

HIGH LIFE

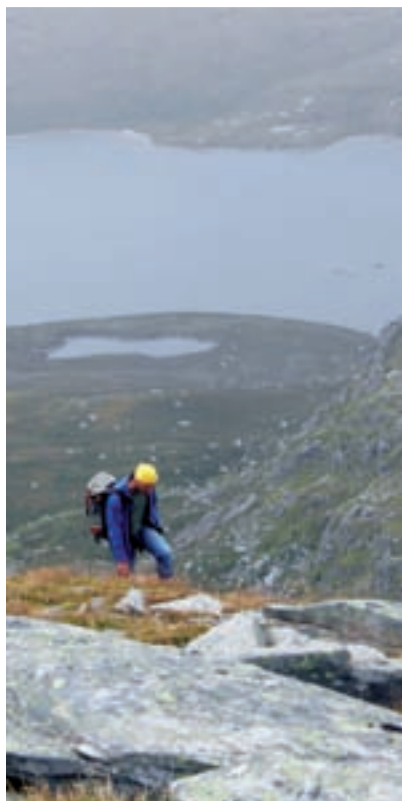
CLIMBING MOUNTAINS IS ABOUT MUCH MORE THAN JUST GETTING TO THE TOP. **GRAHAM UNEY**, A SENIOR GUIDE WITH WILDERNESS SCOTLAND, SUGGESTS SEVEN SUMMITS TO STIR YOUR SOUL THIS YEAR

WHAT MAKES A MOUNTAIN ICONIC? Is it purely down to shape? Does it depend on the variety of routes to the summit? Or the wildlife you'll find on its flanks? Defining the iconic mountains of Scotland will always be a very subjective exercise. And yet it's something we're often asked to do.

The question is put in a variety of ways, but always boils down to the same thing. People often ask, "What's your favourite hill?" In a way, it's like to trying to define why we go into the mountains at all – "because it's there" always sounds a bit feeble in the same way that saying "Ben Lomond is my favourite mountain because it's great" doesn't quite hit the nail on the head either.

In truth, the hills I've come to think of as being icons of Scotland are, for me, classic for a variety of reasons. It may be that I've had an epic day on one of them, or have had a memorable wildlife sighting, or perhaps I've shared a grand day out with a particularly nice bunch of people. So, really, perhaps the question should be: "What have been your best mountain experiences?"

Well, I've been pushed into a corner on this, and forced to make a choice. With so many from which to choose, it's not been easy, but here are (possibly!) my top seven iconic summits of Scotland.



Chin up: on the approach to Ben Hope (right) and nearing the summit (left); the Stuic from Cac Carn Beag on Lochnagar (above left)



LOCHNAGAR, 1,155M – GRAMPIANS

I came to Lochnagar quite late, and immediately wished I'd got to know this wonderful mountain years ago. The magnificence of the north-eastern corrie and its broad spectrum of climbing routes make it a popular venue for hill walker and mountaineer alike. However, as if you need more of an incentive to explore this spectacular mountain, there is even more to discover than this crag-girt bowl topped by its pair of summits.

My favourite corner of Lochnagar is Coire Loch nan Eun, tucked in beneath the north-western face of the mountain. I recently camped on the top of The Stuic, a rocky ridge that falls between Loch nan Eun and Lochan na Feadaige, and even now I can recall waking to a bright June morning as fresh snow sparkled off the vast plateau to the south and stags hollered from the corrie below.



Getting there:

Take the minor road up Glen Muick from Ballater.
OS Map Landranger 44

Suggested start point:

NO 307850
Spittal of Glenmuick car park.
Look out for red squirrels around the Glen Muick visitor centre.

BEN HOPE, 927M – SUTHERLAND

When it comes to climbing Munros you've got to go a long way to beat Ben Hope. Come to think of it, you've got to go a long way to climb Ben Hope, too. This dramatic lump of a mountain is the most northerly Munro of them all, and its position at the head of Loch Eriboll on the north coast, set amid a vastness of deep glens, savagely-cut sea cliffs and rolling moors makes it a formidable challenge for most.

I recently took a group up the hill from Strathmore, and as we approached down the length of Loch Hope, everyone in the van fell quiet as the grey buttresses that form the western face of this stark mountain loomed overhead. I'm sure they all thought I was joking, until I jumped out of the van by the big bend in the Strathmore River and pulled on my boots.

