

The “stalkerpath phenomenon”

PARALLEL DITCHES

Linking and extending stalkerpaths with ‘tramlines’

- some curious discoveries in the Western Glens

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This NOSAS Report amplifies one detail touched upon in the original main Report on the “Stalkerpath Phenomenon” of November 2021¹. It mentioned a puzzling discovery thus:

Parallel ditches

One curious design [of path] is found only in Strathfarrar, mainly on the southern (Cannich) march where the ridge west of Struy and the NW shoulder of An Soutar display widely separated parallel deep ditches zig-zagging up and weaving through the bumps and dips. The turf in between the ditches is undisturbed, except locally on An Soutar where some cut-and-fill may have been done. This suggests preparations for construction of a substantial track. Although these loci are 6 km apart, an ambitious and unprecedented scenic drive for light carriages could have been envisaged along this broad and characterful ridge, skirting the rocky Corbett of Sgurr na Diollaid. Similar traces occur on the shoulder above Culligran opposite Struy (*ie. Sgùrr a' Phollain*).

Since then, despite wide-ranging explorations, only a handful more substantial instances have been found, all in the western glens - but the interpretation then hazarded has been radically rethought.

The eight (originally six) main **Parallel Ditching (PD)** locations now known (Table 1) are briefly described here, along with some minor instances, and are illustrated with much additional commentary in the accompanying fully-annotated Powerpoint slide sets:

Associated Powerpoints

[STALKERPATH PHENOMENON - PARALLEL DITCHES David Jarman June 2026 150dpi n=121](#)

[STALKERPATH PHENOMENON - PARALLEL DITCHES PD3 Sgurr a' Phollain SP9.45 David Jarman June 2026 150dpi n=134](#)

[STALKERPATH PHENOMENON - a FARRAR SKYWALK - SP9.43B Deanie Ridge June 2026 David Jarman 150dpi n=74](#)

The ‘Farrar Skywalk’ is another recent piecing-together discovery, which links latterly-made PD-dominated paths SP9.43A and SP9.45, with several earlier conventional paths, in an ‘eased route’ along the outer northern Strath Farrar ridge above Deanie. PD3 Sgùrr a' Phollain is so lengthy that it has been given a separate ppt.

¹ **The “stalkerpath phenomenon”**

- a first survey of stalkers’ paths in the Scottish Highlands - Western Glens study area. Nov 2021. Available on NOSAS website, with accompanying slideset, and on ResearchGate.

What are 'Parallel Ditches' ?

The **PD technique** for route-defining in the hills appears to be previously unreported, and hardly even observed - these are minimalist works, barely counting as artefacts, almost invisible in the landscape, only OS-mapped where they were links in a made path. Yet not inconsiderable thought and effort was invested in them: when followed, they excite the imagination, and encourage speculation unchecked by any possibility of contradiction. They are actually rather elegant, in the same economical and practical hand-tool cheap-labour mindset of the **stalkers' paths (SP)** of which they are an intriguing variant form.

The terrain traversed is generally rather similar - upland coarse grass, little if any bedrock, on deep diggable ground, perhaps peaty but not boggy, possibly heathery but not too densely (then if not now). The 'ditches' are quite narrow spade-width slots, still often deep enough to twist an ankle or break a leg if stepped into inadvertently (all too possible where overgrown by rank vegetation). They are typically 3-4 m apart, give or take. They may slant across a hillside, without benefit of cut-and-fill work, making the line quite an awkward cross-slope to follow. Where they twist or zigzag, as most do, the straights are usually linked, often with neatly curved angles. However they are not drainage ditches.

TABLE 1 - Table of paths including elements of Parallel Ditching (PD)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
			path no	parent path no	full km	branch km	PD km %	sec-tions	bends	path top	date
PD 1	Druim na Sruidhe	NH355370	SP9.34	SP9.33	7.5	3.5	0.6 17	4	B D	660m	post-1901
PD 2	An Soutar NW	NH260360	SP9.37A	SP9.37	4.2	2.0	0.8 40	1	Z	640m	post-1907
PD 3	Sgùrr a' Phollain	NH337440	SP9.45	*	6.25	2.65	2.25 85	5	B D C	767m	post-1907 1926-39?
PD 3A	Deanie Burn NE	NH327431	SP9.43A	SP9.43	5.3	2.5	0.55 22	3	B	725m	1901 -1907
PD 4	Gleann Meinich	NH215555	SP9.67	*	7.8	4.5	0.75* 17	?	nil	430m	post-1907 1926-39?
PD 5	Glencarron Lodge (W and E)	NH056516	SP10.xx SP10.xy	*	2.0 1.1	-	0.55 18	1	B	550m	? around 1907
PD 6	Am Bathaich	NG999075	SP7.27	SP7.26	2.65	1.4	0.22 16	1	Z	740m	1899 -1906
PD 7	Sron Lice na Fearna	NG987025	SP7.44	-	1.25	-	0.25 20	2	Z	450m	1899 -1906

NOTES - columns

- 3 gridref is an approx centre of the PD zone - see GoogleEarth kmz for location pins
 - 4 Stalkerpath Inventory (on NOSAS website)
 - 5 where PD is within a branch from/extension of a (usually earlier) main path - to give true % of route achieved by PD
 - 6 length of parent path to fork, plus branch or extension
 - 7 length of branch/extension containing PD
 - 8 aggregate PD length (estimated from imagery)
 - 9 sections of PD, if interspersed with SP
 - 10 where PD sections make distinct, neatly set out, full Bends, Doglegs, Corkscrews or Zigzags
 - 11 elevation attained by path or branch/extension head, not necessarily highest point of PD elements
 - 12 date - blue - PD elements mapped (now or formerly) as integral parts of normal continuous path
 - purple - paths or extensions with PD never mapped
 - timespans - based on appearance of path including PD in OS map sequence - as qualified in ppt
 - see Table 2 for explanation of suggested dates
- * PD 3 : SP9.45 was mapped in two stages - PD comprises most of Phase 2 Clach Mhor - Carn nan Gabhalach

- * PD 4 : length of 0.75 km PD is whole extension beyond conventional SP end at burn crossing - proportion of true PD impossible to determine from imagery / in field
- * PD 5 : SP10 Glencarron comprises two adjacent paths to rim, linked along rim and to summit by PD

Terminology

As no established name for this device appears to exist, the term '**Parallel Ditches**' is resorted to. Initially 'Double Ditches' was adopted, but this has to be reserved for made paths provided with drainage ditches on both sides (which is not uncommon). At one locus, they were recorded as 'guideslits' but this seems rather obscure. As the pairs of slots are usually parallel (and consistently so, unless terrain deflects), the 'PD' form

Map dates - the sequence of georeferenced OS maps available on NLS Map Library website comprises three Six-Inch Editions (6-1 to 6-3), which were fully re-surveyed, and interspersed One-Inch Editions with varying degrees of revision (1-1 to 1-7). Their approximate survey or revision dates are given as they arise. Current metric maps at 1:50,000 and 1:25,000 are now available on Trove.

