

Discover Coille Mhór

Important Plant Area

A patchwork of moorland, loch and temperate rainforest

This walk covers a mix of habitats from open moorland and loch, to shady, enchanted oak and birch woodland. This woodland is home to a rich diversity of unique small plants that cover branches, trees and boulders. It is these moss, liverwort and lichen species that make Scotland's rainforest internationally important.

Where to start

Start from Balmacara Square car park, off the A87 between Dornie and Kyle of Lochalsh (grid reference NG80652831).

Distance

5.6 miles there and back or 8 miles as a circular walk. Allow between 3–4 hours.

Walk grade

A strenuous walk along narrow gravel paths with sections of rocky steps, road and forest track. Sturdy footwear is essential.

Refreshments

Balmacara Square, where this walk starts, is the nearest village for a cafe.

WC

The nearest public lavatories are at Kyle of Lochalsh – 2.5 miles away.

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Thank you

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Wildflower walks



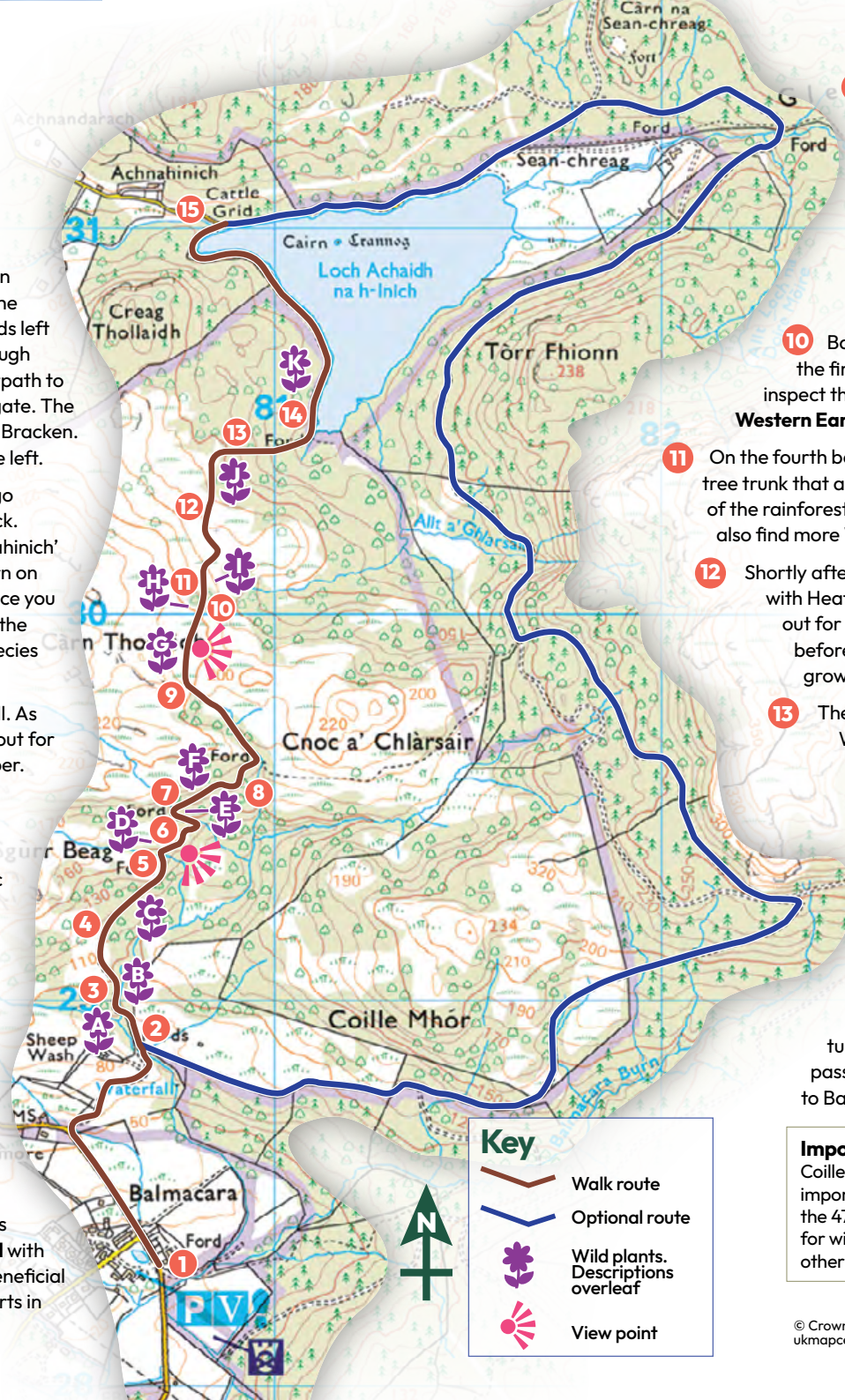
The wild plants of Coille Mhór

A 5.6 mile walk in Scotland's
rainforest – part of the West
Coast Important Plant Area

