in Perthshire.

The Birnam Oak could have been there as a young twig when Shakespeare wrote of Birnam Wood's coming to Dunsinane to conquer Macbeth. Who hasn't heard of the Birks of Aberfeldy? And the yew at



Birnam Oak, Dunkeld (Route 35)

'REAL' PERTSHIRE



Beinn Dorain over Auch (Routes 28, 29)

Perthshire was abolished in 1975. The name is now applied to the Perth & Kinross Council area: its tourist board is called VisitPerthshire and the council's website is www.perthshire.org. When Perthshire did exist, it extended west to include Ben Lui and Ben More at Crianlarich.

I've used 'real Perthshire' as a rough definition for this book. It lets me include the whole of the Ben Dorain group in the west, even though its main approaches are from Bridge of Orchy in former Argyll. Ben Alder is also included; the county boundary runs past Benalder Cottage, and it's a fine hill with two genuine scrambling ridges and approaches from Perthshire's Loch Rannoch.

Perthshire, however defined, is a big place; it contains one in seven of Scotland's Munros. The Lowland part of the county is represented in this book by a single route in Perth itself. Lowland Perthshire, with some fine walking in the Ochils, is covered in *Walking in the Ochils, Campsie Fells and Lomond Hills* by Patrick Baker, also published by Cicerone Press. That part of the far southwest is included in the Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park, and by my own Cicerone guide to it.

I've also excluded the far northeast of the county at the back of Blairgowrie. Strathardle and Glen Shee drain into the Isla not the Tay, and feel to me like Angus Glens (and eight more Munros would have meant cutting down on the lower hills, riversides and back valleys).

Fortingall is the oldest living being in Europe: according to legend, Pontius Pilate played in its shade as a child. (This is unlikely, as his mother would have worried about the poisonous berries; and anyway, Pontius Pilate wasn't Scottish.)

High striding hill ridges; quiet valleys floored with grass rather than harsh heather; big trees and even bigger rivers: these are the pleasures of Rannoch, Atholl and the south-eastern Grampians.

WHEN TO GO

April is still winter on the summits, but low-level routes offer good walking then and in May. The leaves are breaking and birds are at their noisiest.

Low-level routes are also excellent in October as the birch leaves turn gold.

May and June are enjoyable at all altitudes. July and August can be hot and humid, with less rewarding views. East Highland midges come in slightly smaller hordes than in the west but are getting worse with global warming. The trick is to keep moving, and when you stop, stop high.

Midges hang on until the first frost, normally some time in September. October brings clear air and lovely autumn colours. In between times there'll be gales. Over much of this area, from mid August (sometimes July) to 21 October, responsible access to the hills includes avoiding disturbance to deer stalking (see Appendix B).

Creag an Tulabhain of Meall Ghaordaidh from Stronach bridge (Route 23)



Winter is a time of short days and foul weather. Snow can lie on the high tops from December to April. Well-equipped walkers skilled in navigation and with ice axe love the winter most of all, for the alpine-style ascents of Meall nan Tarmachan and the 100km views through the winter-chilled air.

SAFETY IN THE MOUNTAINS

Safety and navigation in the mountains are best learnt from companions, experience, and perhaps a paid instructor; such instruction is outside the scope of this book. For those experienced in hills further south, such as Snowdonia or the Lake District, these hills are noticeably larger and can be a lot more remote.

The international mountain distress signal is some sign (shout, whistle, torch flash or other) repeated six times over a minute, followed by a minute's silence. The reply is a sign repeated three times over a minute, followed by a minute's silence. To signal for help from a helicopter, raise both arms above the head and then drop them down sideways, repeatedly. If you're not in trouble, don't shout or whistle on the hills, and don't wave to passing helicopters.



To call out the rescue, phone 999 from a landline. From a mobile, phone either 999 or the international emergency number 112: these will connect you via any available network. Reception is good on most summits and ridges and on hillsides that have line of sight to the A9 or Aberfeldy. Sometimes a text message can get through when a voice call to the rescue service can't: pre-register your phone at www.emergencysms.org.uk.

Given the unreliable phone coverage, it is wise to leave word of your proposed route with some responsible person (and, of course, tell that person when you've safely returned). Youth hostels have specific forms for this, as do many independent hostels and B&Bs.

Help required
Raise both arms
above head
to form a 'Y'



Help not required
Raise one arm above
head and extend the
other downward, to form
the diagonal of an 'N'



AVALANCHE DANGER

The Scottish Avalanche Information Service's website www.sais.gov.uk doesn't cover these less-frequented hills – nearest is Southern Cairngorms. Greatest avalanche danger arises after recent heavy snowfall, on moderately steep slopes facing away from the wind. After snowfall from the west, the east face of Heasgarnich could be at risk; after snowfall from the southeast, you may want to avoid the northern spur of Meall Ghaordaidh.

