

# SILENCE AND LIGHT

In the lesser-trodden corner of the Highlands known as the Coulin Forest, **David Lintern** finds summer glory, wild magic - and space for reflection.

PHOTOS: DAVID LINTERN





[Opening spread] Sunrise over the Fannichs from our high camp on Beinn Liath Mhòr [above] Camp under An Ruadh-Stac

SOME PLACES RING LIKE A BELL. Two lochans lie quietly under An Ruadh-Stac, the Steep Red Hill, feeding larger lochs to the north and drawing the eye directly down the glen towards Beinn Damh. The sun splashes down in an arc of showy gold over the mountain's summit before illuminating its rakes and corries, rays cast like searchlights. As the sun dips lower, the wind stills on the lochans. An Ruadh-Stac catches fire, glows its name, and throws ruddy sparks into its own reflection. From a rib of smashed quartz that hangs above my camp, Beinn Damh is perfectly aligned with those fiery pools, as if by design. I stumble around with my camera, muttering superlatives to myself under my breath. There is a tangible magic here. Everything feels as it should be.

Often overlooked in favour of the more famous Torridon hills, which lie to their north, the Coulin Forest is the lesser-known area to the south, an intricate land of rugged quartzite hills heavily pockmarked by exquisite lochans. This camp was almost exactly a year after my first visit, ostensibly to see if a link could be made between the three hills surrounding Coire Làir, and the next group further west. Last time, I'd travelled with Matt, a hillgoer and soon-to-be father in his own time, and for work a planning officer for the government environmental advisory body Scottish Natural Heritage. We camped high on Beinn Liath Mhòr, photographed until 10.30pm, and then woke again at 3.20am for more. Sunrise on the Big Grey Hill was spectacular, and so was the sandstone ridge and its quartzite summit – at least after more sleep and a wander along at a more reasonable hour. But the more interesting ground came afterwards, as we negotiated the erratic-strewn terraces and

pools that cluster at the head of the glen. Sgorr Ruadh was hot, hard work rewarded with an even grander viewpoint than its counterpart, before a complex descent to a lochan-dotted bealach – a Highland Shangri-la of reeds and lilies. There were echoes of Port de Rius on my Pyrenean Haute Route, a puddle-strewn cirque surrounded by a mute chaos of whitewashed granite that reflected back the pinks and blues of evening Alpenglow. I already wanted to come back, and I hadn't yet left.

A year later, and high summer again. I climbed into Coire Làir, this time turning left instead of right, returning to that same enchanted bealach. The old stalkers' paths here are lines of artfulness and ingenuity – taking the path of least resistance (and least erosion) – this one traversing steadily under Fuar Tholl's improbable towers. I dropped my sack and climbed steeply above those towers over broken screes to an airy plateau, suddenly cut adrift from my day-to-day and surprised to feel a slight sense of vertigo, even with plenty of ground under my feet. I met a small group of old-school hillwalkers ticking Corbetts on my jog back along its crescent edges; there were big smiles from Barnsley, cotton T shirts, silk scarves and a can-do attitude, an exchange I wouldn't change for all the high-tech day-glow gear on the high street. I was soon back to the bealach and a breathtaking reveal to An Ruadh-Stac and Maol Chean-dearg.

On our photography-orientated trip the year before, Matt and I had spent time studying the abstract patterns frozen in the rock: veins of quartz that spanned the coarse, pinky grey slabs that mimicked fingers or branches that grasped for food or light. In small stones caught in dips and hollows, nestled in pollen-crustured lichens of dusty ochres and medieval greens, we saw analogues



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## BACKPACKING ROUTE

**START/FINISH**  
Achnashellach  
**GR:** NH002481  
**Distance:** 35km / 21.7 miles  
**Ascent:** 3016m / 9842ft  
**Time:** 2-4 days

In this article David recalls two separate trips into the Coulin Forest. If the two walks he describes are taken together, it produces a fantastic but very challenging multi-day backpacking route over the region's three Munros and two Corbetts, with the lochan-scattered terrain offering a host of wild camping opportunities. The comfy Coire Fionnaraich bothy is also along the route, next to the Fionn-abhainn. It can be useful to have a bike stashed at Coulags, to save the road walk or a hitch along the road back to Achnashellach station. Alongside two other authors, David is working on a book about more remote Scottish backpacking routes, for publication by Cicerone in 2020, in which this route will feature.





