

The “stalkerpath phenomenon” – a survey of stalker’s paths in the Western Glens

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This report provides a brief introduction to “stalker’s paths” – their historical spread, and their archaeological character and survival – illustrated with data and examples from a study area between Mullardoch and Achnasheen. It follows on from a NOSAS visit to a pair of paths at Glencarron Lodge in August 2021 (blogpost in preparation), and sets the scene for a NOSAS talk in March 2022.

SYNOPSIS

The study reported here maps and evaluates the networks of stalkers’ paths made by sporting estates in a large sector of the Western Highlands (north of Elchaig–Mullardoch–Cannich and south of Carron–Bran). It charts their spread over the Victorian–Edwardian era and beyond, from successive OS editions. It quantifies their geographical density and height ranges, and their diverse topographical locales. Their construction quality, details, and current condition are assessed from imagery and from groundtruthing a large sample. Individual paths are being photo-documented, but not as yet recorded in detail.

In this pioneering systematic investigation of “stalkerpaths” – here so termed to sharpen perception of a taken-for-granted phenomenon – a radical transformation of access into the mountain areas becomes evident. Its socio-economic associations are equally significant, with recreation, entertainment, display and investment often as important as practical sporting purposes. A surprising proportion of the original path network remains in ‘pristine’ or good condition. Many paths have been adapted for modern estate management or adopted by hillwalkers, while many others are forgotten or lost. The best surviving examples are identified for recognition and protection.

EPIGRAPH

“Standing above Glen Carron Lodge on our walk earlier in the year, I was awed by the realisation of what the shooting lodges and the paths had done to the Highlands in a short space of time.” - *Roland Spencer-Jones*



SP9.41 **Sgurr Fhuar-thuill** Glenstrathfarrar
initial quad use - pristine surface - washed-out ford - into upper corrie - up headwall - onto summit ridge

SUMMARY OF RESULTS ¹

Within the study area of 435 square miles, there are **85 stalkerpaths**, including 15 branches, totalling **156 miles** in length (252 km). This can be visualised as 230 metres of made path in every grid square. Average path length is thus only 3 km, or 2.2 km if

¹ see Summary Table appended - the full Inventory can be obtained from the author, although it is still being refined and validated. For definitions of ‘stalkerpath’ and ‘hill track’ see below.

11 atypical long rambling paths in the lower periphery are discounted. For more typical stalkerpaths, the maximum length is ~6 km.

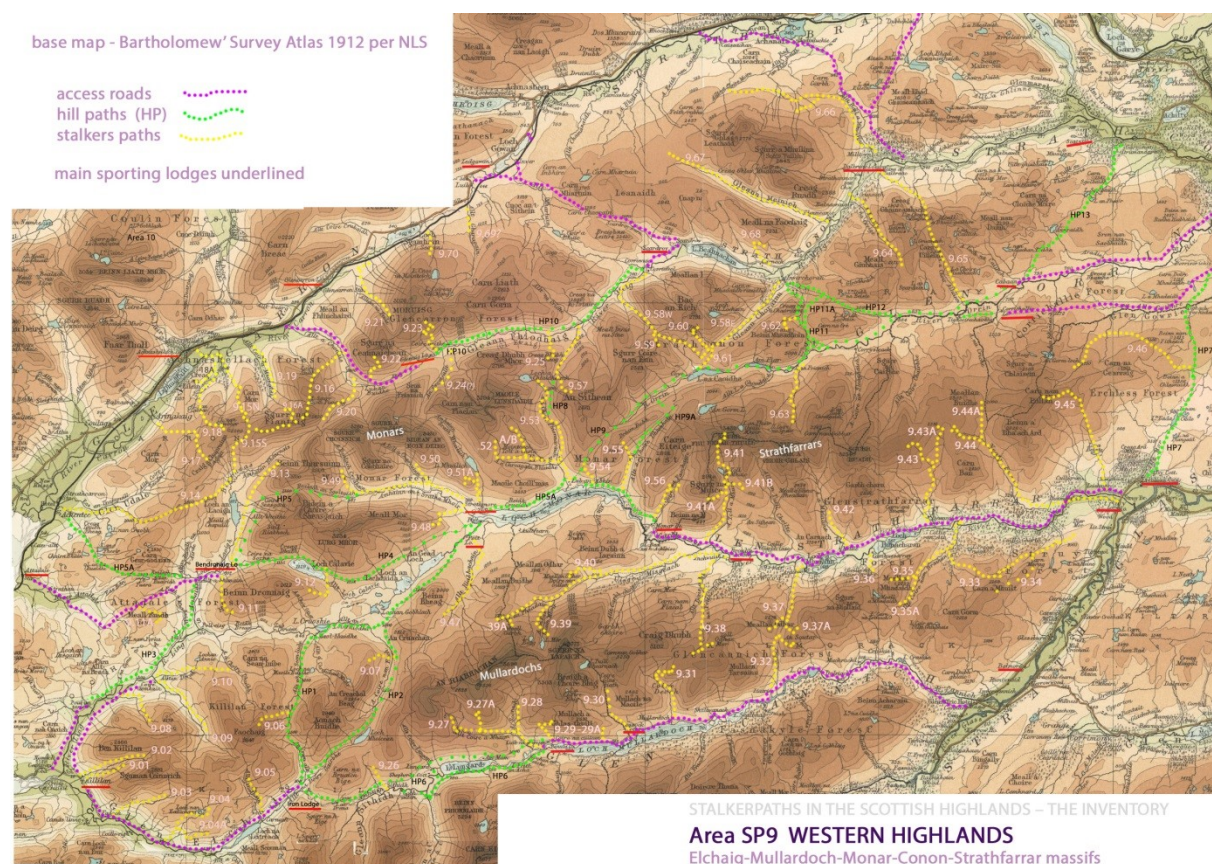
The popular impression of stalker's paths winding up into the high corries and passes is somewhat romanticised. Only 35 of the 85 have any zigzags, albeit with some spectacular sequences (max 31 zags), and only four ascend into corries. The majority are relatively low-level and straight.

Current condition on a five-category scale finds 20 surviving relatively 'pristine', while 26 are 'abandoned' in places; only 3 are wholly lost. Light machining to enable 'quad' access (ATVs) affects 30 paths, with a further 12 partly bulldozed for vehicular access.

An overall quality assessment yields seven five-star and fourteen four-star cases. There are 25 one-star cases (see below and Summary Table for the categories).

There are an additional **15 made 'hill tracks'** through the glens and lower passes, totalling **63 miles** in length (102 km), an average of 6.8 km, increasing the impact to 360 metres per grid square.

Not included in the data are several score miles of 'carriage roads' constructed up every glen to the new Estate Lodges – altogether, a startling transformation in access both into and within the mountain areas, from a near-absence of constructed ways to a near-complete opening-up. By the end of this era, nowhere is even a couple of miles from a made path or track.



this map of the 85 stalkerpaths and 15 hill tracks, with estate tracks, is provided in four quadrants in the accompanying slideset together with illustrations of most paths

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1. INTRODUCTION

The opening up of the Highlands during the 18th and 19th centuries, with the construction of military roads, canals and harbours, estate and public roads, and, of course, railways has attracted considerable attention and a burgeoning literature, not least the genre of travel by these various means. Their history and archaeology are broadly well known and recorded, although valuable work is still there to be done - for example where early carriage roads have been superseded and almost lost (eg. that from Scardroy over to the Kyle road at Luib²; see NOSAS blogposts³).