High up on the summit plateau we followed a pair of ptarmigan, still half white as they moulted out of their winter coats, while from the mist-shrouded summit a ring ouzel called from the rocky screes on the north side. Pure magic.



Getting there:

South of the A838, along east side of Loch Hope on minor road.
OS Map Landranger 9

Suggested start point:

NC 461477
Car park at the barn at Muiseal.
The Dun Dornaigill Broch just down the road is well worth a visit.

BEINN DAMH, 903M – TORRIDON

Beinn Damh (or Ben Damp) lies on the south side of Loch Torridon, and almost turns its back on the splendour of the higher peaks across the water to the north. It's a fine mountain of rocky terraces and hidden corries, and one of the most memorable things about an ascent is the views of the Torridonian giants looming across the glen. Beinn Alligin never looks finer than when viewed from Beinn Damh, while Liathach's grey skirted flanks look impossibly long and steep.

However, one of the best things about Beinn Damh is the view into the Coulin Forest from its summit. Although below Munro height, the summit is quite tough to reach. It involves an approach through Toll Ban, a deer-filled corrie to the north of the summit ridge, then a number of false peaks lead up to Spidean Coire an Laoigh and The Stirrup Mark.

From the summit, great crags fall to the east and south-east, down to the Drochaid Coire Roill and into the depths of Coire nan Cnamhan. And beyond these dark trenches, the stark outlines of An Ruadh-Stac, Maol Chean-dearg and Sgorr Ruadh dominate the view. Superb.



Getting there:

Follow the A896 west from Kinlochewe through Glen Torridon.
OS Map Landranger 24

Suggested start point:

NG 889542
Park by the Torridon Inn. Go on a clear day and check out the views of the Torridonian giants to the north.

RONAS HILL, 450M – SHETLAND ISLES

I did say this was going to be subjective, didn't I? I'm guessing that a fair percentage of hill-going folk won't even have heard of lowly Ronas Hill, but it will always be up there with my favourite summits in Scotland. At 450m high it barely counts even as a hill, but this, the highest peak in the Shetland Isles, makes up for its lack of stature by its immense character. Think 'Jack Russell' and you'll get the idea. It's a mass of lovely pink granite rising above the deep fjord of Ronas Voe on North Mavine, the northern tip of Mainland Shetland, and is packed with interest.

Never been bonked by Bonxies (*see overleaf*)? Well, this is as good a place as any to lose your virginity (we're talking fearsome, dive-bombing seabirds, in case you're wondering). The views along the coast to Fethaland and across Ronas Voe to the huge sea cliffs of Eshaness make for a memorable day out in one of the wildest corners of Scotland.

