

Discover Munsary Peatlands Important Plant Area

An easy walk amid spectacular scenery and 'big skies'

This walk guides you along a farm track, surrounded by heathland, to the edge of Plantlife's Munsary Peatlands Reserve. You'll see some common heathland and wetland species along the way, which will give you a good sense of why Munsary is so important.

Where to start

Start from the car park overlooking Loch Stemster (grid reference ND 186 423). From the A9, turn eastwards at Achavanich onto the road signed to Lybster. About 820m from the junction, turn left onto a track, cross a cattle grid and park by the sign on the right.

Distance

3 miles to Munsary Cottage, then 3 miles back by the same route.

Walk grade

The walk is along a compacted stone track that can get muddy (it's used frequently by cattle and farm machinery), so sturdy footwear is essential.

Beyond the trail

There is access onto the peatland, but the ground is wet with hidden ditches, so walking can be dangerous.

Refreshments

The Waterlines Heritage Centre and café at Lybster harbour, 7 miles south of the reserve, is open summer only. The nearest pub is the Bay Owl Inn and Restaurant at Dunbeath, 11 miles south of the reserve.

WC

There are no WCs on the trail.



We are Plantlife

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.

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.

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

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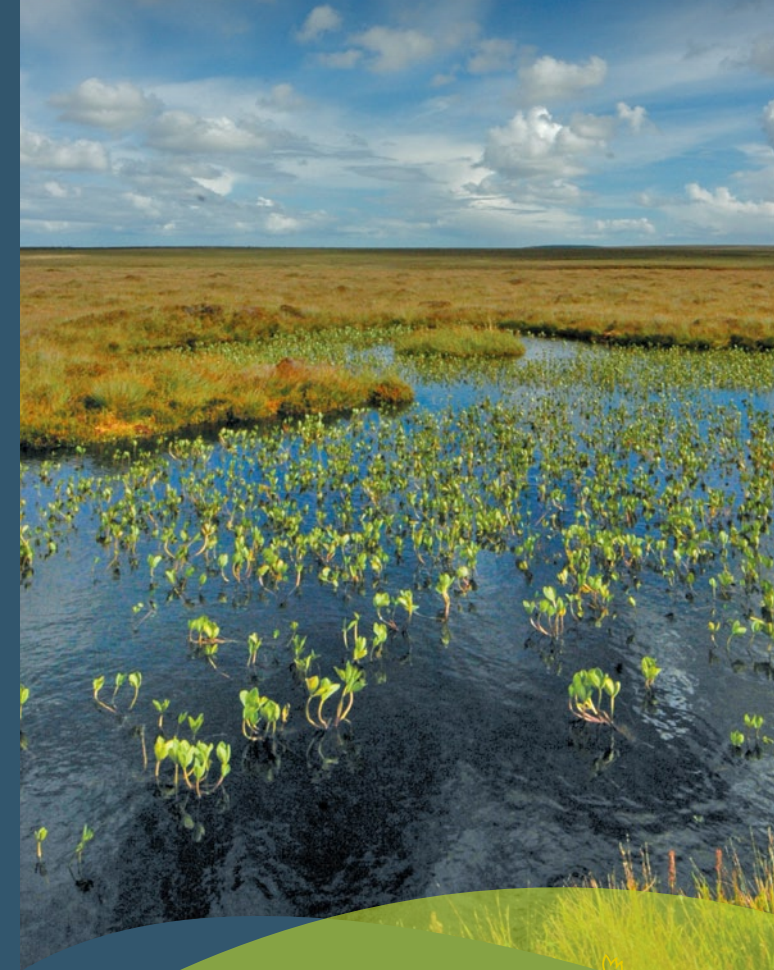
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Plantlife Wild flower walks