By contrast, at the lowest rung of the hierarchy, the construction of walking and pony paths by the new Highland sporting estates seems to have escaped investigation, let alone any systematic recording (obscure sources will be very welcome). These routes are commonly referred to as "stalker's paths", and some are well known anecdotally in hill-going narratives and guide-books, albeit very much taken for granted. But a century ago, when their construction was still fresh or indeed active, Grimble's 1896 compendium of deer-stalking estates⁴ makes no reference to the path networks developed by their new owners.

On a point of terminology, the popular form is both confusing (singular or plural ? apostrophe, where or none ?) and clumsy, in repeated use. It is also misleading, as a good proportion were probably not made exclusively or even primarily for deer-stalking. However, no more general term suggests itself ('hill path' would include made and unmade cases). To identify the artefact more abstractly, the term "**stalkerpath**" is here adopted (compare 'cyclepath'). It also makes a convenient adjective ('the stalkerpath population'). It preserves the association with deer-stalking, but its novelty reminds us of the diversity of design and purpose actually found or suspected with this quite sudden efflorescence of made paths.

Before the advent of these sporting estates in the earlier 19th century, no constructed ways existed across the mountains, and travellers on foot or with horse simply followed

² Osgood Mackenzie recounts the family coach crossing to Gairloch this way in his childhood.

³ Meryl Marshall - Old routes through Ross-shire: Luib, near Achnasheen, to Scardroy in Strathconon; Another Old Route through Ross-shire - Achanalt Station to Dalnachroich in Strathconon via Badinluchie - NOSAS blogposts.

⁴ Augustus Grimble, *Deer Forests of Scotland* (1896)

(available online at <https://archive.org/details/deerforestsofsco00grimrich>)

traditional routes worn by beasts and people, including drove routes (which were not made 'roads'). Burt's Letters of the 1720's, from his Inverness base, describe this experience. In the interior even difficult passages, bogs, and river crossings lack any mention of local works. In the NW Highlands, north of the Wade road to Glenelg, Roy's map of ~1750 delineates only one 'road' coast-to-coast – up Strath Conon and by convolutions via Kinlochewe down Strath na Seallag to Gruinard. This is clearly nothing more than a route followable with a guide. It is not known why this one route was selected among the many such options. The numerous scattered habitations on his map exist in an apparent communications void⁵.

Nor did the conversion of large tracts to sheep 'ranching' require any road or path construction, even for the building of isolated new shepherds' houses, such as Doirevaire in Gleann Fhiodhaig, beyond the head of Strath Conon⁶.

The new sporting estates had entirely different needs and expectations for communication. Speed and ease were now of the essence – to reach the Highlands, to arrive at the handsome new Lodges often erected well up into 'remote' glens, and then to access the objects of sport and recreation – both for the new owners and for their guests. Quite where the inspiration for constructing such stalkerpaths came from is not known, with no obvious precedents in other 'rough-country' parts of Britain. Possibly the Grand Tour was an influence, crossings of the Alps being by engineered roads, and with constructed paths enjoyed to reach higher places of resort⁷. Once a few pioneering owners had invested in such paths, it would become a fashion that most would wish to follow, especially if entertaining guests was a priority⁸.



New **Benula Lodge**, on the north side of natural Loch Mullardoch, per Oikofuge website. Stalkerpaths radiate from it, including SP9.27 / 27A up Coire Mhaim (behind) and An Riabhachan (right).

Motivations aside, the outcome transformed the accessibility of most of the Highland interior in the remarkably short space of a few decades. This was of course initially for the exclusive and sometimes heavily guarded benefit of owners, staff, and guests. It is

⁵ Old Ways New Roads 2021 - Hugh Cheape's contribution stresses the ubiquity of unmade 'old ways' and the ability of those who needed to travel to get about quite freely through the hills, quite rapidly if unencumbered.

⁶ Meryl Marshall, Strath Conon (NOSAS)

⁷ JE Bowman 'The Highlands and Islands - a Nineteenth Century Tour' (1986, p152) visits the Falls of Foyers in 1826 - "on the other side, an alpine path zigzags up the rocks"

⁸ the spread of the broch might be an earlier manifestation of keeping up with the proto-Jones; the conservatory craze a later one.

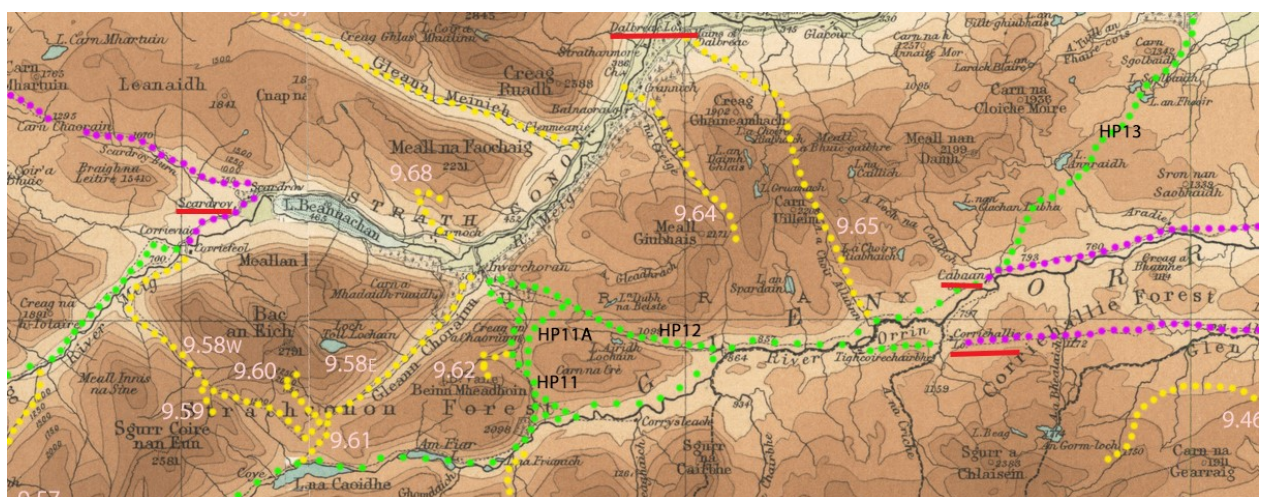
now for all to enjoy, where the paths survive. Although fit Highlanders were renowned as fleet of foot across rough terrain, typical rates of progress on foot increase from say 1 mph across rough ground to 3 mph on a stalkerpath - an acceleration comparable with transport revolutions such as railways and motorways (or even the new A9, in its early years). This can now be understood and appraised as the 'stalkerpath phenomenon'.

2. MAPPING STALKERPATH INCIDENCE IN THE WESTERN GLENS STUDY AREA

The study area is a swathe across the Western Highlands north of Glen Elchaig–Loch Mullardoch–Glen Cannich and south of Strath/Glen Carron–Strath Bran. It includes the Monar, Strathfarrar and Strathconon hills⁹. It spans high mountain ridges and intermediate moorlands, highly accessible and unusually remote properties, and sporting estates of all sizes and ownership character. It is entirely on the prevailing schist rocks which support healthy deer populations - prime stalking country. Apart from the two large hydro dams at Monar and Mullardoch, the recent spate of run-of-river schemes, and a few peripheral hill-climbing approach routes, it remains a relatively wild, undisturbed hinterland, not crossed by any through roads and largely spared afforestation. It arguably displays one of the finer flowerings of the "stalkerpath phenomenon" in the Highlands, especially in the 'wet west'.

