



Trail

## Moor than meets the eye

Explore why this moor has been seen as both an inspiring wilderness and a bleak wasteland

**Time:** 30 mins

**Distance:** 1 mile

**Landscape:** rural

There are only a few places in Britain where you can experience vast open spaces like this. Take a moment to turn through 360 degrees and enjoy the sensation of the hummocky ground stretching away from you on all sides until it meets the distant mountains.

This is Rannoch Moor, regularly described as the 'last remaining wilderness in Britain'. On a clear sunny day you may feel your spirits lift as your senses drink in the surroundings, but if it is cloudy and rainy you may be quite content to leave the bleak, colour-drained landscape.

Rannoch Moor is a place of extremes and contradictions, and over the centuries it has inspired and awed in equal measure. This trail explores some of the very different reactions it has provoked. We will consider what, aside from the weather, makes people feel so differently about this landscape

### Location:

Rannoch Moor, Highland, Scotland

### Start:

Car park layby on A82, Bridge of Orchy, PA36 4AG

### Finish:

Car park layby on A82, Bridge of Orchy, PA36 4AG

### Grid reference:

NN 30849 49645

### Keep an eye out for:

Wet and boggy ground: wellies or walking boots strongly recommended!

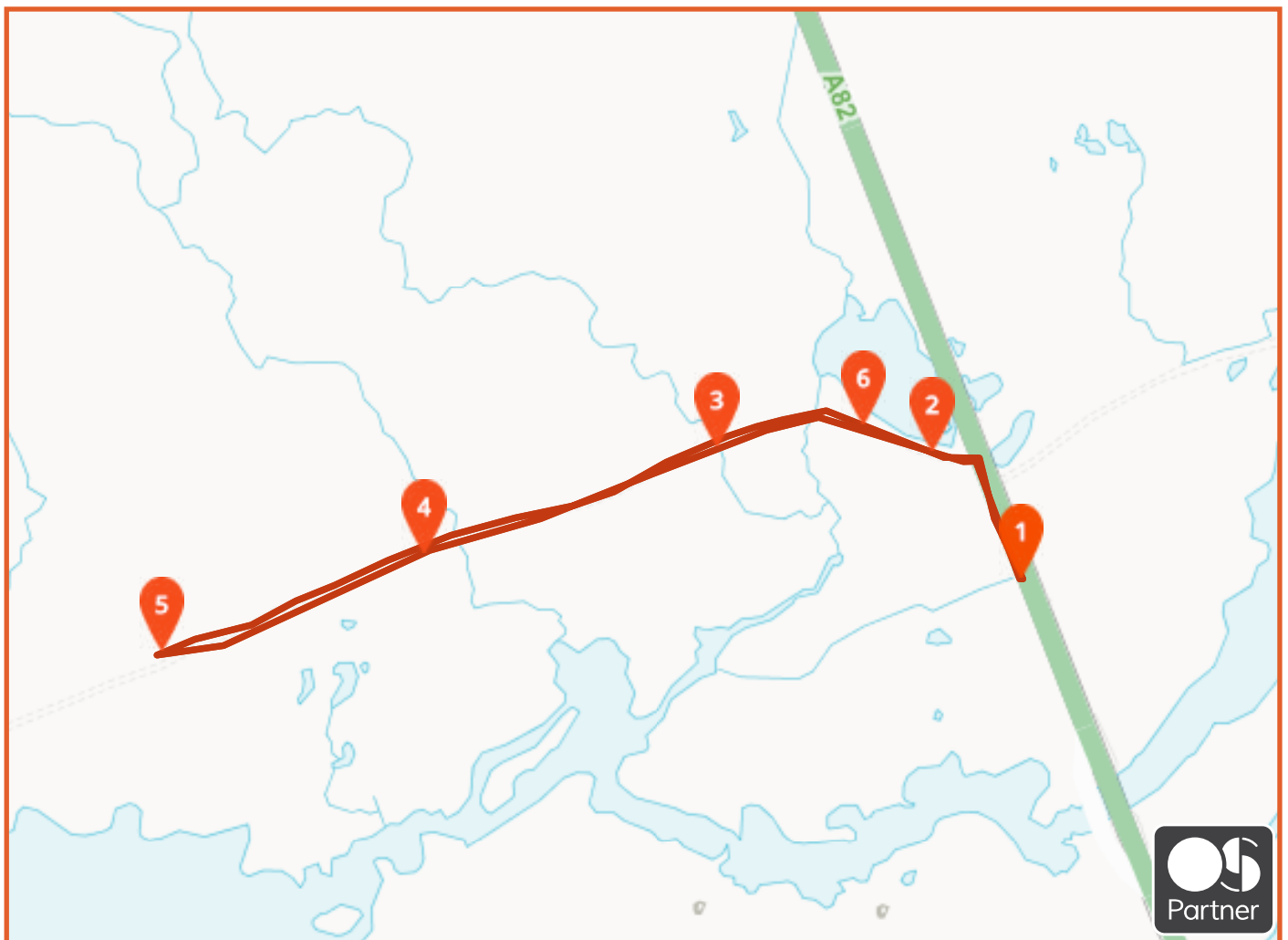
### Directions



From the layby walk 100 metres along the road in the direction of Glen Coe and take the footpath off to the left by a red and white pole. Stop beside a small pool.



## Route and stopping points



- 01 Small pool
- 02 Stone crossing over stream
- 03 Large boulder on left
- 04 Large boulder on right
- 05 Back at small pool

## 01 Small pool

This boggy pool is just one of thousands of watery spaces that make up Rannoch Moor. It is the most extensive area of western blanket bog in Europe.

Blanket bog develops where there is plenty of rain and a damp climate, so water sits on the ground. Plants, insect and animal remains will not decay fully under such conditions and over thousands of years they form a dark boggy material called peat.

Rannoch Moor is so damp it is 82% water or bog. Apparently one winter in the 1950s an intrepid traveller managed to skate his way right across it!

In his book *The Wild Places* nature writer Robert Macfarlane rejoices in this expanse of bog-land: *“So expansive was the space within which we were moving that when I glanced up at the mountains west of the Moor, to try to gauge the distance we had come, it seemed as though we had not advanced at all.”*

Does the vastness of the moor inspire you today, or does it feel intimidating?

For many this is a desolate place, and Macfarlane writes:

**“Many know the Moor ... but relatively few enter it, for it is vast and trackless and has a reputation for hostility at all times of year”.**

Don't worry; we shan't attempt to cross the entire Moor on this trail! Let's just make a couple of stops to explore what others have felt, and to get a taste for this unusual landscape ourselves.

