

Discover of Ben Nevis Important Plant Area

A breathtaking walk up Scotland's highest mountain

As well as stunning views of Glen Nevis, this walk takes you through a range of habitats with much to see close to the ground. See how the species of wild plants change – from the flowers of wet heath, bog and grassland, to alpine and arctic specialists adapted to life on rocks and scree.

Where to start

Start at the Glen Nevis visitor centre just outside Fort William (grid reference NN122730). There is a train station in Fort William and in summer months, a bus runs from Fort William to the Glen Nevis visitor centre.

Distance

10 miles return. Allow six to eight hours to complete the walk. You don't have to climb to the top, there are plenty of plants to see on the lower slopes.

Walk grade

The route follows a well-maintained mountain track, which is steep and strenuous in places. **It is vital to take a map, compass and waterproof clothing.** Please check the mountain weather forecast before you set off from home. **On arrival in the area, always ask at the Glen Nevis visitor centre for weather advice and any appropriate safety and navigation leaflets.**

Refreshments

The Ben Nevis Inn, five minutes from the visitor centre, serves hearty food.

WC

There are public toilets at the visitor centre.



We are Plantlife

Plantlife is the charity that speaks up for Scotland's wild flowers, plants and fungi. From the open spaces of our nature reserves to the corridors of Holyrood, we're here to raise their profile, to celebrate their beauty, and to protect their future.

Wild flowers and plants play a fundamental role for wildlife, and their colour and character light up our landscapes. But without our help, this priceless natural heritage is in danger of being lost.

Join us in enjoying the very best that nature has to offer.

Scotland's countryside.
Save it with flowers.

Patron: HRH The Prince of Wales



Speaking up for the nation's wild plants

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Plantlife is a charitable company limited by guarantee,
Company No. 3166339. Registered in England and Wales, Charity No. 1059559.
Registered in Scotland, Charity no. SC038951.

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ISBN: 978-1-907141-78-2

May 2013

Cover photograph: ©Laurie Campbell

Thank you

We would like to thank the John Muir Trust and the Friends of Nevis for their assistance in producing this guide. Funding was provided by the Heritage Lottery Fund and Scottish Natural Heritage.



LOTTERY FUNDED



Plantlife

Wild flower walks



The wild flowers of Ben Nevis

A 10 mile return walk up
Scotland's highest mountain



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Directions

- 1 From the visitor centre car park, cross the wooden footbridge over the River Nevis, turn right and follow the path beside the river. After 300m turn left up the hill.
- 2 Climb over the stile and join the Ben Nevis mountain track, which climbs up the western side of Meall an t-Suidhe. This is also known as the pony track and was built in 1883 for construction of the observatory on the summit.
- 3 There are many plants growing on the banks by the path. You might see the carnivorous sundew, with its sticky droplets glistening invitingly, and bog asphodel, with its dramatic yellow flower spikes. Heather cloaks the land.
- 4 The slope to your right is covered in bracken, one of our native ferns. As you climb look at the banks to your left and in the drains running across the path, and you might find the aptly-named lemon scented fern.
- 5 As the path twists and turns, winding its way up the glen, eyebright, violets and thyme colour the banks in spring and summer. Look for tormentil with its four petalled yellow flowers. Birch, rowan and hawthorn can still grow at this altitude. In the summer months you can see the fragrant orchid with its spike of sweet smelling pink flowers.
- 6 At 570m, the terrain flattens. To your left is Lochan Meall an t-Suidhe (pronounced Meal an T). This is often referred to as "half way lochan" but you're not quite half way yet. Here wet heath supports sphagnum moss, deer grass and cross leaved heath.
- 7 At the junction of paths, turn right and head uphill on the mountain track. You'll soon cross the Red Burn stream under a waterfall. Look out for butterwort, which like the sundew catches insects.