The Inventory has been compiled by combing every OS map edition on the National Library of Scotland website plus current metric maps, augmented from satellite imagery and field work¹⁰. However, it was quickly realised that the simple popular conception of a "stalker's path" zigzagging up the glenside could not be applied indiscriminately to the diverse population of paths and tracks being identified. The problems of deciding which should qualify as 'stalkerpaths' are compounded by successive OS maps having never consistently distinguished vehicular roads and tracks from footpaths, made or unmade, especially when some are intermediate 'bridle paths'¹¹ for horses and possibly small, wheeled vehicles.

A three-tier classification has thus been devised, and is proposed for discussion as a basis for future mapping and archiving (illustrated in this Strathconon–Orrin extract, which exemplifies some difficulty category assignments):



Purple Estate carriage roads, up to Lodges and across low passes to other main routes
 Green Hill tracks between glens and habitations (open dots - traditional worn routes, never improved)
 Yellow Stalkerpaths

⁹ this is the original Area 9 of Munro's Tables, hence the coding system.

¹⁰ these are mainly extensions or branches of mapped paths (10 cases), the principal 'new path' being up the south shoulder of An Riabhachan from East Benula.

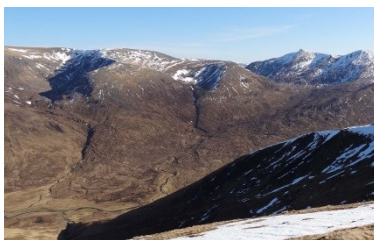
¹¹ so noted as B.P. on Second Edition Six-Inch maps.

- carriage roads leading to Lodges, and occasionally beyond. These are identified but excluded from the tally.
- hill tracks exist primarily to link habitations and enable communications between glens, thus serving public or estate business, including cattle and sheep movements, over and above their sporting purposes. Many are probably ancient worn routes that have never been made or improved, other than locally. Unmade cases such as those through the Monar passes rise to 590m¹². No made ones rise above 460m. For example, the Iron Lodge to Patt Lodge route by way of Maol Buidhe cottage is a made track which probably took small carts. The term 'pony path' is sometimes encountered¹³, but is unhelpful as ponies can use many stalkerpaths. These 'hill tracks' are also identified, with evidently made ones tallied separately.
- stalkerpaths are thus purpose-made for sport and recreation. They are usually designed for walking and for ponies; whether the best-made took very small wheeled vehicles remains unclear. They are nearly all cul-de-sacs, whereas nearly all 'hill tracks' link up. And all made paths above 460m are stalkerpaths.

Applying this classification has entailed some difficult judgements, with additional uncertainty when relying on imagery. For example, the well-made path from Achintee over to Bearnais would be a 'hill track' if Bearnais was a permanent dwelling and the path was primarily intended to access it, stopping there. But the path carries on over a high pass to Achnashellach, and was built past it, not to it, with the building at that time probably a mere bothy. The whole is thus classified as a stalkerpath.

In validating the map population of presumed stalkerpaths, half (43) have been visited by the writer over the years, of which 23 have so far been reconnoitred and photographed for this study. One unexpected difficulty is with OS mapping accuracy:

- ❖ earlier editions appear to have mapped a few paths in error, with no visible evidence
- ❖ paths have mysteriously come and gone, grown and shrunk, over successive editions;
- ❖ now, regrettably, with revision mainly from satellite image interpretation, path extensions or even new paths are appearing that prove to be natural landscape lineaments, intermittent deer trods, or unmade ATV routes. All these require ground-truthing.



Mis-mapping from satellite imagery: OS metric maps now show a path (SP9.24x) up **An Crom-allt** south of Gleann Fhiodhaig, which does not exist in any usable sense, nor are there any traces of abandoned made path. It is a series of short deer trods worn where their movement is concentrated on a ford at the confluence of two ravines. Above the well-defined near and middle brow trods (right image) there is no 'path' on up the glen.

3. STALKERPATHS IN THE LANDSCAPE - CHARACTER AND PURPOSES

It has to be admitted that a clear majority of stalkerpaths are plain practical affairs, going up the burnsidcs into the upper or side glens, probably following traditional trods,

¹² Iain R Thomson "Isolation Shepherd" (2016) describes taking sheep through essentially trackless passes at both ends.

¹³ Leonie Charlton 'Pony paths' Northwords Now 41, 2021, pp 4-5.

with modest construction work and often lacking any zigzags or other distinctive artefacts. These are the most likely to have succumbed to 'improvement' for mechanised vehicular use, or alternatively to have vanished in the boggy or lushly vegetated valley bottoms.

A sizeable minority rise more or less steeply onto shoulders or ascend the escarpments above Strath Carron onto the higher moors, while a dozen go into passes. Only handfuls go along intermediate ridges or rise to near summits (usually lesser ones). Most notably, only four rise into corries, and only two negotiate corrie headwalls (SP9.16A / 41, illustrated in Section 8).

Taken along with their typically short lengths, this suggests that most stalkerpaths served relatively functional and circumscribed roles in sporting estate management. Their main purpose seems to have been to break the back of the initial 'get-in', whether up a steep glen-side or easing the heavy going in valley floors and on lower moors. This purpose is surmised (in the absence of records or recollections of owners' original intentions and usages) to be of threefold benefit:

- to speed and ease access for the stalking parties to their quarry - and back for dinner;
- to enable ponies (garrons) to be led to points convenient for them to wait¹⁴, and for stalkers and ghillies to drag the beasts to them¹⁵;
- possibly, to enable other guests to come up, perhaps on ponies or even in dog-carts, to spectate and take luncheon.

There is however a second purpose to consider – recreation. The wealthy new 'lairds' did not just want to indulge in the thrill of the chase. The possession and embellishment of a Highland estate (especially once Albert and Victoria had acquired Balmoral) was a status symbol like a Mediterranean yacht or Caribbean island today, intended to entertain family, friends, and especially those one wanted to cultivate. By no means all of these people would participate in the "huntin', shootin', and fishin'". Other outdoor activities were thus of paramount importance in keeping people occupied, amused, fit and, perhaps, appetised. The obvious answer was walks and rides, especially to destinations such as waterfalls, gorges, and viewpoints where the 'romantic' taste for the sublime could be experienced. In the days before cameras, these could be sketched, watercoloured, penned, or versified. This was all, of course, on the host's land, whose extent and grandeur could be admired.

On some estates, amenity woodlands were planted, to be enjoyed with scenic walks and drives¹⁶. On other estates, as may be surmised with several stalkerpaths in the study area, they doubled as recreational walks, especially out of season or on wet days and Sundays. There is a distinct trend for paths that appear on later OS editions to roam further, to rise to higher summits, and to offer circular walks; in other words, to be more scenic.

Two circular walks (or possibly pony rides) stand out here:

¹⁴ perhaps with a bit of shelter, space to move about, a bite of better grass, water; sometimes path character becomes sketchier beyond such suspected stances.

¹⁵ a young stalker in Glen Elchaig advises that he routinely ascends and gets along the ridges, without benefit of path, to identify his quarry and work down onto it. His ghillie then brings the (garron, as was) ATV up the (quadded) stalkerpath into the glen floor as near as possible to the dragging route.

