



Loch Insh. © CNPA

View to Cairngorms from Newtownmore. © CNPA

Scottish Red Deer. © Mark Hamblin

Ballater from Craigdarroch. © P&J Photography

View to Loch Avon. © Mark Hamblin 2020VISION/CNPA

Place Names

This leaflet is an introduction to the background, meanings and pronunciation of some place names in the Cairngorms National Park. The name 'Cairngorms' was first coined by non-Gaelic speaking visitors around 200 years ago to refer collectively to the great central mountain group in the North East. Their original Gaelic name is *Am Monadh Ruadh* or 'The russet coloured mountains'. These mountains form the heart of the Cairngorms National Park *Pàirc Nàiseanta a' Mhonaidh Ruaidh*. Place names give us an insight into the culture, history, environment and wildlife of a place. They were used to identify landscape features and to commemorate events and people. They also remind us of local folklore associated with certain places. Place names therefore play a vital role in maintaining a community's local heritage.

Linguistic Heritage

Some of the earliest place names derive from the languages spoken by the Picts, who once ruled large areas of land north of the Forth. The principle language of the Picts seems to have been distantly related to Welsh, Cornish, Breton and Gaulish. Names that are probably Pictish in origin include Pit – a portion of land; Càrdainn or Cardine – copse; Aber-Easg or Esk – a bog stream (possibly related to the name Exe in Devon); and Dohbar or Dour – water (related to the name Dover).

Over 1,000 years ago Gaelic became the dominant language in the Cairngorms. This is why the majority of the current place names in the National Park are Gaelic in origin. Examples include Allt – a large stream; Coille – a forest; Druim – a small ridge; Meall – a conical hill; and Tom – a small hillock.

However, by the 18th and 19th centuries many people could speak both Scots and Gaelic resulting in the appearance of some Scots place names, for example Shark – a long ridge; Birk – a birch tree; Bigging – a building; Brig – a bridge; Haugh – a river-meadow; Straucht – a straight stretch of road; Kirk – a church; Burn – a stream and Meikle (locally pronounced as Muckie) – big.

The Gaelic dialects of Badenoch and Strathspey survived into the 21st century, while in Aberdeenshire the last native Gaelic speaker died in 1984. Today, rich dialects of Scots such as Doric are spoken in the east and south of the Park and there is a revival of Gaelic in the north and west.

Useful websites

Am Baile – Highland History and Culture www.ambaile.org.uk
 Dictionary of Scots Language www.dsl.ac.uk
 Heritage Paths www.heritagepaths.co.uk
 Scottish Place Names Society www.st-andrews.ac.uk/institutes/sassi/spns



Place Names Ainmean àite



The Cairngorms with Làirig Ghàrru from Rothiemurchus. © D Gibson

Nature in the Landscape

The way the landscape was named by local people in the past can give us a valuable insight into the habitats and species of the Cairngorms in centuries gone by. Names such as *Glas-coille* (the green wood) near woodland occurred in the past, but no longer do. The *Allt an Da Chroabh Bheath* (burn of the two birch trees) on Balmoral which runs from 1000m down to an altitude of 880m indicates that birches would once have extended much higher up hillsides than they do today.

Many topographical features have been named after species characteristic of the Park, such as eagles, eg *Creag na h-Iolair* (rocky hill of the eagle) in Glenfeshie; wildcats, eg *Eag a' chait* (ravine of the cat) on Abernethy; and deer, including several places where there would have been a deer trap, such as *Cam Eilng*, (hill of the deer trap) on Rothiemurchus. There is also place name evidence for some of the long lost wildlife of the Cairngorms, including wolves eg *Wolf Grain* (Scots 'wolf streamlet') on Glen Tanar and *Allt a' Mhadaidh* (Gaelic 'stream of the wolf') in Glen Shee, and possibly cranes, eg *Bogingore* (little bog of crane or heron) near Dinnert.

Gaelic pronunciations in this leaflet are based on local dialects spoken in the Park



Although nowadays mountain ranges like the Cairngorms are often regarded as a barrier between communities, this was once far from the case. The Cairngorms are criss-crossed with passes and routes which connected communities with each other as well as with places farther afield. People would often use these passes to visit relatives, attend social events and transport goods and wares.

Some routes follow mediaeval roads, such as Comyn's Road, which the Red Comyn, Lord of Badenoch is said to have commissioned so that he could transport his favourite beer more easily from Atholl Highlands to markets in the Lowlands. Also surviving are remnants of routes which cattle reivers would have used, giving rise to names such as Rathad nam Mèirleach. The Thieves' Road. Some remnants of the military roads built by General Wade following the failed Jacobite Rising of 1715 also survive.



Wade's Road © C Cadden

Traditional routes

Common Words

- Abhainn: River
- Achadh: Field
- Allt: Large stream
- Baile: Township
- Beinn: Mountain ('Ben' in Scots)
- Bràigh: Upland ('Brae' in Scots)
- Cadha: Steep slope (local dialect)
- Caochan: Small stream
- Càrn: Cairn-shaped mountain
- Clach: Stone
- Cnap: Lump
- Cnoc: Low hill
- Coille: Forest
- Coire: Large hollow in hillside ('Corrie' in Scots)
- Craobh: Tree
- Creag: Crag/mountain of medium height
- Dail: Riverside meadow
- Druim: Small ridge
- Fiacail: Narrow ridge
- Gleann: Tributary river valley ('Glen' in Scots)
- Inbhir: River mouth
- Làirig: Mountain pass
- Loch: Lake
- Lochan: Little lake
- Loinn/Lyne: Enclosure/stackyard (local dialect)
- Meall: Conical hill/hill with conical summit
- Monadh: Mountain range, usually with passes, which in the southern part of the Park, are sometimes given the name of 'mounth' in Scots (a word derived from monadh)
- Ruighe/Re: Slope/shieling/croft (local dialect)
- Sgòr: Peak
- Shios: East (local dialect)
- Shuas: West (local dialect)
- Sliabh: Moor (local dialect)
- Srath: Main river valley ('Strath' in Scots)
- Sròn: Nose-shaped ridge
- Tom: Small hillock
- Uisge: Large river

Gazetteer

The gazetteer gives the pronunciation and meanings of a selection of place names in the National Park that appear on maps in Gaelic or were originally Gaelic and have since been anglicised or translated into English/Scots.

The pronunciation of the Gaelic place names is based on local dialects. One characteristic of these dialects is the tendency to drop final unstressed syllables, so 'monadh' tends to be shortened to 'mon' and 'uisge' to 'uisg'.

In Gaelic, colours are 'attributive'. This means that the words for colours vary in meaning, depending on what they are describing. For example, when gorm refers to a mountain, it usually means 'blue', but when it refers to a corrie, it usually means 'green'.

In the phonetic system below, the letters are to be pronounced as they are in Scottish English. The syllables on which the main stress or emphasis lies are in capital letters. The following indicates how the different sounds are to be pronounced: y in by, gy, cy, ly, my, ny & vy: y in 'yard'.

ay : 'may'	ey : 'eye'	ow : 'cow'	u : 'sun'
a : 'car'	ee : 'keen'	oy : 'boy'	ch : 'loch'
e : 'bell'	i : 'tin'	o : 'cord'	tch : 'itch'
ei : 'height'	oa : 'soar'	oo : 'moon'	ng : 'sing'

Further Information

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- Ordnance Survey www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk
- Scottish Place Names Society www.st-andrews.ac.uk/institutes/sassi/spns
- Am Baile – The Gaelic Village www.ambaile.org.uk
- ScotWays (The Scottish Rights of Way and Access Society) www.scotways.com

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