

The Cairngorms

The Cairngorms is the wildest and most extensive area of uplands in Scotland and embraces the largest tracts of land over 600m and up to 1300m high. For this chapter 'Cairngorms' is interpreted very broadly – from Strathspey in the north, to Braemar and central Deeside in the east and south, and around the edge of the uplands to Blair Atholl in Glen Garry, according to the authoritative Scottish Mountaineering Club guide. Originally the Cairngorms was called Am Monadh Ruadh, meaning 'red rounded mountains' (referring to the big outcrops of pinkish-red granite) but the name of the summit most visible from Strathspey was adopted for the entire area in the 19th century. Oddly, the name of this summit – Cairn Gorm – means 'blue rocky mountain'.

With its central plateau generally above 1000m, the Cairngorms is a place to be taken seriously and not where you'd go for a casual stroll. The area offers some of Scotland's finest opportunities for long-distance walks along the network of public paths, and for magnificent treks across rolling mountains and plateaus. In winter it's one of Scotland's two main mountaineering and ice-climbing venues, and very popular with cross-country and downhill skiers. The greater part of the area is within Cairngorms National Park (see the boxed text on p144), the larger of Scotland's two parks, set aside in 2003.

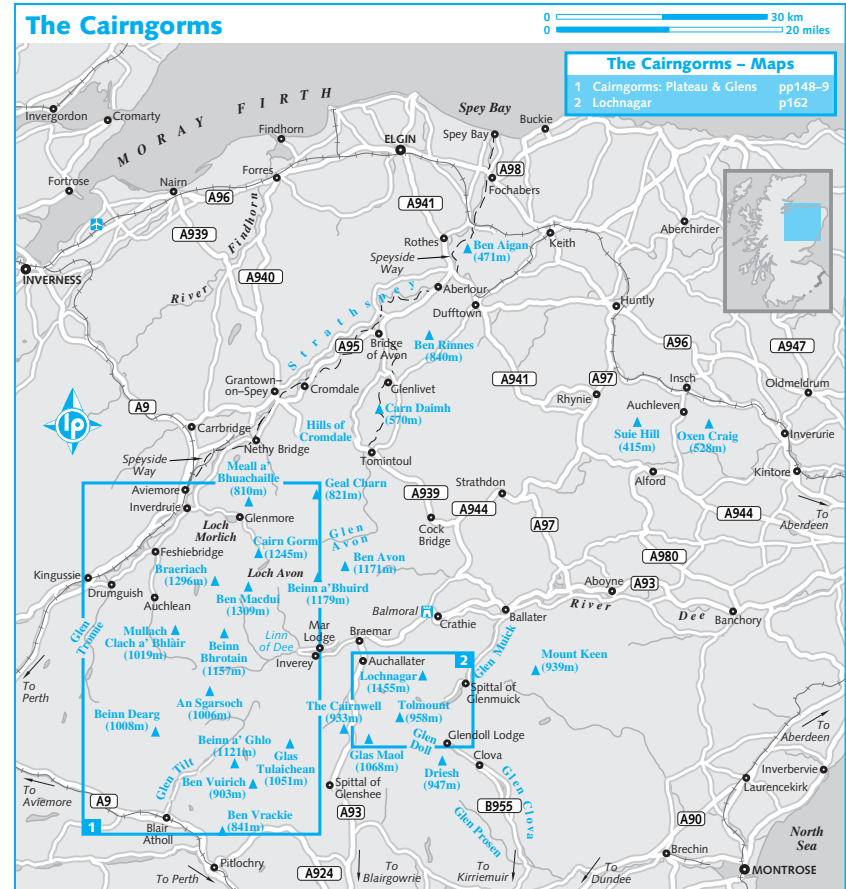
The Cairngorms can seem intimidatingly bleak and featureless. However, once you have spent some time here, you may understand what Henry Alexander, an early Scottish Mountaineering Club guidebook author, meant when he wrote, 'the greatness and dignity and calm of the Cairngorms cast their spell over the spirit'.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Magnificent views to distant horizons from **Cairn Gorm** (p147), a vast alpine plateau seemingly on top of the world
- Following centuries-old pathways through remote glens to **Lairig Ghru** (p152), Scotland's most dramatic mountain pass
- Marvelling at Glen Derry's beautiful Caledonian pine woodlands, with purple carpets of heather in late summer, on the **Blair Atholl to Glenmore** (p156) walk
- Seeing mysterious, darkly beautiful lochans cradled by the towering cliffs of glacier-sculpted corries on **Lochnagar** (p159)

■ www.cairngorms.co.uk

■ www.visithighlands.com



ENVIRONMENT

Granite and schist have created two basic types of Cairngorms' landscapes. The plateau and the big, rounded mountains with smooth, contoured slopes consist principally of granite, which commonly weathers into vast sheets of scree and fine gravel. Crags, bluffs and broken slopes and cliffs indicate the presence of schist (and gneiss and diorite). The landforms have glaciation and the ice age written all over them: long, deep, U-shaped glens, great cliff-lined trenches, scores of stunning corries gouged out of the mountain slopes, and curiously shaped mounds of moraine in the glens.

The Caledonian woodlands, which include birch and juniper, in Rothiemurchus,

Glen Derry and Glen Feshie in particular, are but remnants of the once-extensive tree cover. The arctic-alpine vegetation of the Cairngorms is outstanding in its variety and extent. Tiny flowering plants, mosses and liverworts survive in areas where snow lingers into summer and on the crags and the gritty plateaus. Heather moorland is widespread below 750m (higher in some areas, lower elsewhere); the heather species are mixed with grasses and sedges.

Only a few birds and mammals live on the high ground: long-legged mountain hare, introduced reindeer on the Cairngorm plateau, golden plover, dotterel, snow bunting and the remarkable ptarmigan, which changes plumage three times a year

and is a permanent resident. Red and roe deer and red grouse are most likely to be seen on the moors and in woodlands. In the trees, bird life is plentiful, notably crossbills, siskins and big black capercaillies.

The Cairngorms' exceptional ecological importance has long been recognised in scientific and conservation circles. The national park takes in the Cairngorms National Nature Reserve, several sites of special scientific interest and parts of two national scenic areas. The UK government is considering nominating the core mountain area (25% of which is owned by conservation and public organisations) as a World Heritage site, principally for its geological features.

The Cairngorms' climate is the closest in Scotland to an arctic regime. The mountains are exposed to the coldest winds, from Arctic regions to the north, and from the continental European landmass to the east and southeast. The wind can be ferociously strong; speeds exceeding 150mph have been recorded at the Cairn Gorm summit weather station. As the mountains are well inland, snow accumulates to greater depths and lasts much longer than elsewhere in Scotland, from late November until May, although the cover waxes and wanes markedly during that time. In fact, snow can fall in any month, although rarely in August.

INFORMATION Maps

The OS Travel – Road 1:250,000 map No 2 *Northern Scotland* is ideal for planning and finding your way around; map No 4 *Southern Scotland* would be useful for access from the south.

Books

The most comprehensive guidebook around is *The Cairngorms* by Adam Watson, published in the Scottish Mountaineering Club's (SMC) District Guide series. For in-depth information, Scottish Natural Heritage's *Cairngorms: A Landscape Fashioned by Geology* is excellent. The Scottish Rights of Way Society's *Scottish Hill Tracks*, edited by DJ Bennet and C Stone, is useful for long-distance routes. Of the several walking guides covering the area, *Walks Speyside including Glenmore* and *Walks Deeside* by Richard Hallewell are very compact and each describes 25 varied walks. In similar format, Nick Williams' *The Cairngorms* outlines 40 circular walks, mostly for hardy types. John Brooks' *Cairngorms Walks* has better maps and more generous descriptions. Jim Crumley's *The Heart of the Cairngorms* is a passionate statement of the 'need for wildness' to be recognised in conservation and development proposals.

CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK – UNFINISHED BUSINESS

After much debate, Cairngorms National Park was officially declared in September 2003, an event welcomed more or less universally, though with large reservations by many people. The most contentious of these was to do with the park's southern boundary, which follows the watershed between the River Dee and south-flowing steams, but excludes several fine glens and hills, leaving the park without an accessible southern gateway. The only reason the Scottish Executive, which decided to draw this boundary, would give was that it needed to reduce the number of local government authorities involved – never mind anything to do with nature conservation. Widespread dissatisfaction coalesced in the PARC (Perthshire Alliance for the Real Cairngorms) but to no avail (yet), the Executive saying only that the issue will come up for debate again when the park is reviewed in 2008.

Meantime, life goes on. There are plenty of roadside signs welcoming visitors to the park and a shelf-full of attractive and informative brochures about the park, but unlike most (if not all) national parks, it has no dedicated visitor centre (go to the local TICs instead) and no national park rangers. The several existing ranger services, run by local estates and councils, remain in business, continuing to do excellent work.

To end on an upbeat note, in August 2005 the park received the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas, the first British park to do so. It is only given to areas that match exacting standards for sustainable development and tourism management, based on an action plan drawn up by the park authority.

Information Sources

Cairngorms National Park (www.cairngorms.co.uk) does not have a dedicated visitor centre; instead, local TICs carry a selection of the park's publications.

For accommodation bookings throughout the area, contact **VisitsScotland** (☎ 0845 225 5121; www.visitscotland.com). **Traveline Scotland** (☎ 0870 608 2608; www.travelinescotland.com) is the most direct source for detailed public transport timetables.

NORTHERN CAIRNGORMS

The focus of this section is mainly on the vast, central Cairn Gorm-Macdui plateau, crowned by Ben Macdui (1309m, 4294ft), Scotland's second-highest mountain, rising to the south of Cairn Gorm (1245m, 4084ft). The plateau is separated from neighbouring mountain massifs by the deep gash of Lairig Ghru in the west and Lairig an Laoigh in the east, and is pitted with spectacular, cliff-lined corries on its northern and southern faces. The weather on the plateau is notoriously fickle, with low cloud, mist, strong winds and sleet likely at any time. Visibility can quickly deteriorate to zero and, although the paths are well worn, prominent landmarks are scarce so route-finding can be difficult. Navigation skills – using a map and compass – are therefore essential.

Don't be put off if you're not keen on climbing mountains. On the northern slopes of the plateau, in Rothiemurchus Estate (privately owned) and Glenmore Forest Park (managed by Forest Enterprise), there are many low-level walks suitable for all and ideal for days when the mountains are shrouded in cloud.