Dates suggested for PD cases are speculative - see Interpretation (2) and ppts for more detail - but the general conclusion is that they are a later, probably Edwardian, possibly interwar, variant form.

makes some sense. "Parallel Ditching" may describe the activity where this is helpful¹.

The seven main PD cases

The first four cases are those mentioned in NOSAS Report and presentation (2021-2) as all being in **Strathfarrar**, including its Glen Cannich march. They also featured in a presentation to the Strathglass History Society in 2024, where the PD technique proved unknown to this knowledgeable audience, including an estate owner who has the honour of hosting one of them, and a head stalker in nearby Glen Affric.

PD 1 - Druim na Sruidh / the Struy Ridge	SP9.34 ²	- never mapped
	PD length	- 0.6 km (intermittent)
	date	- around / after 1907

The approach to this extraordinary relict is from Struy Lodge (which was at times the base for a separate sporting estate spanning lower Strathfarrar). Initially it was the access track to the lead mine, the perplexing traces of which were discussed by Roland Spencer-Jones in his 2025 NOSAS presentation. This track existed at 6-1 (1875) but was deleted from 6-2 (1902), peculiarly. From the mine, a pony path (now ATV track) then extended by 1-3 (1907) across a low pass down through the Strathfarrar pinewoods to Pollcherian bridge (SP9.33).

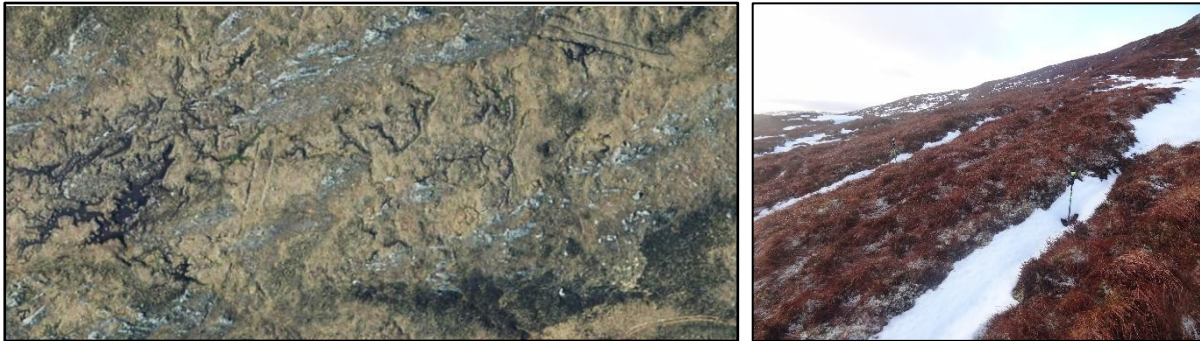
Some 500 m west of the mine chimney, at a ford, traces of a branch path can be discerned following a nameless burn and coming in behind Carn Moraig 569m. An ATV track interferes with the evidence, but where that carries on west, elements of PD with some path-making dogleg up onto and along the broad, rugged ridge. They resume in a dramatic sweep across a peaty dip and re-ascend, in small instalments, towards Carn a' Mhuilt 662m, the local high point.

The Inventory notes of 2020 describe with some asperity

² reference number in the Stalkerpath inventory

“remarkable fragmentary ill-planned mishmash of short parallel ditches (PD) and odd wide-narrow cut paths/grooves ... ?incomplete” “short PD crosses wet flat up to foot of slant ramp, single D lower down” “final short steep PD fr dip beyond pt 590 up nose of Mhuilt - pointless ?”

Of a total route length from the mine to Carn a' Mhuilt of 3.5 km, much of the lower half is lost (if ever properly made), but most of the upper half is traceable on imagery and/or on the ground. Within this, four reasonably clear and two less certain segments of PD are identified, each of ~100 m length. They alternate with more conventional made paths - although these too can be idiosyncratic, for example in crossing the peaty hollow between the two tops, they become incongruously akin to military defences.



PD 1 - Druim na Sruidh - short PD lengths across dips between bare tops; 3 m spacing (marked by snow patches and poles)

This branch along Druim na Sruidh has never been mapped. There are no indications - on imagery or on the ground - of it ever extending west towards Sgùrr na Diollaid and An Soutar.

PD 2 - An Soutar NW

SP9.37A	- never mapped
PD length	- 0.8 km
date	- post-1907, probably 1926-39

An Soutar is a similarly rugged 680m top some 6 km SW of PD 1, on the Farrar-Cannich march, which is here crossed by the broad 520m Bealach a' Bhaca pass just to the west of this hill. From Ardchuilk in Strathfarrar, a path up Allt Innis na Laraich towards this pass pre-existed 6-1 (1875), but has been demapped since 1-7 (1950s), presumably as destroyed by gully erosion and floods. In fact, much of the path is extant and followable, with only short sections lost. At 450m, this 'parent path' crosses to the west bank (Ford 1), follows it, and then ascends to the brow of Meallan Odhar 694m in the still-conspicuous and delightful zigzags of a classic stalkerpath (SP9.37).

It had been assumed that a branch path seen leading in to the extraordinary PD zigzag staircase of An Soutar continued up the east side from Ford 1.³ In the field, it now seems likely that it recrossed at a Ford 2, with a conventional path curving up the slopefoot and then rising in an abrupt ramp to segue into a still-baffling set of **Parallel Ditches** - initially, an exceptional 5.5 m apart.

