

Finding *Scottish* sunshine

Carol and Anthony take advantage of fine weather in the beautiful **Scottish Highlands**, getting active and up close to some elusive wildlife...

WORDS & PHOTOS Carol Kubicki

A trip to Scotland always makes me obsessively check multiple weather apps. I tell Anthony this is because predicting the weather among the mountains is tricky but, actually, it is so I can find the one that suits my optimistic nature and is forecasting the sunniest weather! For a May road trip around Scotland, the fickle weather fairies were on my side and every app, even the pessimistic Mountain Weather Information Service, was predicting blue skies for the western Highlands. Packing a t-shirt and sun cream, we set off!

Don't tell everyone, as we like to have it to ourselves, but peaceful Glen Orchy is one of our favourite wild camping spots. It is also a great starting point for a walk, either a short stroll along the picturesque Eas Urchaidh rapids or to the beautiful hidden remnants of the ancient Caledonian pine forest. This time, we headed for the summit of Beinn Mhic-Mhonaidh, a 2,611ft-high Corbett (mountains in Scotland between 2,500 and 3,000 feet high).

Forestry workers were clear-felling the plantations and we teased to chat about trees and the changes

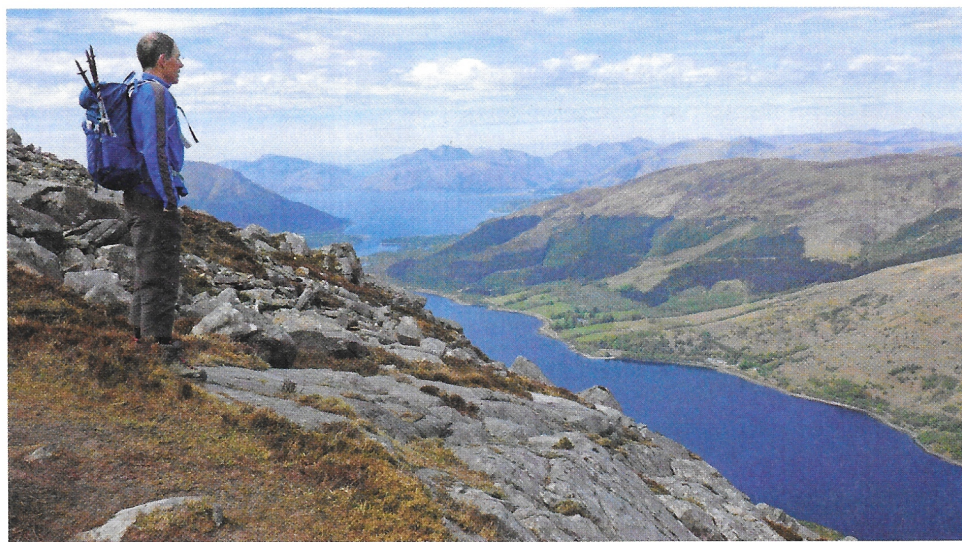
in Scottish woodland, as the dismal spruce plantations are partly replaced with mixed woodland that supports a range of wildlife. These were the last people we saw! I love the contrast of the solitude and tranquillity I find on the hills. The pleasant woodland tracks soon ended and we were on open hillside, the path disappearing and leaving us slogging up the grassy slopes. The hummocky and stony summit was surprisingly lovely with pools, a cairn and a stunning 360° view. We were surrounded by bigger mountains, many dusted in fresh snow, and sat playing our favourite, 'What is that mountain?' game.

We arrived at Glencoe Mountain Resort in a hail shower that I hadn't noticed on any forecasts. When the weather cleared, we strolled down the road to see the sun setting behind the distinctive Buachaille Etive Mòr, the craggy pyramidal mountain that features in so many photographs.