Extensive snow cover can persist on the high plateau until well into May and start to build up again in November, so the best months for the area are May to September.

Two walks – a high-level circuit over the summit of Cairn Gorm with an optional extension to Ben Macdui, and a medium-level route deep into the range through Lairig Ghru – provide a good introduction to the scale and wildness of the Cairngorms. There's an outline of a beautiful short walk

around Loch an Eilein (p151) and the More Walks section (p162) includes outlines of the ascent of nearby Braeriach, third only to Ben Nevis and Ben Macdui and a truly magnificent peak; a much shorter climb over Meall a' Bhuachaille, with fine views of the plateau; a long, low-level walk to beautiful Loch Avon; and an outline of the Speyside Way, a long-distance path linking Aviemore and Buckie on the North Sea coast.

PLANNING Maps

Harvey's Superwalker 1:25,000 *Cairn Gorm* map covers both walks in this section very well.

Information Sources

At the Cairngorm funicular's base station at Coire Cas – generally known as Cairngorm – the **Cairngorms countryside ranger service** (☎ 01479 861703) can give expert advice about walks on the plateau; the local weather forecast is posted there daily. The service runs a program of guided walks during summer. Whatever your opinion is about the funicular (see the boxed text on p150), the website of its operator, **Cairn-Gorm Mountain Ltd** (www.cairngormmountain.com), is worth a look.

ACCESS TOWNS Aviemore

☎ 01479 / pop 2397

Aviemore sees itself as the gateway to the Cairngorms, with the full range of facilities, but lacks the atmosphere of a real mountain town.

The **TIC** (☎ 0845 225 5121; www.visithighlands.com; The Mall), in the town centre, has a good range of maps and guides, and can look after accommodation bookings.

The several gear shops in the centre of town, all open daily and with similar ranges of stock, include Cairngorm Mountain Sports, Nevisport and Ellis Brigham.

SLEEPING & EATING

The nearest and most amenable camping ground is at Rothiemurchus (p146).

Aviemore SYHA Hostel (☎ 0870 004 1104; www.syha.org.uk; 25 Grampian Rd; dm £14; ☑) is a superior hostel, five minutes' walk from the town centre.

Old Bridge Inn (☎ 811137; 23 Dalfaber Rd; bar meals £9) is a largely unspoiled, traditional pub specialising in Scottish fare; local ales are on tap.

For supplies, the Tesco supermarket has all you're likely to need.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

First ScotRail (☎ 0845 755 0033; www.firstscotrail.com) services from both Edinburgh and Glasgow to Inverness stop at Aviemore (£36, 2½ hours, nine Monday to Saturday, five Sunday) as does the **GNER** (☎ 0845 722 5225; www.gner.co.uk) midday service from London Kings Cross to Inverness via Edinburgh (7½ hours, daily); fares for these trips are variable. There is also a suburban service from Inverness (£9, 40 minutes, 11 services Monday to Saturday, five Sunday). The First ScotRail *Caledonian Sleeper* from London Euston to Inverness calls at Aviemore.

Scottish Citylink (☎ 0870 550 5050; www.citylink.co.uk) buses from Edinburgh and Glasgow (both £16, 3¼ hours, six services Monday to Saturday, five Sunday) stop at the train station; the TIC handles bookings and inquiries. **Highland Country Buses** (☎ 01463 811211; www.rapsons.co.uk) links Aviemore and Cairngorm Ski Centre (£3, 25 minutes, at least 10 daily).

By car, turn off the A9 between Kingussie and Daviot to reach Aviemore.

Glenmore

☎ 01479

Glenmore (7 miles from Aviemore), beside the Ski Rd up to Coire Cas, is the closest settlement to the start of the walks. Forest Enterprise's **Glenmore Forest Park Visitor Centre** (☎ 861220) concentrates on the surrounding forest park. The *Guide to Forest Walks*, available from the centre, includes maps and notes for waymarked walks in the park. There is also a **café** (breakfast £7, lunch £6, dinner £8; ☎ breakfast & lunch daily, dinner Jun-Sep) here.

SLEEPING & EATING

Glenmore Camping & Caravan Site (☎ 861271; unpowered/powering sites for 2 £10/19) is run by Forest Enterprise. Pitches are mostly flat and well grassed; the views are superb.

Cairngorm Lodge SYHA Hostel (☎ 861238; www.syha.org.uk; dm £14; ☎), in a spacious former

lodge, has excellent facilities, as well as a great outlook.

Glenmore Lodge (☎ 861256; www.glenmorelodge.org.uk; s/d £20/40, mains £6-10; ☎ lunch & dinner), about 1 mile east of Glenmore, houses the National Sports Training Centre. The Lochain Bar has a marvellous view of the Cairngorm plateau and – when you can't see the view – stunning posters of more distant peaks. Accommodation availability (shared bathroom) depends on courses in progress.

Cas Bar (Cairngorm car park), near the funicular station, is primarily a watering hole, although it does also serve snacks and light meals.

Glenmore shop (☎ 861253), next to the camping site, stocks a small range of supplies and liquid fuel and gas; the local forecast is posted outside. It has an adjacent **café** (breakfast £5, lunch mains £5, dinner mains £8; ☎ lunch daily, dinner Jun-Sep).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Highland Country Buses operates services between Aviemore and Glenmore; see opposite for details.

Inverdrurie & Coylumbridge

☎ 01479

These two tiny settlements beside the road to Cairngorm can serve as quiet alternative bases to Aviemore.

Rothiemurchus Visitor Centre (☎ 812345; www.rothiemurchus.net; Inverdrurie) is run by Rothiemurchus Estate and provides information about the estate, including guided walks led by the estate's own rangers. Under the same roof is the Farm Shop and Larder, stocked with seriously tempting Scottish delicacies.

Rothiemurchus Camp & Caravan Park (☎ 812800; Coylumbridge; unpowered/powering sites for 2 £10/15) is set in pine woodland beside the Lairig Ghru path.

Junipers B&B (☎ 810405; Inverdrurie; s/d £28/50) is welcoming and comfortable.

The **Einich** (☎ 812334; mains £7-14; ☎ lunch daily, dinner Wed-Sat), in an old stone building next to the visitor centre, is a pleasantly informal restaurant. Local produce is to the fore on the small menu; the soup is second-to-none.

For public transport to Inverdrurie and Coylumbridge, see opposite.

CAIRN GORM HIGH CIRCUIT

Duration	4½–5 hours
Distance	7.5 miles (12km)
Difficulty	moderate–demanding
Start/Finish	Cairngorm car park
Nearest Town	Glenmore (opposite)
Transport	bus
Summary	An outstanding mountain walk across a sprawling alpine plateau, with magnificent wide-ranging views; take in even higher Ben Macdui for good measure.

This is the most popular high walk in the Cairngorms, the highlights being the summit of Cairn Gorm, the dramatic peaks of Stob Coire an t-Sneachda and Cairn Lochan, and the awesome corries. It can't be stressed too strongly that this walk is not a doddle. The vast plateau drops precipitously in almost all directions and severe weather is possible at any time; conditions may be fine at Glenmore but up on top it can be completely different. If you haven't done much walking, then solicit some experienced company for this great walk. Ben Macdui provides even wider views and a greater sensation of remoteness, out of sight of the developments on the northern slopes; what's more, at 1309m it's Scotland's second-highest peak.

Although this walk can be done in either direction, it's described clockwise, going up to Cairn Gorm from the northeast, around the rim of Coire an t-Sneachda, over Cairn Lochan then down the ridge and back to the start. The ascent to Cairn Gorm's summit is about 645m and there's an additional climb of about 155m over Cairn Lochan; for Ben Macdui add another 200m of climbing. Realistically, the only escape route is down Fiacail a' Choire Chais, the ridge between Coire Cas and Coire an t-Sneachda. The main Cairn Gorm walk isn't a particularly long day, so you'll have plenty of time to enjoy the views; adding Ben Macdui makes for a full day but if you're fit – no worries!

GETTING TO/FROM THE WALK

Highland Country Buses (☎ 01463 811211; www.rapsons.co.uk) links Aviemore and Cairngorm Ski Centre (£3, 25 minutes, at least 10 daily), via Inverdrurie and Coylumbridge.

By road from Aviemore, take the B970 via Inverdrurie to Coylumbridge, then con-

tinue along the Ski Rd to Glenmore and the Cairngorm car park.