These zigzag twice up to 600m before heading NE on a slightly rising traverse to fade into a peaty col - apparently aiming not for the immediate summit of An Soutar but east along the Sgòrr na Diollaid ridge. A couple of zigs have been cut in conventional

³ this pass was also approached by a once-mapped stalkerpath ascending from Liatrie in Glen Cannich, now largely lost, but from near the pass, a clearly followable (but unmapped) long cut line slants elegantly back across the SW flank of An Soutar, doglegging to fade out at 600m (SP9.32). There is no hint of any connection let alone similarity between these two routes up the same hill, a quite unusual circumstance.

stalkerpath mode, perhaps as they are even more taxingly cross-slope, demonstrating that SP and PD were seen as interchangeable modes of route-making. Although the zigzag gradient is generally congenial to walking, the breakout up onto the shoulder is tiresomely steep, as occasionally seen with stalkerpaths - perhaps suggesting guests were mounted - and the PD is a variant on the 'pony path' as these were and still are called.

The parent path SP9.37, zigzagging tightly up Meallan Odhar opposite, wilfully chose (pre-1875) the steepest and rockiest nose, rather than easier terrain just beyond. It suggests the entertainment of guests to a frisson of alpine excitement in the generally rolling hill country of mid-Farrar. Its offshoot is of quite different character, guiding guests as easily as possible to a dip in the broad ridge, from where a short step would readily gain an attractive hilltop and vista. It also hints at an era where economies were being sought, with PD much cheaper than SP-making, with minimal maintenance.



PD 2 - An Soutar - on the Strathfarrar-Cannich march

Given that the approach up the valley floor from Ford 2 is a clear conventional path, no different from the parent, it has missed mapping at 6-2 (1901) and 1-3 (1907) when many paths were added, and presumably although less certainly at 1-4 (1926) when a few extras appear - including a burnside route above Braulen up-glen opposite. Its absence from 6-3 is due to the parent path being demapped as noted. A later Edwardian date is possible, but a later interwar date more probable.

PD 3 - Sgùrr a' Phollain

SP9.45	- mapped in entirety
PD length	- 2.25 km (intermittent)
date	- post-1907, probably 1926-39

This is the north top of the Corbett **Beinn a' Bhathaich Ard**, a high eastern outpost of the Western Glens and fine viewpoint of handsome form. Gaining this ridge today is not easy from any approach, but is aided to some extent by the mapped stalkerpath which ascends from the Strathfarrar gate via Loch na Beiste and Carn na Gabhalach to the summit, culminating in a classic flight of eight zigzags - spectacular on imagery, and fascinating underfoot.

The middle stretch, from the loch to Carn na Gabhalach, has several long segments of **Parallel Ditching**. The thin or messy path worn by hillwalkers now largely avoids them, and they are often hard to see - in places only found by prodding or stamping around until a pole or boot goes in. Roland Spencer-Jones, in arranging a NOSAS visit to the midslopes here, was much taken by their revelation, and has since prompted insights into the dates and stages of this major path (ppt, slide 20).

The PD elements ascend the gentler, more open slopes, reverting to conventional made 'pony path' for the occasional causeway and for several steeper 'risers', surmounted with short sets of zigzags. These tend to have well-rounded bends, thus 'corkscrews',

suggesting that ponies would indeed go this path. Nonetheless, one riser is conquered by what appear (on very poor imagery and in very thick heather) to be curvaceous PD loops.

This path is relatively late, post-Victorian, first appearing on 1-3 (1907) and then only to the small fishing loch and a short way beyond. The upper half is not mapped until 6-3 (1967), but several lines of reasoning (see ppt) point to a later interwar extension. Again, reliance on PD suggests a need for economies, and a main aim of guiding guests safely up to and down from the finest vistas on the then Struy Estate. It is difficult to see any substantial deer-stalking benefit, although guests may have shot the upland birdlife. The absence of a made path or PD along the ridge either side of Carn na Gabhalach (OS are here mapping a worn trod) might simply reflect the existence of a sheep fence along the estate march, the iron strainers for which survive.

Both the length of the PD element and its proportion of the overall path - 85% from loch to Gabhalach - make PD 3 Sgurr a' Phollain an outstanding exception (see Table 1). It is also an important case where a hybrid path of alternating SP and PD construction has been mapped in its entirety, with OS accepting that long stretches of PD can qualify as a 'path' (6-3 appears to adhere to the PD route rather than any walkers' trod by then existing).

SP9.45 and its PD 3 components have yielded so much fascinating detail, on a second scoping visit and from closer investigation, that a separate ppt slideset has been created for it.



PD 3 - Sgurr na Phollain - deep slots on a bend



PD 3A - Deanie Burn NE - crossing a peat-moss

PD 3A - Deanie Burn NE

SP9.43A	- briefly mapped
PD length	- 0.55 km (intermittent)
date	- 1901-1907

Yet another mapping mystery surrounds Deanie Burn NE. In Strath Farrar, there are two main waves of path creation : pre-1875 and pre-1907 (probably 1901-1907, if 6-2 is to be relied on). Most follow ravines up to the cols or ridges. These are vulnerable to erosion in spates, and hence three were demapped at 6-3 - as seen with the parent of PD 2, here, and next door at Neaty Burn NE (SP9.44A). But the parent here (SP9.43 - see below) has not been demapped, despite erosion and deterioration. And Deanie Burn NE is the only demapped case not first mapped until 1-3, so it only survived 50 mapped years.

This fly-by-night impression has bedevilled Deanie Burn NE from its first spotting in map-library trawling, dismissed as never properly made, and seemingly superfluous with

four paths reaching the main ridge within 4 km. Was it ever any more than a late scratching of the moorland surface ?

This negative impression was counter-spiced by suspicions on imagery of **Parallel Ditching** in the upper reaches, where the Deanie ravine opens out into the broad stepped basin of Coire nan Caorach. Mapping mystery then became comedic on first ground-truthing, entirely missing the PD and corrie, as OS 1-3 had mislocated the exit up a glacial meltwater notch to that in the main 719m col, whereas it actually short-cuts up the adjacent one to a 725 m nick. It did though unveil sufficient remnants down the deepening ravine to the fork to excite admiration at the sheer brio and astonishment that one could still avail of them to insinuate through apparently impassable clefts.

A second ground-truthing from the foot confirmed the exhilaration that guests must have experienced - a precursor of gorge-walking - and now located, at the exit from the fading ravine, the well-hidden start of a PD sequence more than twice as substantial as discerned on imagery. The two main sequences negotiate broad, gently rising peaty bogs, weaving through the hags, with a made path up the nick in the riser between. The upper stretch reaches the foot of a gentle escarpment, but instead of zigzagging up it to the skyline, a major excavation traverses its foot to exit via the mentioned notch.