Being lost or tired is not sufficient reason for calling the rescue service, and neither, in normal summer weather, is being benighted. However, team members I've talked to say not to be too shy about calling them: they greatly prefer bringing down bodies that are still alive...

There is no charge for mountain rescue in Scotland – teams are voluntary, financed by donations from the public, with a grant from the Scottish Government. You can make donations at youth hostels, TICs and many pubs.

MAPS

Some people enjoy exploring in mountains that are badly mapped or not mapped at all. They should stay away from the Scottish Highlands, as they have been excellently mapped – three times over. The mapping in this book for the shorter and lower routes is from the Ordnance Survey's Landranger series at 1:50,000. For these low walks this book's mapping may be all you need. For mountain walks, however, it's advisable to have

a larger map that shows escape routes and the other glen you end up in when you come down the wrong side of the hill. This guide shows mountain routes on 1:100,000 scale maps not intended for use on the hill.

Harvey's excellent British Mountain Map: Schiehallion at 1:40,000 scale covers about half this book, south of Lochs Tummel and Rannoch, and west of Aberfeldy – so Schiehallion is in the top right corner. The map is beautifully clear and legible, marks paths where they actually exist on the ground, and does not disintegrate when damp. Harvey also cover Ben Lawers in their 1:25,000 Superswalker format.

The 1:50,000 Landranger mapping, as used in this book, covers this area on sheets 42 (Glen Garry & Loch Rannoch), 43 (Braemar & Blair Atholl), 50 (Glen Orchy & Loch Etive), 51 (Loch Tay & Glen Donart), 52 (Pitlochry & Crieff), 57 (Stirling & The Trossachs) and 58 (Perth & Alloa).

The Harvey maps mark fences and walls on the open hill but not on the lower ground; Landranger doesn't mark them at all. So if you're planning



Length



Difficulty



1 Meall na Fearnna to Ben Vorlich

Start/finish	Glenartney church car park (NN 711 161)
Distance	26km/16½ miles
Ascent	1300m/4400ft
Approx time	9hr
Max altitude	Ben Vorlich 985m
Terrain	Grassy slopes, steep onto Ben Vorlich; some peat hags on Carn Labhuinn; small riverside paths and tracks

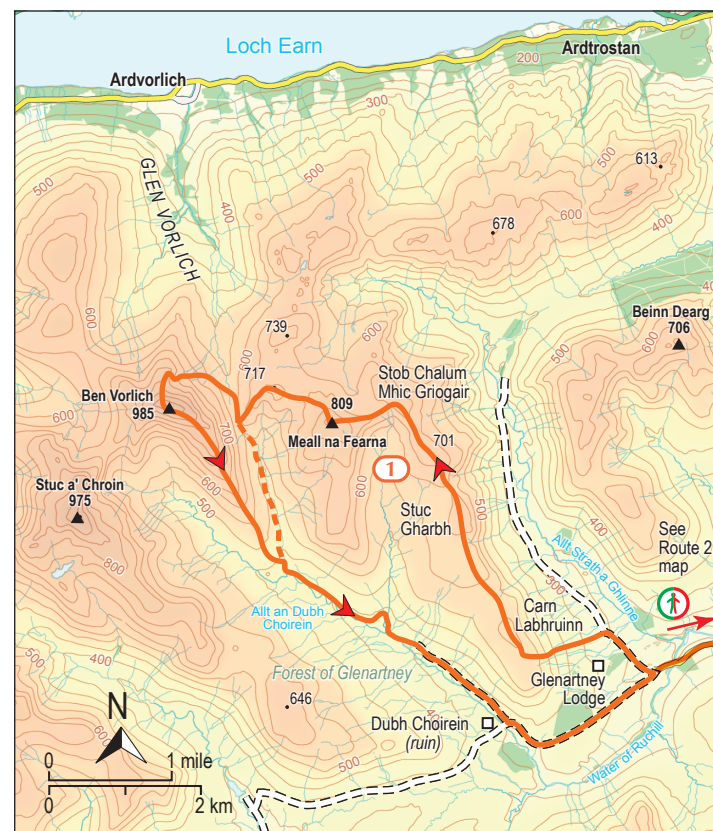
Omitting Ben Vorlich gives a walk of 23.5km and 900m ascent (15 miles/3000ft) – about 7½hr. Ben Vorlich can also be bagged on its own, by a long walk in up Gleann an Dubh Choirein: similar distance and ascent.

Meall na Fearnna is a typical Perthshire Corbett. Once the peat hags are passed, it's a high grassy ramble. Ben Vorlich then rises steep-sided and rather rocky, an intimidating hill from this angle. In this particular case, the Munro is indeed much more than the Corbett. You plunge into the steepness of the eastern slope, avoid almost all of the trodden highway rising from Loch Earn, and earn yourself a delightful grassy ridgeline for the descent.