### Directions

Follow the footpath away from the pool and between two hillocks before emerging into a more open section of the moor. Stop where a series of stones provide a crossing over a tiny stream

## 02 Stone crossing over stream

Imagine you were here over 400 years ago, in the 17th century, when there were no paved roads or cars. It would have taken many hours to cross the Moor. You may have felt isolated or overwhelmed by the rugged terrain, particularly if bad weather set in. Indeed, many travellers back then thought the Highlands were an inhospitable and dangerous place.

It was not just the distances and changeable weather that intimidated visitors; this landscape was the home of a number of Scottish clans. Outsiders, especially the English, saw the clans as fierce and troublesome people, and this helped shape their view that this was an unsafe land.

While clans sometimes raided cattle from each other, on the whole they lived peacefully side-by-side. To many it was the English who were dangerous, as they wanted to control the people and land here.

But by the late 17th century, differing political opinions between the clans caused tension. The English provoked these differences as a way to keep the Scots divided and subdued.

In January 1692 the British Government ordered all clan leaders to swear allegiance to King William III. The MacDonald clan lived just north of Rannoch Moor in Glen Coe. Unfortunately, their chief was a few days late in swearing allegiance and in the meantime the Government sent an order for troops to deal with any disobedience.

One person this order was passed to was Captain Campbell; head of a rival clan to the MacDonalds. Campbell's men took the MacDonalds by surprise and killed 38 people. Many more died trying to escape over the freezing moors and mountains.

This incident became known as the Glencoe Massacre and memories of it haunted the region for decades. Many outsiders viewed the massacre as evidence of the clans' violent nature, reinforcing their sense that this was a place of savagery and wildness.

### Directions

Cross the stream and continue along the footpath until you reach a boulder on the left, where the ground opens out again to provide views to the water and pools of Loch na Stainge off to the left.

### 03 Large boulder on left

At the last stop we heard about some of the prejudices and dark histories that led many outsiders to view Rannoch Moor and Glencoe as hostile places. However, by the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century things had begun to change.

A number of writers, including Thomas Pennant, William Gilpin and Samuel Johnson toured Scotland and published tales of their journeys. They enjoyed the awe they felt at being in such vast landscapes, and the frisson of horror they experienced learning about its dark histories. They described the land as picturesque, and suggested places for day-trippers to visit to take in the best views.