Although PD accounts for only a fifth of the branch, above the ravine head it is the route mode adopted for half the route - in simple mode, with only a couple of well-executed radiussed right-angle bends. It is almost invisible, yet once located, the 'tramlines' follow an optimal line through the maze of hags, taking all the uncertainty and wasted effort out of the journey - and transforming the experience of an apparent desolation into an intricate and indeed intimate delight. Even so, it is puzzling that such a circuitous route was chosen, when a direct line would seem almost as easy.

As this path first appears on 1-3 but is not on 6-2, a date between 1901 and 1907 seems the most likely window. This is also one of the four PD routes to be mapped as integral parts of conventional paths.⁴

PD 4 - Gleann Meinich, Strathconon	SP9.67	- extension never mapped
	PD length	- 0.75 km (overall)
	date	- post-1907, probably 1926-39

This discovery came from a routine verification of an inconsequential stalkerpath largely lost to forestry tracks and 'quadding' (for ATVs). It had been mapped at 6-3 as diverging from the old farm and forest tracks up the glen some way beyond the ruin and terminating at the forest end. Imagery showed it leading on to not just nowhere in particular but really nowhere at all other than not far from an incongruously deep-dug and flooded grouse butt in the bleakest imaginable 408m shallowest skyline depression not warranting the term 'pass' and thus nameless. Groundtruthing discovered much of it to consist of PD, of sorts.

The first 400 m beyond the forest are well-preserved conventional path within burn incision confines, but beyond a second (unmapped) tributary and ford, the route heads up the vast peat-bog moor. There are extensive traces of ditching (better seen on the

⁴ the ppt devotes two slides (55-56) to the chasing down of this elusive PD, for 'historical interest', so here is the original written attempt to pin down what was then only a 'minor occurrence' :

"Midway up Deanie Burn, a branch path, mapped from 1-3 to 1-7 but not on metric, yet undoubtedly made, follows the recesses of the splendid ravine of the Allt Coire nan Caorach until it vanishes into a peaty upper basin. Once again, as if a twin, the mapped line bears away from the burn, rises straight up until the head gets too steep, and then traverses in to a glacial nick beside the 725m col west of Meallan Buidhe. The traverse is clear on imagery as a standard stalkerpath (although underfoot it raises doubts as to whether made or adopted) - but the straight-up segment (again not seen from above and still to find in the field) shows up on imagery as a 150 m length of PD."

poor imagery), but how far they are guide slots or for drainage is unclear - they could serve both purposes, in a hybrid expression. Likewise there are few indications of a raised centre or former surfacing, but occasional borrow pits and narrower ditch spacings hint at hybrid construction modes.



PD 4 - Gleann Meinich - widely and regularly spaced ditches with minimal raising/surfacing of median strip

The route fades out just beyond the watershed, with nothing further evident despite casting about, but imagery now suggests possible continuations of PD ilk down towards Camashie in Strath Bran.

As this is an unmapped extension of one of the group of paths not mapped until 6-3 (1967), dating is wide open. The forest itself is first mapped at 1-7, thus post-1926, with a forest road ending halfway from the ruined cottage to the forest edge, but no path (not picked up as this was a major-changes revision, not a resurvey). It seems likely that the path predated the forest, with its first part since obliterated by the road, and was completed as an entity, including PD, to the grouse butts on the 'pass'. Quite why the 6-3 resurvey picks up the path but terminates it at the (arbitrary) forest edge is hard to interpret. This may favour a post-1907 late Edwardian enterprise, but an interwar date is possible.

PD 5 - Glencarron Lodge

SP10.xx ⁵	- PD link never mapped
length	- about 500 m (continuous)
date	- probably 1902-1907 or soon after

A remarkable pair of stalkerpaths zigzags up the steep flank of Glen Carron from the Lodge in unusually close proximity - just 300 m apart midway - to end rather below the brow at 450-500m asl. A NOSAS visit in 2021 made a circuit of them, and concurred that since deer stalking would hardly require both, they must also have fulfilled an agreeable recreational purpose - hence the idea of working up an appetite for those large Victorian dinners. The party traversed the steep upper slope between the path heads, contriving not to overshoot the second despite swirling mists. A Powerpoint slideset⁶ provides the mapping and estate ownership history that accompanied the visit.

However, just before the NOSAS talk on the full Western Glens study in March 2022⁷, rescruity of the GoogleEarth imagery discerned faint **Parallel Ditches** across the upper

⁵ Area 10 (Torridon-Coulin) not yet inventorised

⁶ "The Glencarron stalkerpaths, Ross-shire - a NOSAS visit to trace the pair of abandoned zig-zag paths above Glencarron Lodge" (also addresses paths on the linked Genuig Estate) n=17

⁷ "The Stalkerpath Phenomenon" March 2022 n=216. PD had already been discovered in November 2020, butb this was the first instance beyond Strath Farrar.

slope above the path heads, possibly turning uphill above the western one. A note announcing this remarkable discovery was hastily added to slide 27, along with a doodled approximate line (the imagery extract fortunately just allowing space for the cross-link if not for the summit extension)⁸.

Groundtruthing confirmed PD sweeping uphill from the eastern cut path head, traversing across to a dry gully above the western head, and then turning sharply up towards the top of the broad promontory named Coille Bhan (560m asl).

Finding the start from either pathhead is not easy - both cut paths extend higher than current OS mapping shows, that on the west intermittent and doubling back to end in the shelter of a grassy dry meltwater channel (pony stance ?), that on the east carrying on up from a slight bench as a much narrower and tighter corkscrew path to a level but unsheltered grassy platform. This platform is flanked by what could be taken to be slanting drainage ditches, except they are narrow slits. In fact they converge upwards as a PD funnel embracing the pathhead, which initially continues on up in an S-form to an elegantly radiused angling out. From here it bears west across the upper slope, rising slightly, with quite alarming steep jinks to negotiate awkward channels and side-scarps. Even though the crossfall is considerable, no benching or path making has been done, thus one slot is several feet above the other.