- 8 Ben Nevis supports a number of species of saxifrage. Easy to identify is the starry saxifrage with two yellow spots on each white petal. See if you can spot mossy saxifrage. Alpine speedwell and milkwort species add a splash of blue to the path side.
- 9 Soon you will reach the start of the famous zigzags, which lead you up through scree and boulders. The climb now begins in earnest. Watch the landscape change and the vegetation diminish rapidly. Birch trees cannot grow here and are replaced by specialist species such as dwarf willow which hugs the ground. Alpine ladies mantle stands out with its five lobed leaves.
- 10 By the time you reach the top of the zigzags you will be over 1,000m above sea level. The temperature will have dropped noticeably. Here the specialised parsley fern can be seen growing in the scree.
- 11 The slope now flattens out and there is one last climb which leads to the summit plateau. There are some very steep drops, so make sure you stay on the path. A line of cairns follows a grid bearing and not the path to aid navigation when the path is snow covered and visibility is poor.

- 12 Congratulations you have reached the summit at 1,344m above sea level. Very few plants can survive here, but there are some rare species of lichens, including one called goblin lights which forms yellow patches in dark crevices. See if you can spot woolly fringe moss and, if you are lucky, the beautiful moss campion with its dainty pink flowers.
- 13 The building is an old meteorological station. From 1883 to 1904 it was manned throughout the year and observations taken every hour.

Important Plant Areas (IPAs)

Ben Nevis is internationally significant for its threatened wild plants and is one of 52 Important Plant Areas (IPAs) in Scotland. For more information and to discover other IPAs to visit, go to www.plantlife.org.uk/scotland