William Gilpin wrote: *"Glencoe is ... one of the most interesting scenes in the whole country, hung with rock, and wood; and abounding with beauties of the most romantic kind"*.

Their writings inspired others and it soon became fashionable among the wealthy to tour the Highlands. Rannoch Moor was still considered a wild and difficult place, but now people began to relish the vast expanses and brooding landscape.

Amongst the early visitors were the poet William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy, who visited in 1803. They loved the grandeur of the mountains, but described the Moor as a 'desolate and extensive wild'.

In her recollections of the tour Dorothy wrote: *"We had upon the whole both been disappointed ... we had been prepared for images of terror, had expected a deep, den-like valley with overhanging rocks"*.

Having read the earlier writers' accounts and seen paintings (like the one above) dramatising the landscape of Glencoe and Rannoch Moor, their experience felt a little flat in comparison! Nonetheless, their accounts inspired others to visit and contributed to changing perceptions of the area from a place of bleakness to a tourists' delight.

#### Directions

Follow the footpath until you reach a large boulder on your right and a smaller clump of boulders on your left with the Lochan behind.

### 04 Large boulder on right

Here the mountains open like an arena ahead of us. On a clear day the view is spectacular and it is easy to see why tourists became enchanted with this landscape.

By the 19th century writers and artists had transformed the British upper class view of the Highlands. Romantic descriptions of the landscape emphasised its beauty and drama. In 1810 Sir Walter Scott published his poem 'The Lady of the Lake', which featured Loch Katrine in the Trossachs, south of Rannoch Moor. The poem was an instant hit and tourists flocked to the area to see such places for themselves.

*"The Summer dawn's reflected hue  
To purple changed Loch Katrine blue;  
Mildly and soft the western breeze  
Just kissed the lake, just stirred the trees"*

A little later the region was given the royal seal of approval when Queen Victoria toured there. She wrote: *"[The Highlands] seemed to breathe freedom and peace, and to make one forget the world and its sad turmoils."* She loved it so much that Prince Albert bought Balmoral Castle for her in 1852 so they might always have a home there.

Despite the growing popularity of the Highlands, Rannoch Moor still proved to be a landscape people either loved or hated. While many raved about the place, some found it dreary. Charles Dickens wrote to a friend: *"All the way, the road had been among moors and mountains with huge masses of rock ... giving it the aspect of the burial place of a race of giants ... anything so bleak and wild, and mighty in its loneliness, it is impossible to conceive"*.

How have you found the Moor today? Have Queen Victoria or Charles Dickens come close to capturing your feelings?

#### Directions

Turn and retrace your steps until you arrive back at the small pool.

## 05 Back at small pool

Today Rannoch Moor still inspires opposing reactions in people and is represented in a number of different ways.

Some see it as an inspiring place to feel free and get healthy in. This is certainly how the tourist organisation VisitScotland promotes the place. They highlight the exhilarating walks and cycle routes and brand it 'one of the last remaining wildernesses in Europe'.

Others feel little connection to the landscape, finding it bleak and boring. In the 1996 film *Trainspotting* a gang of friends from Edinburgh make a brief trip to the moor, but it only confirms their sense of disillusionment.

In other cases it is a mysterious and brooding landscape that might hide all manner of goings-on. In the 2012 film *Skyfall* Rannoch Moor is the location of James Bond's family home, but also where Bond and M must try and escape a psychopath. The moor is presented as a dangerous place of bogs, mist and murder. This both fuelled perceptions of it as a treacherous landscape, but also inspired new visitors.

Though Rannoch Moor arouses a variety of responses, a common thread in many of them is a sense of wildness. This wildness however is not as 'natural' as we may think; Rannoch Moor is carefully managed today.

The National Trust for Scotland picks up litter, fixes footpaths and maintains discrete car parks. The Trust has also decided not to create any more new footpaths, signs or way-markers in an attempt to retain the feeling of emptiness and remoteness on the Moor.

Over 2.5 million people visit Glencoe and Rannoch Moor every year. Keeping a sense of wildness here and minimising the evidence of all these people is a challenge: but a necessary one, to keep attracting them.

Whether you have loved or loathed the scenery today, it will have moved you in some way. In a time when global travel is increasingly affordable, and many of us are absorbed in our smartphones, a British landscape with the power to move us is a special thing, and one that seems important to protect.

### Directions

Walk back to the road, turn right and return to the layby where you parked your car.

 Trail complete – we hope you have enjoyed it!