The riverside path from Dubh Choirein is an ancient right of way. Today just enough people walk it to keep it clear and followable for the 6km from the hill base back to Glen Artney.

See map for Route 2 for the route start. Start along the road up-valley, to cross its bridge over Allt an Dubh Choirein. Keep ahead to a white gate with a walkers' gate alongside.

Keep ahead (northwest) on the track past farm buildings. Pass below a plantation (which conceals Glenartney Lodge). In another 500 metres pass below a smaller and



newer plantation. Now turn off left up rough grassland. The slope steepens to the plateau of Carn Labhuinn.

Turn northwest on grass and peat hags, across **Carn Labhuinn** and the wide col behind it. Best is to keep along the tops of the east-falling steep slopes. **Stuc Gharbh** is pleasant grassy going, and this continues along the 701m ridge and **Stob Chalum Mhic Griogair**. From the northern and main top, drop south to cross a peaty



*Ben Vorlich from
across Loch Earn*

col at its highest point, then southwest up to the grassy top of **Meall na Fearn**.

Drop steeply north, swinging northwest as the slope eases, then bending west to the **717m** top. Now posts of an old fence lead down a spur, to the highest point of Bealach Gliogarsnaich.

To omit Ben Vorlich

Turn left and follow the stream south down out of the pass and along its wide valley. There's no path; the best going is beside the stream. You reach the valley foot and rejoin the main route at the ruin of Dubh Choirein house.

The **main route** follows the path north through the col for 500 metres, with a stream forming alongside. As Glen Vorlich opens out below, slant out to the left – leaving the path too early will land you on steep uncomfortable slopes. Head up west towards the northeast-facing hollow below the summit of Ben Vorlich. Reach the small floor of this hollow at about 700m level.

Here you have two options. One is to take a deer path which slants out to the right, passing up a grassy ramp between two small outcrops, and from the top of the ramp, turn left up the spurline Sgiath nam Tarmachan. The other is just to continue straight up the hollow. Another deer path slants out right, higher up, or you can just keep up the steepening slope, to right of stones and scree, to arrive suddenly at the path on Sgiath nam Tarmachan.

On turning left up Sgiath nam Tarmachan from either route, you soon meet the broad Munro-baggers' path up from Loch Earn. Follow it up to the white trig point at **Ben Vorlich** summit.

A delightful 100 metres of ridge lead to the east summit, just 1m lower. Continue down the well-defined southeast ridge, with a small path and old fence posts. At its foot the ridge levels, with a peat hag. Drop left for slightly easier going alongside the stream Allt a' Bhealaich Gliogarsnaiche, following it down to the ruined **Dubh Choirein** house. ▶

Remains of a footbridge start the path down **Allt an Dubh Choirein**. This path is mostly still there, and follows the left bank of the small river. After 1.2km the river has a small, tree-lined gorge. Just after this the main path heads out left, away from the river, to a bridge over a sidestream Allt na Fearn, then follows it back to the main river. In another 400 metres you pass a footbridge. Around 600 metres after that, the riverside path joins a grassy track, through a gate below a new plantation.

*The route omitting
Ben Vorlich rejoins
here.*

*Ben Vorlich summit,
from the east top*



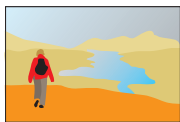
If it's got dark, you can just walk back along the road.

The track gives comfortable walking, after 1km joining a somewhat more used one that arrives over a bridge from the right. The track passes over the spur of Monadh Odhar, then drops to the farm passed on the outward walk.

Head through the white gate and down the driveway track. Once across the river bridge, take a gate on the left. ◀ A fishermen's path runs through riverside meadows; where it passes under powerlines it is marked with yellow noticeboards about not flourishing one's rod overhead.

As the bank steepens, the path is just above the river. Pass along more level meadows, then keep above another steep banking above the river. Just beyond this, a foot-bridge over a ditch leads to a gate into the church car park.