Discover Coille Mhór Important Plant Area

Directions

- 1 Leaving the car park at Balmacara Square, head uphill on the road out to Plockton and look to your right – across the field, you'll see the forest of Coille Mhór. As the road bends left by a house on the left, turn right off the road and go through the gate on the right. There is a fingerpost showing 'Footpath to 'Achnahinich'. Do watch out for cattle once through the gate. The croft access track continues uphill, flanked by Gorse and Bracken. Keep to this main track and don't take the track off to the left.
- 2 You'll come to a small burn, so cross the footbridge and go through the kissing gate on the left, leaving the main track. Follow the direction of the fingerpost 'Footpath to Achnahinich' as you now go through the birch forest with the small burn on your left. Cross a second footbridge, then walk uphill. Once you reach a level section, look in the rowan tree to the left of the path. This tree is full of interesting lichens, including a species of dark brown **Sticta**.
- 3 The path then comes out of the trees, but continues uphill. As you go around a corner and up a small stone ramp, look out for **Grass-of-Parnassu** flowering here during June to October.
- 4 After this, you'll enter stands of Eared Willow and birch. Follow the path, crossing a small footbridge. The path starts to climb and just to the right, you'll see the first big oak tree – its trunk is carpeted with a moss characteristic of Scotland's rainforest, **Slender Mouse-tail Moss**.
- 5 Continue along the path and cross another stream. Look in the bank and you'll see the **Common Dog-violet**.
- 6 Continue uphill, then come out of the trees briefly for a view of the rest of the wood, down to Balmacara Square, the Glenelg peninsula and across to Skye. Go back into the trees with the stream to your right. To the right of the path, you'll see another large oak, covered with lichens and mosses. Look carefully at the large horizontal branch and you'll see a clump of grey upright lichen, which is a species of **Devil's Matchstick**.
- 7 Soon after this tree, turn the corner to the right and cross another ford. Keep a look-out for small saplings of **Hazel** with their distinctive leaves. These are regenerating Hazel, beneficial as a substrate for the unique lichens, mosses and liverworts in the future.



- 8 Soon after this, turn the corner and head uphill, through birch and willow, then descend to another footbridge. After this, the path ascends again, bringing you out onto moorland with good views.
- 9 The path now undulates over the moorland. During late summer, look out for the bright flowers of **Bog Asphodel** near the rivulets that flow downhill and under the pathway. Once at the brow of the hill, you'll see Loch Achaidh na h-Inich ahead of you.
- 10 Back in the woodland, the path descends more steeply and at the first sharp right bend, look for a fallen tree on your left. If you inspect the horizontal trunk, you'll find cushions of the leafy liverwort **Western Earwort**.
- 11 On the fourth bend after the fallen tree, look at the first green-clad birch tree trunk that arches over the path. Here you'll find one of the special gems of the rainforest – another leafy liverwort, **Prickly Featherwort**. You may also find more Western Earwort on this trunk.
- 12 Shortly after this, the trees end and the area opens out onto moorland, with Heather and Bog Myrtle. Once back into the birch trees, look out for an old dry stone-walled animal pen to the right of the path before it descends. In spring, you'll find **Wild Hyacinth** (Bluebell) growing in the pen.
- 13 The path now starts its descent through birch, rowan and Eared Willow. After an open area, the path steepens its descent through the trees and eventually bends sharp left as it reaches the shores of Loch Achaidh na h-Inich.
- 14 The trees along this shoreline are full of large leafy lichens, **Tree Lungwort** among them. You might also come face-to-face with the elusive **Ghillie Dhu**. Continue along the shores of the loch until you reach the road.
- 15 At this point, you can return on the same path, back through the woods to Balmacara Square. Alternatively, turn right onto the road alongside the loch. This eventually turns into a forestry road that heads uphill to the left and passes through a kissing gate. Follow the map to bring you back to Balmacara Square.

Key

- Walk route
- Optional route
- Wild plants. Descriptions overleaf
- View point

Important Plant Areas (IPAs)

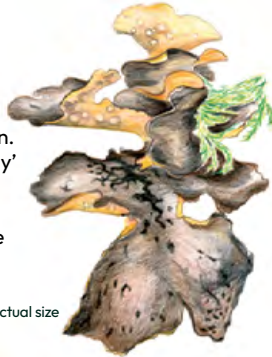
Coille Mhór forms part of the West Coast IPA, which is internationally important for its lichens and bryophyte communities. This is one of the 47 IPAs in Scotland. IPAs are internationally recognised hotspots for wild plants and lichens. For more information and to discover other IPAs to visit, go to plantlife.org.uk/scotland

Plants of Coille Mhór

This woodland is a classic temperate rainforest, rich and diverse in plant and lichen species, as well as folklore. It includes:

'Stinky' Sticta *Sticta* sp.