¹⁶ ambitious cases include Braemore, Torridon, Flowerdale, and (surprisingly) Glenquoich - at Braemore, Sir Henry Fowler of Forth Bridge fame indulged in two suspension footbridges, both extant. In the study area, this is less evident, but is seen at Glencarron and Struy, for example. These are excluded from the Inventory.

- ❖ on Achnashellach Estate, the circuit over the 860m high ridge of Sgurr na Feartaig, which grew from three starting points to converge at a dramatic high pass above Bearnais.
- ❖ on Strathconon Estate, the circuit of Bac an Eich, via Gleann Chorainn and Coire Mhoragein, with branches from both cols up onto the higher ground.

Two paths which ascend to unusually high summits also stand out:

- ❖ Strathfarrar head, where a path climbs from near Braulen Lodge to almost 1000m asl at the Sgurr Fhuar-thuill col, including an airy traverse up the corrie headwall.
- ❖ Strathfarrar foot, where a path initially to a fishing loch extends up a broad shoulder with a final intricate suite of zig-zags to the summit of Sgurr a' Phollain at 850m, an outstanding viewpoint across the whole inner Moray Firth.

And paths which appear designed for dramatic effect or to lead to viewpoints include

- ❖ on Killilan Estate in Glen Elchaig, a path up to the pretty Loch nan Ealachan, doubtless for sketching and picnicking as well as fishing, with a branch along the brink of a wooded chasm giving ready access to the obvious viewpoint over the glen, the bluff above Cragag.
- ❖ Strathfarrar foot - from Pollcherian gorge footbridge, an early scenic pinewood and waterfalls walk with footbridges was extended up Coire nam Brathan onto Meall a' Mhadaidh, with a commanding vista across the whole Estate:



SP9.35 ascends from Pollcherian Bridge through the Strathfarrar pinewoods, and after peaty struggles finally crosses this steep side-slope to the sunlit 630m shoulder of **Meall a' Mhadaidh** (upper left), a picnic spot with a superb prospect up a glen where 'all this is mine'.

All these (naturally longer) paths start conveniently for main Estate Lodges, or short carriage drives from them. Their stalking benefits are often unclear. Their recreational benefits are clear, if ambitious. Of course, the Victorians were used to walking.

4. THE STALKERPATH PHENOMENON – EVOLUTION ACROSS TIME AND SPACE

Almost a third of the stalkerpath population here was already in existence before the First Editions of the OS 6" and 1" maps in the early 1870s. Only 6 were added by the Second Editions in 1902. However, 17 then appear on the 1" Third Edition of 1902-20, with a tail of 7 more in later imperial editions after successive wars. The metric series add a further 16, while 9 have been identified that have never been mapped.

These bald figures come under caveat. A whole chapter could be devoted to the intricacies of cartographic history, with vagaries such as wholesale disappearances in Strathfarrar on the 2nd Edition suggesting estates desirous of privacy, rather than reality.

Thus, the metric additions and the never-mapped cases are almost certainly earlier omissions rather than post-WW2 constructions.

A general impression can however be suggested, of an early mushrooming of paths across the landscape as the conversion from sheep ranches to deer forests swept through, spurred by improving communications. Trains reached Beaulieu in 1862, while the Dingwall and Skye Railway opened to Strone Ferry in 1870. But putting dates on this first wave may prove impossible, while for the following wave, the Third Edition dating as 1902-20 is unhelpful. We can however imagine an Edwardian second flowering. It is possible, with 'new wealth' persisting in some quarters, that the inter-war period saw a few more stalkerpaths constructed, going further in and higher up, some elegant, others rough-and-ready.

There are marked variations geographically in both timing and density. The interior – Monar, Mullardoch, Glenuaig – generally comes later, but then all the Gleann Elchaig (Killilan) and Attadale–Dronaig paths appear post-1902, hinting at earlier estate suppression. Some estate boundaries and ownerships have changed considerably, making comparisons between estates difficult¹⁷. However, densities vary remarkably – Achnashellach is exceptionally high, followed by north Monar and Strathfarrar, while Orrin and parts of Strathconon are sparse.

5. STALKERPATH ARCHAEOLOGY - DETECTION AND CONDITION

A stalkerpath, or made hill path, must show clear signs of deliberate construction with some consistency of width, design, and line. These tests have eliminated four cases mapped by OS (all but one post-metrication), where worn trods or unmade 'quad-tracks'¹⁸ have been mistaken for stalkerpaths; three further such OS cases are suspected. The most egregious is that illustrated above in Gleann Fhiodhaig (Glenuaig)¹⁹.

The status of the original stalkerpath population has been assessed from satellite imagery. This is generally adequate for the purpose, but can exaggerate quad and machine 'quadding'. Groundtruthing sometimes detects followable but little-used paths that do not stand out on imagery, but conversely often finds paths in poorer (wetter/eroded) condition underfoot than they look from above.

About 20 stalkerpaths (almost a quarter) remain substantially 'pristine'. However, with routine maintenance having long ceased in nearly all cases (probably when one or other Wars interrupted estate labour availability), pristine here means traceable in reasonable walking condition, subject to ordinary attrition by the elements, and with the main artefacts of its original construction detectable. This is quite encouraging, sufficient to capture the diversity and landscape character, and restorable.



Most of SP9.18 **Bride nan Eagan** is classed 'pristine' as readily followable, at a brisk pace - sequence is from thick heather footslopes, up escarpment, across broad shelf, and up a rim gully onto plateau - with winter view of well-reserved zigzags.

¹⁷ the Who Owns Scotland website compiled by Andy Wightman is invaluable, although already 20 years old - it is the basis for the density contrasts given here, modified where original boundaries are known.

¹⁸ we refer here to the visible traces left on open ground by ATVs including quad-bikes as 'quad-tracks' and the light machine recutting or easing of stalkerpaths to facilitate their passage as 'quadding' - as distinct from bulldozed tracks to take 4x4s, land-rovers etc.

¹⁹ one candidate confidently spotted by the writer on imagery above one of the Conon–Orrin passes also proved illusory, but at least the wild goose had only been chased a few hundred yards.

Most paths vary in condition over their length, and 189 ratings have been assigned to path segments (quantifying their lengths would be another matter). Broadly equal numbers of segments are pristine, good, or deteriorated (ie. followable but impeded by roughness, wetness, or vegetation). Among the mostly pristine paths, the Gleann Fhiodhaig trio stands out as having lost substantial sections to stream erosion, suggesting unwise route selection here²⁰.

Of the 85 stalkerpaths, only 3 are almost completely lost²¹ but 26 have 'abandoned' elements to the extent that parts can no longer be seen or followed. Tracing their courses may be assisted by maps and imagery, but a good eye for where the path-makers may have headed, or turned, is invaluable, honed by years of practice (at getting lost!). Sometimes in thick ground cover, the boots sense where to go. Crossing side slopes, tiny skyline nicks may betray a cut berm. If no likely way appears ahead, looking up over one's shoulder often espies an obscure double-back.

About 30 stalkerpaths have been 'quadded' in places, but only a few in their entirety. Such 'improvements' inevitably entail some loss of character and artefacts. They are widely distributed, but the Killilan and Attadale estates have gone furthest.

Only 12 have undergone partial conversion to bulldozed tracks, this being a more likely fate for the hill tracks in the glens and passes. One group in Strathfarrar is due to 'big hydro' constructing weirs to capture the waters of hanging tributaries²²; a few recent scattered cases are for 'run-of-river' hydro weirs; others are for estate access or forestry. In addition, the path starts from Benula and Strathmore Lodges have been drowned by the Mullardoch and Monar reservoirs.

