

TRAVEL • KNOYDART

A RUGGED PENINSULA ACCESSIBLE ONLY BY BOAT OR ON FOOT, KNOYDART APPEALS TO THOSE WITH PIONEERING SPIRIT IN THEIR BLOOD. JIM MANTHORPE, RANGER FOR KNOYDART, REFLECTS ON WHAT A DECADE OF COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP HAS BROUGHT TO THIS REMOTE CORNER OF SCOTLAND ▶

ALMOST A WILDERNESS

PHOTOGRAPHY: JIM MANTHORPE



SITTING DOWN FOR BREAKFAST one morning recently, I was interrupted by Tommy the post-man knocking on the door. “Jim, if you’re quick, there are two sea eagles about half a mile down the road.”

I jumped on my bike and headed down to the corner where I could get a good view along the shore and up the hillside. No sign of any eagles, just a couple of hooded crows hopping along the stones on the beach. I headed home and then, as I was putting the bike in the shed, I looked up and saw them, circling like vultures. Not bad for a bit of garden wildlife, I thought.

Four years ago I got a job as a ranger here in Knoydart, a mountainous peninsula facing Skye, sandwiched between North Morar and Glen Shiel. I was probably drawn for the same reason thousands of visitors flock here every year: the tantalising blend of mountains and sea. Knoydart is often referred to as ‘the last wilderness in Britain’ and there is something tremendously appealing about the idea of a small scrap of wilderness somewhere on this island of 60 million people.

However, the tracks and trails, the seven miles of tarmac, the forestry plantations and the ruins of black-houses around the coast tell another story. Accessible only by a 45-minute ferry journey or a 16-mile hike over the

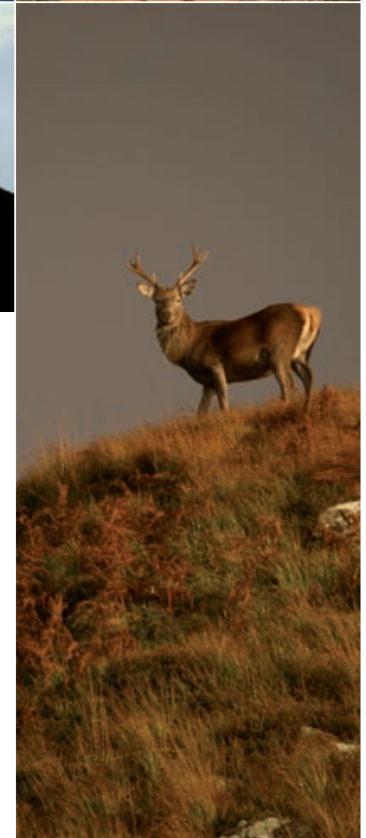
mountains from the nearest road head, Knoydart is certainly hard to reach, but a wilderness? I’m not so sure.

The wilderness debate aside, it’s a beautiful, rugged land of gnarly mountains almost completely surrounded by turbulent seas. Knoydart is also home to a thriving community. It has been ten years since the Knoydart Foundation bought 16,000 acres of the peninsula and assumed responsibility for the management of the estate and a number of its buildings.

As a result, there is a buzz about the place and it’s not just reserved for locals. Each year, scores of volunteers visit to help with conservation and community projects. This year alone, they have cleared invasive rhododendrons from the woodland, cleaned up the beaches, constructed a log cabin and an anniversary totem pole and planted thousands of native trees.

MOUNTAIN MARVELS

But for most visitors, it is the mountains that are the biggest draw. Some are among the most iconic – and remote – in Scotland. Take Sgurr na Ciche, widely considered to be one of the toughest to reach of all the Munros; you can see it from my living room window – a pyramidal peak poking up in the east. It’s quite an expedition to get there: a hike over the 650-metre pass of Mam



Meadail, a descent back to sea level and then a climb to its 1,040-metre-high summit.

If you start early enough you can do it in a day, but it is easy to underestimate the distance and rough terrain. It’s much better to take it slowly over a couple of days. After work one Friday I did just that.