2 Beinn Dearg



Length



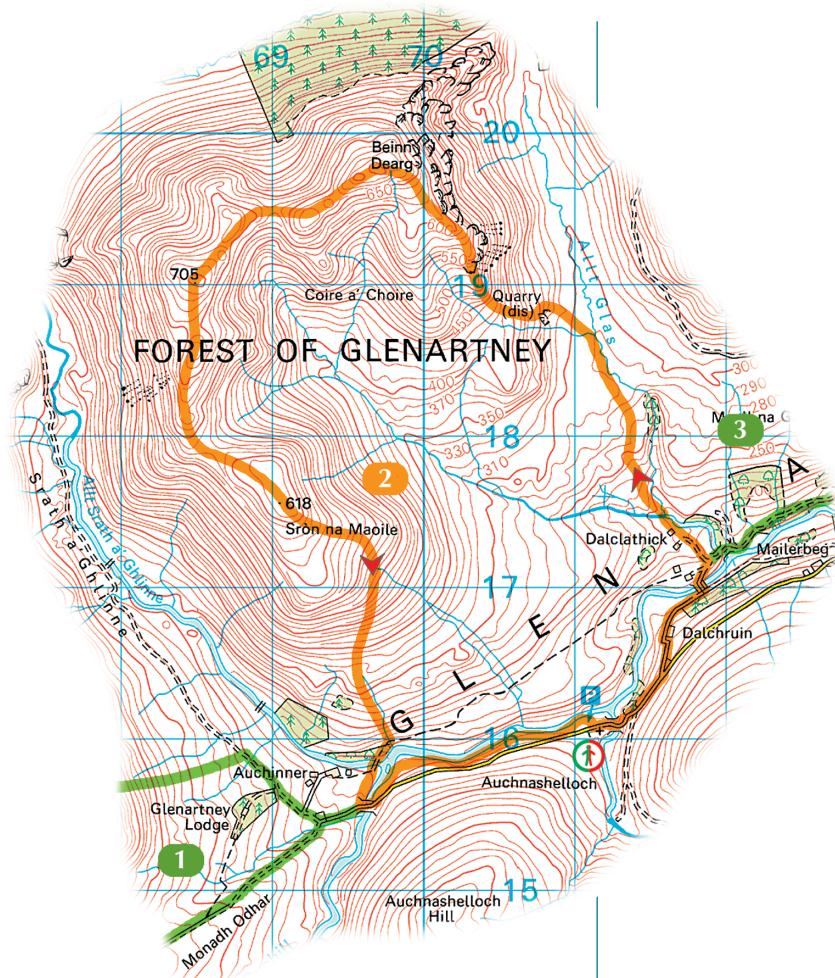
Difficulty



Start/finish	Glenartney church car park (NN 711 161)
Distance	13.5km/8½ miles
Ascent	750m/2500ft
Approx time	5hr
Max altitude	Beinn Dearg 706m
Terrain	Pathless grassy ridge; approach and final descent on rough tussocky grassland

Switzerland has its *röstigrabe*, east of which one eats pan-fried potatoes and speaks German. Perthshire has its heatherline, east of which one struggles in knee-scratching shrubbery and speaks Anglo-Saxon swearwords. The green ridge of Beinn Dearg is all the more enjoyable when you look across Allt Glas to the brown twigs of Ben Halton on the other side of the divide.

The green ridgeline fringed with its small crags is a delight, but the approach is across damp moorland. And the last half-kilometre of the descent shows that grass too can induce swear words, when you meet it thigh-high in July or August.



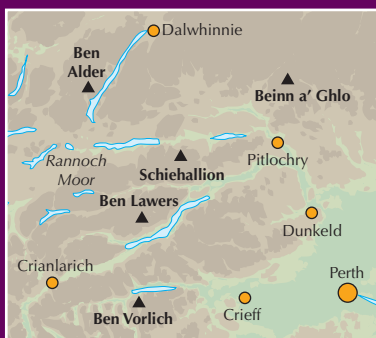
Start back along the Glen Artney road for 400 metres, then bear down left on a farm track marked 'Dogs on Leads'. Pass below the buildings at **Dalchruin**, then follow the riverside to a bridge.



- 42 Munros, as well as smaller hills and low-level routes
- summits, passes, lochs, rivers, ancient woodland • Beinn Dorain, Ben Lawers, Beinn a' Ghlo, Ben Alder, Schiehallion

Between Loch Lomond National Park and the Cairngorms, a huge stretch of the southeastern Grampians lies within the former county of Perthshire. It's a place to relax, compared with the rigours of Scotland's rocky north and west. These hills are big but mostly grassy and, from Schiehallion to Atholl, from Rannoch to Ben Vrackie, there are a lot of them.

This guide presents a selection of 80 routes, many challenging and unconventional, divided between 10 areas. All the Munros are included, as are many of the Corbetts and several smaller hills from Shee of Ardtalnaig to Birnam Hill. Here too you will find great rivers like the Tay and Garry, the wild passes of Gaick and Minigaig and the woodland walks of Perthshire's Big Tree Country.



- routes are graded by length and difficulty
- with notes on local transport, accommodation and facilities
- includes comprehensive advice on access during the deer-stalking season

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MOUNTAIN WALKING | SCOTLAND



US \$24.95

ISBN 978-1-78631-107-8



9 781786 311078

UK £14.95