[left] Sunset camp under An Ruadh-Stac [above] Looking down on camp from An Ruadh-Stac [right] Dusk on the stalkers' path out of Colre Làir [below] Glacial scarring on quartzite rock

with moons, lochs, trees and mountains. As above, so below. But looking deeply and unhurriedly at the intimate details of a place can also be a disconcerting experience. For how long had those things shared that relation to each other? How long had they sat there? These tiny vignettes were mirrors to our own frailty. From those portals, what stared back was inky black, unknowable, geological time.

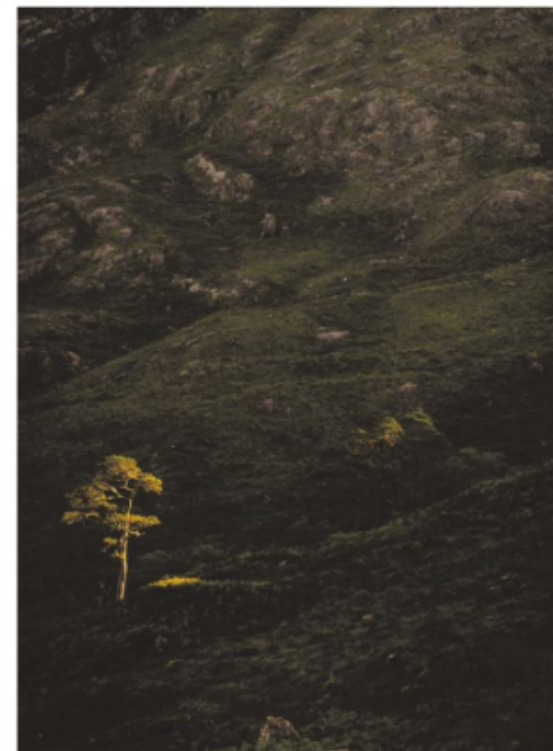
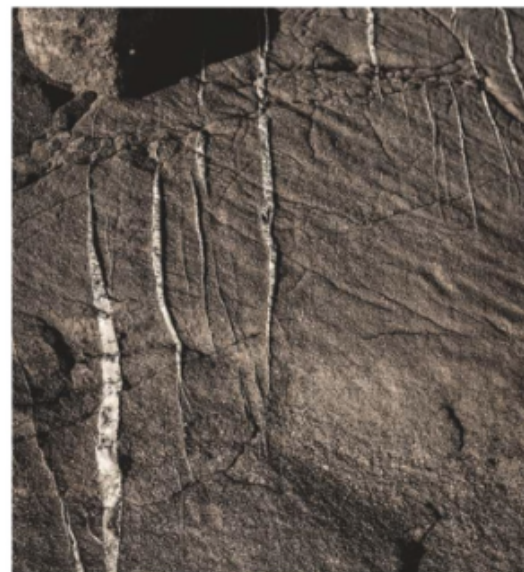
A year later, and this time my wise old friends were joined by new and more forgiving ones. In a daze and the heat haze I stared blankly at the ground as I headed south-west, cross-country and cross-grain from Bealach Mòr into the next glen. Blankets of pink sea thrift danced at my ankles, and dwarf juniper filled in gaps between slabs. Further downhill in the damp, browsed bog myrtle told a familiar story about Highland overgrazing, but I shooped the eco-politics away for today. Bog myrtle is a favourite – I love its citrus astringency rubbed between the fingers. Clutches of ling heather blushed on the cusp of full flower. Common orchids were anything but. And there were the yellows and blues of flowers I've yet to learn the names and interactions of. All bore quiet witness to this place, always at ebb or at flow but not going anywhere. The truth is at our feet, I thought absent-mindedly, before getting on with the slow and steady business of grinding up a searing white, crumbling zig-zag path to the foot of Maol Chean-dearg.

Returning to this place of wonder at midsummer reminded me

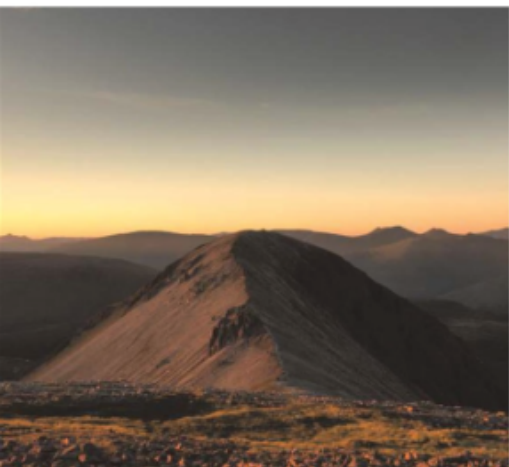
of the atmosphere conjured by Ed Abbey in *Desert Solitaire*, but I've given my copy away to a friend so I can't quote from it. No matter; another favourite, from Herman Hesse's *Wanderings*, speaks just as well to this trip:

"There is no more spring in my heart. It is summer. The greeting of strange places sounds different to me. Its echo is quieter in my breast. I don't throw my hat into the air. I don't sing. But I smile, and not only with my mouth. I smile with my soul, with my eyes, with my whole skin, and I offer these country sides, whose fragrances drift up to me, different senses than those I had before, more delicate, more silent, more finely honed, better practised, and more grateful... My yearning no longer paints dreamy colours across veiled distances, my eyes are satisfied with what exists, because they have learned to see. The world has become lovelier than before... I am ready to let myself be baked in the sun till I am done."

