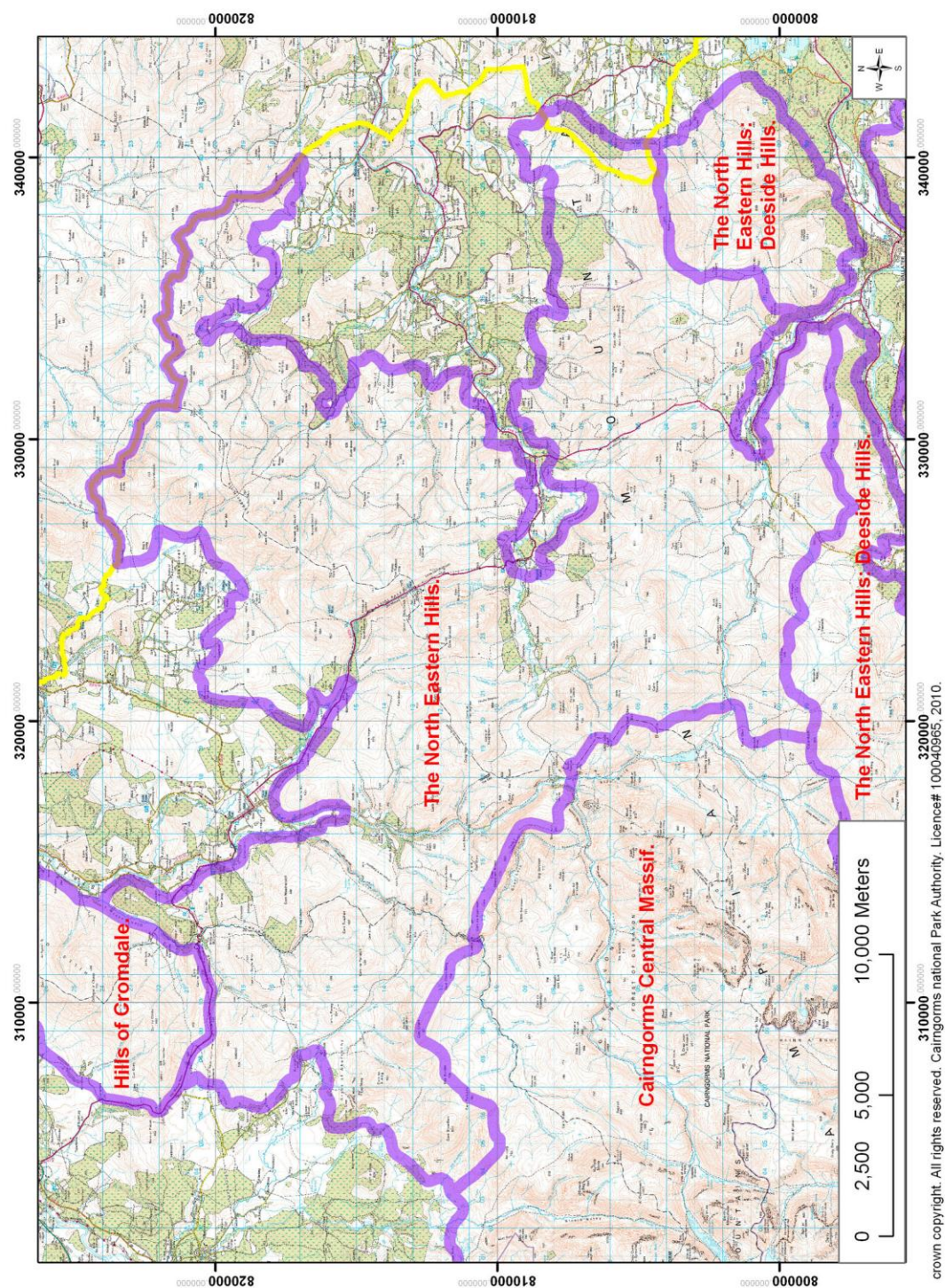


## 1.1 The North Eastern Hills



### 1.1.1 *Landscape Character*

This large tract of land, curving round the main Cairngorms massif to the north and east, is characterised by rounded, smooth sided hills are generally around 600m to 700m in height