6. STALKERPATH ARCHAEOLOGY - DESIGN AND ARTEFACTS

This is so far only a scoping study, with photos taken *en passant*. Some general observations can be offered on path specifications and recordable artefacts:

- width - there seems to have been a conventional standard width of six feet²³, for ordinary properly constructed paths. This presumably permitted ponies (garrons) to be led, for deer extraction. How wide a path needed to be (across a steep slope) for guests to ride or be led is unknown. Narrower paths for people to walk single file are common, usually higher up, whether etched as notches into the slope, or where a line is simply cleared of boulders. Conversely, mostly lower down, some paths seem more generous, and may have been designed for small carts and gigs. However, encroachment by vegetation, especially heather²⁴, and by soil and stone creep has

²⁰ the Sgurr nan Ceannaichean path, well-known to hillwalkers, starts up a green tongue between two large gullies cut in weak glacial debris - the centres of the dozen tight zigzags survive, their ends are lost to recent storm erosion.

²¹ one above Killilan Lodge, superseded by one on the opposite bank, if still traceable on imagery; one up the Allt Taige from drowned Cozac (Cossack) Lodge at Mullardoch; and one east of Moruisg criss-crossing up a river, where the early mapping may have been, exceptionally, of bankside animal trods or skimpy upgradings thereof. The lower parts of several early paths on the south side of Strathfarrar have disappeared to stream erosion, suggesting new owners/factors were unaware of the futility of burnside path-making in steep V-valleys, when they could have been carried up the open shoulders above.

²² although such vehicle tracks were and are not essential for weir construction and maintenance, witness that in the Strathfarrar pinewood above Pollcherian, built without any visible track and now accessed by a rudimentary quad route.

²³ this was also the standard width of a municipal pavement, until it became 2 m. Path-making gangs traditionally included a tall lad who would lie across the cut way at intervals to gauge the correct width.

²⁴ a principal bane especially on side-slopes, as heather grows down across the path, forcing deer to the outer edge and even off it. The cut path then infills with dense heather and is lost.

narrowed most paths so that the design width can only be determined at spots such as bridges and rock walls.



These paths in Glen Elchaig and Strathfarrar (SP9.04 / 35) have rare cuts through boulders or bedrock ledges where a six-foot width is verifiable.

- surface - paths were universally surfaced with 'till', the glacial moraine fortuitously smeared and heaped across the land. As a 'readymix' of silt, sand, and gravel it compacts and drains well, and is comfortably resilient to walk on²⁵. Often, the ground simply needed scraped, but where fill was required, it was dug from 'borrow pits' which dot many path-sides (a road engineer's term, although the loan is never repaid). Sometimes entire glacial hummocks ('tullochs') have been levelled. Borrow pits often contain mires or pools, a bonus for wildlife. Where borrow pits are absent, cheapskate construction may be suspected - and deteriorated condition the outcome. Unfortunately, even with the best-made paths, this material is vulnerable to water erosion, and today only tiny fragments survive intact, usually across little brows. Very occasionally, if such fill was lacking, wet ground might be crossed with stone pitching, turf causeways, or corduroy construction with logs²⁶.



SP9.04 **Loch nan Ealachan**, Killilan, Glen Elchaig displays stone pitching to strengthen the scraped surface on a wet ascent, and a raised turf-bank path across a peaty moor lacking 'till' to expose or borrow.

²⁵ and much preferred to the hard 'macadamised' roads built of broken stone rather than rounded pebbles, especially when many highlanders, and their beasts, still went barefoot.

²⁶ beyond the study area, a fine example of corduroy path is at Dubh Loch, Fisherfield.



Borrow-pits are hard to photo - this large one beside SP9.35 in **Coire nam Brathan**, Strathfarrar has not saved the ill-conceived path line verging between deteriorated and abandoned in condition. Fine examples line a path above Leckie up the **Heights of Kinlochewe** (right), this one beside a well-preserved skimmed surface on a glacial tulloch.

- drainage - the *sine qua non* of durable path-making was quickly realised to be effective drainage, on several scales. Path surfaces were domed to shed water; ditches were dug one or both sides (double-ditching); frequent dips with escape ditches would prevent water flowing down the path to become an erosive rivulet; where seeps and rills flowed across the dips, they would be hardened with paved or slabbed 'water crossings', whether dished or flat with kerbs. Sometimes, cut-off drains slant the hillside above, channelling surface water to the hardened crossings. Again, construction standards vary widely, with economy versions relying on frequent maintenance and repair.
- cundies, fords, and bridges - these are the chief constructed artefacts, a prerequisite where streams and rivers had to be crossed. The better quality paths feature stone 'cundies'²⁷ to carry paths across streams small enough to be spanned with large slabs on squared stonework abutments (these are often now concealed in rank vegetation²⁸). Stone arch bridges are almost unknown, being reserved for estate access roads. Footbridges of timber and wire are uncommon, being unsuitable for ponies, and mainly used for crossing narrow ravines; the originals seldom survive, and replacements are few. Fording was the rule, and indeed 'Ford' is today a useful tell-tale on a 25k map that a path exists²⁹. Even the best-made stone-paved fords are vulnerable to storm spates, and often survive only as a few obviously set stones, or as localised boulder strews downstream. Where a steep burn course had to be crossed, handsome check-dam fords might be built up, which tend to survive as they arrest the spate and are permeable (they also created scenic waterfalls).

²⁷ this is a Scottish lowlands term for a built ditch under a road - here it indicates a stone box limited in width to the span of slabs locally available. They are now often replaced with pipes.

²⁸ and can be lethal if the slabs have become invisibly gappy - especially if cycling.

²⁹ again, OS policy is inconsistent: properly, only constructed fords should be so marked (or recognised shallow crossing points at rivers), but some paths are sprinkled with this word at every burn.



The numerous paths on Killilan Estate in Glen Elchaig were well designed and built, with SP9.04 **Loch nan Ealachan** displaying stone cundies (left) and a small check-dam ford.

- slopes - stalkerpaths in the study area have an average height gain of 330 m (aggregate 28,370 m). Discounting the substantial mileage which rises gradually up the valley floors, where steeper slopes had to be surmounted this was almost entirely done by simple cut-and-fill notched terraces slanting up across them. Being hand-dug, this was done much more conservatively than with today's JCB, the material being carefully emplaced as a compact embankment, minimising bare faces



The long zag across Sgurr nan Ceannaichean upper slope, simple cut and bank now only 3-4 feet wide

exposed to erosion. Stone retaining walls were a last resort, at awkward spots – unless the owner wished to impress guests with visible craft, or a path needed to be wide and stable enough for light wheeled traffic.

- zig-zags - the emblem of the stalkerpath, 226 pairs of zig-zags are recorded in the study area. The traverse of Sgurr na Feartaig (Achnashellach) benefits from 31, and there are several continuous sequences of a dozen or so. However, only 35 of the 85 paths possess them. They are difficult to construct, the corners ranging from sharp 'step-ups', via slight dug-in or built-out easings to get a pony round, to substantial curves for a cart or gig. Tightly curved sequences are corkscrews, broader ones are hairpins. These are perhaps the most persistent and visible artefacts, tending to choose the more stable slope panels to ascend, and with drainage runoffs at each bend; however they suffer from quadding enlarging the bends, notably on Killilan.