THE WALK

Map p143

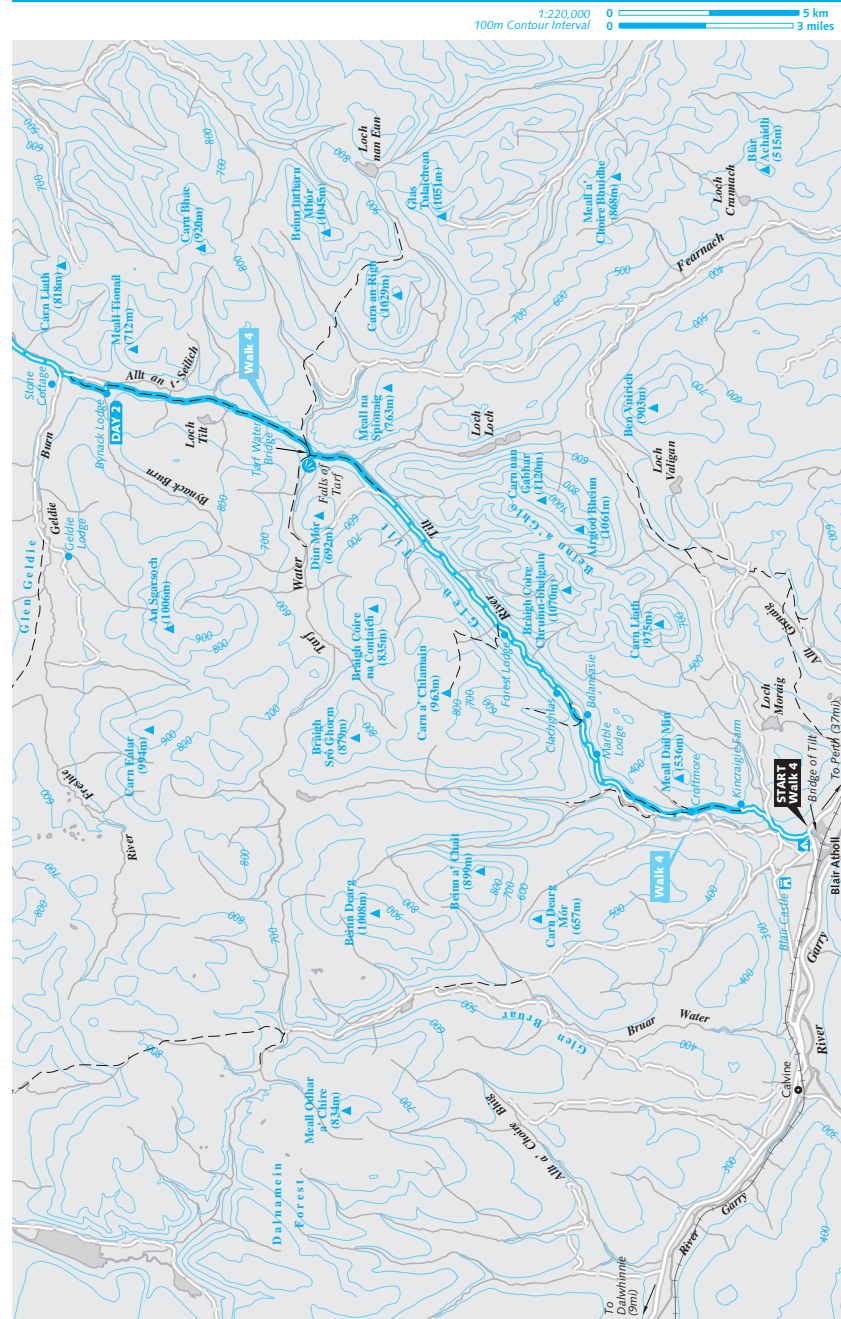
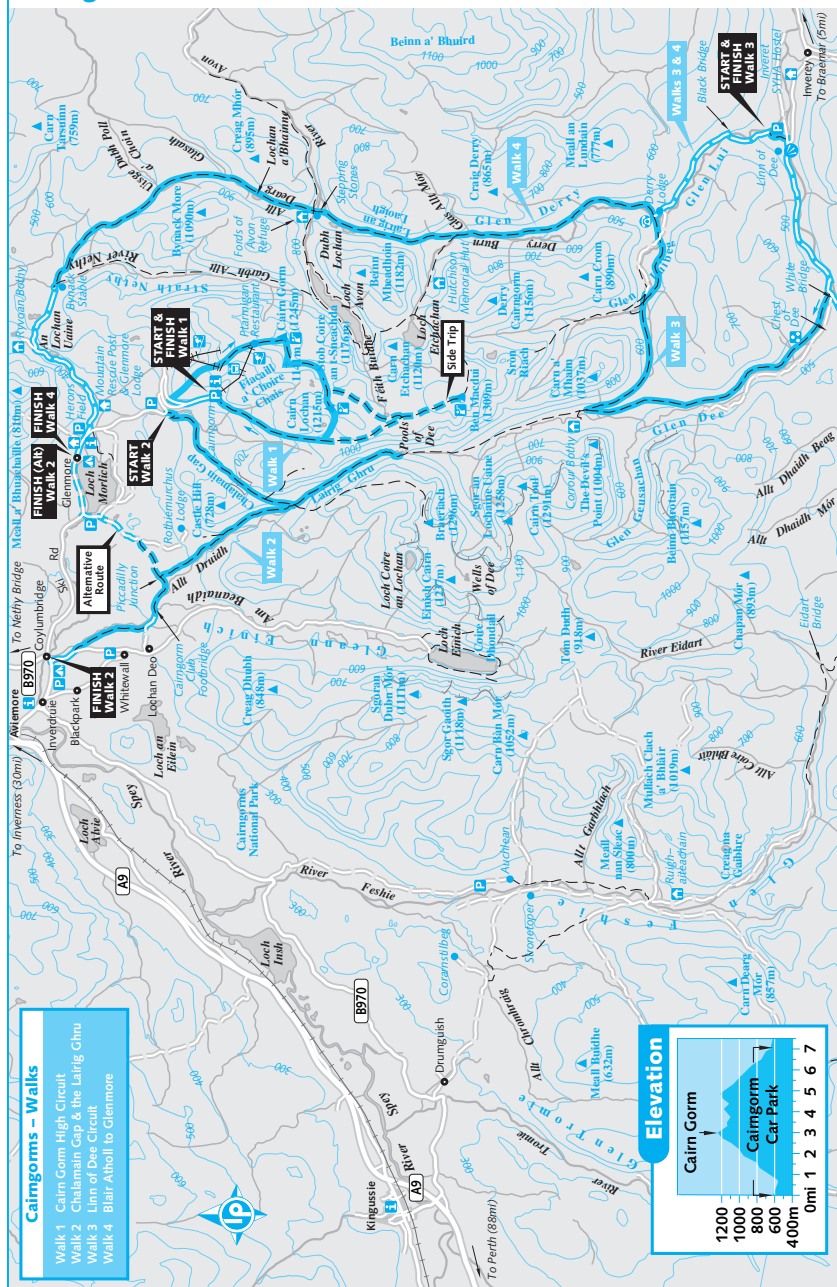
Start by walking back (north) down the road, away from the car park, to a road junction; take the road to the right for about 90m to a stonework drain on the right. A small cairn in the heather marks the start of a narrow path on the other side of the ditch, parallel to the road. Follow this entrenched old track for about 200m and you'll find that it becomes wider and clearer, up the heather-clad slope. After a while cairns mark the route, which continues steadily up, with views unfolding of the corries and spurs of the Cairngorm plateau. The path goes beneath a ski lift and past the top of another, weaving in and out of the picket fences lining the routes of the lifts. Having left the heather behind, the path then crosses gravelly ground and skirts the Ptarmigan restaurant. Beyond the restaurant, a stone-paved path leads fairly steeply up to a boulder field where cairns and poles clearly mark the route across this minor obstacle course and up to the large cairn on the summit of **Cairn Gorm** (1245m), with a weather station nearby.

Among the multitude of features in the view are the long, flat plateau of Ben Wyvis (just west of Inverness) to the north; the sprawling bulk of Ben Macdui nearby; beyond it, the sharper profile of Braeriach; and, to the southeast, flat-topped Ben Avon, dotted with granite tors.

Descend sharply west over a jumble of big boulders – initially there's no clear path – towards a wide path on clearer ground below. Then, on a broad saddle, diverge a little to the right to a prominent cairn (1141m) at the head of Fiacail a' Choire Chais (the escape route mentioned earlier) for a great view of the crags on the eastern side of Cairn Lochan.

To continue, follow the broad path around the rim of Coire an t-Sneachda, which is lined with cliffs. Its flat floor is decorated with swampy lochans. A cairned route, rather than a path, leads up to **Stob Coire an t-Sneachda** (1176m) and more great views. Drop down west to a small gap. The path to Ben Macdui (see the Side Trip on p150) leads south from here. Otherwise, climb steeply to **Cairn Lochan** (1215m) with

Cairngorms: Plateau & Glens



its sprawling cairn close to the rim of the plunging cliffs. The beautiful green patchwork of broad Strathspey dominates the outlook to the northwest and west.

Continue generally southwest, following a cairned route, then descend the steep, mostly rocky slope to the clearly defined path along the north-south ridge rimming the western side of Coire an Lochain. The path loses height fairly quickly down the heathery slope as it bends northeast and crosses a small stream. A well-made path takes over – you may be grateful for the huge stepping stones planted across a very boggy stretch. The excellent path leads on, making it much easier to enjoy the superb views of the northern corries, then across Allt Coire an t-Sneachda and on to the Cairngorm car park.

SIDE TRIP: BEN MACDUI

2½ hours, 5 miles (8km), 200m ascent

From the small gap between Stob Coire an t-Sneachda and Cairn Lochan, follow the clear, narrow path leading south then southwest above the shallow valley of Fèith Buidhe and down to a wide saddle cradling Lochan Buidhe. Snow can linger on the north-facing slope, just east of the lochan, into late summer. Beyond Lochan Buidhe you can see the dramatic cliffs of Carn Etchachan, while in the opposite direction, across the depths of the Lairig Ghru, Braerach's magnificent corries look as if some giant hand has scooped them out of the plateau. Follow a cairned route southeast across boulders then climb the steep slope, past a minor peak, and on to the summit of **Ben Macdui** (1309m), marked by a lonely

survey pillar, near which is a low stone shelter and a geographic direction plate erected by the Cairngorm Club (Aberdeen) in 1925. It helps identify the features in the extraordinarily wide view – from Ben Nevis and Creag Meagaidh (just south of west) to Lochnagar (slightly south of east) and Ben More Assynt (a bit west of north).

To return to the Cairn Gorm High Circuit route, retrace your steps to the saddle at Lochan Buidhe. From there, keep to the left or westerly path over the broad spur, then it's down – with an awesome view straight into the Lairig Ghru, overlooked by rugged Lurchers Crag. Follow this path back to Cairngorm car park as described in the main route.

CHALAMAIN GAP & THE LAIRIG GHRU

Duration	6–6½ hours
Distance	14 miles (22.5km)
Difficulty	moderate-demanding
Start	Sugar Bowl car park
Finish	Coylumbridge (p146)
Nearest Town	Glenmore (p146)
Transport	bus
Summary	An energetic walk over a low pass into one of the wildest and most spectacular glens in Scotland.

Far from any road, the Lairig Ghru is widely regarded as the finest mountain pass in Scotland. Cut by a massive glacier slicing right through the mountain mass, it provides a natural route from Strathspey to upper Deeside. Lairig Ghru means 'pass of Druie' – the stream that drains its northern side. It has been used for centuries as a trade and cattle-droving route, and is a public right of way. Traditionally, people walked the full 28 miles (45km) from Aviemore to Braemar, but these days many start from Coylumbridge or Glenmore. The walk described here is a day's outing from just south of Glenmore, through dramatic Chalamain Gap and up to the top of Lairig Ghru then back to Coylumbridge through Rothiemurchus pine woodlands.

The best way to do the walk is as described, starting at a point higher than the finish. Crossing Chalamain Gap involves a climb of 240m and it's another 225m up to the top of Lairig Ghru.

SHORT WALK

Secluded **Loch an Eilein**, part hidden in tall forest, sits at the foot of a long ridge to the northwest of the main Cairngorms massif, within both the Rothiemurchus Estate and Cairngorms National Park. Well-made paths through birch and pine woodland provide an easy 3-mile (5km) circuit of the beautiful loch, for which you should allow 1½ hours. To reach the start, follow the B970 southwest from Inverdrue (p146) for about 1 mile to the signposted turnoff to Loch an Eilein. The parking area (£2) is 1 mile further on. For more information, call at the main Rothiemurchus Visitor Centre (p146).