Devil's Staircase

Sometimes, it's a name that attracts me to a walk and this is certainly the case with the Devil's Staircase. If it weren't for

ABOVE The view along Loch Linnhe is Scotland at its most picturesque



2015 Renault
Master medium-
wheelbase

CONVERSION

TYPE Devon Tempest by
devonconversions.co.uk

OWNED SINCE 2015

LAYOUT Rear kitchen/
washroom with twin sofas in
the front lounge that convert
to single beds

TRAVEL SEATS/
BERTHS 3/2

WHAT WE LOVE

ABOUT IT It's great just
being able to pull over, any
place, any time, throw the
side door open and enjoy
the vistas with a cup of tea
in hand. That's the beauty
of touring in a campervan,
isn't it?

of the West Highland Way from Kingshouse to Kinlochleven, as it climbs the dramatically named Devil's Staircase. The weather forecast was spot on; the sky was brilliant blue as we walked along the old military road towards the splendour of Glen Coe.

The staircase is a series of spectacular zigzags, named by eighteenth century road-building soldiers while trudging up the steep slope with loads of stone. Workers building the remote Blackwater Dam for the aluminium works continued using the name, as they would rush down Devil's Staircase each pay day for a drink at Kingshouse. Some workers had a tippie too many and never made it back.

Without weighty rocks or hard liquor, it is a superb hike. At the top, everyone gasps as the views open out across isolated glens and rugged mountains, Ben Nevis in the distance. We stopped to take it in before continuing on the broad path that descends gradually down to Kinlochleven, the long ribbon of Blackwater Reservoir to our right and the narrow Aonach Eagach ridge to our left. Near to

pipes built for the aluminium smelting plant's hydroelectric scheme, as motorcycle trial competitors hurtled by.

Mountains in the sun

There's no shortage of mountains to climb in Scotland. As well as the 221 Corbetts list, compiled by John Rooke Corbett in the 1920s, there are the big guys, the Munros. Hugh Munro listed all the mountains in Scotland over 3,000ft in 1891. These Munros might be Scotland's headline act but the supporting Corbetts are enjoyable climbs, sometimes more challenging than a Munro.

Look up from Glencoe village and you will notice the steep cone-shaped summit of Pap of Glencoe or Sgorr na Ciche. Looking like a child's drawing of a mountain, I was surprised to discover this isn't a Munro, or even a Corbett. At 2,343ft, the Pap is a Graham (Scottish mountains between 2,000 and 2,500 feet). The 219 Grahams were called Elsie (LC for Lesser Corbetts) by Alan Dawson but were later named Grahams after Fiona Torbet (nee

ABOVE Glencoe Mountain Resort; There is nothing to get in the way of the views from the

were still called Elsies!

The sunshine continued and we took our time on the Pap, enjoying the fantastic views along Loch Leven. On the summit, it was a little breezy and we found a sheltered spot for lunch. We were joined by 16 chatty Netherlanders who, excitedly, found a geocache box on the summit. Back in the village, it was warm enough for ice creams.

From Glencoe, there is an excellent waymarked cycle route towards Oban and we grabbed the chance for a sunny day on the bikes. The lovely off-road section to Duror includes an old railway line that hugs the coast; the panorama across Loch Linnhe, shimmering blue in the sunshine, is Scotland at its best. Resting on a bench on the highest section of the route above Kentallen, I relaxed with the warm sun on my arms and, returning to Glencoe, we stopped for a refreshing pint.

Sitting outside that evening, we got talking to our German neighbours who wanted ideas for days out on foot and bicycle. Anthony grabbed our map and they exclaimed as if he'd produced a rabbit from a teapot! 'Germans never take a map on a walk,' they said laughing at our quaint English traditions. To say thanks, they generously shared their bottle of Altmeister, a potent German herbal liqueur, and we toasted stunning Scotland.

An international day of hiking

At 4,413ft, Ben Nevis is the UK's highest mountain and the return hike is a 10-mile walk up the so-called 'tourist path' that can take anything from 90 minutes (if you run) to nine hours! I am no runner and prepared for a full day, carrying enough food to feed a multitude, three bottles of water and a flask.

Although I enjoy the solitude of the mountains, I knew



ABOVE LEFT TO RIGHT Tiny snow bunting spotted on Ben Nevis; A smiling author on Ben Nevis!

BELOW The bulk of Ben Nevis from the campsite near Corpach (Linnhe Lochside Holidays)

this wouldn't be the case on Ben Nevis and, instead, I embraced a sociable day, chatting to other walkers as we climbed. It was a perfect day with temperatures in the mid-20s and everyone was in good humour, taking photographs of the breathtaking views, sharing stories and supporting those who were finding it hard going.