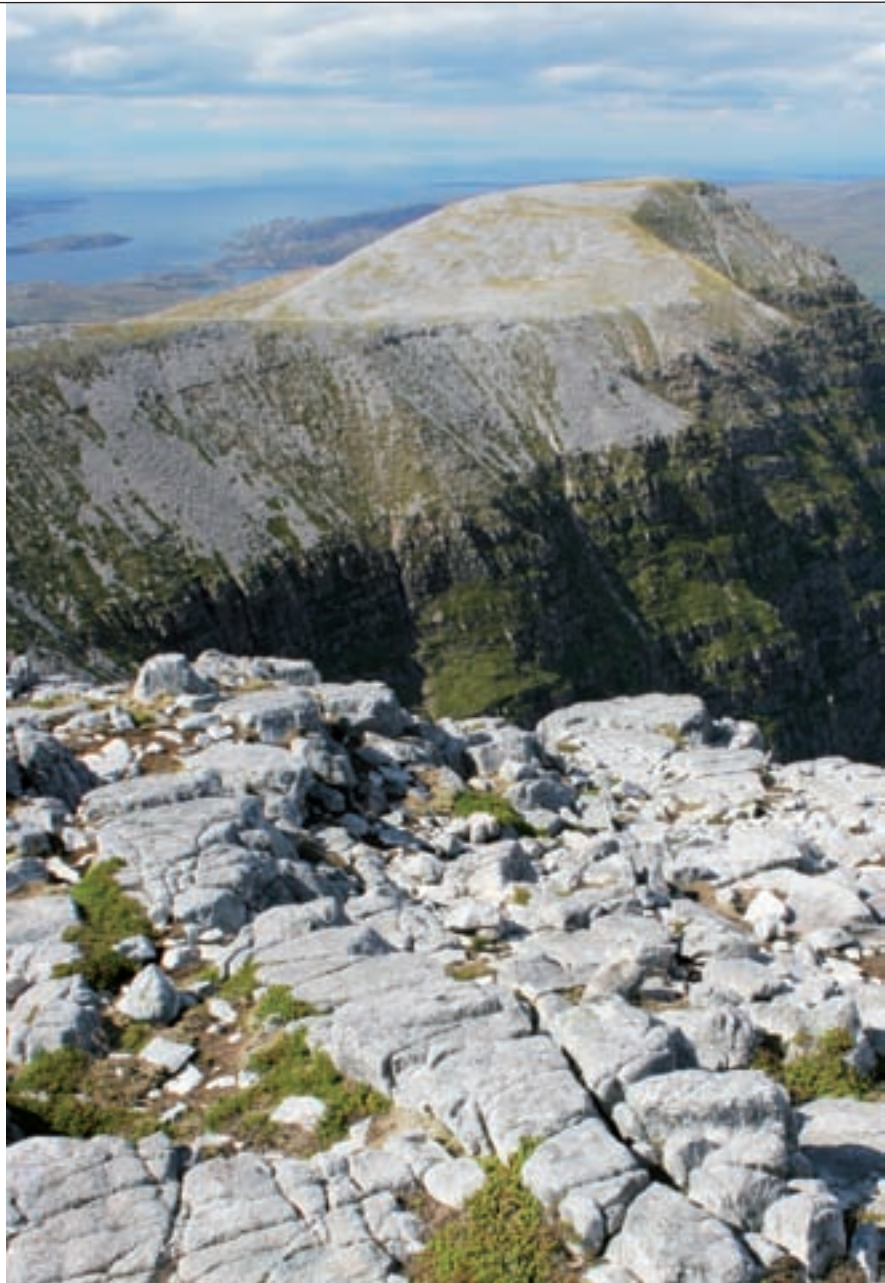


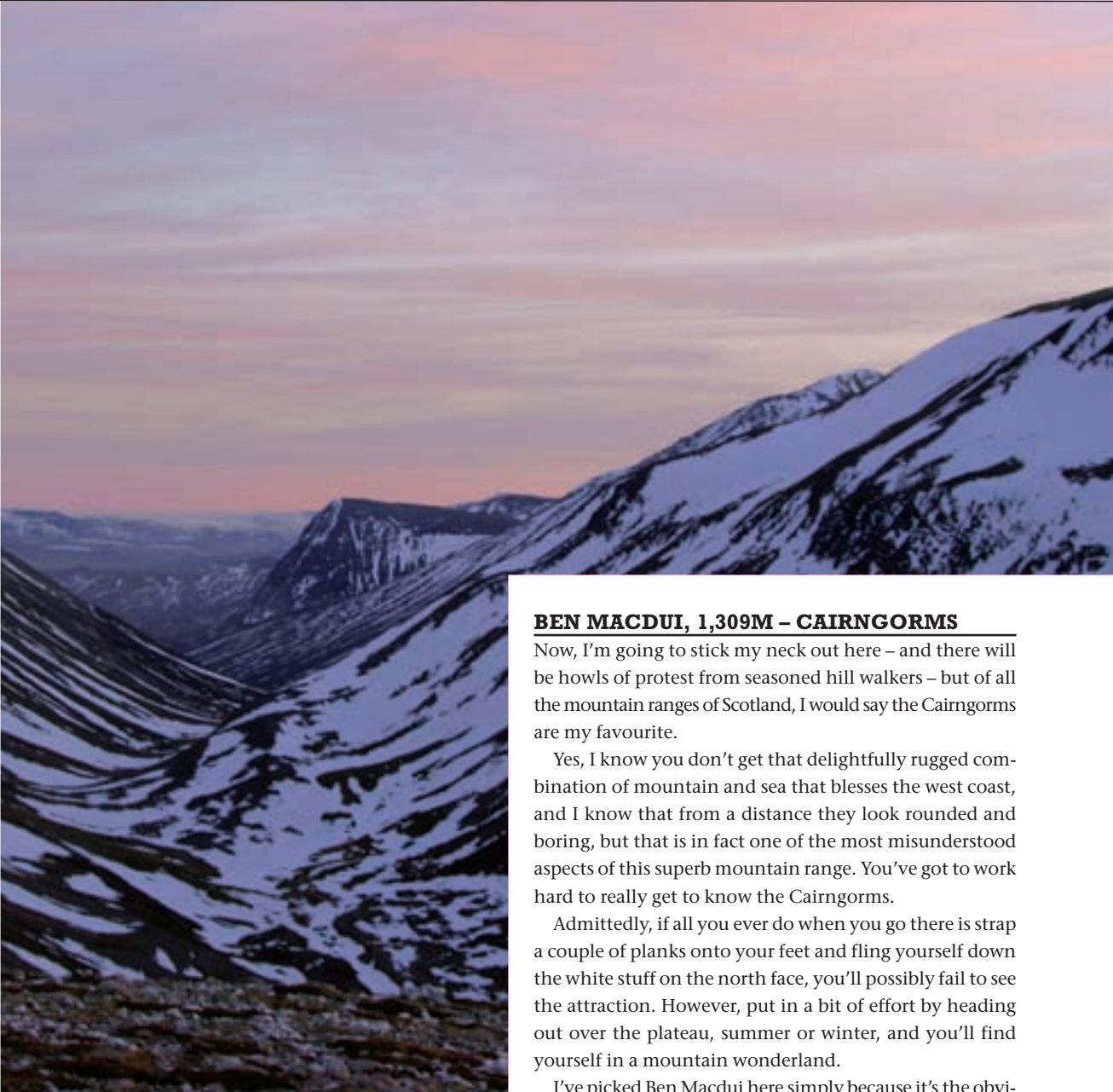
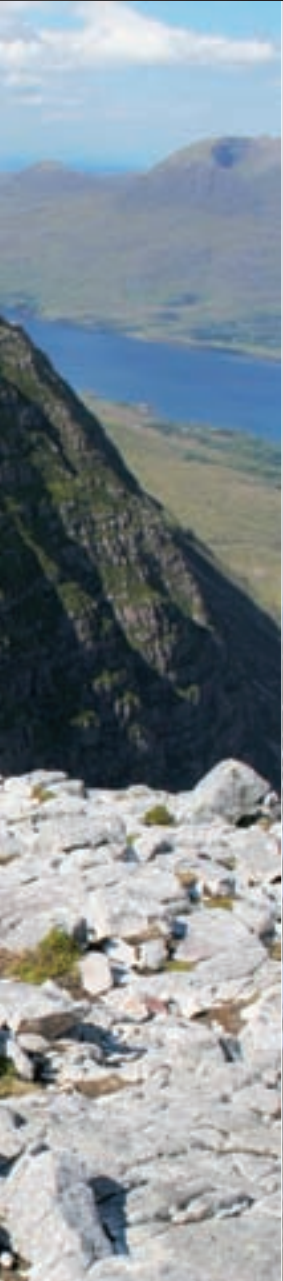
Getting there:

Northlink ferry from Aberdeen to Lerwick,
www.northlinkferries.co.uk
OS Map Landranger 3

Suggested start point:

HU 335811
The head of Ronas Voe. Otters can often be seen in the fjord-like waters.





Views for days: the summit ridge on Beinn Damh (top left); Ben Macdui and the Lairig Ghru (top right); sauntering to the summit of Ronas Hill (left)

BEN MACDUI, 1,309M – CAIRNGORMS

Now, I'm going to stick my neck out here – and there will be howls of protest from seasoned hill walkers – but of all the mountain ranges of Scotland, I would say the Cairngorms are my favourite.

Yes, I know you don't get that delightfully rugged combination of mountain and sea that blesses the west coast, and I know that from a distance they look rounded and boring, but that is in fact one of the most misunderstood aspects of this superb mountain range. You've got to work hard to really get to know the Cairngorms.

Admittedly, if all you ever do when you go there is strap a couple of planks onto your feet and fling yourself down the white stuff on the north face, you'll possibly fail to see the attraction. However, put in a bit of effort by heading out over the plateau, summer or winter, and you'll find yourself in a mountain wonderland.