This PD traverse ends at the dry meltwater channel some 100 m (distance) and 20-30 m above the western pathhead stance. Here it curves hard right very steeply uphill, fading onto thinly vegetated bedrock outcrops, with a brief resumption across a slight depression. It expires well short of the 560 m high point, amidst a confusion of wet hollows, tussock grass struggles, eroding peat, and low outcrops that might benefit from guidance both to it and back from it. Further confusion is provided by deer trods that can resemble made paths, and can be twin-trods where the deer have socialised or sought to overtake that resemble PD, and by fragments of a possibly made path along the plateau-ridge that resembles a deer trod.

As an artefact, this PD route is neater and less deeply etched than the Farrar set, with no hidden holes or pole-deep slots. This reflects the dry terrain⁹ with grass-moss cover on thin soils and little peat or dense heather. The slits are generally spaced 3-3.5 m apart, but closer on the short steep ascents, unclear why. The setting-out is elegant, but the abrupt and awkward jinks and jumps could once again suggest design for ponies (ridden or led) rather than guests on foot; likewise the unbenched crossfalls.

The NOSAS visit impression of a primarily recreational purpose is reinforced by the discovery of this PD link and extension, making a circular route with a guarantee of not losing the way, especially in mist. While the top of Coille Bhàn may seem unprepossessing, there are dry knolls where visitors could halt, with a magnificent prospect to Slioch, Fisherfield and Fannich beyond the broad shoulders of Coulin Forest - and south to Monar - there perhaps to picnic, to sketch, to philosophise, or indeed to hunt and shoot the moors and corries beyond.

PD 6 - Am Bathaich, Glenquoich¹⁰	SP7.27	- mapped as SP component
	length	- 220 m (continuous)
	date	- 1899-1906

⁸ on current GoogleEarth imagery these ditches are just visible, with sharpening; on BingMaps parts can be traced if you know where to look.

⁹ the whole hillside is within an extensive Rock Slope Deformation on the flank of the Carron-Bran glacial breach, hence underdrained and lacking surface water channels.

¹⁰ not the well-known Am Bathaich Corbett near Cluanie Inn, but a spur behind Sgùrr a' Mhaoraich.

This steep ridge tucked in amongst the Quoich Munros should be celebrated for one of the finest flights of stalkerpath zigzags in the Highlands (Z=26) up its smooth eastern nose, conspicuous to those who penetrate here, or observe from Gleouraich (itself possessing the best-known and most-used, Z=31). At their head, the made path negotiates the encroaching RSF (Rock Slope Failure) and continues out onto a short stretch of easier, wider ridge. No made path was needed here, but once confronted by a final bluff, it resumes with a further short flight (Z=4) which bafflingly gives out just where it becomes most needful, well before the summit crest is gained.

Only on checking the Z tally for shows to audiences where someone is bound to know the exact number (the Grampian Club of Dundee and The Munro Society) was a short sequence of PD espied on the imagery, linking these two flights. The bold W-shape is quite distinct on imagery, once located. It traverses the open shoulder with two neat zigzags of its own, of a fairly uniform width of ~2.5 m (narrower than elsewhere). The corners are sharper than the usual corkscrew curves, but the angles are as elegantly radiused (thus wigwags ?). That the wigwags are not conventional made SP becomes clear where they traverse side slopes with no benching.



PD 6 - Am Bathaich - the wilful tangent; neatly rounded 'wigwag' corners

At either end the PD segues a little confusedly into the conventional made path. Yet a line between the two cut-path termini would wander easily up or down the height of land, more or less directly, whereas the long initial PD leg veers off at a wilful tangent, with the wigwags well down on the north side - some legs of the W hardly even rise. One wonders whether the line was set out on the ground, or imposed from a map. Nevertheless, on visiting¹¹, this proves to be one of the best preserved and most delightful examples of Parallel Ditching.

Amusingly, the path has been mapped in its entirety since 1-3 (1906), but - even on current metric maps including larger-scale OpenMap - as a direct line up the axis of the shoulder, ignoring the pesky wigwags.

PD 7 - Sròn Lice na Fearna, Cuaich	SP7.44	- mapped as SP component
	length	- 220 m (intermittent)
	date	- 1899-1906

A short but classic stalkerpath (Z=16) gains the long east ridge culminating in Sgurr nan Eugallt, easily accessible from Glenquoich Lodge (pre-Cuaich reservoir). As well as sections of PD including the terminus, there are, unusually, signs on imagery of initial PD lengths superseded by tight zigzags.

¹¹ in mid-March 2025, on the back of vindicating the splendid stalkerpath up Sgurr nan Eugallt above Kinloch Hourn - to whose builders thanks are still due for providing the only bivviable flattish surface in many miles.

Yet amidst possibly the largest and finest collection of stalkerpaths in the Highlands, radiating from both Glenquoich Lodge on the north side of Loch Cuaich (most of them groundtruthed) and Kinlochquoich at its head (most of them not), only these two (PD 6/7) appear to utilise the PD technique in the routemakers' armoury.

Minor occurrences (<200 m long)

Just as stalkerpaths are easily confusable with deer highways and geological lineaments (as recent OS revisions mapped remotely from imagery attest), so PD is hard to distinguish - on imagery - from ATV tracks, which are also usually parallel. The clue is that PD is slightly wider apart, and may occur in the middle of nowhere¹².

A further source of confusion may arise where a wet or boggy depression has to be crossed, and double ditches are dug to drain a made path. This may be elevated as a causeway, using excavated peats, or properly surfaced with borrowpits nearby as tell-tales. Such ditches may be slits like PD, but tend to be more substantial, and will drain off at any bends and dips.

SP9.18 Bride nan Eagan - this beautiful and unusually long stalkerpath wandering up the moors and braes south of Achnashellach, little known and only recently noticed by OS remote-mappers, eventually approaches the escarpment of An Eagan¹³. Just before the final zigzagging ascent, a 60 m run up a gentle grassy slope is demarcated by parallel ditches, with little evidence of the made causeway found across earlier depressions. As Achnashellach Estate was owned by Sir Ivor Guest before he bought adjacent Glencarron, the PD technique experimented with here may have been taken from one to the other, and deployed on the grander scale of PD 5.



SP9.38 Feith Bhan - this obscure path up the burn south from Inchvuilt in Strath Farrar (next west from SP.37 / PD2) has a short PD terminus onto a rare dry knoll :

¹² where the deer go in double file for a blether, their twin trods of comparable spacing have also deceived remote OS mappers as 'vehicle tracks' - despite converging into single file.