From the car park follow a wide path south to the small **visitor centre** (Easter-0ct), where you can learn something of what you'll be seeing during the walk. The large, partly grassed mound nearby is the remains of a lime kiln. Continue south along the track, close to the shore and soon the islet that gave the loch its name comes into view, monopolised by the brooding, grey ruins of a 14th-century castle. Further on, close to the path on the left, is a memorial to Walter Rice, who drowned while skating here in 1882, reputedly because he misjudged the thickness of the ice. From the end of the track, a path leads on to the left. Beyond the bridged crossing of the stream joining Loch Gamhna to Loch an Eilein, the path leads along the eastern shores, and there are more good views of the castle. At the northern end of the loch, bear left along a shoreline path to the visitor centre and turn right to reach the car park.

Alternatives One possible alternative for the return is to walk back to Herons Field car park on the Ski Rd near Glenmore, a distance of 14.8 miles (23.5km); Forest Enterprise charges £1 for the use of this car park. Or, you can reach the Ski Rd near the western end of Loch Morlich via the Rothiemurchus Estate road, although car parking there is less satisfactory. The distance for this version is 12.8 miles (20.5km). There's an outline of these alternatives after the main walk description.

If you have plenty of time, there are several interesting possibilities to consider. You could continue down Lairig Ghru to

THE CAIRNGORM FUNICULAR

During the 1960s the northern (and eastern) slopes of the Cairngorms were opened up for downhill skiing with the building of a road from Glenmore into Coire Cas. From there chairlifts ascended via an intermediate station to Ptarmigan, the top station at 1080m. However, the lift was often closed by the strong winds that regularly buffet the plateau.

In 1994 the Cairngorm Chairlift Company proposed a funicular railway similar to those operating in continental European alpine resorts. It would be more reliable and comfortable and it would, the company said, attract up to 100,000 visitors annually, twice then-current numbers. Many jobs would be created and the local economy would thrive.

Walkers, mountaineers and conservation groups protested that the environmental impact of the development would be disastrous in an area of supreme ecological and scenic importance, that it couldn't possibly be economically viable and would probably drive visitors away rather than draw them in. What's more, snowfalls seemed to be on the decline.

Nevertheless, financial backing was secured, Scottish Natural Heritage sanctioned the proposal (subject to mandatory access restrictions to protect adjacent European Union-designated conservation areas) and the Scottish Executive approved the proposal. To minimise the visual impact of the funicular and its support columns, the top 250m of the track to the Ptarmigan Visitor Centre go through a shallow tunnel, blasted out of the hillside.

The funicular and new base-station facilities opened in December 2001 and the new Ptarmigan Visitor Centre and restaurant the following spring. CairnGorm Mountain Ltd, the operating company, undertook to plough money back into the ski area, including footpath repair and construction.

One big string was attached to the European funding – the funicular must operate as a closed system during summer, to ensure the increased number of visitors doesn't cause severe damage to the fragile mountain environment. This means that between 1 May and 30 November funicular riders are not be allowed out onto the mountain, their experience being confined to displays in the visitor centre and what they can see from the viewing platform and the funicular carriage. Access on foot to the summit is now from the Cairngorm car park only.

Opponents of the funicular were not amused when the Ptarmigan restaurant was chosen as the site for the official opening of the Cairngorms National Park in September 2003, and several who were invited boycotted the ceremony. It remains to be seen whether the summer access restriction withstands commercial pressures, as visitor numbers have fallen way short of the optimistic forecasts.

BENNACHIE – THE CAIRNGORMS' EASTERN SENTINEL

Bennachie is a range of lowish mountains overlooking the lowlands northwest of Aberdeen. The highest point is Oxen Craig (528m); of its various satellites, Mither Tap (518m) is much loved by the locals and affords an incredibly far-ranging view on a good day, from Morven (a mountain in eastern Sutherland) far to the north, to the Cairngorm plateau and around to Aberdeen's urban sprawl.

Heather moorland carpets the ridge's higher ground, dotted with characteristic granite tors; the lower slopes are given over to conifer plantations and small-scale farms. People have lived on and around Bennachie for thousands of years. There's an Iron Age fort on Mither Tap, and crofters were evicted from the eastern slopes in the 19th century.

Much of the range is owned by the Forestry Commission, which has developed a web of waymarked walks across Bennachie, from short woodland strolls to the scenic, 11.5-mile-long West Gordon Way. Following forest tracks and footpaths, these walks fan out from the **Bennachie Centre** (☎ 01467 681470; bennachie.warden@aberdeenshire.gov.uk; 🕒 10.30am–5pm Tue–Sun) and from car parks on the northern and southern sides of the mountain. The waymarked Way, from the Bennachie Centre to the Suie car park in the west, is shown on OS Landranger 1:50,000 map No 37, and extends onto map No 38.

The Bennachie Centre has displays and a forest shop; rangers lead guided walks from the centre during summer.

The centre is a few miles west of Inverurie; access from there, via Burnhervie, is signposted. For information about accommodation and facilities in Inverurie and nearby Alford, contact the **Inverurie TIC** (☎ 01467 625800; 18 High St).

the Luibeg path, and on to Derry Lodge and Linn of Dee, from where it's possible to reach Braemar, or keep going south, right through Glen Tilt, to Blair Atholl (see the walk on p156).

GETTING TO/FROM THE WALK

The walk starts at Sugar Bowl car park, on the northeastern side of the Ski Rd, 1.75 miles south of Glenmore. You could use the Highland Country Buses service from Aviemore to Cairngorm Ski Centre (see p147), although the driver will probably stop below the car park for safety's sake.

At the end of the walk, there's a small roadside car park nearby. Alternatively, the same bus service to the start of the walk stops in Glenmore and Coylumbridge on the way to Aviemore.

THE WALK

Map p143

From the car park cross the road and follow the path down to a footbridge across Allt Mór. Climb up to the right then, on the rim of the bank, veer left along a stone-paved path and continue past a sign warning that you're entering a wild mountainous area. The views along the moorland here are great, taking in the deep corries and sharp spurs of the northern face of the Cairn-

gorm plateau. The path dips to cross a small stream then climbs steadily to narrow **Chalamain Gap**. Clamber over the boulders filling its narrow cleft, keeping to the lowest level to avoid the peaty, heathery slopes. It's an eerily quiet place, where rock falls seem to occur fairly frequently. On the far side there are magnificent views across Lairig Ghru to mighty Braeriach and the cairn-topped Sgòran Dubh Mór beyond. The wide, rocky and occasionally wet path crosses a shallow valley then descends steeply to the Lairig Ghru path beside Allt Druidh.

The path crosses the stream on big boulders and climbs the heathery slope, before emerging onto more open ground overlooked by steep slopes. Elongated mounds of moraine, left behind by the retreating glaciers, partly block the valley as you climb towards the pass. The path is marked by occasional cairns; follow these carefully, keeping to the left (east) for the final stretch to the **Lairig Ghru** crest. Ahead, the rugged peaks of Cairn Toul and the Devil's Point come into view. Continue for another 650m or so to the **Pools of Dee**, the headwaters of the River Dee, from where you can look far down the southern side of Lairig Ghru.

Retrace your steps to the point where you joined the Lairig Ghru path and continue

downstream. The rough path crosses steep, rocky slopes with Allt Druidh far below in a deep trench cut through the moraine. Continue past a path to the right (to Rothiemurchus Lodge), with fine views of the Monadhliath Mountains on the western side of Strathspey and Meall a' Bhuaichaille above Loch Morlich. After about 1.25 miles you come to some beautiful Scots pines, the outliers of the Caledonian woodland and a precious remnant of the great forests that once covered much of the Highlands. The path junction, known unofficially as **Piccadilly**, has direction signs to Aviemore (to the left/west) and Loch Morlich (to the right/east).

Follow the Aviemore track, beside Allt Druidh, past a stream junction and down to the footbridge, built in 1912 by the Cairngorm Club, over Allt na Beinne Moire (mapped as Am Beanaidh). A short distance further on, bear right along a path to Coylumbridge. This leads through dense pines then more-open pine woodland (where the displays of purple heather in August are magnificent), across small burns and through gates. Pass a path to the left (to Glen Einich) and continue along the broad track, past Rothiemurchus Camp & Caravan Park, to the road at Coylumbridge. There is a small roadside car park to the left.

ALTERNATIVE FINISH: PICCADILLY TO GLENMORE

1¼ hours, 3 miles (5km)

Turn right at Piccadilly along the wide path towards Loch Morlich. This leads through pine woodland to a high deer fence, just beyond which you meet the wide gravel road

to Rothiemurchus Lodge. Bear left and continue along the gravel road for nearly 1 mile to an unsigned junction.

To reach the Ski Rd near the western end of Loch Morlich directly from here, just continue ahead for 300m. There is some roadside car parking here and there's a Forest Enterprise car park (£1), 200m to the right. Glenmore is 1.25 miles along the Ski Rd.

For Herons Field, follow the path from the unsigned junction to a footbridge across a small burn then go through a tall gate and go left along a wide forest track, skirting the shore of Loch Morlich. Near its eastern end turn left along a path marked with a red-banded post. Follow the route, marked with these posts, north and east through cleared land and pines to the car park just west of Glenmore. Sugar Bowl car park is 1.25 miles further south along the Ski Rd.

SOUTHERN CAIRNGORMS

The highlights of this area, south of an east-west line roughly through Ben Macdui, are the lengthy public footpaths through the glens, which serve to unify the entire Cairngorms area. For walkers, these pedestrian 'highways' offer outstanding opportunities for extended walks in remote, uninhabited country, and easy access to scores of mountains. Many of the walks pass through the large Mar Lodge Estate, owned by the National Trust for Scotland (NTS). The estate is rich in archaeological evidence of past

MAR LODGE ESTATE – A WORK IN PROGRESS

The National Trust for Scotland's purchase of the 29,500-hectare Mar Lodge Estate in 1995 was hailed by many conservationists as a victory for the protection and better management of natural areas. All too frequently estates had been acquired by wealthy people with no real understanding of the natural values of the land. In the mid-1990s, the estate's red deer population was too high to allow the precious Caledonian woodlands to regenerate naturally (a problem since the 1830s), magnificently wild and lonely glens were blighted with exotic conifer plantations (although not on a large scale) and bulldozed tracks scarred some hillsides.

