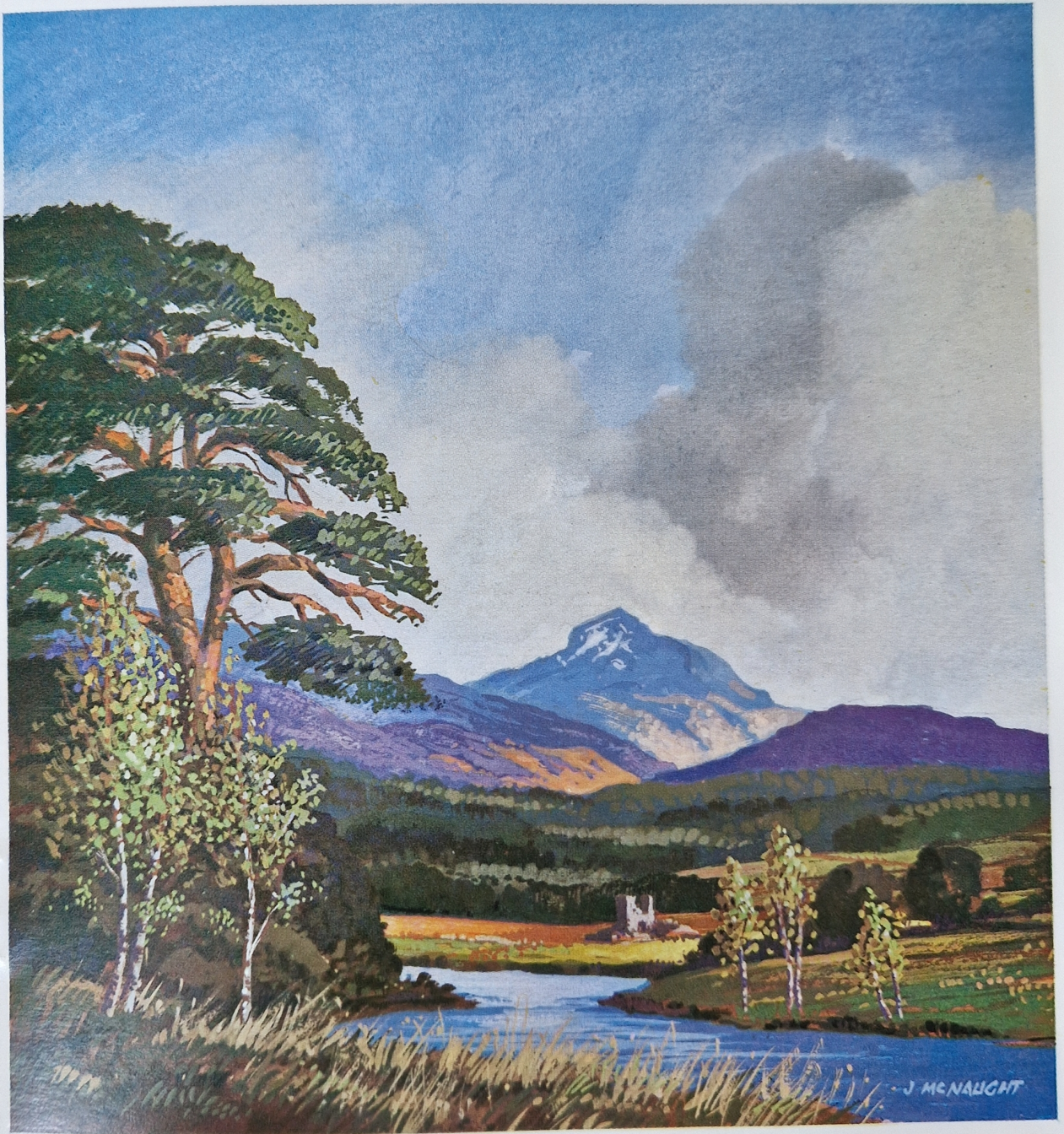


JRM 15/3/2
FORESTRY COMMISSION



BENNACHIE

BENNACHIE FOREST

Within an area of about 12 miles square lying south of the Inverurie to Insh road are some 20 blocks of woodland which comprise Bennachie Forest. The two main blocks called Bennachie and Pitfichie lie to the north and south of the River Don respectively while to the west is the very attractive wood of Whitehaugh: to the east extending towards Inverurie and Kemnay are most of the smaller blocks.

The total area of the forest including the unplanted "tops" is around 15,000 acres. Much of it is land that is too steep, too poor or too rocky for normal agricultural purposes.

The forest lies between the higher ranges of the Grampian Mountains and the Buchan Plain and provides many varied and fine views especially to the north. The most magnificent of these are to be had from the Bennachie Ridge and the Millstone Hill which lies close by the Ridge to the south east.