It felt like the whole world was climbing Ben Nevis, as we met different nationalities, ages and shapes. We bumped into the Netherlands' walking group again and kept meeting an elderly couple from South Africa. She was sprightly and rushing ahead but was worried about George, her partner, who was taking his time. 'She runs on fresh air,' he told us and had a dreamy look in his eye when we told him we had stopped for buttered scones and coffee. We met him again as we descended and he'd managed to grab some food and was going to make it.

This was a truly glorious day. The path is well made with nicely graded zigzag sections, making even the steep slopes enjoyable, and large cairns near the summit steer hikers away from the sheer cliffs. A snowy slope near the summit had become an impromptu slide, everyone hurtling down, whooping with delight.

None of this sociable hiking prepared me for the



The panorama across Loch Linnhe, shimmering blue in the sunshine, is Scotland at its best



GLENCOE MOUNTAIN RESORT
Kingshouse, Glencoe, Argyll
PH49 4HZ glencoemountain.co.uk

INVERCOE HIGHLAND HOLIDAYS
Glencoe, Argyll PH49 4HP invercoe.co.uk

GLEN NEVIS HOLIDAYS
Glen Nevis, Fort William PH33 6SX
glen-nevis.co.uk



LINNHE LOCHSIDE HOLIDAYS Corpach, Fort
William PH33 7NL linnhe-lochside-holidays.co.uk

ABOVE Sunset from the Invercoe Highland Holidays campsite

BELOW LEFT TO RIGHT Treacherous snow cornice on Ben Nevis; The pine marten carried chunks of bread and peanut butter to her kits in the nest!

magnificence of the summit of Ben Nevis. The northern corries, still draped in thick snow, were craggy and menacing and the wide plateau has so much space it didn't feel crowded. I tried to absorb the views at each compass point, everything lower than I was; I never want to forget this moment. Among the throng, I stopped to watch a tiny snow bunting flitting among the rocks, unnoticed by most.

Elusive Scottish wildlife

Pine martens, once killed for their fur, are now protected and their numbers have risen slowly in Scotland. But they are still rare and seeing one of these nocturnal woodland mammals is tricky. Glenloy Lodge has a resident pine marten and I had booked an evening wildlife watching there, crossing my fingers that one would show up.

We cycled along the canal to meet Jon at Neptune's Staircase and, along with another motorhoming couple, were driven to Glenloy Lodge. We settled into their conservatory while Jon told us that pine martens are cat-size and excellent tree climbers. Mostly chestnut-brown with a characteristic pale yellow 'bib' on the chin and throat and a long, bushy tail, they are also gorgeous.

Of course, wildlife doesn't always come to order but Jon put the perfect treat, bread cubes smeared with peanut butter (sugar-free, Jon assured us), along the garden wall and we waited. Almost immediately, a graceful female pine marten slid down the conservatory drainpipe searching for food. Ignoring the five people watching behind the glass, she came within a few feet, delicately eating her titbits. At this distance, I could see her large paws and sharp claws, cat-like teeth and beautiful, thick fur. Satisfied, she carefully took three cubes of bread in her mouth to feed her hungry kits in the nest and scurried off.

Delighted, we had tea and cake and shared holiday tips with the fellow motorhomers for an hour, always keeping an eye on the garden. A red squirrel visited, as well as a great spotted woodpecker, and chaffinches helped themselves to the peanut butter. Eventually, the pine marten returned and came right up to the window sill – I was pretty much nose to nose with her!

A hill of my own

Our final day of sunny weather and hill walking couldn't have been more different to Ben Nevis. From near Glenfinnan, we walked up Sgùrr an Utha, a 2,611ft-high Corbett, and didn't see another hiker all day. The grassy hill had plenty of wildflowers; on the way up, I found tiny purple butterwort and orchids and delicate pink trailing azalea higher up. From the rock-strewn summit dotted with pools, the views stretched over the hidden Loch Beoraid as far as the Inner Hebridean islands.

We woke the next day to heavy rain, the fine weather had broken exactly when my weather apps said it would. But I pulled on my cagoule, smugly smiling; for once, we had been in the right place at the right

