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 Very 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’ Mhonaidh Ruaidh.

Invercauld Bridge over the River Dee
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The Pictish language and culture were superseded by that of the Gaelic-speaking Scots over 1,000 years ago.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 GYO Osachen) – 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’ Broon 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 (Dreish & Mayar) and Loch Etchachan.

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.
Traditional Routes

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

The Cairngorms with Làirig Ghrù from Rothiemurchus
The map locates the place-names mentioned in the gazetteer. The map should not be used for navigational purposes. Reproduction is prohibited without the permission of the copyright holders.

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The gazetteer gives the pronunciation and meanings of a selection of the many thousands of place-names in the Park associated with its settlements, glens, hills, woodlands, rivers and lochs. More information can be found in some of the literature and websites listed.

The gazetteer includes place-names which appear on maps in their original Gaelic form and names of main features which were Gaelic in origin, but which have been anglicised or translated into English/Scots over the years. Spelling follows accepted conventions.

The pronunciation of the Gaelic place-names is based on that found in the local Gaelic dialects of the Cairngorm area. One characteristic of these dialects is the tendency to drop final unstressed syllables, so ‘monadh’ tends to be shortened to ‘mon’ and ‘uisge’ to ‘uisg’.

In the phonetic system below, the letters are to be pronounced as in Scottish English. The syllables on which the main stress or emphasis lies will be shown in capital letters. The following indicates how the different sounds are to be pronounced:  
- y in by, gy, cy, ly & ny: y in ‘yard’
- ay : ‘may’
- ey : ‘eye’
- ow : ‘cow’
- u : ‘sun’
- a : ‘car’
- ee : ‘keen’
- oy : ‘boy’
- ch : ‘loch’
- e : ‘bell’
- i : ‘tin’
- o : ‘cord’
- tch : ‘itch’
- ei : ‘height’
- oa : ‘soar’
- oo : ‘moon’
- ng : ‘sing’

Settlements

Aviemore (avee MOAR): An Aghaidh Mhòr (in ackee VOAR) - this may be connected with the old Gaelic word adhbhadh meaning ‘a dwelling place’.

Ballater (BALitir): Bealadair (BYALtir) - may be from Bealach Dobhar - Pass Water.

Bellabeg (belliBEG): Am Baile Beag (im bali BECK) - The Little Town.

Boat of Garten (boat i GARTin): Coit a’ Ghartain (cochtch GARSHTen) - ferry-place of the area called Garten.

Braemar (BriMAR): Bràigh Mhàr (brey VAR) - The Upland of Mar - the town of Braemar consists of two settlements, Baile a’ Chaisteil (Castleton) and Achadh an Droighinn (The Field of the Thornbush).

Cambus O’May (camis i MEI): Camas a’ Mhaigh (camis i VEI) - The River Bend of the Plain.

Carrbridge (CARbridge): Drochaid Chàrr (drochitch CHAR) - Bridge of the Boggy Place.

Cockbridge: Drochaid a’ Choilich (droycht CHILLeech) - was also referred to locally as Ceann Drochaid - Bridge-end.

Corgarff (corGARF): pronounced (cor GARee) in Gaelic, possibly from Coire a’ Gharaidh - Corrie of the Animal’s Den.
Churchtown of Buichead’s Glen. (Buichead is an old Gaelic personal name).

Laggan (LAGin): Lagan (LAKan) originally Lagan Choinnich - St Kenneth’s Hollow

Nethy Bridge: Locally known in Gaelic as Obar Neithich (oabir NYAYeech) - The Mouth of the Nethy (river).

Newe (nyow): locally known as The Newe - from An Neimheadh (in NYOW) - The Sacred Place.

Newtonmore (nyoo tin MOAR): Baile Ùr an t-Sliabh (bal oor an TLAYee) - The New Town of the Moor. Often referred to locally as An Sliabh (in SLEEow) meaning ‘The Moor’.

Tomintoul (taminTOWil): Tom an t-Sabhail (tom in TOWil) - The Knoll of the Barn.

Tomnavoulin (tam ni VOOLin): Toman a’ Mhuilinn (toman i VOOleen) - The Little Knoll of the Mill.

Rivers and Burns


Callater Burn (CALiter BURN): Uisge Chaladair (ooshk CHALatir) - Caladair may mean ‘Hard Water’ or ‘Calling Water’.