The wild plants of Munsary

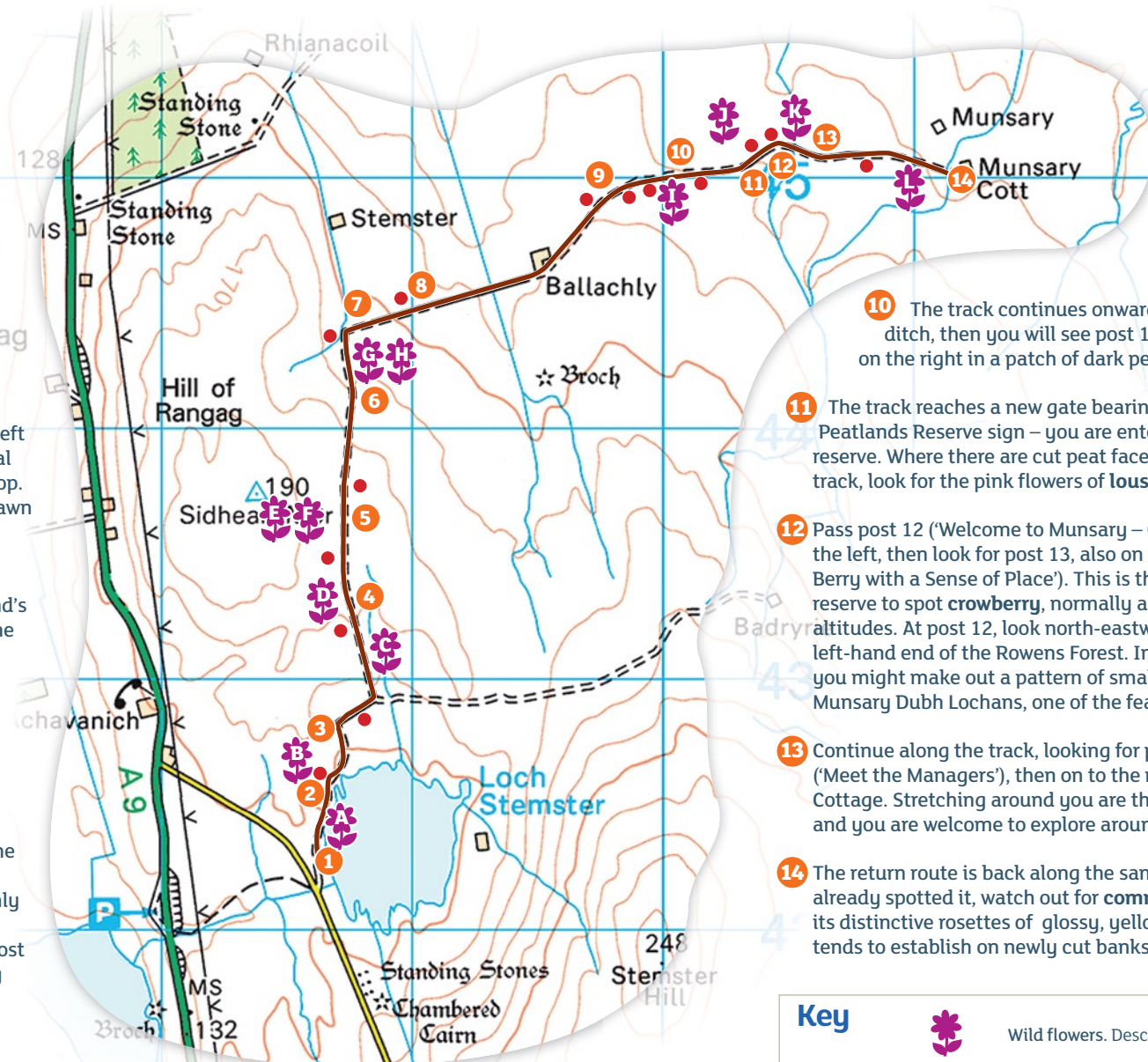
A 6-mile return walk to the
Munsary Peatlands Reserve



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Directions

- Between the car park and Loch Stemster, try to spot the 'yellow blobs' of **marsh marigold** in spring and early summer. Walk along the track away from the road.
- As you reach the end of the loch, look for a pond to the left of the track. You will see the first of the natural trail signal boards beside the pond with a green band around their top. Look for **bogbean** in the pond, along with frogs or frogspawn in springtime.
- The track leaves the lochside and rises through a gate. It bends sharply right, and you should spot post 2 ('Scotland's Spiny Spear of Destiny') on the right. Just beyond this, the track bends left, with a stone sheep fank (pen) on your right. The track rises through a second gate, and you should see some **ling heather** on both sides of the track. Cross a cattle grid, then look for post 3 ('Mountain Silk Turns the Bog White') on your left. This is the best place to see **cottongrasses**, such as hare's-tail cottongrass.
- The track continues to climb. In the distance on the right, you will see a wind farm in the Rowens Forest. In the hollow before the forest, you might spot the remains of Munsary Cottage and to its left, the grey roofs of Ballachly Farm. Watch for post 4 on the left ('Spot the Difference: Three Flowers called Heather'). The cutting behind this post is a good place to recognise the differences between **ling heather**, **bell heather** and **cross-leaved heath**.
- The track climbs to its highest point, and the view to the north shows why Caithness is the land of 'big skies'. Look in the ditch on the right for **bog moss** and frogspawn or tadpoles. A little onwards, you will see post 5 on the right ('A Fragile Economy in a Living Landscape').
- The path now drops gently, with a fenced field on the left. Look in the ditch on the right for **pondweeds** and **lesser spearwort**. Just before the corner on the left, post 6 ('River Neighbours') tells you more about the **pondweeds**.
- The track now bends sharply to the right. A little further on, look for post 7 on the left ('A Fertile Corner in a Land of Peat').



- Follow the track onwards. Keep straight ahead as you pass Ballachly Farm and go through another gate. Look on the left for post 8 ('Heather – a Highland Harvest') and extensive tracts of **ling heather**.
- Continue along the track. Look in the ditch on the right for more **pondweeds**. You will pass post 9 ('Government Storage Facility') on the right, then a short way beyond this post 10 ('A Deep Green Lawn with a Hidden Surprise'). The ditch may be full of bright green **bog moss** – pick up a handful and squeeze it to see how it acts as a sponge.