Key



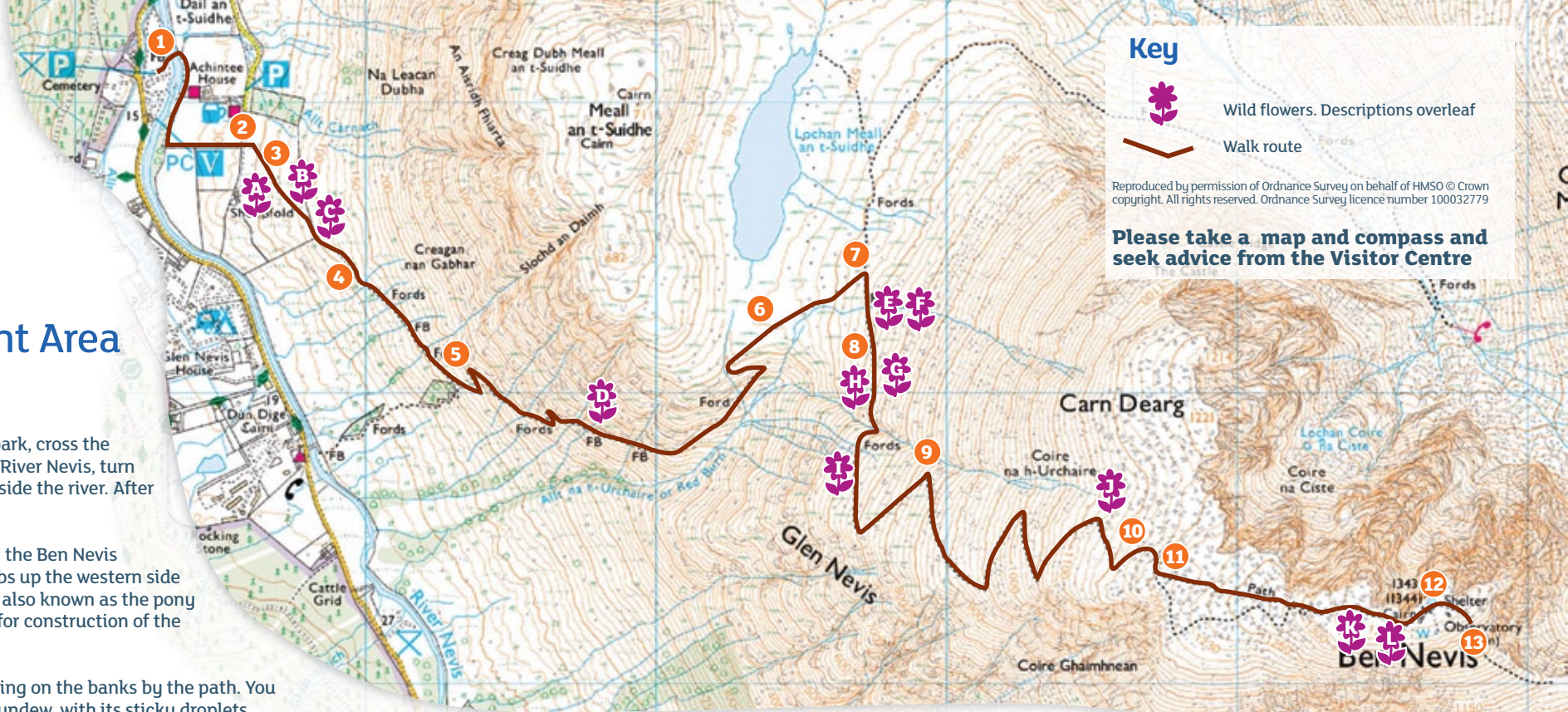
Wild flowers. Descriptions overleaf



Walk route

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Please take a map and compass and seek advice from the Visitor Centre



The plants of Ben Nevis

A remarkable range of wild flowers grow on this mountain. They include:



A **Bog asphodel**
Narthecium ossifragam

Flowers from July to August, lighting up wet heath and bog with its golden spires. In autumn the whole plant turns deep orange. The flowers were once used as hair dye.

B **Eyebright**
Euphrasia agg

A beauty in miniature, it has tiny white flowers with purple stripes and a yellow spot. Eyebright is semi-parasitic, getting some of its nutrients by tapping into the roots of other plants.



G **Cross leaved heath**
Erica tetralix

There are three species of heather in Scotland. Cross leaved heath gets its name from its leaves which are arranged in groups of four around the stem. The Gaelic name fraoch-an-ruinnse (rinsing heather) reflects its former use as a scouring brush.

D **Alpine lady's mantle**
Alchemilla alpina

Very common on Ben Nevis, this is a mountain specialist. Its leaves have silky white hairs underneath, which help to reduce evaporation. Its small, yellow-green flowers are out from June to August.



E **Sundew**
Drosera rotundifolia

A carnivorous plant – the leaves are covered in red hairs, tipped with sticky droplets, which attract and trap insects. There is a long history of use of sundew as a cure for coughs.

F **Common butterwort**
Pinguicula vulgaris

Look for distinctive yellow-green leaves arranged in the shape of a star. Butterwort is a carnivorous plant – the leaves excrete a sticky fluid to attract and trap insects. Vivid violet flowers can be seen from May to July.



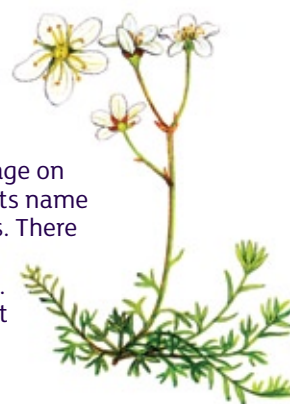
G **Milkwort**
Polygala species

A plant of many colours. Its flowers are normally dark blue but can also be pink, purple or white. See which species you can find: heath milkwort has opposite leaves whereas the leaves of common milkwort are alternate up the stem.



H **Mossy saxifrage**
Saxifraga hypnoides

There are many species of saxifrage on Ben Nevis. Mossy saxifrage gets its name from its divided, moss-like leaves. There are only a few patches near the mountain track, so look carefully. Its beautiful white flowers are out from July to August.



I **Foam lichen**
Stereocaulon vesuvianum

Lichens are a combination of fungi and algae. This lichen is easily spotted from the mountain track. Also described as “plumes from a volcano”, which is where it gets its Latin name.

J **Parsley fern**
Cryptogramma crispa

You'll find this fern forming tufts in the screes and crags. It has two types of fronds: sterile ones, which look like parsley leaves, and fertile fronds, which are narrower and in-rolled so they look a bit like pods.



K **Woolly fringe moss**
Racomitrium lanuginosum

Well adapted to life on the summit, this moss can carpet boulders where few other species can survive. Also known as old man's beard because of the grey fringe at the top of its shoots.



L **Moss campion**
Silene acaulis

It is worth getting to the top to see this beautiful plant. Its mounded cushion shape and small leaves protect it from cold, drying winds. The delicate pink flowers appear on short stalks from July to August.