The main thrust of the Trust's program to rehabilitate the landscape is reducing the numbers of deer from 3300 in 1995 to around 1650. This will enable the Caledonian pines to regenerate and the heather moorland to recover from the intensive grazing by deer. At the time of research, Trust staff monitoring new tree growth had found fairly restricted, slow progress. To put a positive spin on this, it will probably take more than a decade to make good the neglect of more than 170 years!

settlement and many hundreds of sites have been identified. Examples of these, such as the foundations of stone cottages and stone-walled enclosures, are quite common through Glen Dee.

This section features walks along some of the public footpaths and a mountain walk to beautiful Lochnagar in Deeside, the area centred on the River Dee and its broad strath. Under More Walks (p163) are notes about a walk around Loch Muick (near Lochnagar) and another up Morrone, a fine mountain above Braemar.

LINN OF DEE CIRCUIT

Duration	6½–7 hours
Distance	16 miles (26km)
Difficulty	moderate
Start/Finish	Linn of Dee
Nearest Towns	Braemar (right), Inverey (opposite)
Transport	private

Summary A generally low-level exploration of two beautiful glens and superb Scots pine woodlands, with awesome views of the Braeriach massif above Lairig Ghru.

This is a superbly scenic, comparatively low-level walk, exploring Glen Dee and Glen Lui, west of Braemar. It's a good way to familiarise yourself with the area and its special feeling of remoteness and isolation. With a high point of 610m (only 250m of ascent), it is ideal for a misty day. A clockwise direction is recommended so you walk up the ever-narrowing Glen Dee towards spectacular Lairig Ghru, and the best of the going underfoot is concentrated in the second half of the walk. The walk can be extended further up Lairig Ghru as far as the Pools of Dee; this involves an extra 7 miles (11km) return.

The NTS has a policy of encouraging the long walk-in to the mountains – the reason for the car park being at Linn of Dee rather than Derry Lodge.

This walk is the key to several mountain climbs (or Munro-bagging excursions): massive Beinn Bhrotain (1157m), rising from the western side of Glen Dee; the Devil's Point (1004m), towering over Corrouth Bothy; Carn a' Mhaim (1037m), opposite the bothy; Ben Macdui (1309m) via Glen Luibeg and Sròn Riach; and Derry

Cairngorm (1156m). All are very fine walks, although adding any to the route described here makes for a long day, best kept for good midsummer weather. Spreading these walks over a couple of days would be better; small Corrouth Bothy, renovated by the Mountain Bothies Association (p21), could serve as a base, and there's plenty of tent space nearby. During the renovation, seven large sacks of rubbish were lifted out by helicopter; please help to ensure that this expensive clean-up is never necessary again. Elsewhere, being in NTS territory, there's no problem with wild camping for a night or two, although open fires are strictly prohibited.

During the walk you see plenty of evidence of the NTS's work to restore the magnificent pine woodlands, with fenced areas (exclosures) in Glen Luibeg where the native woodland, safe from hungry deer, is slowly making a comeback. In Glen Dee, conifer plantations and their enclosing fences are being removed, to make way for native species and to give capercaillie and black grouse a better chance of thriving without the hazard of lethal fencing. Less obviously, the number of red deer has been greatly reduced.

PLANNING When to Walk/Stalking

The walk is entirely within the NTS Mar Lodge Estate, where estate staff do the stalking, but never on weekends. Walkers' access is not affected by stalking activities.

Maps & Books

The OS Landranger 1:50,000 map No 43 *Braemar & Blair Atholl* covers this walk. The Harvey Superwalker 1:25,000 *Cairn Gorm* map excludes the area northwest from Linn of Dee, between Glen Luibeg and the River Dee.

The SMC's guide *The Cairngorms* contains some relevant information. The NTS booklet about Mar Lodge Estate is available from the rangers' office at Mar Lodge or, more conveniently, from the TICs in Braemar and Ballater.

NEAREST TOWNS Braemar

☎ 01339 / pop 400

Braemar, internationally famous for its annual September Highland Gathering, is a compact village deep in the mountains, just

off the A93. The **TIC** (☎ 741600; www.aberdeen-grampian.com; ☎ daily Jun-Sep, Mon-Sat Oct-May) carries a good range of guidebooks, and the local weather forecast is usually on display. The one bank does not have an ATM – the nearest is in Ballater (p161).

Braemar Mountain Sports (☎ 741242; 5 Invercauld Rd; ☎ daily) has a comprehensive range of stock, including stove fuels.

SLEEPING & EATING

Invercauld Caravan Club Site (☎ 741373; www.caravandub.co.uk; Glenshee Rd; unpowered/powerd sites for 2£15/24) is open to nonmembers. It's well laid out with plenty of trees and grass; facilities include a drying room.

Braemar SYHA Hostel (☎ 0870 155 3255; www.syha.org.uk; 21 Glenshee Rd; dm/d £13/26; ☑), beside the A93 just south of the village, has smallish dorms and a few doubles, an excellent drying room and a large kitchen. The mountain weather forecast is displayed daily.

Schiehallion House (☎ 741679; www.schiehallionhouse.com; Glenshee Rd; s/d £25/52), run by two keen walkers, provides a touch of luxury without too much fuss; look forward to a warm welcome.

Fife Arms Hotel (☎ 741644; Mar Rd; mains £8-12; ☎ lunch & dinner) is the walkers' pub, and the lounge bar serves bar meals that are better than average.

For self-caterers there's an Alldays supermarket, Strachan's grocery for Scottish delicacies, and a good butcher where you can also buy delicious fresh bread, a great start to a fortifying picnic lunch.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Stagecoach (☎ 0870 608 2608; www.stagecoachbus.com) operates service 201 between Aberdeen and Braemar (£8, 2½ hours, eight services Monday to Saturday, five Sunday) via Ballater.

Braemar is on the A93, 59 miles (96km) from Aberdeen and 17 miles (28km) west of Ballater.

Inverey

Inverey can't even be called a settlement – it consists simply of a couple of buildings, one of which is the small **Inverey SYHA Hostel** (☎ 01339 741969; dm £12), just west of the village on the Linn of Dee road. There's always plenty of hot water on tap to compensate for the lack of a shower.

The postbus service from Braemar (see below) passes Inverey on the way to Linn of Dee; ask the driver to drop you at the hostel.

GETTING TO/FROM THE WALK

The walk starts at the NTS Linn of Dee car park (£2 per day), 6.4 miles (10.5km) west of Braemar, just north of the River Dee bridge. A **Royal Mail postbus** (☎ 01246 546329) service, route 072, links Braemar and Linn of Dee (£2, 20 minutes, Monday to Saturday) via Inverey but doesn't reach Linn of Dee until 1.40pm.

THE WALK

Map p143

From the car park head west along the road and continue on past a barrier, along a vehicular track. You soon leave a pine plantation behind, entering wide, steep-sided Glen Dee. Follow the road, past many former settlements and scattered Scots pines, almost to White Bridge (about 1¼ hours from the start). Just before the bridge, leave the track on the well-made path to the right (west). In about 250m you pass close to the picturesque clear pools and cascades of the **Chest of Dee**. The path – generally pretty rough but properly constructed in places and easy to follow – leads northwest up Glen Dee, with the river in view. About 1.2km beyond the Chest of Dee, the path fords a small burn, beside which are the remains of two small dwellings. After a couple of miles the route drops down to the river bank where the glen narrows. From here, splendid views of the mighty cliffs of the Devil's Point, the gateway to Lairig Ghru, and Cairn Toul beyond begin to unfold. As the glen widens again, near the cliff-lined Glen Geusachan to the west, the path rises across the heathery-peaty slope and leads to a junction. This is spectacularly overlooked by the Devil's Point and is just about opposite **Corrouth Bothy** (about 2½ hours from White Bridge).

To reach the bothy, go down a narrow path on the left to a bridge across the river. Pick your way through the peat hags up to the bothy, standing more or less high and dry above the peaty morass. The small bothy, which was built in 1877 to house an estate deer watcher on the lookout for poachers, was renovated in 2006 by the

Mountain Bothies Association. The outlook to Ben Macdui is most impressive and the bothy is dwarfed by the surrounding mountains.

From the path junction it takes a good three hours to continue up through the magnificent depths of Lairig Ghru to the Pools of Dee and to return – it's well worth the effort if time is on your side.

The route back to Linn of Dee heads south from the path junction. The path rises steadily up the lower slopes of Carn a' Mhaim to the divide between the Dee and Luibeg Burn. Around here the quality of the path improves dramatically, with sections of stone paving and beautifully built culverts. The path descends into **Glen Luibeg** to an enclosure – go through the gate. There's a choice to be made here; the dry-foot option is to turn left (north), cross 300m of muddy ground to Luibeg Bridge, then go back downstream through an enclosure, past a path junction (to Ben Macdui) on the left (1½ hours from Corour Bothy). The alternative, when Luibeg Burn is low, is to carry on straight ahead and cross the stream on widely spaced stepping stones, before joining back up with the main path.

From here, the track rapidly becomes wider and seems well made. It winds its way east through Glen Luibeg, where the scattered pine woodlands are a dramatic change from the moors and crags earlier. After about 1.5 miles you reach the edge of a flat stretch of open grassland. Follow a rough path east from here to a bridge over Derry Burn, near boarded-up Derry Lodge (around one hour from Luibeg Bridge). There is a telephone for public and emergency use here, in a red box on the side of a brown timber building near the lodge. It's coin-operated and maintained (at a loss) by the volunteer Braemar Mountain Rescue Team.

The last hour of walking is nice and easy, down Glen Lui on a vehicular track, past enclosures, areas cleared of exotic conifers and the scattered remains of former settlements. Beyond the Black Bridge, the track rises a little then falls, passing a fenced plantation on the left. On the downhill section, look out for the sign indicating the path to the right, heading through a plantation to the car park.

BLAIR ATHOLL TO GLENMORE

Duration	2 days
Distance	44 miles (71km)
Difficulty	moderate–demanding
Start	Blair Atholl (opposite)
Finish	Glenmore (p146)
Transport	train, bus

Summary Two magnificent days through the length of the Cairngorms, skirting the eastern slopes of the plateau through isolated glens and beautiful Caledonian pine woodlands.

