

Ballochbuie Pine Forest, Balmoral Estate Winter Wildlife Walk BMF 2023

Distance: 10-14km, 6-8 miles

Ascent: variable depending on route chosen

Time: estimated - 4 hours

Start: The Keiloch car park, Invercauld Estate, 3 miles east of Braemar

The length of this route is variable and will be adapted according to preferences on the day.

Ballochbuie supports one of the largest remaining continuous areas of native Caledonian forest, situated on the slopes of the Dee valley below the foothills of the Lochnagar massif. Ballochbuie was saved from felling by Queen Victoria in 1878 and it has been part of Balmoral Estate ever since.

This is a fascinating and varied hike, starting from Invercauld Estate we first must cross the Old Brig O'Dee which was built in 1752, and subsequently bypassed in 1859 when the 'new' Brig O'Dee was constructed. As we enter the pine forest, we are now walking on Balmoral Estate, where we initially climb gradually up through the trees on a well-constructed track. We will look out for native wood ant nests along the edge of the track and signs of pine marten which live in the forest.

As we reach the top of this climb fabulous views open out right across Ballochbuie and up to the summit of Lochnagar itself. We wander through the pine trees and under lime-rich crags where we really are walking in the footsteps of royalty. The pinewoods are home to red squirrels and black grouse. A short descent brings us to a wonderful log cabin situated by a lochan, a great place for a rest.

From here we cross through scattered pines to reach the Falls of Garbh Allt, an impressive tumbling waterfall over granite slabs. If we are very lucky, we may see signs of otter, or a dipper on the rocks. After stopping to explore and reach the bridge above the waterfalls we can decide on our return route with lesser and more energetic options available depending on time and the prevailing weather conditions on the day. We may be able to spot some of the red deer which inhabit the forest too.

Hill-walking gear appropriate to the conditions and time of year including strong waterproof walking boots, waterproof jacket and trousers, warm hat, warm, waterproof gloves, an extra layer, flask and/or water bottle and a packed lunch are recommended. And binoculars if you have a pair.

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