

SKYE ESTATES

Sconser, Strathaird, Torrin

From Gharbh-bheinn looking down to Loch Ainort and the Sound of Raasay. Marsco and Red Cuillin on the left.

KEY FACTS



Torrin was acquired by the John Muir Trust in 1991, Strathaird in 1994 and Sconser in 1997.

Areas

Torrin 2225 ha (5500 acres), Strathaird 6500 ha (15,000 acres), Sconser 3400 ha (8400 acres).

Summits

Blà Bheinn, 928 m (3044 ft) is the highest point in the JMT land. Gharbh-bheinn 806 m (2649 m) is where the three estate boundaries meet. Glamaig 775 m (2542 ft) is the highest of the Red Cuillin.

Designations

- The Cuillin Hills National Scenic Area (green on map above) includes parts of all estates.
- The Cuillins Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) includes parts of all estates.
- The Cuillin Special Protection Area, a European designation under the Birds Directive, includes parts of all estates.
- The Elgol Coast SSSI is 2 km north of Elgol in Strathaird.
- The Sligachan Peatlands Special Area of Conservation (SAC) includes part of Sconser and Strathaird.
- The Strath SAC and SSSI include part of Torrin.



Approximate boundaries of the three estates, also showing the main excluded areas (pale tint). The summits shown, from North, are Glamaig, Marsco, Gharbh-bheinn and Blà Bheinn.

THE LAND

The John Muir Trust land on Skye is east of the Black Cuillin Ridge, and between four sea lochs – Sligachan and Ainort to the north, Scaavaig and Slapin to the south.

It's a landscape of strong features and also strong contrasts. High mountain slopes including Glamaig, Sgurr na Stri and Blà Bheinn rise from sea to summit without interruption. They are also seen rising from wide peatlands, as in Glen Sligachan, and against the croftland and coastal woods of Torrin and southern Strathaird. The hills themselves may be red and rounded (the Red Cuillin between Glamaig and Marsco) or black and jagged (Blà Bheinn and its satellites), and there's also white limestone that outcrops and is quarried at Torrin.

The area west of the Blà Bheinn–Clach Glas–Garbh-bheinn ridge, including Coire Dubh, is as wild as any land in Britain. Its rugged nature is enhanced by its remoteness and loneliness and the absence of roads, tracks and vehicles.

The west boundary of the JMT land runs through Loch Coruisk, in the heart of the Black Cuillin and undoubtedly the most spectacular body of water in Britain.

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Three estates

Torrin The £180,000 purchase price of Torrin was raised by intensive fundraising. It is entirely crofted and was the first JMT estate to include croft land. There are 18 crofts.

Strathaird The Trust was invited to buy Strathaird by its previous owner. The purchase price of nearly £800,000 was raised through the Blà Bheinn Appeal, the most successful appeal the Trust has run. Strathaird is the JMT's largest estate. The south is crofted, with three townships, Drinan (11 crofts), Elgol (26) and Glasnakille (10). The estate farm at Kilmarie has been run by a farming partnership since 2001.

Sconser was bought with the co-operation of the previous owner and of the estate's crofting tenants. An appeal raised £200,000, much more than the purchase price. Sconser is 60% crofted. On taking over, the Trust more than doubled the area of the common grazings to 2000 ha.

■ Like other John Muir Trust properties, the Skye estates were bought from willing sellers with the support of the community, and not bid for on the open market.



Blà Bheinn

Sometimes written *Blaven* in English, its name means 'Blue mountain'. *Blà* comes from the Norse for blue.

Sorley MacLean wrote:

and even if I came in sight of Paradise
what price its moon without *Blaven*?



From top Red and black Cuillin: Marsco with Blà Bheinn group behind from Glen Sligachan Keith Miller; peatlands of Strath na Creitheach Andrew Raven; Blà Bheinn above Torrin Ian Anderson; model of Collie-Mackenzie sculpture; restructuring conifer block beneath Blà Bheinn; shipping out coastal litter from Loch Scaivaig both Douglas Halliday.

Natural history

Geology The 'Red Cuillin' to the north are rounded, and formed from granite with a reddish hue. Blà Bheinn and other hills to the south of the area are, like the main Cuillin ridge across Cor'-uisg, are mainly gabbro, a rough grey or brown crystalline rock, interspersed with basalt, which by contrast is smooth and slippery, especially when wet. Both granite and gabbro hills are the deeply eroded roots of large volcanoes. The effects of gouging, sharpening and scoring by ice age glaciers is clear to see. Weathering since the ice retreated has produced the scree slopes on both red and black hills, and, where basalt has eroded faster than gabbro, has formed some of the chasms, slots, pinnacles and 'bad steps' that are the delight or despair of hillgoers. Torrin is on Durness limestone which has been worked for 'Skye marble' for centuries.