Glen Tilt provided a natural, low-level route between Blair Atholl and Braemar for centuries. The Duke of Atholl tried to frustrate this tradition by closing the glen in the 1840s but lost his court case, ensuring the right of way's integrity. Forest Lodge is a long-standing centre for hunting; Queen Victoria was a visitor in 1844, and she and Prince Albert drove through Glen Tilt to Braemar in 1861.

The unswerving southwest to northeast trend of Glen Tilt betrays its location on a major geological fault line. The rocks here, predominantly schist and limestone, have produced relatively fertile ground so the glen looks much greener than others in the Cairngorms. You can never get away from the ice age in the Cairngorms; the unusual evidence in Glen Tilt is the sharp bend in the course of Tarf Water, where a bank of moraine rerouted its original flow into the River Dee.

This walk takes you across three major watersheds: between the River Garry and the River Dee north of Glen Tilt, between the Dee and the River Avon over Lairig an Laoigh, and between the Avon and Strathspey north of the Fords of Avon. Typical of the Cairngorms, there is clear evidence of glaciation in the wide, flat-bottomed glens and in the great mounds of moraine in upper Glen Derry. The amount of ascent involved is about 820m, the greater part of which is in the stretch north from Linn of Dee.

The recommended place to camp, near the ruins of Bynack Lodge, is within the NTS's Mar Lodge Estate.

Glen Derry pine woods are one of the outstanding features of this walk – the NTS's work to restore their vigour is outlined in the boxed text on p153.

Alternatives Some of the finest camp sites in the Cairngorms are in Glen Derry, beneath the Scots pines, not far from deserted Derry Lodge. This is in the heart of the NTS's Mar Lodge Estate, where wild camping is perfectly OK – provided you leave the area as you find it (see p21). However, Derry Lodge is 27 miles (43.5km) from Blair Atholl – on the long side for a day's walk. If you're tempted by the Munros within easy reach of Glen Derry – Derry Cairngorm (1156m), Carn a' Mhaim (1037m) and Ben Macdui (1309m) – then a short day to Glen Derry from Bynack Lodge makes sense. As you walk through Glen Derry and over Lairig an Laoigh, you'll also pass Beinn Mheadhoin (1182m) and Bynack More (1090m) to the west, not to mention the magnificent mountains to the east, foremost among which is Beinn a' Bhuird (1196m). For these it would be worth considering making a base at Hutchison Memorial Hut on upper Derry Burn.

Another possibility is to stay at Inverey SYHA Hostel (p155), just over 1 mile east of Linn of Dee (23 miles/37.3km from Blair Atholl). And lastly, if you have five or six days to spare, there's a grand Cairngorms tour worth contemplating. From Glenmore, it's easy to reach the path through Lairig Ghru (p151), then to follow it all the way down to White Bridge, where you pick up the path followed earlier from Blair Atholl.

Shorter walks include the stroll up Glen Tilt to Forest Lodge, which would make a good 16-mile (26km) day out from Blair Atholl.

PLANNING

When to Walk/Stalking

In **Atholl Estates** (☎ 01796 481646) the most sensitive period for stalking is from mid-August to mid-October. While it's fine to follow the path through Glen Tilt, for walks elsewhere you should check with the estate office about daily activities.

The central part of the walk is in the NTS's Mar Lodge Estate where access is open at all times.

Maps

The OS Landranger 1:50,000 maps to carry are No 43 *Braemar & Blair Atholl* and No 36 *Grantown & Aviemore*. The eastern

boundary of Harvey's Superwalker 1:25,000 *Cairn Gorm* map coincides with the path northward from Glen Derry, so it's worth having this map if you are planning to climb any of the Munros west of the route described here.

NEAREST TOWNS

See Glenmore (p146).

Blair Atholl

☎ 01796 / pop 300

Blair Atholl is a large village on the southern fringe of the Cairngorm uplands, close to the A9 and ideally placed for exploring the area.

Atholl Estates countryside ranger service (☎ 481355; www.athollestaterangerservice.co.uk; ☒ Easter-Oct), provided by the major local landowner, is based in a building next to the large car park near the Bridge of Tilt. The rangers can provide details of guided walks and waymarked routes on the estate.

There's an ATM at Atholl Stores, close to the main road and next to the Atholl Arms Hotel.

The website www.blairatholl.org.uk is a good first port of call for information. The nearest information centre is the **Pitlochry TIC** (☎ 01796 472215; pitlochrytic@visitscotland.com; ☒ daily Apr-Oct, Mon-Sat Nov-Mar), about 6 miles (10km) south of Blair Atholl along the A9.

SLEEPING & EATING

Blair Castle Caravan Park (☎ 481263; www.blaircastlecaravanpark.co.uk; unpowered/powerd sites for 2 £14/16; ☒) is exceptionally well set up and maintained. There's a small shop on site. Pick up a copy of the brochure *Discover Atholl Estates*, outlining local waymarked walks.

The nearest hostel is **Pitlochry SYHA** (☎ 0870 004 1145; www.syha.org.uk; dm £13), about 6 miles (10km) south on the A9.

The **Firs B&B** (☎ 481256; www.firs-blairatholl.co.uk; St Andrew's Cres; s/d £35/50) has beautifully furnished rooms in a fine old house; breakfast is first-rate.

The **Loft Bistro** (☎ 481377; Golf Course Rd; mains £12-15; ☒ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) is an experience in itself. One of the better restaurants around, the house speciality is Aberdeen Angus steak; vegetarian choices are limited.

The **Atholl Arms Hotel** (☎ 481205; www.athollarmshotel.co.uk; r £80, mains £8-14; ☒ lunch & dinner) serves superior-quality bar meals in the

New Bothy Bar. Staying here, in understated luxury, would be a rather special treat.

For self-caterers, there are two mid-sized supermarkets, Atholl Stores and a Spar.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

First ScotRail (☎ 0845 755 0033; www.firstscotrail.com) trains stop at Blair Atholl from Edinburgh, Glasgow (both £19, two hours, six services Monday to Saturday, three Sunday) and Inverness (£16, 1½ hours, six services Monday to Saturday, three Sunday).

Blair Atholl is on the B8079, directly accessible from the A9, 32 miles (52km) north of Perth and 33 miles (54km) south of Kingussie.

THE WALK

Map p143

Day 1: Blair Atholl to Bynack Lodge

6½–7 hours, 19 miles (30.5km)

The walk starts at the Bridge of Tilt on the main road (B8079) through Blair Atholl. Cross the bridge to the eastern side of the River Tilt and go left down some steps to a river-side path through mature woodland. The path follows the river for just over 800m then leads up to the road; follow the road for 100m then turn right at the Scottish Rights of Way Society sign towards 'Deeside by Glen Tilt'. There's another of these signs at the next road junction; turn left then, shortly, cross a bridge and go steeply up to the final turn, left towards Kincairnie Farm. From here there's a fine view of white Blair Castle amid trees to the southwest. Follow the gravel road and soon, at a bend, cross a stile and follow a grassy track to a gate. This leads through woodland and across open ground; just past Croftmore (a stone house with well-tended gardens) ignore a track going up to the right and continue gently down to a gravel road (1½ hours from Blair Atholl).

Soon, a grassy track offers a short cut from the road. A few hundred metres further on is the solitary stone cottage Marble Lodge. The steep, scree-strewn slopes of Beinn a' Ghlo are starting to dominate the view ahead. The road crosses the River Tilt and leads along the bank. Almost opposite deserted Balaneasie cottage, bear left along a grassy track to cut off another bend in the road, with Glen Tilt opening up invitingly ahead. The startling sound of roosters crowing leaves you in no doubt that Clachghlas is

lived in. A good mile further on you reach the imposing entrance to Forest Lodge (a map shows preferred walking routes during the stalking season). Walk past the lodge, along the edge of a small conifer plantation and into the ever-narrowing glen. The road becomes a vehicular track, which eventually ends about 3 miles from Forest Lodge. The **Falls of Tarf** and **Tarf Water Bridge** are about 200m further north along a path (2¾ hours since joining the road). The bridge was originally built in 1886 by the Scottish Rights of Way Society to commemorate a drowning there in 1878. Just beyond the bridge, a stone in the ground bears the figure '13' – the miles from Blair Atholl.

A good path continues up the glen, more of a narrow defile, for about 1 mile. It widens suddenly around the source of the River Tilt, where the new outlook is towards big, sprawling mountains. About an hour's walk from Tarf Water you reach the start of a rough vehicular track; it's another 20 minutes to the rather forlorn remains of **Bynack Lodge**, with a few windswept larches.

Day 2: Bynack Lodge to Glenmore

10 hours, 25 miles (40km)

The first stage of this long day is comparatively easy, along the path on the eastern side of Bynack Burn, soon crossing Allt an t-Seilich. A vehicular track continues to the Geldie Burn crossing, which shouldn't present any problems unless the burn is in spate. Continue north along the track, past a conifer plantation, to White Bridge and the River Dee. After crossing the bridge head east down broad Glen Dee to the sealed road near Linn of Dee (1¾ hours from Bynack Lodge).

Continue east along the road to the car park and, from its northern edge, turn onto a signposted path to Glen Lui. This leads through the conifer plantation to a vehicular track in Glen Lui and another straightforward stretch up the broad glen, dominated by the bulk of Derry Cairngorm ahead. After about an hour, you reach **Derry Lodge**, standing silently with boarded-up windows in the open pine woodland. There is a telephone for public and emergency use in a red box on the side of a brown timber building near the lodge. It's coin-operated and maintained (at a loss) by the volunteer Braemar Mountain Rescue Team.

Cross the bridge over Derry Burn and follow a path leading north away from the burn (rather than along the faint and discontinuous path beside the burn). Go through the woodland, past an enclosure, over a low, heathery hillock and then down to a footbridge over Derry Burn. The path meets a vehicular track about 200m further on. The glen soon starts to close in. There are inspirational views ahead to the tors on the broad summit plateau of Beinn Mheadhoin, rising impressively above Stob Coire Etchachan's cliffs.

The vehicular track ends beside an enclosure. A wide track continues through another enclosure, but follow the path leading on and starting to climb. Soon, large stepping stones provide an easy crossing of Glas Allt Mór and a good path leads on to the junction with the path to Hutchison Memorial Hut below Stob Coire Etchachan (1½ hours from Derry Lodge).

