

Ben Eighe



‘First Among Equals’

Beinn Eighe is Britain’s oldest National Nature Reserve. It was set up in 1951 primarily to protect the ancient pinewood west of Kinlochewe, but the reserve embraces a vast area of 48 square kilometres stretching from loch-side to mountain top. A huge cluster of rugged peaks, ridges and scree-covered slopes between Loch Maree and Glen Torridon forms part of this national jewel, most of which is owned by Scottish Natural Heritage. The importance of the whole of Beinn Eighe – for wildlife, geology and enjoyment of the natural Highland scene – is now recognised worldwide.

Grannies of the grey slope

One of the most westerly fragments of ancient Scots pinewood survives at Beinn Eighe on the Glas Leitir (grey slope). Some of its seed trees, or ‘granny’ pines, are more than 350 years old. But their ancestral roots go much deeper.

Scots pines arrived here around 8200 years ago. This was long after the last Ice Age glaciers – which scooped out the hill corries and the trough now filled by Loch Maree – had melted.

Ancestors of these pioneers survived the big freeze in a refuge far to the southwest. That is why the native pinewoods in Wester Ross are a bit different from those elsewhere – the ancestors of other pinewoods in Scotland arrived later and from a different source.

Sands of time

Some 800 million years ago, massive rivers flowing from mountains in what is now Greenland began to dump sand

and gravel over the ancient bedrock in the area that eventually evolved into northwest Scotland. Piling up to six kilometres thick, these sediments became the Torridonian sandstone that forms the bulk of Beinn Eighe and neighbouring mountains.

A little over 200 million years later, this area formed a beach, on the edge of a long-vanished ocean! The slow build-up of sand gave the raw material for the quartzite that today blankets Beinn Eighe's high ridges and scatters pale screes down its slopes.

Around 400 million years ago, major movements of the Earth's crust shook the area. The rolling, crushing, continent-powered Earth-engine drove a large slice of Torridonian sandstone upwards to come to rest on younger quartzite rocks in places. This reversal of the usual sequence (where older rocks sit below more recent ones) is one of the reasons for Beinn Eighe's great geological interest.

First among equals

Beinn Eighe has attracted a clutch of accolades:

- 1951 National Nature Reserve – first in Britain (extended 1962 and 1973). SNH now manages over 70 NNRs.
- 1969 Gairloch Conservation Unit formed (first deer management group in Scotland)
- 1976 Biosphere Reserve
- 1978 Part of Wester Ross National Scenic Area
- 1983 Awarded Council of Europe Diploma (renewed 1988, 1993, 1998 and 2003)
- 1985 Site of Special Scientific Interest
- 1988 Two Geological Conservation Review Sites
- 1996 Part of the Loch Maree Complex candidate Special Area of Conservation

Wee hairies and big hawkers

Abundant midges can mean there's no escaping the insect life here. But meeting some of the reserve's hundreds of other kinds of insects – many of them rare and unusual – is much more pleasant.

In summer, golden-ringed dragonflies mount feeding patrols along the burn-banks, where they may even tackle wasps on the wing. Other local hawkers include the beautifully coloured blue aeshna.

A moth flying in crazy zigzags over the heather could be a male northern eggar, trying to home-in on the scent of a female. The caterpillars of this moth and some other common ones are very hairy as protection against predators. So look, but don't touch!!

Small and beautiful

More than 500 metres up the mountain slopes, a dense cover of tough plants hugs patches of ground. Some parts are like a miniature woodland, with dwarf willow and prostrate juniper rising only a few centimetres above the surface. In others, fir and alpine clubmosses sprout among small sedges.

This dwarf shrub heath, as botanists call it, is one of the finest of its kind in Britain. Similar to the vegetation found on the arctic tundra, its presence here shows just how severe the exposure can be way up the Beinn.

Beinn shapers

Gaelic speaking clansfolk, Viking settlers, ironworkers, crofters, deerstalkers and foresters are just some of the people who have played important parts in the human story of Beinn Eighe. One of the first major ironworks in the north was founded at Letterewe, across Loch Maree, in the early 1600s. Charcoal from local timber fuelled its furnace.

Later, good croftland and benign landlords spared the area from the worst emigrations in the Clearances, which

blighted Highland life in the 19th century. Pioneer Corps lumberjacks from Newfoundland and British Honduras felled many trees in the pinewood for the 1939-45 war effort. Now, scientists, teachers and nature reserve managers have come to the fore, using the reserve as a resource to boost understanding of the planet and some of its wildlife.

Heads and tales

Perhaps the goriest episode in Beinn Eighe's history was in the late 14th century, when the heads of raiders slain by Black Murdo of Kintail were washed up at the 'Ford of the Heads', or Anancaun, as its Gaelic name 'Ath nan Ceann' has become known in English.

Old dairy farm buildings at Anancaun are now the Scottish Natural Heritage Field Station. This is used as an educational and biological studies base for long-term volunteers and visiting groups, and houses the Scottish Natural Heritage reserve and area office.

For visitors who would like to find out more about Beinn Eighe, there's a visitor centre just outside Kinlochewe, which is open Easter to October, and three all-ability trails that are open all year. Other facilities for the public include the two self-guiding Glas Leitir Woodland and Mountain Trails, which start beside the main A832 road.

On the trail of the ancient pines

The Woodland Trail winds up and back through the pinewood for about 1½ kms, whilst the Mountain Trail leaves the pinewood and climbs the hillside. Walking the whole 6½ kms trail takes three or four hours, with stout footwear recommended to cope with the steeper bits. But a trek along even a small part of it can be fun.

Scottish crossbills – found only in the Highlands – live here. Buzzards often soar low over the trees, while higher up, you might glimpse a golden eagle or raven. Pine martens and wildcats have dens in the reserve, but

droppings on the trail are often the closest you'll get to them. Perhaps next time you might see one...

Getting to Beinn Eigh

Beinn Eighe NNR lies at the southeast end of Loch Maree near the village of Kinlochewe. It can be accessed from both the A832 and A896 roads.