

A Guide to Scottish hill names

If you get confused by the unpronounceable names of the Scottish mountains, this is probably because they're mainly Gaelic names: don't worry, most Scots don't know what they mean and can't pronounce them either. So here's a short guide, based on names of Scottish Munros.

First, there's the word 'ben', which means mountain or hill, as in Ben Nevis. It's sometimes written as 'beinn' or 'bheinn' or 'binnean'. Then there's 'meaoll' or 'meall', which means hill, and 'carn' or 'charn' or 'cairn', which means a rocky summit, or hill. 'Sgurr' or 'sgorr' is a rocky peak, 'stob' is summit or peak, and 'tom' means summit as well. If the Inuit have 38 different words for snow, then the Scots can have a dozen or so for hill.

Then there's words like 'dearg', which means red. It's worth getting your pronunciation right on this one, because it's really quite common: say it 'jerrak', and if you can roll your r-r-r's a bit, so much the better. So you get Munros called Ben Dearg, Sgurr Dearg and Carn Dearg, and roughly translated they come in as Red Hill, Red Hill and Red Hill respectively. And since 'ruadh' also means red, Sgurr Ruadh translates as Red Hill as well.

'Bhuidhe' means yellow, and you get Meall Bhuidhe (two of them) and Beinn Bhuidhe, meaning Yellow Hill. Beinn Ghlas is Greeny-grey Hill and Stob Dubh is Black Hill. 'Gorm' means blue. So Cairn Gorm (in the Cairngorms range, where else?) means Blue Hill, but don't confuse it with Carn Gorm, also Blue Hill, forty miles away in Glen Lyon. 'Ban' and 'gael' both mean white, and there are two Stob Bans, a Sgurr Ban, three Geal Charns and one Gael-Charn, all White Hills (as is Cairn Ban, of course) – some of these actually have a white underlying quartzite rock, and the name doesn't just refer to the snow cover!

Next come 'mohr', 'mor' and their anglicised version 'more'. This simply means big. So Ben More (both of them), Binnean Mor, Creag Mohr and Sgurr Mohr all mean Big Hill. Beinn Liath Mhor is Big Grey Hill, and Glas Bheinn Mhor is Big Greeny-grey Hill. Ben More Assynt is the Big Hill of Assynt, and Beinn Liath Mhor Fannaich is the Big Grey Hill of Fannaich.

'Beag' means small or little, so Binnean Beag means Small Hill. Perhaps rather confusingly, though, Aonoch Mohr (Big Ridge) is lower than its neighbour Aonoch Beag (Little Ridge). There's only a couple of metres in it and no-one bothered with accurate theodolite measurements a couple of hundred years ago. People just went with which mountain was more massive (the slightly lower one, but they probably didn't know that it was lower) and decided that it deserved to be called the big one. No-one thought that it might cause confusion a couple of hundred years later among the thousands of people who (for some crazy reason) would spend their leisure time in climbing all the mountains in Scotland over 3000 feet high!

Now, what do Beinn Mheadhan and Ben Vane have in common? Not much really – the first is in the Cairngorms and the second is by Loch Lomond – except that they are both pronounced the same. 'Vane' is the anglicised rendition of the Gaelic 'mheadhan', and it means middle or in-between. It's also written sometimes as 'meadhonach', so round the back of Ben Nevis you have: Carn Mor Dearg, Carn Dearg Meadhonach and Carn Beag Dearg – Big Red Hill, In-betweeny Red Hill and Little Red Hill.

So a lot of these exotic-looking names are actually quite mundane. Some names, though, are evocative of adventure and romance: Bauchaille Etive Mor (the Big Shepherd or Guardian of Etive, though more commonly called the 'Big Buckle', to distinguish it from Bauchaille Etive Beag, the 'Wee Buckle'); An Teallach (the Forge), and Schiehallion (Fairy Hill of the Caledonians). Beinn Alligin is Beinn Àilleagan in Gaelic, meaning the Jewelled Mountain, but its big imposing Torridonian sandstone neighbour is simply called Liathach – the Grey One. Some are named after people: Sgurr Alasdair (Alistair's or Alexander's Peak); Ben McDui, and Sgurr Mhic Connich (MacKenzie's Peak). Others? How about Braigh Coire Chruinn-bhagain – translated as the Height of the Corrie of Round Blisters – or Sgurr an Doire Leathain (Peak of the Broad Oak Thicket)?

So how to pronounce all these strange names? If you were to study Gaelic, you might learn all sorts of rules of pronunciation of the written word, followed by so many exceptions and caveats that it might be surprising that a written language actually exists! You really have to know how to pronounce the word before you read it, and even if you're born to the language, it's no guarantee that you will pronounce an unfamiliar word properly. It doesn't help that words might be spelt differently in different parts of the country, and never mind different accents giving different pronunciations. It's a bit like English, really.

It might not be so difficult to get your tongue round them, if only you could get your head round the jumble of letters that seem to bear no resemblance to how the words are pronounced. You might think that short names are easier to deal with. Not necessarily: take Beinn Fada – correctly pronounced something like 'Ben Attow' – and Carn Aosda (pronounced 'Carn Osh').

And so we come to Anglicisation. A few mountains have genuinely English names: the Saddle (presumably someone decided that it looks like a saddle); the Inaccessible Pinnacle (because it is a pinnacle, and compared with all the other Munros, it really is quite inaccessible); Broad Cairn (it is quite a broad summit), and the Devil's Point (because it looks like... well, you can look that up yourself!).

Take Bidean a' Choire Sheasgaich and translate it into English. Imagine: 'I'm just going to climb the Pinnacle of the Corrie of the Fallow Cattle, love. I'll be back in time for tea'. Perhaps it sounds better in its original Gaelic form: 'Bidean a' Choire... Cheesecake?' – 'I'm just off to climb the Cheesecake' doesn't sound much better, but maybe just a little bit better.

And that's how it works: most of the English-sounding names are actually English interpretations of the Gaelic pronunciation: Ben Vane and Beinn Mheadhan; Conival and Cona' Mheall (meaning 'Adjacent Hill'); Mount Keen (Monadh Caoin, the Gentle Hill), and even the Cairnwell is an anglicised version of An Càrn Bhailg (the Peak of Bags). And actually, not all come from Gaelic – Ben Hope is reckoned to have Norse origins (Beinn Hob, Bay Mountain).

And so we return to Ben Nevis. Is it derived from Beinn Nibheis, meaning Malicious Mountain, or does it come from Beinn Nèamh-bhathais, meaning the Mountain with its Head in the Clouds, or more poetically, perhaps the Mountain of Heaven? At least we all know how to pronounce it, we know where it is, and it's Scotland's highest mountain (and we're proud of it!).