



## Place-Names in the Cairngorms

This leaflet provides an introduction to the background, meanings and pronunciation of a selection of the place-names in the Cairngorms National Park including some of the settlements, hills, woodlands, rivers and lochs in the Angus Glens, Strathdon, Deeside, Glen Avon, Glen Livet, Badenoch and Strathspey. Place-names give us some insight into the culture, history, environment and wildlife of the Park. They were used to help identify natural and built landscape features and also to commemorate events and people. The names on today's maps, as well as describing landscape features, remind us of some of the associated local folklore. For example, according to local tradition, the River Avon (Aan): Uisge Athfhinn – Water of the Ver Bright One – is said to be named after Athfhinn, the wife of Fionn (the legendary Celtic warrior) who supposedly drowned while trying to cross this river. The name 'Cairngorms' was first coined by non-Gaelic speaking visitors around 200 years ago to refer collectively to the range of mountains that lie between Strathspey and Deeside. Some local people still call these mountains by their original Gaelic name – Am Monadh Ruadh or 'The Russet-coloured Mountain Range'. These mountains form the heart of the Cairngorms National Park – **Pàirc Nàiseanta a' Mhonaigh Ruaidh.**

## Linguistic Heritage

Some of the earliest place-names derive from the languages spoken by the Picts, who ruled large areas of Scotland north of the Forth at one time. The principal language spoken amongst the Picts seems to have been a 'P-Celtic' one (related to Welsh, Cornish, Breton and Gaulish). Probable Pictish names include those incorporating for example the prefix Pit – a portion of land; Càrdainn or Cardine – copse; Aber – mouth of river; Monadh or Mounth – a mountain range (related to modern Welsh Mynydd); Easg or Esk – a bog stream (possibly related to the name Exe in Devon) and Dobhar or Dour – water (related to the name Dover in Kent).

The Pictish language and culture were superseded by that of the Gaelic-speaking Scots over 1,000 years ago. The Gaelic language became the dominant language of the Cairngorms area and because of this the majority of the current place-names within the Park are Gaelic in origin. However, there was a gradual decline of Gaelic in the Cairngorms area and by the 18th and 19th centuries many people in the area were bilingual, speaking Scots as well as Gaelic (Scots is a Germanic language related to English). As a result of this there are also Scots place-names, which include for example the words Shank – 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 Muckle) – big.

The Gaelic dialects of Strathspey and Badenoch survived to a limited extent into the 21st century. In Aberdeenshire, the last native Gaelic speaker died as recently as 1984. Today, 'Doric' – a rich dialect of Scots – is still spoken in the east of the Park, while there is a revival of Gaelic in the west of the Park. The Gaelic pronunciation given in this leaflet, which is explained in the gazetteer, is based on the local dialects spoken in the Park area.

Glens and lochs usually take their names from the rivers and streams that flow through them or from them, but there are some exceptions such as Glen Geusachan: Gleann Giùthsachain (glown GYOOsachen) – Glen of the Little Pine Wood; Glen Einich: Gleann Eanaich (glown ENeech) – Glen of the Boggy Place and Glenmore: An Gleann Mòr (in glown MOAR) – The Big Glen.

Gaelic has a more complex colour system than English, since the colours are what linguists call 'attributive'. This means that the words for colours vary in meaning, depending on what they are describing. For example, when the word gorm is used in reference to a mountain, it usually means 'blue', but when gorm is used in reference to a corrie, it usually means 'green'.

## Recording Place-Names

The Ordnance Survey has done a great deal of valuable work throughout Scotland in recording place-names for posterity. However, the collection process over the years has involved many challenges, in particular recording an unfamiliar language and local dialects.

Consequently some place-names were incorrectly recorded, lost or their original meanings obscured.

One example of this is Bridge of Brown which actually derives from Drochaid Bhruthainn (drochitch VROON) meaning 'Bridge of Boiling Water'. This place is called Brig o' Broom in Scots which has become anglicised to Bridge of Brown.

It is possible to establish the meaning of many place-names through exhaustive research of old documents, intensive study of the languages once spoken in the area (including local dialects), examining the local terrain and by interviewing local inhabitants. However, uncertainty remains over the meanings of many place-names, especially those which are of older origin, for example some of the Angus Glens (Prosen, Clova and Doll) and Munros (Driesh & Mayar) and Loch Etchacan.

There are still many names which exist only in oral tradition and a number of individuals and organisations have been maintaining the tradition of recording these as well as undertaking other research, for example, The Scottish Place-Names Society. The Ordnance Survey and the Gaelic Place-Names Liaison Committee also work together to ensure that there is a consistent approach to the collection, maintenance and depiction of Gaelic place-names.

## Further Information

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

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## Traditional Routes



Sign erection on Làirig Ghrù

The Cairngorms has many historical routes including early medieval roads like Comyn's Road (which the Red Comyn, Lord of Badenoch, is said to have commissioned so that he could transport his beer more easily to Badenoch!); drove roads (which were used to take cattle to market) such as the Firmouth; routes used by cattle raiders, such as Rathad nam Mèirleach and traditional passes used by drovers and packmen such as Am Bealach Dearg. There are also extensive sections of 18th century military roads.

Although nowadays mountains such as the Cairngorms are regarded as a barrier, paths through such mountains were commonly used and there was much coming and going from area to area, outwith the winter months. For example the women of Rothiemurchus used to walk through the Làirig Ghrù carrying baskets of eggs to sell at Braemar. More information about traditional routes can be found in the ScotWays leaflet and website.

## Common Words

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



The Cairngorms with Làirig Ghrù from Rothiemurchus



## Place-Names



Published by The Cairngorms National Park Authority