I've picked Ben Macdui here simply because it's the obvious choice, being the highest Cairngorm peak at 1,309m, but there are countless hidden corners to explore. I've snowholed above Loch Etchachan, and I've descended the Allt a' Choire Mhoir into the Lairig Ghru. I've spent a spooky night under the Shelter Stone, and I've walked across the summit plateau at midnight in temperatures around -30°C, and I'd do the same again tomorrow given half a chance.

There are few mountain ranges that give such a sense of space, wildness and solitude that you'll find in the Cairngorms. If you only have one adventure this summer, make it a trip into the heart of this glorious range. You won't be disappointed.



Getting there:

From the A9 at Aviemore head east on the Cairngorm Mountain road through Glen More. OS Map Landranger 36

Suggested start point:

NH 989060
Park in the Coire Cas car park on Cairngorm. On the walk, look for ptarmigan, snow buntings and dotterel (summer).



Watch your step: the summit ridge on Suilven (left); looking to Canna and Sanday from Orval (right); a Bonxie pair – not to be trifled with (below)

SUILVEN, 731M – ASSYNT

I can just hear you all saying, “Ah, Suilven. Now that’s a proper iconic mountain.” And you’d be right. Suilven is certainly special. Look at it from any angle and your jaw drops. It just has to be the most improbable shape for a mountain, particularly when viewed from Lochinver on the coast.

There are a number of routes to get you to the base of the mountain – all of them long – but my favourite is through the dappled birch and alder woods alongside the River Kirkaig. You get tantalising glimpses of the massive summit dome as you approach, and then, as you crest a low ridge beside Fionn Loch, the mountain is revealed, large as life.

The dome that rises so abruptly from the moor when viewed from Lochinver is actually only the western end of the mountain, and is known as Caisteal Liath, or the grey castle. Beyond this, the highest point, there is a long and crenallated ridge of sandstone, leaping eastwards from a low point on the ridge, the Bealach Mor. This, the Bealach Mor, is the key to gaining the summit.

I sat there recently, watching as a juvenile golden eagle followed the ridge westwards, hunting into the wind then dropping sharply down the northern flanks and sweeping back to Meall Meadhonach at the eastern end before starting the whole process over again.



Getting there:

Take the ‘Mad Road’ south from Lochinver to Inverkirkaig.
OS Map Landranger 15

Suggested start point:

NC 085193
Car park by the bridge. Keep an eye out for golden eagles during the ascent.



ORVAL, 571M – ISLE OF RUM

Orval is another one of those unknown hills. It lies on the western point of the diamond shape that is the island of Rum – the largest and most mountainous of the Small Isles.

So, why Orval? It's true, there are grander peaks on Rum, for to the east of the Orval group, and separated from it by the head of Glen Harris, the Rum Cuillin form one of the most magnificent island mountain ranges in Scotland. There, you'll find the likes of Askival, Ainshval, Trollabhal and Hallaval – all great peaks with terrifying Norse names.

But Orval is one of those mountains that, being separated from the main cluster of peaks, gives superlative views of the main range. From its bald summit you get impressive glimpses of the Rum Cuillin peaks across the way, while to the west you gaze down on the delightful island of Canna, and the Outer Hebrides fill the horizon in lumps and bumps upon the deep blue of the Minch.

Orval is by no means bland either. Its western face, overlooking the wild corrie of Glen Guirdil, is graced with

greying crags and the famous Orval Pinnacle, a wild fang of rock tenuously clinging to the main bastion of the mountain.

This is also eagle country par excellence. Both golden and white-tailed sea eagles hang around here, and Glen Guirdil is one of the best places to see them hunting.

Oh, and did I mention that Orval is in the most remote corner of the island too, making a walk out here a true adventure. So, what are you waiting for? ■



Getting there:

Caledonian MacBrayne operate ferries to Rum from Mallaig, www.calmac.co.uk. OS Map Landranger 39

Suggested start point:

NM 411991
Step off the ferry and head west across the island on foot.

Everyone has their own favourite hill – some well-known, others well and truly off the beaten track. Tell us about your own top summits, and why they get your juices going, and we will post your recommendations for other readers to enjoy on the Scotland Outdoors website. Just email summits@scotoutdoors.com

PHOTOGRAPHY: GRAHAM UNEY