The **Sgurr nan Feartaig** stalkerpath SP9.16 has numerous zozags, this set rising up the west end from the Bearnais col. Such higher-level paths are not intended for spring use.

Parallel ditches

One curious design 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 (a new way up at the west end would have been required, much of SP9.37 above Ardchuilk having been lost to gully erosion). Similar traces occur on the shoulder above Culligran opposite Struy³⁰.

7. SOME CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS - THE SYMBOLIC VALUE OF STALKERPATHS

There is much more that could be done - including detailed recording and archiving, tracing ownership histories and the personalities involved, and searching for estate records and any folk memories of path usage and lore. Good photographs, whether of details or from viewpoints opposite, are hard to obtain in good contrast light. All suggestions and contributions will be welcomed.

The more one delves, the more fascinating become the motivations for making these paths. Beyond the practical benefits for sport and recreation and entertainment, and beyond the display of wealth and success, what else motivated the constructors? For some, buying a Highland estate may have been a canny investment in property, likely to appreciate in a stable and prosperous high-Victorian economic climate. And investing in its tangible and listable assets would enhance that value. Marketing an estate as being equipped with fine stalking paths would equate today to a forestry plantation being marketed as fully 'roaded'.

These *nouveau riche* estate purchasers would have wished to stamp their mark, show they knew a thing or two, and continue the earlier spirit of agricultural improvement and

³⁰ for illustrations and another recent discovery just outside the study area, see NOSAS Blogpost on the Glencarron Lodge stalkerpaths and accompanying slideset.

landscaped policies of the Scottish Enlightenment. Yet they must have been conscious of their complete inexperience with this kind of land and its best management, and at the mercy of their factor and head stalker in an entirely new industry. Whoever may have initiated the stalkerpath idea, following this new-fangled trend would be hard to resist.

Because one key thing this study suggests is that stalkerpaths were not needed for successful stalking. Some estates (such as Killilan) are fully 'stalkerpathed', others have a token one or two. Not only does Grimble make no mention of them, in his assiduous garnering of data on numbers of stags taken he never suggests that an estate prospers because of, or could do much better if equipped with, stalkerpaths.

These new owners were also well aware of the dynastic tradition of clan ownership, now being romanticised by Walter Scott. To what extent were they dreaming of starting new dynasties, creating assets for their heirs? Might we even see stalkerpaths within a colonial mindset, that civilising influence bringing progress into savage lands, the benefactors signifying their advent with conspicuous flourishes, inscribing almost ineradicable 'improvements' across vast acreages and on public maps?

How enduring this Highland idyll might have proved cannot be known, as the Great War ended it. Few if any estates here remain in the hands of the families that developed them. The numerous changes of ownership will owe much to sons killed, to taxes, to economic depressions. The cold reality of unprofitable estate ownership may also have lost its appeal to heirs living in more comfortable parts of Britain. It may be telling that the exceptional restoration of 'Clan Macpherson' lairdship of Attadale was a buy-back funded by success in the City.

The true heirs and beneficiaries are now overwhelmingly hillwalkers and all who find solace in the 'wilds'. Although walkers know them as 'stalker's paths', their existence is very much taken for granted³¹. Modern estates have little use for traditional stalkerpaths³² and rarely maintain them, a delightful little exception being up Beinn Meadhoin south of Inverchorain, Strath Conon. In the study area, few paths are of much advantage to walkers - of the "best eight" below, only three could be called popular, while three probably go un-walked for months on end. Indeed, it is a main aim of this Study to encourage more people to seek out these paths and keep them vital. The writer only came to appreciate there was a buried history here quite recently, and the Epigraph with which this Report opened is a kind of epiphany - yet another way of 'seeing the hills differently', and better.

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8. HIGH POINTS OF THE STALKERPATH PHENOMENON - illustrated

The study area stalkerpath population has been rated on a five-star scale for

- > original quality of design and construction,
- > present degree of pristine survival (which is not unrelated), and especially
- > choice of route, overall and in detail, on both functional and scenic fronts – bearing in mind the several modes of recreation and entertaining they were to serve.

This yields seven five-star and fourteen four-star cases. There are 25 one-star cases.

³¹ the valuable Geograph website has 37 images so tagged in the Highlands, often in obscure locations to 'bag' a square, and all perceived as individual made paths rather than as a population with definable attributes and history.

<https://www.geograph.org.uk/tagged/stalkers+path>

³² although an autumn 2021 Ross-shire Journal 'country walk' follows the part-quadded path up Allt an Amise and the half-vanished spiral on up An Sidhean, encountering Strathconon Estate stalkers followed by their pony-man, the garron clearly capable of negotiating a quite narrow path.

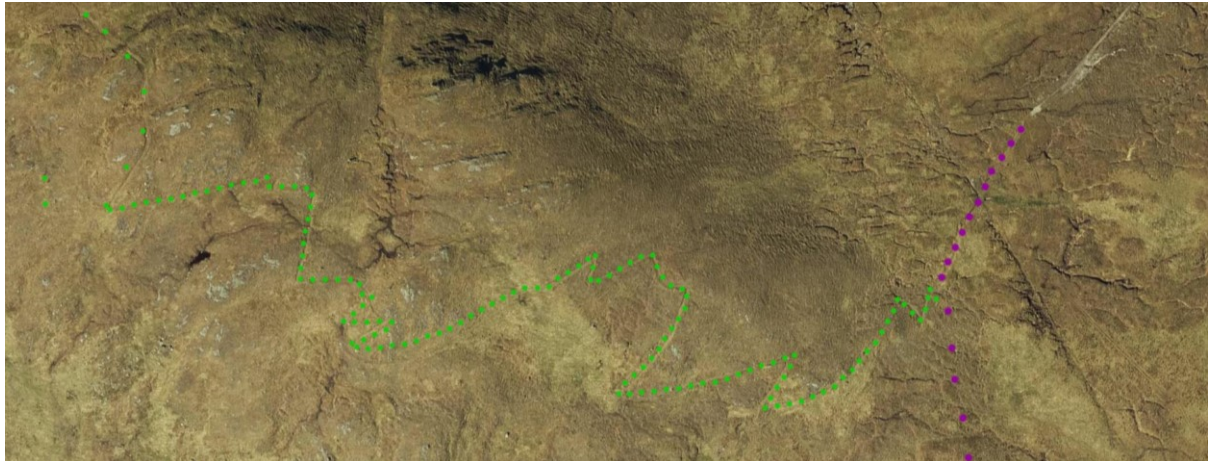
The surviving stalkerpath high points from that privileged era thus include :