Clunie Water (CLOONee): Uisge Chluanaidh (ooshk CHLOOANee) - Water of the pasture.

Dee: Uisge Dhè (ooshk YAY) - Water of Dè (possibly a deity).

Derry Burn: Uisge an Doire (ooshk in DIR) - Water of the Copse.

Don: Uisge Dheathain (ooshk YEN) - Water of Deathan (possibly a deity).

Isla (EILi): Uisge Île (ooshk EEL) - Water of the High Bank.

Lee: Uisge Li (ooshk LEE) - possibly Water of Flood.

Livet (LEEVit): Liomhaid (LEEVitch) - Shining or Flooding one.

Lui (LOOee): Laoigh - Calf one (possibly a deity).

March Burn: Allt na Crìche (alt ni CREECH) - Stream of the Boundary/March. Marks the old boundary between Strathspey and Deeside.

Mashie: Mathaisidh - Good Meadow River.

Muick (mick): Uisge Muice (ooshk MOOichk) - Water of Pig One (possibly a deity).

North/South Esk: Easg Thuatha/Easg Dheas (esk HOOa / esk YAYs)- North/South Bog Stream.

Spey (spay): Uisge Spè (ooshk SPEI) - possibly River of Hawthorn.

Tanar (TANir): Uisge Thannar (ooshk HANGir) - possibly connected to Tanaros, a British/Gaulish thunder-god.

Truim (TROOeem): Elder Tree River.

Lochs

Loch Alvie (ALvee): Loch Allmhaigh (loch ALavee) - possibly means ‘Loch of the Rock Plain’.

Loch an Eilein: (loch in YAYlen): The Loch of the Island.

Loch an t-Seilich (loch in TCHAYleech): The Loch of the Willow tree.

Loch Brandy: Loch Branduibh (loch BRANdoee) - Brandubh’s Loch. (Brandubh is an old Gaelic personal name).

Loch Builg (loch BOOleeck): Loch of Bag (i.e. bag-shaped).

Loch Dava (DAwin): Loch an Dàbhain (loch in DAVin) - Loch of the area called Davan.

Loch Einich (loch ENeech): should be Loch Eanach - Loch of the Boggy Area.

Loch Garten (GARTin): Loch a’ Ghartain (loch GARSHTen) - Loch of the area called Garten.

Loch Insh: Loch Innse (loch EEnsh) - Loch of the Island or Loch of the Water Meadow.

Loch Kinord (loch cinORD): Loch Ceanndair (loch Kyanir) - Loch of Head-Water.


Loch Morlich (loch MORleech): may be from Loch Mòr-Thulaich - Loch of the Big Hillock.

Loch Pityoulish (loch pitYOOlish): Loch Peit Gheollais - The Loch of the Settlement of the Bright Place.

Loch Vaa: Loch a’ Bhàtha - The Loch of the Drowning.

Pools of Dee: locally Lochanan Dubha na Làirige (lochan doo ni LAAReek) - The Little Black Lochs of the Pass.
Traditional Routes

Beum a’ Chladheimh (bem i CHLEYee): The Gash of the Sword.
Comyn’s Road (CUMeens road): Rathad nan Cuimeineach (rat ning Coomeenyach).
Gaick Pass: gàig (GAeeck) - a cleft.
làirig an Laoigh: should be Làirig Laoigh (lareeck LOOee) - Pass of Lui. Also known locally as An Làirig Shios (The Eastern Pass).
làirig Ghrù: should be Làirig Dhrù (lareeck GROO) - The Pass of Drù. Also known locally as An Làirig Shuas (The Western Pass).
Rathad nam Mèirleach (rat nim MYARlach): The Thieves’ Road (ie cattle raiders). Includes the Pass of Ryvoan, from Ruighe a’ Bhothain (ree VOAen) - The Slope of the Bothy.
Slochd (slochk): An Sloc (in SLOCHK) - The Pit/Den. Also known as Sloc Muice (The Wild Pig’s Den).
The Capel Mounth (CAypil munth): Monadh Chapall (mon i CHAPil) - The Mounth of Horses.
The Firmounth (FERmunth): Am Monadh Giuthais (i moni GYOOish) - The Mounth of Pine.
The Ladder Road (LAYdir): Monadh an Fhàraidh (mon in ARee) - The Mounth of the Ladder.
The Lecht: An Leac (in LYECHK) - The Declivity.
The Minigaig Pass: Minigaig is locally Monadh Ghàig (mooni GAeeck) - The Mountain Range of Gaick.
The Pass of Drumochter (drimOOCHtir): Druim Uachdair (drooeeem OOACHKir) - Ridge of the High Ground. Often referred to in Gaelic poetry as Druim Uachdair nam Bò (Druim Uachdair of the Cows) or Druim Uachdair an Fheòir (Druim Uachdair of the Grass).
The Tolmount (TOLmunth): An Dul Monadh (in DOOLi mon) - meaning uncertain. This is also known as Jock’s Road - named after John Winter, who fought for the right to walk over these mountains.