This area includes an ancient valley system, probably formed 400 million years ago and the geology is perhaps the most varied in the whole of the National Park, with narrow bands of schists, including quartzites and limestones, intrusions of granite and basic igneous rocks, and old red sandstone in the Tomintoul basin

Ridges, formed by erosion resistant rocks, alternate with valleys and basins on other, less resistant rock types which have been subject to chemical wearing and erosion over hundreds of millions of years. The hill sides form formidable flanks which rise abruptly from the edge of the occasional low lying valleys which extend into this upland area

These steep sided flanks are divided by deep valleys incised by watercourses, often with multiple tributaries, carved between smooth sided, drier ridges

Occasionally, the river valleys have deepened to create long, narrow steep sided valleys which cut through the upland massif, forming a skeletal network of more accessible passes

The Ailnack gorge, a spectacular canyon deeply cut into Devonian sediments in its lower part, is a particular geological feature

The majority of these hills are overlain with blanket peat, which in places has been severely eroded

The hills are frequently managed as grouse moorland, where heather has been burnt in long, broadly rectilinear patches, which have sometimes been marked out by flailed heather

Occasional conifer woodland, both planted spruce and Scots Pine, extends up onto the lower flanks of the hills from the surrounding glens. Scattered Scots pine can sometimes be found near former grazing land

Settlement is limited to a very few farms and estate buildings within the long glens which penetrate into this upland area, possibly where better drained and more fertile soils can be found

Only in the south east facing glens of the Ladder Hills is there any evidence of historic landuse, in the form of pre-improvement shieling grounds

In addition, occasional lodges and other estate buildings, can be found well into the interior of the narrow valleys, located adjacent to watercourses where tributaries feed into the main rivers

Several roads cross over the high passes, often sitting along drier ridges, or tucked against the break in slope as they climb up and over the most accessible through routes

Vehicle tracks wind along the narrow, steep sided river valleys, allowing access into the interior

A more extensive network of access routes extends up the ridgelines of the drier spurs onto the upper hill slopes

The ski centre at the Lecht is also located within this character area, and some of the lifts and other infrastructure are seen on the skylines of the long ridges

#### 1.1.2 *Landscape experience*

There is a tremendous sense of space and openness, linked to great distance, experienced from the upper slopes and ridges which contrasts with the enclosure of the narrow steep sided river valleys

The upland hill forms are bold, rounded and formidable, creating a sense of solidity and 'bulk' in the landscape which dominates over the human interventions

This area is diverse and complex, in terms of both geology and topography, but can be easily over shadowed by the dominance of the Cairngorm massif

The roads which cross over this area offer readily accessible panoramic views and easy, vehicular access to a landscape of mountain and upland character

Elsewhere, the interior of this character area is secluded and can be remote, particularly as the hill ranges and narrow valleys extend west and south towards the mountainous Cairngorm massif

The heather turns purple in August, creating an accessible seasonal spectacle

#### 1.1.3 *Relationship to adjacent character areas*

In addition to having a strong identity in its own right, this hill group forms a 'transition area' to the higher and even more remote interior of the Cairngorms central massif, as well as providing some visual containment to the surrounding, lower lying character areas, such as Strathdon, Glen Livet and, to the west, Abernethy

#### 1.1.4 *Assessment of distinctiveness*

The varied relief creates a complex landscape which can be difficult to understand as a whole. The area is often overlooked in favour of higher mountain areas, yet the valleys and basins give a powerful sense of remoteness. The sense of vast expanse and the extent of the heather moor creates an open landscape where the rounded form of the hills is very apparent. The moor is further emphasised by the pattern of muirburn and the spectacular flowering of the heather in August.





*The smooth, rounded hills*



*Long ridges alternate with valleys and basins*



*The pattern of muirburn stands out clearly on these hills, with scattered pine on the lower flank of the hill*



*Patches of brighter green possibly reflect a change in underlying bedrock, here the focus of a small farm, with a deeply cut valley in the background*