As I walked up Glen Dubh-Lochain I heard a familiar steady drone emanating from a small shed in the glen. This is a comforting sound to the locals. It means the hydro turbine – owned and maintained by Knoydart’s own hydro-electricity company, Knoydart Renewables – is working. A pipe draws water from Loch Bhraoisaisg, 350 metres above on Bheinn Bhuidhe, to the turbine in the shed, generating electricity for the whole village.

For Angela Williams, development manager of the Knoydart Foundation, the renovation of this green electricity scheme has been the most significant of a number of achievements over the past decade. “Without it, businesses such as the bed and breakfasts would have struggled,” says Angela. “It is a fundamental service.”

It has certainly encouraged people to stay in Knoydart and attracted others to move in and invest in the area. “People can see that it’s possible to establish a business here thanks to the hydro,” she adds.

Take sisters Isla and Rhona Miller who were brought **D**

Community action: rhododendron burning (opposite); Sgurr na Ciche peeking above Inverie (top left); totem pole carving (top right); Lord Brocket’s bleak monument (above left); a resident of Knoydart (right)



Cl up in Knoydart. With the help of the Foundation, which leased them the old pier shelter and helped pay for its renovation, they set up a pottery and tearoom business. The carrot cake is fairly flying off the shelves.

Rhona Miller puts the success down to the locals. “We’ve been amazed at how much support local people have given us. They just keep coming back – even in winter.”

I left the hum of the hydro turbine behind. In its place was nothing but the urgent sloosh of the river tumbling over black rocks and the happy chittering of skylarks.

Further up the glen is a reminder of a less happy time for Knoydart. Lord Brocket’s cold, stone monument sits imperiously on a knoll. Seen for miles around, it was erected by Lord Brocket, a Nazi sympathiser who owned the Knoydart estate during the 1930s and 40s. He was close friends with a number of high-ranking Nazis, including the German foreign minister Joachim Von Ribbentrop, who was a guest at his home, Inverie House. Brocket even attended Hitler’s 50th birthday party in Berlin in April 1939.

After the war, in 1948, seven local men staked a claim to a parcel of Brocket’s land, demonstrating their belief that they had a right to grow food for themselves and the community. The case went to the courts and ultimately

a century later the estate has finally come under community ownership.

At the pass, I sat in the purple moor grass – the stiff breeze keeping the midges at bay – and watched a golden eagle rising on the late afternoon thermals. After a night under canvas, I descended to the ruins at Carnoch and began the long climb up the spine of Sgurr na Ciche, reaching the summit just before the clouds came down. For ten minutes, I was treated to a view of almost the entire Knoydart peninsula. Beyond, the ragged edge of the Cuillin hills on Skye and the isles of Rum and Eigg to the south were all clearly visible.

ESTATE BOUNDARIES

Although the highest peak in Knoydart, Sgurr na Ciche is not actually on Knoydart Foundation land. Most visitors, like the wildlife, are blissfully ignorant of where the estate boundaries lie, but when you live and work here you become acutely aware of them. The highest mountain on Knoydart Foundation land (except for the summit and the northern slopes which are owned by the John Muir Trust) is Ladhhar Bheinn.

The pronunciation, by the way, is ‘Larven’ (it has nothing to do with ladders). Translated from Gaelic it means Hoofed Mountain, perhaps receiving this equine moniker from the spectacular Coire Dhorraill on its north side which, with a lot of imagination, could possibly resemble a horse’s hoof. Whatever the derivation, it’s a

magnificent hill – remote, massive and, on its north side, scoured with deep corries and narrow ridges.

My last jaunt to its summit was as a guide for a group of walkers from Seattle. We began the ascent at Folach, a ruined 19th century shepherd’s cottage – a stark reminder of a time when the people who lived on the land were turned off it to make way for sheep. Pre-clearances, **D**

“AT THE PASS, I SAT IN THE PURPLE MOOR GRASS AND WATCHED A GOLDEN EAGLE RISING ON THE LATE AFTERNOON THERMALS”

Sea to summit: Inverie Bay (opposite); a busy day at Inverie pier (below)

Lord Brocket won. In 1991, to commemorate those ‘Seven Men of Knoydart’ a small cairn was erected in Inverie inscribed with the words: “History will judge harshly the oppressive laws that have led to the virtual extinction of a unique culture from this beautiful place.”