Forests and Woods

Ballochbuie (balichBOOEE): Am Bealach Buidhe (im BYALach BOOee) - The Yellow Pass.
Coilacreich (ceil i CHREECH): probably Coille a’ Chrhithich (ceil i CHREECH) - The Wood of the Aspen.
Coille a’ Phiobair (ceil i FEEpir): The Piper’s Wood.
Cranach (CRANeech): A’ Chrannaich (i CHRANeech) - The Place of Straight Trees.
Glenmore Forest: (glenMOAR): Coille a’ Ghlinne Mhòir (ceil i gleenyi VOAR) - The Forest of the Big Glen.
Rothiemurchus Forest: (rotheeMURchis): Coille Ràt Mhurchais (ceil racht VOORichish) - The Forest of the Place of Murchas’ Fort.
The Genechal (JENichil): An t-Seann-Choille (in JOONG ichil) - The Old Wood.
Places of Interest

1. Balmoral (BilMOARil): may be from Both Mhorail (ba VORil) - Dwelling of the Great (forest) Clearing. Highland home of the Royal Family.
4. Clach nan Tàillear (clach nin TAlyir): The Stone of the Tailors - they perished here in a blizzard one Hogmanay while crossing the Làirig Ghrù.
5. Castle Roy: An Caisteal Ruadh (ing cashtchil ROOig) - The Red Castle - rumoured to be the oldest ruined castle in Scotland.
6. Dùn dà Làmh: locally Dùn Dà Làimh (doon da LEY) - The Fort of Two Hands - possibly so-named because it has fine commanding views of the two main approaches to Badenoch from the west. The remains of a massive (probably Pictish) fort are found here.
7. Kindrochit Castle (cinDROCHHit): Kindrochit is from the Gaelic Cinn Drochaide (ceeng DROYCHTCH) - Bridge-End. This 11th century ruin is said to have been built as a hunting-lodge for Malcolm Canmore, King of Scots
8. Lag na Caillich: locally Slag na Caillich (slack ni CALyeech) - The Hollow of the Old Woman. The traditional boundary between Clan Grant and The Clan Chattan.
9. Queen’s Well: Tobar nan Clachan Geala (TOApir ning clachin GYAL) - The Well of the White Stones - built to commemorate a visit by Queen Victoria to Glen Mark in 1861.
10. Ruthven Barracks (RUVin): Ruthven from Ruadhainn (ROOAeen) - Red Place. The Highland Army gathered here in 1746 after the Battle of Culloden, only to be told to disband, bringing to an end the last Jacobite rising.
11. Scalan: An Sgàilean (in SCALan) - The Shelter. This building played a vital role in the survival of Scottish Catholicism - during the 18th century when the Roman Catholic Church was banned, a college situated here prepared around a hundred boys for the priesthood.
12. The Cat’s Den: Uamh a’ Chait (ooa CHACHTCH) - hideout of the outlaw Sandy Grant, nicknamed ‘The Cat’ - said to be an ancestor of President Ulysses Grant of the USA.
13. The Colonel’s Bed: Leabaidh a’ Chòirneil (lyepee CHORNil) - main hideout of John Farquharson of Inverey, better known as The Black Colonel. A colourful character who was a prominent Jacobite in the late 17th century.