SP9.12 Beinn Dronaig

Attadale

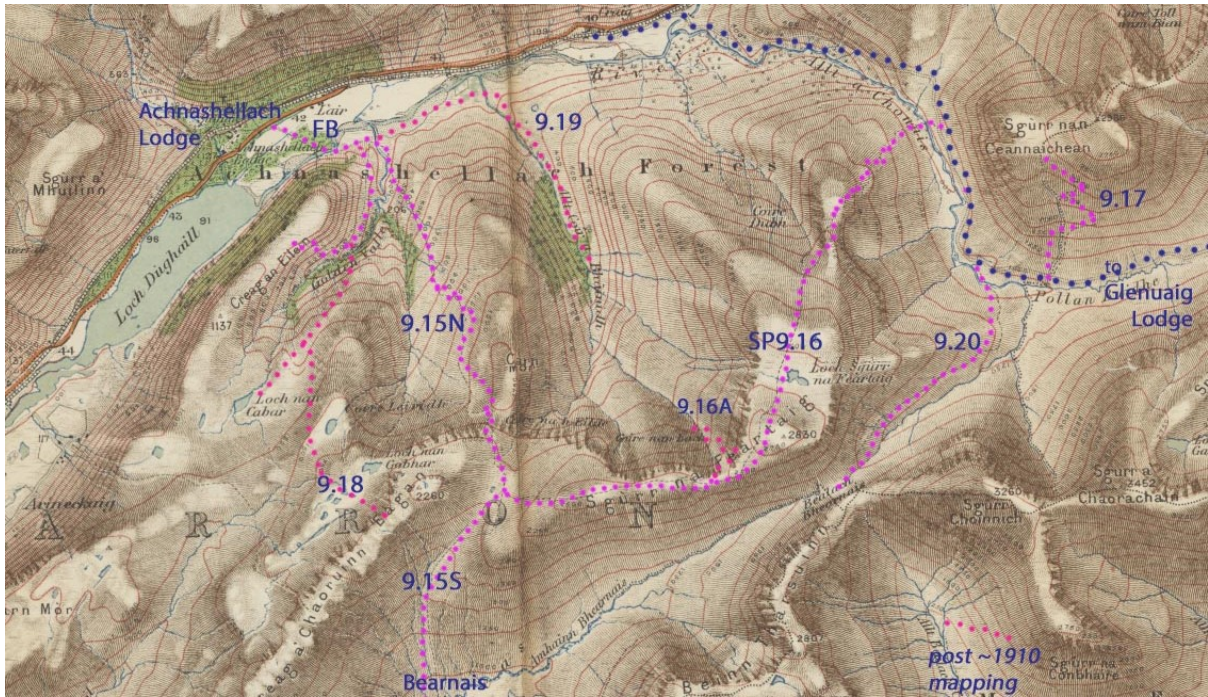
start NH 059387

short, exquisite 9-zigzag sequence up the east end, though approach tracks marred by quadding; primarily for sporting access; only four feet wide, but ponies could do it, as the terrain is fairly gentle.



Only 1.7 km long and gaining less than 200 m, from an obscure turning off a 'hill track' of sorts – quadded top end from Loch Calavie-foot, made to the low col, a mere route south across the wastes to ford the River Ling at Maol-bhuidhe; it may become a new 'worn trod' as the Cape Wrath Way follows it.

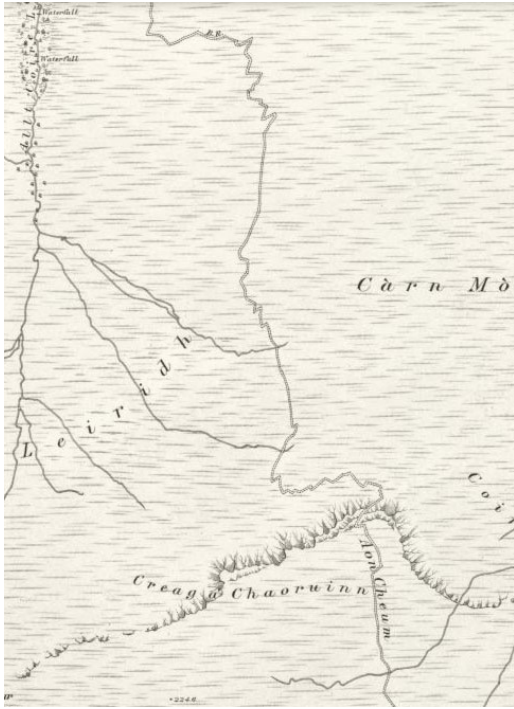
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Achnashellach Estate has several of the top-rated paths :



SP9.16 **Sgurr na Feartaig** Achnashellach start NH 027449
 Sky-walking the entire 6 km ridge, over tops more than 800m high, with 10- and 21-zigzag flights up either end, plus 18-zigzag approach up the Bearnais path (9.15N), option of unique 8-zigzag corrie headwall descent midway; marred by loss of River Carron ford and footbridge, and by forestry; initial phases either end were probably made for sport, but the ridge path appears intended more to delineate and celebrate a fine recreational circuit from the Lodge.



SP9.16A Coire nan Each headwall zigzags(, with Sgurr na Feartaig path along rim (summit top left; view looking south) - enlargement recommended to see both path and dotted line offset above



left - SP15N Achnashellach-Aon Cheum right - SP9.16 Sgurr na Feartaig east end
 OS 6" 1st Ed 1875 shows both these approaches to the Sgurr na Feartaig traverse
 OS 6" 2nd Ed 1902 links 9.15N and 9.15S across the Bearnais pass
 OS 1" 3rd Ed ~1910 completes the 9.16 traverse

SP9.18 Bride nan Eagan Achnashellach start NH 011481
 The most intricate and delicate of all, in places needing intuition to read it, 12 zigzags up stepped escarpments onto a rocky plateau; marred as 9.16, plus a daunting heather-swamped start; loch fishing, stalking, and recreational value.



Bride nan Eagan - a pristine segment twists up the lower tiers of the Strathcarron escarpment (dotted line offset above - again, enlargement recommended)

SP9.22 Sgurr nan Ceannaichean Achnashellach start NH 082467

Bold 18-zigzag ascent from Gленаig carriage drive to Munro shoulder, fine viewpoint over Strath Carron; tight lower sequence between ravines with eroded ends, very long upper slants.



Lower flight between gullies, corkscrew curves rather than zigzags - most corners now eroded off

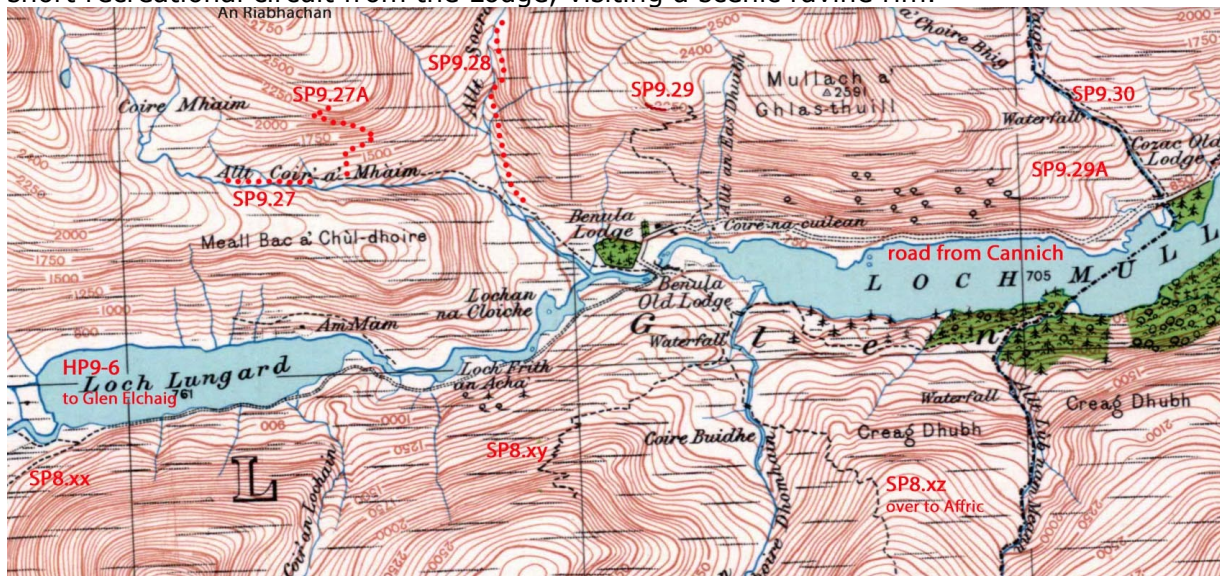
SP9.23 **Glenuaig Lodge** Glencarron start NH 109480
ingenious 11-zigzag ascent from Lodge to Moruisg plateau rim, exploiting an extensive landslide which breaks up the craggy trough wall; gully erosion damage; obvious sporting purpose, but makes a circuit with previous (if on different estates).



