

Into The Wilderness

Long-distance coast-to-coast route over a remote Scottish landscape

by FIONA RUSSELL

THE germ of an idea for a big adventure began in one of Scotland's largest second-hand bookshops. Flicking through an old guidebook at Leakey's store in Inverness I came across a walk – coast to coast in a day.

The author of *Exploring The Far North West Of Scotland* – the late Richard Gilbert – described a route of 53km (33 miles) from Inverlael to Bonar Bridge in the Highlands. This seemed incredibly short, although when I later looked at a map of Scotland I identified a narrow stretch of mainland between two indents of sea – Loch Broom in the west and the Dornoch Firth in the east.

When I suggested the idea to a walking friend, Ben, he came up with a clever adaptation. A keen mountain bagger, he had spotted a Corbett to the south of the book's route. After a bit of re-plotting, we settled on a two-day walk across Scotland, from Inverlael to Argy, with a hike to the summit of Càrn Bàn.

The route would include fewer tracks compared to the more northerly one, but it would allow us to bag a remote mountain.

Choosing a window of good weather in



A stunning vista of west coast peaks

“Without our heavy packs, we felt like we were walking on air”

Kit list

- ▲ Hiking boots
- ▲ Waterproof jacket and trousers
- ▲ Walking poles
- ▲ Spare socks and baselayer
- ▲ Gloves and headwear
- ▲ Emergency bivvy bag
- ▲ Map and compass
- ▲ Smartphone with map/navigation app
- ▲ 45 to 55 litre rucksack
- ▲ Lightweight tent
- ▲ Sleeping mat
- ▲ Sleeping bag
- ▲ Cooking stove, pots and utensils
- ▲ Walking and camp food
- ▲ Water



Setting up the tents

early May, Ben and I began the walk by dipping our boots into the sea at Loch Broom.

I felt a heightened sense of purpose, taking on the challenge of a long-distance A to B route through a remote landscape – although, to start with, we followed a trail popular with Munro baggers to reach Beinn Dearg.

A forest track gave way to a path which headed uphill, steeply at times, beside the River Lael to reach a bealach at a height of around 850 metres (2800 feet).

Our pace was slower than normal due to the weight of our rucksacks packed with camping kit. It wouldn't be the first time that we were grateful for our walking poles.

Leaving behind the well-trodden path, we set off into a spectacular wilderness. A wild and rugged glen of moorland, peatland and high rise mountains spread as far as we could see. It was as magnificent as it was daunting.

I looked at my watch as we descended towards the base of the valley and realised how many miles of this rough terrain we would need to walk.

top tip

Look out for golden eagles, white-tailed sea eagles and red squirrels around Alladale Lodge.



Fiona and Ben

My pack was starting to become heavy and, as I tried to adjust the straps, I felt a moment of despair. If we had stuck to the original plan, we would have been on a track or path for the entire coast-to-coast crossing.

As we walked towards an area of large peat hags with soggy bog in between, I fell silent. Normally, Ben and I have an almost endless amount of stuff to talk about – from past times when we went to school together, through decades of life and work to contemporary topics.

Thankfully, not long afterwards, I came to my senses and realised how lucky I was to be surrounded by such an incredible landscape. There was no obvious route, but we had maps and common sense, and we fell into a contented plod.

We skirted the edge of a large, picturesque loch, picked our way through more peat hags, tramped over thick grass and rough vegetation and then passed by another loch.

Finally we could see a small building ahead. It turned out to be Glenbeg bothy, formerly maintained but now falling into disrepair. It would have been a reasonable

place to sleep in warm weather, but the location didn't suit our adventure.

We'd hoped to find a path from the bothy to the base of the Corbett and, while there was evidence of an old track, it didn't look like many people had walked our way recently. The wet terrain undulated and we were both tiring as we closed in on Gleann Beag, below Càrn Bàn, at around 19km (12 miles).

The walk so far had taken longer than we expected and we were uncertain if we had the energy for the planned Corbett hike the same day.

We rested and chatted, before deciding to walk up towards a loch at 609m (2000ft) elevation, where we hoped to camp.

On fatigued legs we climbed slowly on the steep path that zigzags up the southern slope of Càrn Bàn.

Finally, Ben and I crested a rise in the land and saw »



The cairn at the summit of Càrn Bàn



Following the route of a river

“We had maps and common sense”

It was only as we descended back towards our tents that we needed our headtorches.

Surprisingly rested, after a filling breakfast, we set off the following day to descend the zigzag path back to the glen base. We faced more miles of walking than the day before – although far less elevation – and it would be a route following well-defined paths, tracks and tarmac.

Following the route of a river along Cleann Mor, we enjoyed the lively chatter of numerous birds. We spotted ring ouzels, wheatears and siskin. In the distance, we heard our first cuckoos of the year.

It was then that we met our first humans since the morning before. Two cyclists passed by on a multi-day bike-packing trip.

Eventually, we reached a cluster of buildings, which told us we were close to Alladale Lodge – the estate describes itself as a “wilderness reserve”.

A well-laid track took us towards a public road – and then came the hardest part of the walk. I had expected there to be relief on reaching tarmac, but I’d forgotten how unforgiving it can be, mile after mile, and with a pack on your back.

Both Ben and I suffered painful foot blisters and, after the wild scenery of the previous day, the roadside landscape was much less inspiring. Still, we found enough to chat about to keep us going – and finally we saw a sign pointing us towards Ardgay.

All that was left to do was to dip our boots, encasing sore feet, in the water of the Dornoch Firth.

It had taken 64km (40 miles) and a total elevation of almost 1860m (6100ft) to walk coast to coast across Scotland – plus a Corbett – and we were both thrilled with our achievement.

the loch ahead. We found a camping spot that was not too wet and just large enough for two tents.

The next priority was an evening meal and we quickly set about boiling water for our dehydrated camp food packs. Finishing up, we realised it was only 8pm.

The evening was light and calm. With little else to do, we suddenly made the decision to go for the Corbett top.

It was a relatively gentle ascent off-trail to the cairn at 842m (2762ft) and, without our heavy packs, we felt like we were walking on air. A sunset provided the perfect backdrop for a stunning vista of west coast peaks.

FURTHER INFORMATION

It is possible to use public transport to get to the start and finish of the walk. Ardgay is served by trains from Inverness, while there is a bus service between Ullapool, near the start at Inverlael, to the Highlands city. Ben and I chose to use two vehicles to access the start and finish.