From the path junction, continue heading north. A steepening climb on a rougher path, across a few muddy patches, takes you up to **Lairig an Laoigh** (30 minutes from the path junction). A new outlook unfolds down a wide glen, with boulder-strewn slopes cradling Dubh Lochan, and across the Fords of Avon to the great bulk of Bynack More. Follow the path down, past the well-named Dubh Lochan ('small dark lake') to the **Fords of Avon** (45 minutes from the Lairig). Boulders, rather than stepping stones, should enable you to keep your feet dry on the two crossings, separated by a tiny grassed island. The nearby refuge is small, dark and windowless, and could only be inviting in foul weather.

The path leads on up the glen of Allt Dearg, past Lochan a' Bhainne and across the low divide between the allt and a stream called Glasath, which you soon cross on good stepping stones. The path rises rather muddily from the crossing, around the broad shoulder of Bynack More, wanders around a bit and then drops down to cross Uisge Dubh Poll a' Choin on treacherous, mossy stones. Then it's a short, steep pull up to the broad northern spur of Bynack More – a bleak, windswept place in poor weather, but has the classic Cairngorms feel of open space on a good day. To the south-east, Ben Avon's great tor-studded summit plateau, and Beinn a' Bhuid's crag-lined

top dominate the view. The path, muddy and badly eroded in places, soon sets out on the long descent to the bridge over the **River Nethy** (about 1½ hours from Fords of Avon).

A stony vehicular track leads on from here and, about 1 mile from the bridge, joins a track from the right at the base of the steep scree- and heather-clad slopes of Meall a' Bhuaichaille. The rest is easy, walking south-west down the vehicular track or forest road, past beautiful **An Lochan Uaine**, through pine woodlands and some conifers. Glenmore Lodge (p146), just over 1 mile from the lochan, seems large and incongruous after the emptiness of the moors and glens, but it does have a good bar! Glenmore village is another 1 mile along the sealed road (1½ hours from the River Nethy).

LOCHNAGAR

Duration	6–6½ hours
Distance	14 miles (22.7km)
Difficulty	moderate
Start/Finish	Spittal of Glenmuick
Nearest Town	Ballater (above)
Transport	private

Summary The best-known peak in the Deeside Cairngorms, with spectacular panoramic views and a descent beside a dramatic waterfall to Loch Muick, in the heart of an outstanding nature reserve.

A magnificent mountain, with huge corries scooped out of its northern face, Lochnagar (1155m, 3788ft) is the highest of the peaks to the south of Deeside. It provides a dramatic backdrop to the town of Ballater and is the feature of a huge, roughly horse-shoe-shaped ridge embracing Loch Muick. The name Lochnagar can be confusing – it refers to the twin peaks of Cac Carn Beag and Cac Carn Mòr, as well as a lochan in one of the northern corries.

The walk described here follows a vehicular track, then a well-used and maintained path, with long sections of stone paving and steps, steeply up to the gap between Lochnagar and its outlier, Meikle Pap (980m). Another steep, rocky climb leads to the spectacular rim of the corrie cradling Lochnagar; the summit (Cac Carn Beag) stands on a spur between Lochnagar

and Loch nan Eun to the west. To make an excellent circular walk, the return is down a steep, stone-built path beside Glas Allt to the shore of Loch Muick, where a vehicular track leads back to the start. The total ascent for the walk is 800m.

Alternatives If you're fit and experienced, it will be hard to resist the temptation to 'do the round' of Loch Muick – and, perhaps, to bag another four Munros. To do this, continue from Lochnagar's secondary summit (1150m) southwest and west over the Staic (1093m) above Loch nan Eun (and/or Carn a' Choire Bhaidheach at 1110m, if you're in bagging mode) to Carn an t-Sagairt Mór (1047m), then southeast to Cairn Bannoch (1012m) and on to Broad Cairn (998m).

From there it's a long descent to a boggy saddle; then you can either follow a path down to Loch Muick, or the vehicular track, which keeps to high ground for another 2 miles then drops down across Black Burn to the loch and back to the start. This superb walk of around 16.5 miles (26.5km) involves at least 1130m of ascent and would take around nine hours.

HISTORY

Lochnagar means 'loch of noise' or 'laughter', or perhaps 'noisy' or 'laughing loch' – possibly describing the sound of falling scree on the cliffs.

Glen Muick (pronounced 'mick') once supported many crofting families and the Spittal of Glenmuick ('a resting-place') was used by drovers taking cattle along the Capel Mount route over the mountains to Glen Clova. The famous Romantic poet George Lord Byron, a native of Aberdeenshire, fondly remembered Lochnagar with the lines:

England! Thy beauties are tame and domestic

To one who has roved o'er the mountains afar:

Oh for the crags that are wild and majestic!

The steep frowning glories of dark Lochnagar!

The nucleus of the Balmoral Estate, which extends from the River Dee southeast to well beyond Loch Muick, was purchased by

Queen Victoria in 1878. She added the Ballochbuie Forest to the royal portfolio, so saving it from imminent felling. She was very fond of the estate, and Glen Muick was a particular favourite; she had Glas-allt-Shiel Lodge built beside the loch soon after her beloved husband Prince Albert died. The estate still belongs to the royal family, who are regular summer visitors to nearby Balmoral Castle.

ENVIRONMENT

Lochnagar is essentially a granite mountain, the originally grey-pink rock taking on darker tones as lichen accumulates on exposed surfaces. Evidence of the work of glaciers during the last Ice Age is clearly seen in Loch Muick's U-shaped valley and in the corries where, even now, snow lies well into spring.

Mountain hares are occasionally seen bounding about on the higher ground and you'd be unlucky not to see ptarmigan, which are not at all shy and easily identifiable by their croaking call.

PLANNING

When to Walk/Stalking

Within **Balmoral Estate** (☎ 01339 742534) the stalking season is from mid-August to mid-October. Although access to Lochnagar is maintained throughout the season, stalking takes place around the other mountains in the area. Detailed information is available daily from the estate and at the Spittal of Glenmuick visitor centre (below).

Maps & Books

Harvey's Superwalker 1:25,000 *Lochnagar* map is the one to use for this walk and its possible extensions. The relevant OS Landranger 1:50,000 map is No 44 *Ballater & Glen Clova*.

Naturally, Lochnagar features in all the Munros guides (see the boxed text on p108); the SMC's guide *The Cairngorms* devotes a chapter to 'Dark Lochnagar'.

Information Sources

At Spittal of Glenmuick, the starting point for the walk, Balmoral Estate has a small, information-packed **visitor centre** (☎ 01339 755059; www.balmoralcastle.com; ☺ daily Easter-Oct), where you'll often find one of the countryside rangers; information about stalking activities is displayed there. The rangers run

guided walks in and around the glen from May to September.

NEAREST TOWN

Ballater

☎ 01339 / pop 1450

Very much aware of being in Royal Deeside, Ballater sits on a wide bend in the River Dee. The **TIC** (☎ 755306), in the renovated train station, is very helpful and well organised. **Lochnagar Leisure** (☎ 560008; Station Sq; ☺ daily) stocks a good range of outdoor gear, including fuel.

SLEEPING & EATING

Anderson Road Caravan Park (☎ 755727; unpowered/powerd sites for 2 £7/18) is well set up and can be very busy.

Netherley Guest House (☎ 755792; www.netherleyguesthouseballater.com; 2 Netherley Pl; s/d £35/50), with its trademark blue shutters, is centrally located; the atmosphere is friendly and relaxed.

Celical Guest House (☎ 755699; celical@tiscali.co.uk; 3 Braemar Rd; s/d £33/54) is a friendly B&B centrally located opposite Station Sq.

The nearest hostel is the SYHA at Braemar (p154).

La Mangiatoia (☎ 755999; Bridge Sq; mains £6-13; ☺ lunch & dinner), off the A93 on the eastern side of town, offers an Italian-inspired menu that includes some Scottish dishes, and is good value for this part of the world.

Rowan Tree Restaurant (☎ 755509; 43 Bridge St; mains £5-16; ☺ lunch & dinner) is quite a stylish place, offering a strongly Scottish-flavoured menu, though with limited temptations for vegetarians.

For self-catering, there are two supermarkets, Strachan's (a superior grocery) and a fruit-and-vegetable shop.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Stagecoach (☎ 0870 608 2608) operates bus service 21 between Aberdeen and Ballater (£7, 1¼ hours, 11 services Monday to Saturday, seven Sunday).

By road, Ballater is on the A93, 42 miles (68km) west of Aberdeen and 17 miles (27km) east of Braemar.

GETTING TO/FROM THE WALK

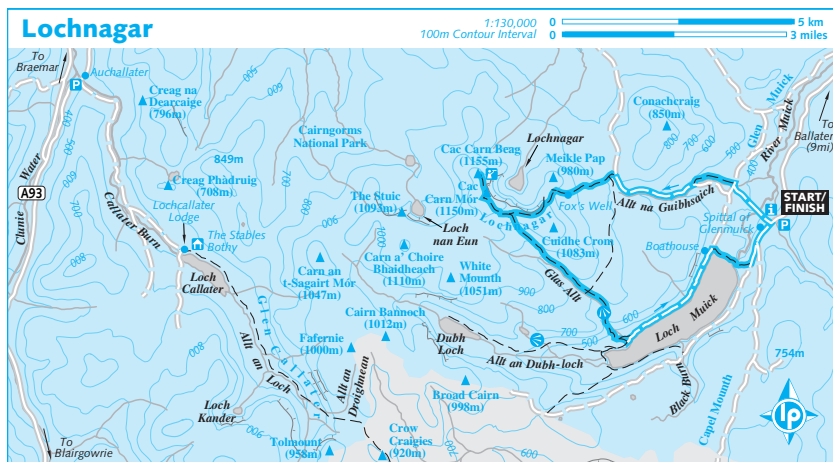
The walk starts at the Spittal of Glenmuick, at the end of the public road through the glen. From Ballater, cross the River Dee

bridge and turn right. About 1.2km further along, bear left at a junction to Glen Muick (as signposted). The car park is 8 miles (12km) from here. A pay-and-display system (£2 per day) operates here; the proceeds are channelled to mountain path repair work.

THE WALK

From the car park, cross the bridge and walk down the track to the visitor centre, passing toilets in the trees. A short distance further on, turn right along the path signposted to Lochnagar. Ahead, the scree-encrusted Meikle Pap, the cliffs on Lochnagar's northeast face and the broad plateau of Cuidhe Crom are framed in the V formed by nearer, heathery mountains. Follow the track across River Muick in its flat-bottomed glen and, where the track bends right, continue straight ahead across a road and to the left of a stone cottage, along a signposted path. This passes a plantation on the left and goes through pine woodland, merging with a wider track from the left; soon you're out in heather moorland. The wide track rises beside Allt na Giubhsaich, crossing it on stepping stones and continuing to gain height steadily in the rather bleak heather moorland. About an hour from the start you reach a fairly broad col between Conachraig to the northeast and Lochnagar.