It is fitting that, despite their failure in the courts, half



There were around 2,000 people living and working along the coastal periphery. The tumbledown walls of blackhouses still lie amongst the bracken. After the clearances, the land became a rich man's shooting estate and the house at Folach was built for the shepherd who would manage the sheep that had replaced the people.

We climbed the steep slope onto the spine of Ladharr Bheinn. Already the views opened up for us with Skye out to the west and Ben Nevis in the east. A stiff breeze sent white scraps of cumulus tumbling over the ridge. Expecting my Seattle group to be used to the hulking Rockies, I was surprised at their concern about the rough terrain and lack of 'walker amenities'.

"You could do with more signs here. How do you know where to go?" one commented as we climbed onto the shoulder of the mountain. "I don't get it. Don't people like paths here?" said another, picking his way between rocky outcrops.

However, by the time we had walked along the airy ridge to stand on the lip of Coire Dhorraicail with the ribbon of sea water that is Loch Hourm below us, I think they had got it. Loch Hourm, like all others in the Highlands, is a flooded glacial trough, but here the ice was especially thick and the scouring particularly intense. The gouge that the ice took out of the mountains has left behind a spectacular fjord with steep mountain walls falling sharply into cold, black waters.

Many a Munro-bagger chooses Ladharr Bheinn for their last summit, partly because it's so remote but also because the pub, the

Old Forge in Inverie, is just a few blistered footsteps away. Indeed, for many people the hills are not the only attraction here. In summer, Inverie is abuzz with sailors, wildlife enthusiasts and ramblers.

The pub – which proudly claims to be the remotest in mainland Britain – is rammed to the gunnels most summer nights. A good night in there feels anything but remote. It is owned by Ian and Jackie Robertson who bought the place against the advice of their bank manager. "They said it had no potential," says Ian. "It was too remote and run down."

Of course, the bank manager was wrong. It turns out that the remoteness is the attraction and that, says Ian, is how they have made the Old Forge the success it is. That and a reputation for good craic and often great music.

"When we started out, we offered free B&B to anyone who could play an instrument and they were queuing up at the door," recalls Ian. The offer of free B&B may be no more but the fiddles, bodhrans and boxes still keep people coming.

If you're lucky, you'll be here on a ceilidh night when the village hall shudders to the thump of dancing feet till dawn. The last one was to celebrate the 10th anniversary of community ownership. At three in the morning, after six hours of raucous music courtesy of Gary Innes and his band, the jaws of the tourists dropped as he announced the disco was about to begin. They left with sore feet from too much hill walking and sore heads from one too many late nights.

Knoydart's greatest assets may be its scenery and remoteness, but the memories that people take with them as they board the ferry back to Mallaig may also be the friendly welcome and the knowledge that they have found a corner of Britain that has escaped the chaos of the modern world. You could even call it a wilderness – of sorts. ■



Sign of intent: the Knoydart commemorative plaque (above); Coire Dhorraicail and Loch Hourm from Ladharr Bheinn (below, top); a memorable night at the Old Forge (below)



ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE

Visitors to Knoydart have two options that could not be more different. Most arrive at Inverie by passenger ferry (The Western Isles) from Mallaig (t. Bruce Watt, 01687 462320), which operates three days a week during the winter and five days a week in the summer. Several boat operators also offer private boat hire.

The more hardy, however, choose to walk in, usually from the road end at Kinlochhourm. A definite adventure, it can be a tough 16-mile trek and should not be taken lightly at any time of year.

SUPPLIES

The shop in Inverie offers a variety of tinned goods but for fresh food you are best stocking up in Mallaig. The Old Forge offers lunch and dinner, while the Knoydart Pottery and Tearoom is open for breakfast and lunch.

STAYING THERE

Knoydart has a variety of accommodation options, including camping. For more information on this and the wider community, visit www.knoydart-foundation.com

FURTHER INFORMATION

For questions on access, walking routes, camping and wildlife, contact Jim Manthorpe (rangerjim@knoydart.org) or Tommy McManmon (rangertommy@knoydart.org).

Harvey Maps, Knoydart, Kintail & Glen Affric

OS Landranger 33, Loch Alsh, Glen Shiel & Loch Hourm