The main species of trees used for planting were Scots Pine, Larch, and Spruce. A considerable number of the plantations have now reached a stage where they are producing in the main, small timber for pit props and pulp while a few provide quite large sizes of timber.

Many of the forest blocks are young, for the land on which they were planted was only purchased after the Second World War.



GEOLOGY AND LANDSCAPE

The Hill of Bennachie forms a huge island of grey and pink granite with schist to the west and gneiss (pronounced "nice") to the east. The granite was formed as molten rock cooled slowly underground and is known as an igneous or "fire-formed" rock. The other two rocks were formed millions of years ago by the action of heat and pressure on deposits of silt and mud and are known as metamorphic or changed rocks.

The destructive force of the glaciers in the Ice Ages followed by the weathering action of wind, rain and frost gradually wore away the softer rocks covering the granite. The end result is the ridge with its broken plateau and the slopes we can see on Bennachie today. The granite is very hard but it is also subject to weathering and erosion. This produces the bizarre shapes and massive blocks of stone found on and close to the summit peaks.

The castellated ridge of Bennachie with its famous "Taps" extending for about five miles from east to west tends to dominate the landscape from the north east. Despite this, Bennachie is not very high rising only to about 1,700 feet. It is on the edge of a large lowland flatter area thus throwing the slopes into marked relief. The ridge is visible from great distances over the "Buchan" plain of Aberdeenshire and from the seas beyond it.

"The Mither Tap o' Bennachie
The sailor's Lan'mark frae the sea"

Oxen Craig, towards the middle of the ridge, is the highest point at 1,733 feet above sea level.

The northern face of the forest is a steep one but the rest of it falls away in a series of peaks and valleys to the east, south and west, occupying rounder, more gentle slopes, while further away to the south west across Strathdon, lie the great peaks of the Grampians themselves - Lochnagar and the Cairngorms. Bennachie demonstrates in miniature the transition zone between better agricultural soils of the great coastal plain of Buchan and the Moray Firth and the rocky bare areas that reach up to the tops of the Grampian mountain range.

WILD LIFE

Within the area of Bennachie Forest there are many habitats or communities containing a very wide variety of plant and animal life. The range of these from the windswept high tops and plateau to the sheltered lush fringes of the River Don is very clear. Each habitat has its own characteristic group of plants and animals and the enthusiastic but patient observer will find study of them all most rewarding. Near the summit may be found several interesting mountain plants, such as the alpine clubmoss, fir clubmoss, the cloudberry, the blaeberry and the crowberry. The dominant plant is the Ling or heather, and the purple bell heather can be found growing amongst it.



In the wetter areas can be found bog cotton, heathrush, the insectivorous sundew and butterwort. An interesting feature is the frequency of the dense swards of woodrush growing on the more sheltered parts of the hill. On the high tops can be found the mountain hare, wildcat, red grouse, short-eared owl, golden plover and curlew. Ptarmigan have been seen. Birds of prey such as the buzzard and kestrel hunt over these open areas searching for mice, voles and other small mammals.

The habitat changes in a dramatic and visual way as one descends from the rocky tops past the hardier mosses and lichens through the heath moorland into the woodland below.

The present forest is man made and many trees not native to Britain thrive within its boundaries but it still contains a remarkable amount of natural indigenous plant life. Native trees such as birch, rowan, ash, hazel, alder and oak can be found growing in the rides, alongside burns and even amongst the conifers. In some places, fairly large areas of naturally recurring trees have been left to help improve the visual and environmental quality of the forest.

Forests, and Bennachie is no exception, are excellent places to search for fungi, lichens and mosses which occur in great variety and numbers. Fox, badger, red squirrel and roe deer find shelter and protection amongst trees, and, though you may not see them, you may find their tracks in the soft ground along the walks and rides or beside the forest roads. Watering places are also good places to seek the signs of their presence.

Bird life is particularly abundant, with many species living and breeding in the forest. Here may be seen the tawny owl, woodcock, great spotted woodpecker, coaltit and goldcrest but especially interesting is the Capercaillie, the largest member of the grouse family. The cock is a huge bird weighing some 10-12 lbs. and looking like a black turkey, while the hen is smaller and grey/brown in colour. The chaffinch is very common and jays appear occasionally.



Finally, the habitat changes from woodland to the valley floor where the forest meets the open fields and the river side. Here plant life is much richer and luxurious containing many grasses and flowering herbs and identification of which can be a challenge. In addition to the woodland animals and birds there can be found the otter, mallard, dipper, goosander and heron along the river banks, while the mole, brown hare, oyster catcher, partridge, pheasant, skylark and snipe can be seen and sometimes heard in the open fields.

Insects, amphibians, and reptiles may also be sought and found for those whose interests lie amongst these members of the animal world.