And now I'm at the top of that path and back at the start of this story; here for the first time. In bright, early evening sunshine, the silence envelops. By nightfall, it roars. For now, the wind ruffles the lochans and I try not to bend too many stakes in the stony ground as I pitch my shelter. As I cook and make nest for the night, time folds and I notice more echoes. I remember Pushkar in northern India; waking to the Adhan, observing women washing vegetable-dyed muslins at the edges of an oval lake encircled by hills on the edge of a great desert on the edge of a new day. Time folds again, and I'm







[above] Sunrise on Beinn Liath Mhòr [right] Lochan-dotted paradise under Fuar Tholl [below] Looking back over Beinn Liath Mhòr from the head of Coire Làir



*I strip off all my clothes and get some air to my skin. Hell, why not? If we can't be completely ourselves in the mountains, then where?*

at a quiet, frosty camp at still water's edge buried deep in a sleepy Ogwen Valley. This is international geography.

Mountains and lakes seem to embody some sort of sacred geometry. Arranged together by fluke of nature they feel archetypal, resonating in a way I don't have words for. I recall symbols from other cultures to give shape to the unspeakable. In Hinduism, cycles of regeneration are symbolised by a Yoni and Lingam, with the Yoni as womb, pool or lake, and the Lingam as pillar, phallic symbol or mountain. Its Taoist counterpart might be the yin and yang symbol; duality sitting together as one, balance and tension. Are these archetypes why hill and loch tug my heart strings so? In the presence of what feels like supranatural architecture, the signs drop away and the signified takes centre stage. An Ruadh-Stac is glowing from its insides, its nature absolute. Only a fool or the devil argues with love.

I wake at 5.50am and the sun has long risen, although my camp is still in shade. Twenty minutes later I am padding up gorgeous blank slabs of milk white quartzite and by 7am I am on the summit of An Ruadh-Stac. Without any thought to Hindu fertility symbols,

or indeed much thought to anything at all, I strip off all my clothes and get some air to my skin. Not something I'd repeat in a busier place, but it felt right, right then. Hell, why not? If we can't be completely ourselves in the mountains, then where?

By 8.30am I'm back at camp, washed at the lochan, bathed in bright sunlight. The day is windless and already hot, the air still full up with quietness and solitude. I am set right again, straighter and taller for my night in the mountains. One cup of coffee, two cups of tea and two hours of lounging later, and I'm heading slowly up the Munro of Maol Chean-dearg, to be treated to a very noisy flypast by a microlight on the summit. Thankfully, I've kept my trousers on for this one. It's a surprisingly elongated mountain and the sun is high in the sky by the time I reach my pack again. I keep to the high ground over Meall nan Ceapairean and eat lunch at the cairn, before dropping down the south ridge to the bothy. It's sweltering.

A year ago, Matt and I had talked about landscape quality. It was refreshing to spend time with someone who had a feel, both personally and professionally, for what that really means. Since

then I've given a good deal of time to the Save Glen Etive campaign, which was emotionally exhausting and left me very cynical about our ability to look after wild places given the current political situation here in Scotland; a superheated cocktail of monopoly land ownership, regional austerity and climate emergency. There's a run-of-river hydro scheme on the Fionn-Abhainn as you walk out from the bothy, and a lot of disturbance, which I hope in time will heal, but it's a reminder of both encroachment and precedent.

Landscapes come in lots of different shapes and sizes, wildness is on a spectrum and I am more than at peace with that, but never has the phrase 'death by a thousand cuts' felt more personal and more pertinent than in the aftermath of that battle for Glen Etive.

Days and nights spent in Scotland's own Range of Light are a perfect tonic for that kind of world-weariness, but to me they also act as a benchmark for the kind of quality I think we need to continue to look out for. There are few finer places than the Coulin in high summer. This is landscape that really can rival anywhere in the world. But unless others know what there is and just what can be, we can't expect them to care if it's gone. 🍵