¹³ dedicated Powerpoint slideset on ResearchGate, or see NOSAS blog for link. The start is almost lost in forestry and then dense heather, and even getting to it requires a circuit of forest roads (unless the Carron is low enough to ford!).



SP9.43 Deanie Burn - this is the 'parent path' for **PD 3A** (see above). A burnside path mapped since 6-1 ascends from Deanie Lodge almost to the summit ridge east of the Munro Sgùrr na Ruaidhe, although large parts are hard to follow or are lost to stream and gully erosion and to the bogs. Near the top, the mapped line deviates briefly away from the burn before rising as a peaty trench to the foot of the corrie headwall, with partly unmapped zigzags to near the rim. Imagery shows a 120 m segment of this deviation (see Fig.) as resembling PD, distinct from narrower made-path segments below and above. However, on visiting, it appears to be a hybrid with a slightly raised and surfaced centre strip, between deep drainage ditches across a boggy stretch. If it is PD, it would be the only case integral with an original pre-1875 path.



SP9.43 Deanie Burn - short doubtful PD



SP9.44 Neattie Burn - PD or surfaced ?

SP9.44 (section E) Neattie Burn - in the next valley east from Deanie Burn, a branch from the burnside path heads out up the moor and onto a high shoulder, delightfully insinuating there by another meltwater nick. An initial 350 m stretch appears on imagery to be classic PD at 2.5-3.5 m spacing, becoming a conventional made path higher up. Some site photos look convincingly PD, but elsewhere show an elevated centre more like a causeway, with contrast vegetation, and some exposures of gravelly surfacing that must have come from borrowpits. Again, it is mapped 6-1 thus pre-1875, and so unlikely to be PD. It has a counterpart on the south side of Strath Farrar in **SP9.35 Meall a' Mhadaidh**.

Interpretation - what was the purpose of Parallel Ditching ?

1. geographical distribution, extent, and interplay with SP

The first observation to make is the obvious one that PD is very localised, an expedient adopted by a handful of estates and their staff - possibly originating in one place and getting passed on by neighbourly contact, or by migrant contractor gangs. It has never entered the stalkerpath toolkit as a universal standard technique.

Thus PDs 1-3A and most of the minor sites just mentioned are all within the Glenstrathfarrar Estate as then was, or its Struy hiving-off. PD 4 is on Strathconon Estate, its neighbour to the north; it appears to be a sole case there, and the poorest example, perhaps made rather late on a traditional family estate which didn't go in much for stalkerpaths¹⁴. PD 5 on Glencarron is again a neighbour, and associated with the SP9.18 Bride nan Eagan minor case on Achnashellach Estate as noted. This leaves only PDs 6-7 on Glenquoich, three glens south, short but very sweet, isolated occurrences both on that estate and in the wider Highlands - a conundrum.

Another distinguishing feature is that PD is usually intermingled with conventional made path, or is a hybrid form, with only one case a clear-(un)cut substantial extension in its own right (PD 5). This implies that PD has been deployed where the terrain locally offers easy enough walking not to need a made path, or too difficult a peat bog to build one, but still needs route guidance linking to the next section. It might also be a stop-gap pending upgrade (as at PD 7). And it could suggest the pursuit of economy measures.

Even so, Table 1 emphasises the modest contribution made by PD in the route-making toolkit. All bar one cases comprise less than 1 km of PD. It usually comprises no more than a fifth of the total path (or branch/extension) length. An Soutar (PD 2) is 40% PD, but of a short branch. The outstanding exception is PD 3 Sgùrr a' Phollain, with 2.25 km of PD comprising 85% of Stage 2 to the first summit (beyond which there is neither PD nor made path until final zigzags).

2. PD mapping history and dating

It would of course be intriguing to know when each case was implemented, and if there is a pattern - for example, in a later phase of Highland estate development, possibly interwar, when spending was curtailed¹⁵. Unfortunately the mapping history (provided with the main Report) is much too patchy; and in any event PDs 1/2/4/5 have never been mapped.

Following much reappraisal of the mapping history and other sources, and much hair-tearing as conclusions are repeatedly revisited and reconciled, a set of best-guess 'windows' for PD development has been arrived at. They are summarised in Table 1 and explained (justified) here.

The essential principles and constraints (or lifelines through the ever-contradictory maze) are ¹⁶ :

- 1 the first **Six-Inch** survey (**6-1**) of ~1875 would have picked up every made path then existing, but not PD unless an integral part.
- 2 the second Six-Inch edition (**6-2**) of ~1901-02 was very thorough and generally reliable (but see PD 5 below), while adding little : any path/PD not shown on it almost certainly post-dates it.
- 3 the third Six-Inch (**6-3**) of 1966-67 was extremely thorough, a full resurvey, and the first on an accurately contoured base : it picked up many SPs missed by the One-Inch editions since 6-2 (ie. 1-3

¹⁴ save for the splendid circular path around Bac an Eich, much of it now sadly on its way to overgrown oblivion in the name of native woodland re-creation; other made paths are mainly tracks to outlying properties, or were so poorly executed as to be mostly gone.

¹⁵ or so we imagine, the Great Depression - but Nancy Mitford's Highland Fling is just one novel of that period with industrial or retailing *nouveaux riches* spending lavishly

¹⁶ recalling Six-Inch surveys are 6-1 to 6-3 and One-Inch versions/revisions are 1-1 to 1-7

to 1-7). Unfortunately, the long gap means that PD cases first shown on it could date from any time after ~1907, or even ~1901 (6-2) if One-Inch editions held not fully reliable.

4 for **One-Inch** editions, the Western Glens mapping history suggests that **1-3** (1906-07) generally picked up SPs and extensions, but **1-4** (1926-27) and **1-7** (1950s) were revisions only for major changes. Even so, 1-4 picks up a couple of significant SPs, one being in Strath Farrar, another in Gleann Fhiodhaig (Glenuaig), whereas 1-7 mostly shrinks or drops paths. Thus PD cases (especially those intermeshed with SP) first appearing at 6-3 are probably post-1907 and possibly post-1926.

5 it is assumed that path-making ended with WW2 (not least as after that, bulldozers and land-rovers started becoming readily available), and that the cases first appearing on 6-3 (1960s) are either later Edwardian or interwar.