HISTORY AND LEGEND

The area is rich in archeological remains, from pre-historical stone circles and standing stones to the more recent ruined castles. A Celtic monument, known as the Maiden Stone can be seen near Pittodrie, while there is a fine example of an Iron-Age hill fort on the summit of the Mither Tap. In later times, castles were built at Balquhain and Harthill, and their remains can still be seen. The Battle of Harlaw was fought close by to the east, in 1411. Ballads and legends tell of this great event.

There are many stories about the locality. The hill was reputed to be the haunt of wizards, fairies and even Satan himself. It has almost certainly always been an integral part of the culture of the local population and holds a special place in the hearts of those living in the locality.

In 1973, an organisation called "The Bailies of Bennachie" was formed, whose objects were to co-operate in preserving the amenities of the area and to collect together information on the history of the region. The Bailies have recently published a booklet which contains an extended account of the history and legend of the Hill of Bennachie.



Maiden Stone

FACILITIES FOR VISITORS

Car parks, picnic sites and toilet facilities have been provided on the north side of Bennachie at Puttingstone. A sign post directing traffic to the "Back o' Bennachie" Car Park lies a little west of the village of Oyne on the Inch road. Here cars can be parked in the sheltered seclusion of the forest and children can play and picnic on the large expanse of grassland near by.

"O gin I were whaur Gadie rins
At the Back o' Bennachie"

A new visitor centre, with car park and picnic site, has been built alongside the unclassified "Lord's Throat" road which runs alongside the north bank of the River Don. This centre illustrates much of the information contained in this booklet.

From both these sites, waymarked forest walks have been constructed to view points and points of interest, and the routes are described below.

Another car park called the "Bennachie Car Park" lies near Pittodrie off the Chapel of Garioch road and is under the control of the Local Authority.

BENNACHIE HILL WALKS

From Puttingstone, two short walks are available on the northern face of the hill. Both these follow the first leg of a long walk to the summit of Mither Tap and en route there are colour coded or signposted branches leading to other peaks. All have sign posts or colours to distinguish them.

The shortest walk follows the yellow markers to a forest road and then returns following white arrows to the car park. Time about twenty minutes.

Another short walk also follows the yellow markers for about 750 yards uphill before branching to the right. It then descends the hill following the red arrows to the car park. Time about fifty five minutes.

The longest direct walk, colour coded yellow, heads directly up hill towards the Mither Tap from the car park. Points of interest off the walk are clearly signposted and loop routes to Oxen Craig and Craigshannoch are waymarked blue and orange respectively. From the summit of Mither Tap, it is possible to follow a route to the north east down the Maiden Causeway to the District Council car park at Pittodrie. Short links from the orange loop to Craigshannoch also lead to the Maiden Causeway and are clearly sign-posted.

The return walk from the car park to the summit of Oxen Craig should take one hour to one and a half hours while the return walk along the yellow route from Mither Tap will take well over two hours.



MILLSTONE HILL WALKS

Two walks start from the Visitor Centre on the banks of the River Don. The short walk lies through the woods behind the Centre, and there is a long walk to the summit of Millstone Hill.

The short walk is marked with red arrowed posts and should take about twenty minutes.

The long walk, marked with yellow arrowed posts, leads up to the summit of Millstone Hill. It is quite arduous and at least two hours should be allowed for the return journey. From the summit on a clear day, the view is outstanding. To the south and west can be seen the peaks of Lochnagar and the Cairngorms, while to the north is the castellated ridge of Bennachie, with the Buchan Plain beyond.

CAUTION

Those venturing on the long walks described above should be fit and well clad. At certain times of the year, arctic conditions prevail on the top of Bennachie, and as with all hill walking in Scotland, due regard should be paid to the risks that the hill and weather may present. The routes have been sited to avoid hazards and should be followed. The granite faces of Mither Tap and Craigshannoch are precipitous in places and it is necessary to keep a close watch on children in these areas. The two long walks are both marked yellow and lead by the most direct route downhill to the nearest car park.

All visitors can help preserve their heritage with vigilance against fire which can destroy in minutes all the forest, moorland and wild life that is roundabout. The risk is very great especially in dry weather.

Dogs must be kept under control to avoid disturbing other people and the wild life.

Please take your litter home.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS


The Bailies of Bennachie [redacted] for their great interest and support.


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Back o' Bennachie Walks

KEY


 FOREST BOUNDARY

 MITHER TAP WALK 2½ Hours.

 CRAIGSHANNOCH WALK

 OXENCRAIG WALK

 TWENTY MINUTE WALK

 FIFTY-FIVE MINUTE WALK

 VIEWPOINT

P
PARKING

 PICNIC SITE

 CHILDREN'S PLAY AREA

 TOILETS