- The track continues onwards, crossing a drainage ditch, then you will see post 11 ('Digging into Time') on the right in a patch of dark peat.
- The track reaches a new gate bearing the Munsary Peatlands Reserve sign – you are entering the Plantlife reserve. Where there are cut peat faces on the left of the track, look for the pink flowers of **lousewort**.
- Pass post 12 ('Welcome to Munsary – Gateway to Europe') on the left, then look for post 13, also on the left ('A Crow-black Berry with a Sense of Place'). This is the best place in the reserve to spot **crowberry**, normally a plant of rather higher altitudes. At post 12, look north-eastwards towards the left-hand end of the Rowens Forest. In the middle distance, you might make out a pattern of small pools. These are the Munsary Dubh Lochans, one of the features of the reserve.
- Continue along the track, looking for post 14 on the right ('Meet the Managers'), then on to the ruins of Munsary Cottage. Stretching around you are the Munsary peatlands, and you are welcome to explore around the reserve.
- The return route is back along the same track. If you haven't already spotted it, watch out for **common butterwort**, with its distinctive rosettes of glossy, yellow-green leaves – it tends to establish on newly cut banks of stony peat.

Key



Wild flowers. Descriptions overleaf



Walk route



Nature trail markers

Important Plant Areas (IPAs)

Munsary Peatlands form part of the Caithness and Sutherland peatlands IPA. This is one of 52 Important Plant Areas (IPAs) in Scotland. IPAs are internationally recognised hotspots for wild plants. For more information and to discover other IPAs to visit, go to www.plantlife.org.uk/scotland

The plants of Munsary

There are all sorts of interesting wetland and bog plants along the track that leads to Munsary Peatlands Reserve. They include:



A Marsh marigold
Caltha palustris

The yellow blobs of marsh marigold flowers are conspicuous in boggy areas beside Loch Stemster in May and June. The species' Gaelic name, *Lus Buidhe Bealltainn*, means 'yellow plant of Beltane', after the May Day festival, held just as marsh marigold flowers.

B Bogbean
Menyanthes trifoliata

The characteristic three-lobed ('trifoliate') leaves of bogbean are visible throughout the year in a man-made pond beside the track. Branching spikes of 10-20 delicate, frilly, funnel-shaped pink flowers appear in May and June, then ripen into green, bean-shaped fruits.



C Ling heather
Calluna vulgaris

Beside the track, there are extensive areas of ling heather, arguably the true 'Scottish heather'. It is a bushy shrub with leafless stems but many short side shoots packed with tiny, needle-like leaves. Its small, pink, bell-shaped flowers appear in August and September.

D Hare's-tail cottongrass
Eriophorum vaginatum

The tussocks of narrow leaves of this member of the Sedge family are common by the track. Its flowers are inconspicuous, but when the fruits develop in early summer, you can spot its dense, fluffy, white seed-heads everywhere.



E Bell heather
Erica cinerea

This is probably the commonest of three heather species at Munsary. The dark reddish-purple, tubular flowers appear in July, before ling heather is fully in flower. Its needle-shaped leaves are arranged in knot-like clusters up its shrubby stem.

F Cross-leaved heath
Erica tetralix

Sometimes called bog heather, cross-leaved heath grows in wetter ground than bell heather. Its hairy grey leaves are arranged in fours up the stem. Its pale pink flowers are shaped like inflated tubes and hang to one side of the inflorescence like little hands of bananas!



G Bog pondweed
Potamogeton polygonifolius

The oblong leaves of this pondweed float on the surface of ditches with running water by the track or lie submerged just below the water surface. The plants do not mind that the water is stained brown by peat and quite acid, but do not like too much cattle trampling.

H Lesser spearwort
Ranunculus flammula

The stems of this yellow-flowered buttercup species creep along the sides of ditches and wet ground, with fleshy, spear-shaped leaves. These are poisonous to cattle, which leave them well alone, with a burning taste (hence flammula meaning 'little flame').



I Bog moss
Sphagnum species

Bog mosses are arguably the most important plants of Munsary Reserve because their dead remains form the peat of which Munsary is built. They grow less well in the 'mineral soil' of the farmland by the path, but you may spot green lawns of bog moss in some of the ditches.

J Lousewort
Pedicularis sylvatica

Look for the toothed, almost fern-like leaves of lousewort in peaty banks by the track. Its pink or red flowers appear from May onwards. Farmers called it a 'louse' because they thought it made their cattle ill, but actually that was a symptom of lack of minerals in the soil.



K Crowberry
Empetrum nigrum

This evergreen, heather-like shrub is regarded as an upland species but it grows here at relatively low altitude because of the exposed, almost sub-arctic climate of Caithness. It has needle-shaped leaves and tiny, easily overlooked flowers that ripen into bitter, crow-black berries.

L Common butterwort
Pinguicula vulgaris

You might spot the oblong, yellow-green leaves of common butterwort spread out in a rosette, looking almost like a seashore starfish along the track. The sticky leaves trap insects which the butterwort digests for nourishment. The purple flowers appear in mid-summer.