This analysis generates the following set of possible datings :

A - clearly captured between reasonably reliable map dates :

PD 3A	Deanie Burn NE	post 6-2 and pre 1-3	1901-1907
PD 6	Am Bathaich	post 6-2 and pre 1-3	1899-1906
PD 7	Sron Leac na Fearna	post 6-2 and pre 1-3	1899-1906

B - not on 1-3, captured by 6-3, therefore post-1907, and possibly post-1926, as 1-4 less likely to pick up paths:

PD 3	Sgùrr a' Phollain	post 1-3 (1907) *	1907/1926-1939
PD 4	Gleann Meinich	post 1-3 (1907)	1907/1926-1939

C - never mapped, earliest date that of parent path :

PD 1	Druim na Sruidhe	post 6-1 (1901) **	1901-1939
PD 2	An Soutar	post 1-3 (1907) ***	1907/1926-1939
PD 5	Glencarron Lodge	post 1-3 (1907) ****	any date

* PD 3 stage 1 (no PD) captured 1-3, stage 2 (with PD) 6-3, therefore post-1907, and possibly post-1926 as 1-4 captured matching SP9.41 (stage 1)

** PD 1 parent path (SP9.33) not captured until 1-3, therefore post-1901 (6-2), could be any date thereafter but if an offshoot of parent, Edwardian pre-WW1 is suggested

*** PD 2 parent path (SP9.37) predates 6-1 1875 but deleted 6-3, SP9.37A fork first half is typical SP yet never mapped, therefore probably postdates 6-2 and 1-3, thus post-1907, possibly postdates 1-4 thus post-1926 as per PD 3

**** PD 5 is a conundrum, with one path demapped between 6-1 and 6-3, the other mapped from 1-3, and suspicions of withholding information thus the options are (a) between Guest purchase and sale ~1871-1890, when the ownership of paths and lodge was severed, or (b) with or soon after E path completion pre-1907, as the PD meshes with it, or (c) at any later date

The Western Glens Inventory identified three waves of path-making (the balance being metric-mapped or never mapped), although the process could have been continuous up to WW1:

➤ first wave	pre-1875	37%	early-mid Victorian
➤ second wave	1875-1907	32%	later Victorian - Edwardian
➤ third wave	1907-1939	26%	late Edwardian / interwar

The advent of the PD technique is thus almost certainly after the 'first wave'; there is pretty solid evidence for it occurring in the 'second wave'; and while 'third wave' is likely for some, it is plausible to argue for PD to be entirely pre-WW1. That would dismiss the notion of it being an economy measure - although until evidence is found in eg. estate archives, interwar deployment to cut costs cannot be ruled out.

3. why PD ?

In the main 'Stalkerpath Phenomenon' NOSAS Report, the line advanced was that making them was not a pre-requisite for deer stalking, as many estates did without, or only had short lower-level ones. Instead, they were seen as a luxury, indulged in by owners for their own family or to add to the attractions for guests staying for extended periods - in a competitive market, entertaining the most sought-after names in the

Highland Season just as in the London season. The more ambitious 'pony paths' were thus primarily recreational, often designed to show the scenic attractions of the estate off to best advantage - ravines, waterfalls, crags, vistas. Including on pony-back.

In this light, where was PD utilised, and why ?

Scenic PD

Paths with PD are significantly longer and higher-rising. Whereas the Western Glens average length is under 3 km, or 2 km if peripheral wanderings are discounted, with SPs in the montane area rarely longer than 6 km, Table 1 shows most of the relevant branches/extensions exceeding 2 km, and half of the full lengths over 5 km.

The average SP path-head elevation is 540m asl, whereas for those with PD it is 615m asl, with 3 of the 8 cases over 700m asl. Also of note is that whereas SPs are typically lower-level and straight-in, with only 40% having zigzags, all but one PD cases include bold curves, doglegs, corkscrews and (in 3 cases) actual zigzags.

All this hints that paths using PD were more elaborate, scenic, adventurous, and attractive for recreational hillwalking. As they do not feature in the First Wave, it might be that later Victorian/Edwardian estate owners were becoming more ambitious, and were seeking to attract more mixed gatherings, providing things to enjoy for the older, female¹⁷, or younger guests, not just traditional male sport.

Guiding your guests - with "tramlines"

Since PD was first encountered, several possible explanations for it have been gone through. Originally, the surmise was that PD was preparatory work for construction of a conventional path, or even for a more substantial track capable of taking small wheeled vehicles. This is difficult to sustain in light of the further cases since discovered, where PD seems the permanent intention (with PD 7 the exception to that rule).

The most plausible purpose that can here be ventured is that the **slits or grooves simply indicated the route to follow**. This might be

- between made path segments, or
- between the made path head and the destination of a brow or wide pass, in the three such cases (PD 2/4/5)

Where people have taken a walk up a hill, for whatever purpose, encouraged by the existence of a stalkerpath, they will always be anxious not to miss their way in mist and adverse conditions, whether because of gaps in the made path or - especially - finding its head for the descent. This would have applied principally to guests, who would probably have been unfamiliar with the detailed topography, but even owners and their families better acquainted with their ground would be glad of such guidelines - today, a small cairn is often placed to mark the head of a path. Our NOSAS party traversing the misty braes above Glencarron could easily have missed the descent path head, and even with benefit of a recce the writer was relieved to hit it spot on - approaching at a lower level than the PD link since identified.

Such PD 'tramlines' might be compared with rural roads today, which commonly have their margins marked by white lines, invaluable in dark and fog (and which driverless cars will utilise...).

¹⁷ again, it is emphasised that women could equal the men in sporting prowess, include endurance - and such would not need paths to get up there.

Other options for waymarking can include

- ❖ cairning - but PD often crosses peaty or grassy terrain where stones are lacking
- ❖ wooden posts - would have rotted away, or suffered attentions of deer
- ❖ paint splashes - as routine in the Alps, and must have been known to travellers - again, a lack of markable outcrops in such terrain; they would be abhorred now by purists, but that cannot have been a motivation for path-builders

Recall too that PD is found at middle to higher levels, where mists are more frequent (verging on endemic - especially in the Highland Season of July-October): PD is not found in glen and trough-corrie floors, where most SPs run, and where if pathless it is harder to get lost, with rivers running down them.