Vegetation On flatter ground, notably the Strath na Creitheach– Glen Sligachan system and upper Strath Mor, there are large peatlands. Some are actively growing blanket bog, little disturbed by man and a priority habitat under the EU Habitats Directive. More widespread is wet heath on the thinner layers of peat found on the lower slopes of the hills. Much of the higher hills is made up of bare rock and scree, with sparse or no vegetation. But the rare mountain avens is found in limestone

outcrops on the SW ridge of Blà Bheinn. Luxuriant species-rich tall herb vegetation has developed on NW-facing crags and ledges in Coire Uaigneich of Blà Bheinn, accompanied by numerous bryophytes (mosses and liverworts). Strathaird is rich in bryophytes, many of them classed as Atlantic species, found in very few places in Europe. Semi-natural woodlands with hazel, ash and hawthorn are found in Torrin and Strathaird coasts; local people have noticed them expanding over recent years.

Fauna 19 mammal species have recently been recorded. Red deer numbers seem to have increased in the last 25 years, perhaps because of less work on crofts and the decay in old forestry fencing. A 2006 count found about 230 animals on JMT land.

Breeding birds are typical of the western highlands, and there is a fairly high density of birds of prey. Since 1994, more than 70 species have been recorded breeding in Strathaird and Torrin, 28 listed as of high or medium conservation concern.

JMT surveys have revealed a rich invertebrate fauna in several sites, notably at Keppoch where 269 species were found in one small area of bog.

Partnerships The Trust wishes to work in active partnership with crofters, and aims to be able to assist with planning and implementing management if invited. We set up management committees for each estate at the time of purchase. The Torrin and Strathaird committees have developed into community associations and all have the opportunity to be involved in the management of the estates.

A video on life in Torrin, and the opening of Torrin's first shop for some time (the Blue Shed cafe and shop, right), are among initiatives we have encouraged. In Sconser, we have helped to get several unused sites in the village landscaped, and to provide a cattle handling facility. We help Torrin householders afflicted by invasive Japanese Knotweed by applying specialist weedkillers. Restructuring forestry blocks produces useful amounts of firewood for sale locally.



Human history

There are signs of human activity on the JMT land for at least the last 6000 years, from neolithic stone circles, up to lost villages that were emptied in 19th-century clearances. More than 300 archaeological sites have been recorded in surveys conducted for the Trust. These include well preserved hut circles from the Bronze and Iron Ages. Nationally important 'ancient landscapes' have been identified – they reveal land divisions, hut circles, tracks, pens, cairns and other settlement remains. Two of these landscapes, in the Abhainn Cille Mhaire basin and on Druim an Fhuarain (both Strathaird) are from the Bronze and Iron Ages and a third, in Glen Scaladal, is probably the site of a Viking-period farm. Felling has revealed more recent 'lost village' remains at Keppoch.

Moving to the Victorian age, a community group from Sconser and Sligachan aim to commemorate the lives of the Sconser climbing guide John Mackenzie and his friend and best known client Prof Norman Collie through a bronze sculpture at Sligachan. We are actively involved in the project.



John Muir Trust at work

The Trust's base in Skye is the house of Clach Glas, on the Elgol road near Kilmorie. It has an information board.

Under the Skye Coastal Woodlands Project, a 5-year plan in partnership with the Peter de Haan Charitable Trust, 24 native woodland areas in Torrin and Strathaird are being managed, regenerated or planted from new. JMT land includes some large commercial forestry blocks whose edges are being 'softened' to reduce their impact: in the long term these woods will be restructured to be at least 90% native trees. Also in the long term, we will manage woodlands outside of crofted areas without fencing.

The restructuring of the forestry blocks and the coastal woodlands scheme both enable us to open up lower-level walking routes as alternatives to more serious upland walks.

We are restoring coastal routes in the areas of Dun Ringill, Rubha Cruaidhlinn and Keppoch on the E coast of Strathaird.

The buoyant red deer population has prevented regeneration of native woodland and is damaging crops and gardens. We have a deer culling programme and aim to reach a balance between regeneration and the deer's place in the landscape by 2008.

Litter collection around Strathaird's coast, and especially the beach at Glen Scaladal, is an ongoing task, as is reducing invasive plant species. We have laid out a discreet parking area, with signage, at the start of the popular ascent of Blà Bheinn. At a few places on this route we have done path repairs to contain damage; in general though the Trust does not believe the mountain experience should be made easier by new paths or waymarking.