Topographic Features

1. A’ Chailleach (i CHALyach): The Old Woman.
3. Am Monadh Ruadh (im moni ROOig): The Russet-coloured Mountain Range.
4. An Garbh-Choire (ing GARichor): The Rough Corrie.
6. Beinn a’ Bhùird (beeng i VOORd) - The Mountain of the Table.
8. Ben MacDui: Beinn MacDuibh (beeng machk DOOEE) - The Mountain of the sons of Duff.
10. Brown Cow Hill: more commonly known in Scots as The Broon Coo and in Gaelic as A’ Bhò Dhonn (i voa GOON).
11. Cairn Toul (cayrn TOWil): should be Càrn an t-Sabhail (carn TOWil) - The Barn-shaped Mountain.
12. Cairngorm (cayrn GORim): An Càrn Gorm (in carn GORim) - The Blue Mountain.
18) Càrn Mhic an Tòisich (carn veechk in TOsheech): MacIntosh’s Mountain.
19) Chalamain Gap: should be Eag Coire na Cómhdhalach (eck cor ni COlach) - The Ravine of the Corrie of the Assembly. Also known as Eag na Sadhbhaidh - The Ravine of the Fox’s Den.
20) Clach Bhan (clach VAN): Stone of Women. Traditionally, pregnant women sat here to ensure an easy birth.
21) Coire an t-Sneachda: locally Coire an t-Sneachdadh (corn DRECHKee) - The Corrie of the Snow.
22) Coire Cas: An Coire Cas (ing cor CAS): The Steep Corrie.
23) Coire na Ciste (cor ni CEESHTCH): The Corrie of Deep Narrow Shape
24) Coire Odhar (cor OWir): An Coire Odhar (ing cor OWir) - The Dun-coloured Corrie.
26) Craigellachie (crayg ELichee): should be Creag Eileachaidh (crayk ELichee) - The Crag of the Rocky Place - The slogan of the Clan Grant.
27) Craiggowrie: probably Creag Ghobharaidh (crayck GOWree) - Crag of the Goat.
28) Creag a’ Chalamain: Creag a’ Chalmain (crayck i CHALimen) - The Crag of the Dove.
30) Creag an Leth-choin (crayck in LEchin): The Lurcher’s Crag.
31) Creag Dhubh (crayg DOO), Newtonmore: A’ Chreag Dhubh (i chraeeck GOO) - The Black Crag - The slogan of the Clan MacPherson
32) Creag Leacach: A’ Chreag Leacach (i chrayk LYECHkach) - The Slabby Crag/Crag abounding in slabs.
33) Eag a’ Mhadaidh (eck i VATee): The Ravine of the Wolf.
34) Glas Maol: should be An Glas-Mheall (ing glass VYWOL) - The Green Hill.
36) Leabaidh an Daimh Bhuidhe (lyepee in dey VOOoee): The Bed of the Yellow Stag.
37) Lochnagar (lochniGAR): probably Lochan na Gäire - The Little Loch of the Noisy Sound. This name actually refers to the loch in the eastern corrie of Lochnagar. The mountain is Beinn nan Gochan (beeng ning CEEICHin) - Mountain of the Paps (Breasts).
38) Meall a’ Bhuchaille (myowl VOOACHHeel): The Hill of the Herdsman.
39) Meall Odhar: Am Meall Odhar Mòr (im myowl owir MOAR) - The Big Dun-coloured Hill.
41) Möine Mhòr: A’ Möine Mhòr (i vonyi VOAR) - The Big Peat Bog.
42) Morven (MURvin): Mòr-Bheinn (MOR veeng) - Big Mountain.
43) Mount Keen (mun KEEN): possibly from Monadh Caoin - Smooth Mountain.
44) Sgòr an Lochain Uaine (scorn lochen OOeyn): The Peak of the Little Green Loch. Known in English as ‘Angel’s Peak’.
45) Sgòr Gaoith (sgor GOOEE): Peak of Wind.
46) Stac na h-Iolaire (stawck ni HYOOOLir): The Precipice of the Eagle.
48) The Devil’s Point: should be Bod an Deamhain (bot in JOeen) - The Devil’s Penis.
49) The Lang Straucht (Scots): The Long Straight.
50) The Shelter Stone: known in Gaelic as Clach Dhìona (clach YEEin) - Stone of Shelter.
51) The Smugglers’ Shank (Scots): The (whisky) Smugglers’ Ridge.
52) Tom Dà Choimhead (towm daa CHOYit): The Knoll of the Two Views. Known locally as Sìthean Dà Choimhid (sheean da CHOYitch) - The Fairy Hill of the Two Outlooks.
Further Information


Ordnance Survey  www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk

Scottish Place-Names Society  www.st-andrews.ac.uk/institutes/sassi/spns

Am Baile – The Gaelic Village  www.ambaile.org.uk

ScotWays (The Scottish Rights of Way and Access Society)  www.scotways.com

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