When first cut, the ditches would have been starkly obvious, especially with vegetation probably grazed much shorter. And the generous space between would doubtless soon acquire a trod. Their present invisibility and risk to ankle or leg would not have been a concern. Cutting slot-ditches would thus have been a sensible and economical option, more durable than marker posts, and convenient in typical grassy/mossy terrain where rocks for cairns or 'tripping stanes' (see below) were not to hand.

The technique for cutting Parallel Ditches is very different from the cut-and-fill earthmoving of conventional stalkerpaths, but would have been familiar - marking out a straight line and digging a narrow slot - from land reclamation by 'moor-gripping' (drainage channels) before the mechanical plough. The only refinement lies with the elegant curves where PD tramlines turned a sharp corner, radiused on the inside especially to avoid awkwardness and risk of putting a foot in it.

Self-guided ponies

There is a further interesting possibility : that these Parallel Ditches were as much for horses as for people. Hill ponies are noted for their intelligence and docility, and would have been well capable of recognising PD 'tramlines' and staying within them. This might have been either :

- (a) for ponies carrying guests, or
- (b) for ponies being sent up, or more likely off down, unaccompanied

Ponies are able to negotiate most stalkerpaths, where zigzags are sometimes rounded at the corners, or even made as corkscrews, to accommodate them. The most 'alpine' Parallel Ditching case, PD 6 Am Bàthaich atop its Z flight, would easily have been reached and followed by ponies, perhaps waiting there while the rigours of the ridge were enjoyed. Famously, King Edward VII was conveyed on ponyback to his deer shoot high on Gleouraich (on Glenquoich Estate) up Hamish Brown's most esteemed stalkerpath, with a comparable Z-score and more vertiginous.

We might imagine a picnic party from Glencarron Lodge ascending one of their zigzag paths on pony back, and enjoying the summit vista and promenade, knowing the tramlines of PD 5 would lead unerringly to the other zigzag path head - especially if cloud swept in. If still riding, they would be assured that the pony would 'know the way' - or they might send off such ponies as were not required by those choosing to walk down, or the one with the empty hampers.

When it comes to **deer stalking**, the main value of a made path is not for the stalkers and the guns but to bring the ponies up to take off the carcasses. It is a great advantage if a pony can make two round trips in a day, or if a ghillie (ponyman) can handle more than one pony: whether these estates ever used their PD-aided paths to

send laden ponies off down unaccompanied - and back for more - would be worth verifying. Such practicalities are rarely mentioned in the sporting literature¹⁸.



tripping stanes

Tripping stanes

in the era of horse-drawn canal barges, the horses were kept away from breaking down the edge of the towpath by a line of rounded stones.

There are occasional cases where a made stalkerpath crosses bare rocky ground, and the line is defined for a few hundred yards by closely-spaced lines of stones, rather than cairns. The photos are (1) on the popular path SP8.08 up Carn Ghluasaid above Loch Cluanie, and (2) on the now-obscure but memorable path SP8.37 up Carn Eige from (drowned) Benula Lodge, this latter with a neatly radiused curve leading into a cleared swathe between parallel stone rows. This could be a variant form of Parallel Ditching, also intended to ensure ponies, ridden or otherwise, stayed on course, as well as people.

IN CONCLUSION

Parallel Ditching is a local variant on the theme of the 'stalkerpath', of interest as illustrating native ingenuity (as the notion does not seem to have come from elsewhere). As importantly, it embodies that Victorian/Edwardian sensibility for the landscape down to its finest details - the way these routes make sense in their settings (while unafraid to be quite conspicuous in their time, and occasionally still); the minimalist hand-dug interventions; the exquisite neatness of the rounded corners.

There are so few examples that they should all be recorded, and it is hoped gradually to do this with HER, with priority to those which add to paths already flagged up as outstanding (PD 5 Glencarron and PD 6 Am Bathaich, Glenquoich). Those on the north side of Strathfarrar are integral to the concept of the 'Farrar skywalk' above Deanie and Culligran (ppt slide 79).

One of these, **PD 3** up Sgùrr a' Phollain (Beinn a' Bhathaich Ard), is the prime candidate for restoration, as the longest, most varied, hardest to trace in thick vegetation, and the most useful for present walkers. It should be a simple enough task, chiefly in stripping heather off the ditches; perhaps a JCB with a narrow-trench back-hoe or even a moor-gripping plough might be of service. The present walkers path does not follow it, and is not especially pleasant, whereas the space between the tramlines could be once again.

David Jarman Findon, Ross-shire March 2026 revised June 2026

As this is the Awards Season, the writer would nominate **An Soutar** as most inspirational (first taste), **Druim na Sruidh** as most perplexing to trace and piece together, **Gleann Meinich** as dreariest (but misery-flicks are

¹⁸ The writer has been told of Barisdale ponies being sent the length of the tricky lochside path to Kinloch Hourn for shoeing at the mobile smiddy - by the smith himself. The mares are born to this routine and pass it on. Led to the paddock gate, pointed along the shore, rump-slap. Treats either end may be suspected.

in vogue), **Glencarron** as greatest surprise (and has needed a revisit to confirm its extent), and **Am Bathaich** for most spectacular, with its elevated set of 'wigwags' in sideways-W form, with an honourable mention for imperishably rewarding **Bride nan Eagan**, guest appearance of PD briefly stealing the show.

And as this revision bears the fruits of three revisits in the brief 'spring season', **Sgurr na Phollain** must now be nominated for most remarkable in scale and ambition, with thanks to Roland Spencer-Jones for prompting much refinement. But it is obscure latecomer **Deanie Burn NE** that captures the award for astonishment - credited to the genius of co-explorer Jane Meek in spotting its start, tracing its evolutions, and adumbrating its span for the photo archive.

ⁱ **"Parallel Ditches" ?**

as these are clearly not drainage ditches, and are narrower than such (barely spade width), and since Double Ditches is reserved for made paths, is there a better term ?

- Parallel Slits no, slits are blade-width, as with sand-slitting, invisible ('guideslits' was tried early on...)
- Parallel Slots better, but a 'slot' can suggest something as short as 'penny in the slot' – 'slotted in'
- Parallel Grooves usually a shallow incision in wood or perhaps stone ... or an LP - groovy, man
- Parallel Grips as in 'moor gripping'
- Parallel Furrows would be best option, as if cut by a plough in a field - altho' it conjures 'furrowed brows' ... - too late, PD is embedded