The upper flight of zigzags above Glenuaig Lodge, six-foot wide thus far, then narrower

SP9.29 **Mullach a' Ghlas-thuill** East Benula start NH 153309

A similar glen wall ascent, also exploiting a landslip, if only 5 zigzags; start drowned by Mullardoch dam; mid section fades in lush grazings; sporting access, also afforded a short recreational circuit from the Lodge, visiting a scenic ravine rim.

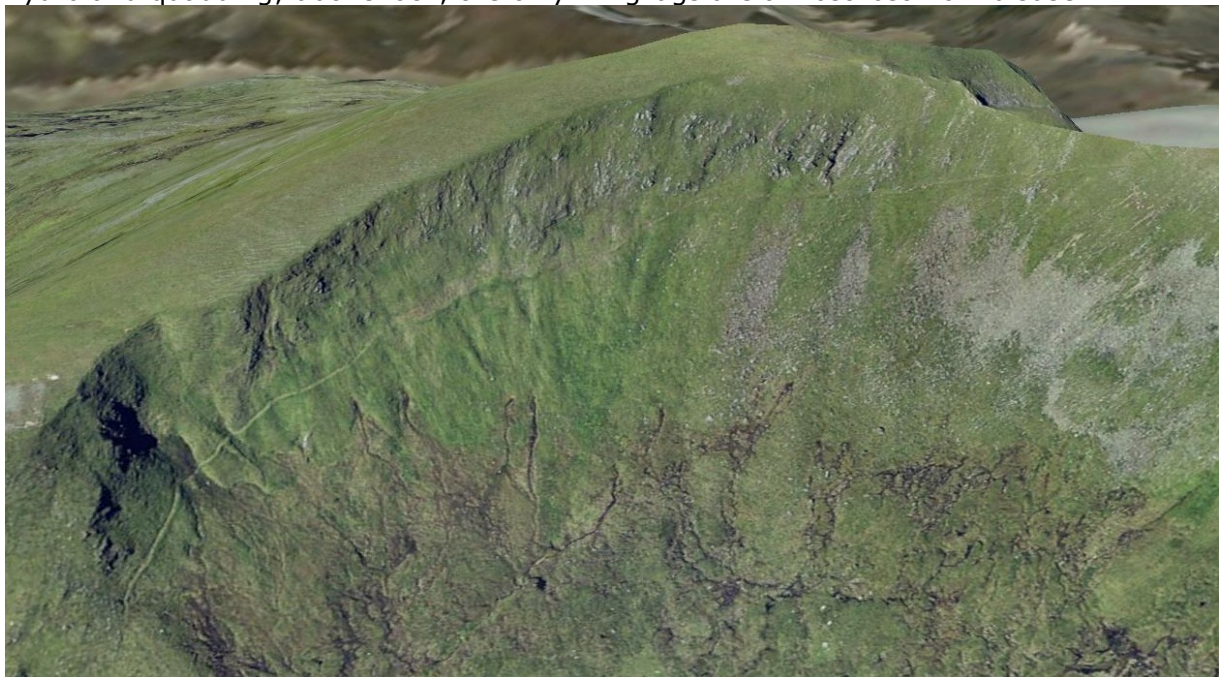


SP9.29 is one of a radiating network around Benula Lodge, Mullardoch - this 1900s 3rd Ed. distinguishes carriage road, old hill track (as a thinner road), and paths. SP9.27A is the one entire path never mapped by OS.

SP9.41 **Sgurr Fhuar-thuill**

Glenstrathfarrar start NH 223392

The most spectacular mountain path, attaining almost 1000m on the north rim by a long curving slant up the corrie headwall (*image below*); lower half to fishing loch marred by hydro and quadding; above loch, the only 2 zigzags are almost lost from disuse.



The upper tier of Toll a' Mhuic, with Sgurr na Fearstaig - just one final zag-back onto the col

SP9.45 **Sgurr a' Phollain**

Glenstrathfarrar start NH 395405

Mundane lower reaches almost lost or incomplete in places; fishing loch; parallel-ditched mystery segment; final ambitious 11-zigzag ascent - more of a corkscrew - (*image below*) to 850m summit and tremendous viewpoint.



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APPENDIX - SUMMARY TABLE to see full width, open in View - 'Draft' /

STALKERPATHS IN THE SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS – THE INVENTORY

Area SP9 WESTERN HIGHLANDS

Elchaig-Mullardoch-Monar-Conon-Strathfarrar massifs

SUMMARY TABLE

sector	main estate	km SP	km HP (made)	km SP+HP	area km ²	SP ratio km / km ²	SP+HP ratio
Glen Elchaig N River Ling S	Killilan	26.0	15	41	96	0.27	0.43
River Ling N	Attadale	8.8	7	15.8	62	0.14	0.26
Strath Carron SE	Achnashellach	35.9	-	35.9	58	0.62	0.62
Glen Carron S Gleann Fhiodhaig	Glencarron & Glenuaig	9.4	5.5	14.9	62	0.15	0.24
Loch Mullardoch N	E Benula Glencannich	14.2	4	18.2	99	0.14	0.18
Strath Farrar S	Braulen Struy	33.8	-	36.8	95	0.36	0.39
Strath Farrar N	Braulen Struy	33.5	6	39.6	100	0.33	0.40
Orrin S	Strathconon Erchless etc	9.4	4	13.4	94	0.10	0.11
Monar S	Patt	3.5	5	8.5	45	0.07	0.19
Monar N	W/E Monar	29.1	-	29.1	77	0.38	0.38
Strath Conon S	Strathconon	31.5	25	56.5	148	0.22	0.38
Strath Conon N	Strathconon	18.8	31	39.9	192	0.10	0.21
Area SP9		252.9	102	354.9	1128	0.23	0.31
		156 miles			436 sq miles	0.36 miles/sqm	
	numbers	average length					
stalkerpaths	70		7 classic SPs (in bold)				
- branches	15						
	85	3.0					
		2.2	excl. 11 long paths not typical SP (85 km) - usual max 6 km				
hill paths (made)	15	6.8	max 460m asl, HP9-1 Maol-bhuidhe				
		length					
longest	SP9.14-15S-N,16	15.1	Achintee-Bearneas-Achnashellach +6.3 Feartaig ridge				
	SP9-58W-E	12.0	Corrievuic-Drochaid-Torran-Inverchoran +0.9 Coye				
	SP9.66	8.2	Milton-Clais Mhor (Sg a'Mhuilín back corries)				
	SP9.67	8.0	Gleann Meinich				
	SP9.65	7.6	Conon-Orrin Carn na Coinnich				
		top elevation					
highest	SP9.06	800	Faochag				
	SP9.16	830	Sgurr na Feartaig				