Leave the track and drop down a well-made stone path, which then climbs the slope of Meikle Pap, strewn with granite boulders. Well up, just before the path turns west under the slope of Cuidhe Crom, a short path to the left leads to **Foxes' Well**, the last source of water on the climb. Beside it is a memorial (with a rather intrusive photograph) to a man who died climbing in the corrie in 1953. The steep, stone-built path continues to the col south of Meikle Pap, from where there are spectacular views of the cliff-girt corrie sheltering Lochnagar's loch. The path then bears left and rises south through the boulder field (where it's discreetly waymarked), well back from the corrie rim, and up to the spacious plateau. Skirt the corrie rim and cross a shallow gap; a line of cairns marks the route, which then swings away from the edge to mount the slope leading to Cac Carn Mòr. Despite its name, it's not Lochnagar's highest point –



this honour goes to **Cac Carn Beag**, 500m north, topped by a massive cairn (about two hours from the Conachraig col). A direction finder installed in 1924 and, remarkably, still in fair condition helps identify the features of the amazing panorama of mountains and glens. Among the more distant are the Pentland Hills (near Edinburgh), Ben Lomond, Creag Meagaidh and Ben Nevis.

Retrace your steps over Cac Carn Mòr and, ignoring a path leading right by a small cairn, drop down its southeastern flank to a prominent path junction; descend steeply into the deep glen of Glas Allt. Extensive path repairs have made this descent into a particularly peaty and heathery place relatively easy. The path follows the stream closely, crossing on a good bridge after nearly 1 mile. Here a track leads away northeast across the hillside but continue in a southeasterly direction. Glas Allt plunges into a dramatic gorge and the path clings miraculously to the steep, rocky slope as it descends towards the deep trench of Loch Muick. The **Falls of Glasallt** aren't particularly high but are attractive nonetheless, pouring down grey, blocky cliffs with long cascades below. The path descends to a pine woodland; go past the end of a dyke beside the stream, cross a footbridge and continue down to the loch-side vehicular track (two hours from Cac Carn Beag). Follow this northeast to the end of Loch Muick and turn right beside the boathouse onto the

path along its northern shore. Cross River Muick and follow the vehicular track north, which takes you back to the start (1¼ hours from where you met the loch-side vehicular track).

MORE WALKS

NORTHERN CAIRNGORMS Braeriach

Braeriach (1296m, 4251ft), meaning 'the brindled upland', is the second-highest peak in the Cairngorms and the third-highest in Scotland. It's the culmination of a great, undulating plateau, with Lairig Ghru on its precipitous eastern side and its western flank rising almost as steeply from lonely Gleann Einich. This magnificent massif, with dark, mysterious carries scooped out of its northern and eastern slopes, is unspoiled by any developments. For Munro enthusiasts the extra lures are Sgòr an Lochain Uaine (1258m) and Cairn Toul (1293m), perched on the rim above Lairig Ghru.

The climb to Braeriach starts only after a fairly long walk in, so you'll need a fine midsummer day. The distance is 18.75 miles (30km) and the ascent is 1000m; allow about nine hours. The best map is Harvey's 1:25,000 *Cairn Gorm*. The SMC's guide *The Cairngorms* is an invaluable reference.

The most popular approach is from the Lairig Ghru path by Allt Druidh (see p151)

to a minor track junction about 150m south of the Chalamain Gap path junction. Rather than return the same way, a descent west into Glen Einich, returning down that valley, makes a much more interesting walk. Extending the walk to Sgòr an Lochain Uaine and Cairn Toul would add 4 miles (6.5km), 300m ascent and about two hours to the walk. The route described is the one Rothiemurchus Estate prefers walkers to take during stalking season (September and October); for more information contact the estate's **visitor centre** (☎ 01479 812345).

Meall a' Bhuachaille

This shapely mountain (the name means 'shepherd's hill') overlooks Glenmore and Loch Morlich and gives superb views of the Cairngorm plateau and Braeriach from its summit. A waymarked path leads north from behind the Glenmore Forest Park Visitor Centre and climbs steeply through the pines to open moorland. From here a well-made path leads up to a broad saddle between Creagan Gorm (782m) to the west and the Meall (810m) itself, then on to the summit. To make a circuit, continue east down the broad spur to Ryvoan Bothy then follow a vehicular track past beautiful An Lochain Uaine ('green lake'), Glenmore Lodge and back to the village. Allow three hours for this 6-mile (9.5km) walk, which includes 480m of climbing. Use Harvey's 1:25,000 map *Cairn Gorm* or the OS Landranger 1:50,000 map No 36 *Grantown & Aviemore*.

Speyside Way

This long-distance path links Aviemore (p145) in Strathspey and Buckie on the North Sea coast, and generally follows the course of the River Spey, Scotland's second-longest river and one of its most scenic. Overlooked by the Cairngorm mountains at its Strathspey end, the Way passes through Boat of Garten, Nethy Bridge, Grantown-on-Spey, Cromdale, Aberlour (where you'll find the Way's excellent visitor centre), Craigellachie, Fochabers and Spey Bay to reach its end at Buckie. A spur route, from Bridge of Avon to Tomintoul (the highest village in the Highlands) provides an attractive walk in its own right and is definitely worth the extra time. The Way is well signposted and waymarked with the official thistle-hexagon logo.

The Way, which can be followed in either direction, is 65 miles (104.5km) long; the Tomintoul spur is 14.3 miles (23km). It is possible to do the whole lot in five days, but six or seven allows time for visiting whisky distilleries and the famous Strathspey Steam Railway.

The **Speyside Way Ranger Service** (☎ 01340 881266; www.speysideway.org; Aberlour visitor centre) publishes a free annual accommodation brochure and a public transport guide.

The 1:40,000 Harvey map *Speyside Way*, the official map for the route, shows facilities and some features of interest. For coverage of the surrounding area you'll need OS Landranger 1:50,000 map Nos 28 and 36, which show the route of the Way.

The official brochure is invaluable, as it indicates which accommodation hosts offer a pick-up and drop-off service – useful where there are long gaps between shelter of any type (particularly between Cromdale and Aberlour). Camp sites are spaced so you could camp each night.

For transport to Aviemore, see p145. Buses link Buckie, Aberdeen and Keith, which is on the train line connecting Inverness and Aberdeen. Several intermediate towns are served by buses from major centres.

SOUTHERN CAIRNGORMS Glen Tilt & Glen Feshie

This two-day, 38.7-mile (62km) walk, linking Blair Atholl and Kingussie, follows two of the Cairngorms' marvellous public footpaths through remote glens. Only 500m of ascent is involved, mostly on the first day. The recommended camp site, near the ruins of Bynack Lodge, is within the NTS's Mar Lodge Estate. For a second night out, Ruigh-aiteachain Bothy in Glen Feshie offers simple but comfortable shelter. As the route follows public footpaths, access during the stalking season isn't an issue (the three estates involved are Atholl, Mar Lodge and Glen Feshie).

You'll need OS Landranger 1:50,000 map Nos 43 and 35.

Contact **Aviemore TIC** (☎ 0845 225 5121; www.visithighlands.com) for help with accommodation. Most First ScotRail services from Edinburgh and Glasgow to Inverness stop at Blair Atholl and Kingussie. Scottish Citylink buses on the Edinburgh to Inverness service

stop at Kingussie, which is on the A86, close to the A9, 15 miles (24km) southwest of Aviemore and the same distance north of Dalwhinnie.

The first day matches that of the Blair Atholl to Glenmore walk (p156). Day two involves about 7½ hours and 19.7 miles (31.5km) of walking; route finding is straightforward, except perhaps for the last few miles from Stronetoper Cottage. Take the next turn left along a forest road signposted to Kingussie. A few hundred metres along, at a crossroads, go straight ahead and on to a gate into open moorland. Ignore tracks to the left. Cross a small burn then a channel; continue across a bridge, bear left for about 50m and go over another bridge. Turn left along the forest road; at a crossroads continue ahead, soon through Drumguish (1¼ hours from the River Feshie). At a T-junction, turn left. Follow this minor road into Kingussie (1¼ hours from Drumguish).

Morrone

Morrone (859m) dramatically presides over Braemar from the southwest and offers a good introduction to the area, with fine views that include Braeriach and Ben Macdui. Well-made and waymarked paths make the climb relatively easy. The communications tower on the summit isn't overly intrusive and makes possible a good round walk, following the gravel road built to construct and maintain it.

To reach the start of the walk, turn off the Linn of Dee road on the western edge of Braemar, along Chapel Brae, signposted to 'Forest Walk'. There's a large car park at the end of the sealed road, beside a small lochan.

The first part of the walk goes through the Morrone Birkwood, a National Nature Reserve protecting an unusual community of birch, juniper and lime-loving herbs. From the summit, go down the road on the eastern flank of the mountain to a minor road. Follow this north for almost 1.2 miles to a narrow gravel road on the left; beyond a large stone house and in open ground, fork right and continue to Chapel Brae and back to the start. Allow about three hours for this 7.5-mile (12km) walk. You'll need OS Landranger 1:50,000 map No 43.

Loch Muick & Dubh Loch

If cloud and strong winds rule out walking to Lochnagar, then a circuit of Loch Muick, with a side trip to mysterious and dramatically beautiful Dubh Loch, is a very worthy substitute. The walk starts and finishes at the Spittal of Glenmuick car park (for access details, see p155) and is best done clockwise, heading out on the vehicular track along the southeastern shore of Loch Muick, then along the path from Black Burn to the head of the loch.

The path to the western end of Dubh Loch takes off from the northwestern corner of Loch Muick – where the main path turns east to follow its northwestern shore. The Dubh Loch path climbs above Allt an Dubh-loch, past a spectacular waterfall on Stulan Burn. The Loch Muick circuit involves very little ascent and is 7 miles (11km) horizontally; the Dubh Loch extension adds about 5 miles (8km). The visitor centre at Spittal of Glenmuick (p160) has plenty of information about the area, including a *Loch Muick Circuit Walk* leaflet; carry OS Landranger 1:50,000 map No 44.

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