The Stictas are a type of dark leafy lichen, which can look more like fungus growing on the tree than lichen. However, look underneath their 'fleshy' lobes to find a pale surface with small spots/pores. When wet or if rubbed, these lichens have a fishy smell, hence their 'stinky' name!



c. 2 x actual size



Grass-of-Parnassus *Parnassia palustris*

This pretty plant with white flowers and heart-shaped leaves is part of the Saxifrage family and is not actually a grass. In Gaelic, it is called Fionnan Geal, meaning 'pleasant little white one'.

Slender Mouse-tail Moss *Isoetium myosuroides*

This moss is characteristic of Scotland's rainforest, mainly found on tree trunks and boulders, forming dense mats. On closer inspection, you'll see its tree-like growth form, unbranched near its base and becoming branched above. Look for the orange/brown capsules that grow on long stalks and release spores.



c. 2 x actual size



Common Dog-violet *Viola riviniana*

Historically, the term 'dog' was given to wildflowers that were unscented and this species is no exception. This is the commonest and most widespread of the violet species and flowers from April to June. The ancient Greeks recognised violets as a symbol of fertility and love, and used them in love potions.



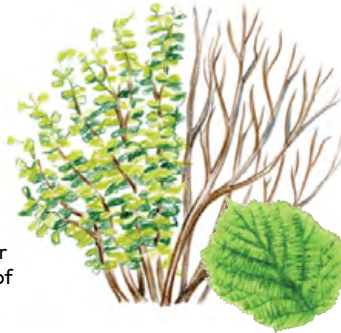
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Devil's Matchstick Lichen *Cladonia* sp.

You can easily see how this lichen gets its name, as parts of it look like miniature matchsticks. There are many species of Cladonia and they are found in various habitats in addition to Scotland's rainforest. If you look closely you will see the red fruiting bodies that produce spores.

Common Hazel *Corylus avellana*

The Hazel has great significance in Celtic mythology, being known as a giver of knowledge. In old Highland rituals, it was believed that hazelnuts put on the fire could provide answers to important questions by the way they burned or jumped. A more practical use for ground hazelnuts was as a source of flour for bread.



Bog Asphodel *Narthecium ossifragum*

This plant of bogs and wet moors can also be called the 'bone breaker', which is the basic translation of ossifragum. It was once thought that if sheep ate the flower, it would give them brittle bones, but current thinking points to the calcium-poor diet of the sheep causing brittle bones. This would make more sense as Bog Asphodel prefers acidic/calcium-poor soils. Look out for the flowers between July and September.



Western Earwort *Scapania gracilis*

This is one of the most common liverworts of Scotland's rainforest. It is medium sized and forms compact mats with small, rounded leaves. It loves wet, humid conditions and can be found all year round.



c. 5 x actual size



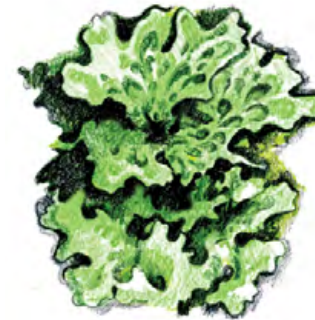
c. 4 x actual size

Prickly Featherwort *Plagiochila spinulosa*

This is a great indicator of good-quality rainforest, so you know you are somewhere special if you find this liverwort. It can form extensive pure patches on rocks and tree trunks in shady areas. If you have a hand lens, look closely to see the spine-like teeth on their leaf margins.

Wild Hyacinth *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*

A member of the Lily family, the Wild Hyacinth (or Bluebell as it is more commonly known) is a familiar sight, flowering in large carpets during April to June. The translation of its Gaelic name, Bròg na Cuthaig, means 'cuckoo's shoe'.



c. 4 x smaller than actual size

Tree Lungwort *Lobaria pulmonaria*

Lichens are a combination of a fungus and a photosynthetic partner, normally an alga. This large, 'leafy' lichen resembles green lungs, hence its common name, and was used to cure respiratory diseases in medieval times. Look to see if you can find its orange/red fruiting bodies.

Ghillie Dhu

A forest sprite restricted to the west coast forests of Scotland, which they protect fiercely. Ranging in size from 7 inches upwards, they are well-camouflaged with their clothes of leaves and moss. Look out for them hiding in mossy nooks and crannies. They move around a lot, so we have not been able to pinpoint them on the map!

