

The Mack Walks: Short Walks in Scotland Under 10 km

Bellabeg-Bunzeach Forest-Lonach Hall Circuit (Aberdeenshire)

Route Summary

This route provides a mix of walking environments in Strathdon, with mature conifer woodland in the Bunzeach Forest complemented by open perspectives from the Upper Don valley floor and surrounding hillsides. The walk takes two diversions to raised viewpoints, near the beginning, and close to the end, with each providing wonderful and differing outlooks.

Duration: 3.5 hours.



Route Overview

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Transport/Parking: There is a very limited Stagecoach #219 bus service to Bellabeg from Alford. Check timetables. Park in the small car-park at the walk start/end point (near the entrance to the access road to Lost farm).

Length: 10 km / 6.2 mi **Height Gain/Loss:** 221 meter.

Max Height: 384 meter. **Min Height:** 272 meter.

Surface: Moderate. Pavement/road, good paths, rough forest access roads. Some fallen trees to be walked over or around. A shorter version of this walk is suitable for off-road mobility scooters if the main section in Bunzeach Forest is excluded, i.e. return from Waypoint 6 directly to Waypoint 13, then proceed from there.

Difficulty: Medium.

Child Friendly: Yes, if children are used to walks of this distance and overall ascent.

Dog Friendly: Yes, but keep dogs on lead on public roads and near farm animals.

Refreshments: There is an excellent Bean to Cup Tchibo hot drinks machine in the Bellabeg Spar shop. The Steading Bar is open for refreshments Fri p.m. and weekends. The Goodbrand and Ross Tearoom in Corgarff is about 7 miles away on the A944. Otherwise, options in Alford or Ballater.



Description

This is a varied walk, incorporating visits to two wonderful viewpoints, around and about the small village of Bellabeg in the scenic but remote area of Upper Donside known as Strathdon, where hill farming and forestry are the main local industries. The early part of the route includes a significant section in mature conifer woodland in the Bunzeach Forest, but there are fine open views to appreciate throughout much of the walk. Bellabeg, once called Invernochty, sits at the confluence of the Water of Nochty, running down from the Ladder Hills, and the River Don, flowing from its source in the mountainous Ben Avon moorlands. De-population has been a feature of Strathdon for the last 150 years, with the term "Land of the Lost" playing on the name of Lost Farm, near Bellabeg. Not long after leaving the village, a diversion onto a bluff overlooking Bellabeg provides not only a wonderful view over the settlement and Glen Nochty but also the opportunity to participate in the Cairngorms National Park "Scenic Photo-Posts" Project which aims to record changing landscapes over the seasons at a number of locations in the Park. After crossing the River Don on a footbridge near Waterside Farm, the route ascends to a vantage point above the river valley where the ruined remains of Colquhonnies Castle stand, between the former Colquhonnies Hotel and the famous Lonach Hall. The castle is a ruined 16thC tower house associated with the 1st Lord Elphinstone, and the Forbes family of Towie. Each year, in late August, the Lonach Highlanders gather here in highland dress to celebrate their neighbourly cohesion and the history of their community. Their annual "march" through the parish is famously punctuated with drams of whisky at friendly stops along the way! Towards the end of our more sober walk there is a diversion to a bench and viewpoint high above the village where there are great views of the Don Valley below you, and a panorama of surrounding hills and countryside. At the end of the walk we pass an information board for the nearby Doune of Invernochty, the massive earthwork "motte and bailey" remains of a 12thC Norman fortress.



Waypoints

(1) Start walk from car-park off Lost Road

<https://w3w.co/gurgled.cuter.shuttled> NJ3529113106

Start the walk from the small car-park near the war memorial in the centre of Bellabeg, just off the road to Lost. Walk past the war memorial on your right, cross the main A944 road with care and go left along the pavement towards the road bridge over the Water of Nocht.



(2) Turn right down road before Water of Nocht bridge

In 130 m, just before the road bridge over the Water of Nocht, turn right and follow the road, initially passing a care home on your right before crossing a bridge over the River Don. Keep going uphill, eventually passing the interesting Strathdon Parish Kirk and graveyards. (130 m)



(3) Left at y-junction along Waterside Road

In 410 m, go left at a y-junction, taking the very quiet minor road signposted for Waterside. (540 m)



(4) Right off Waterside Road into Bunzeach Forest

In 170 m, where there information boards for the Bunzeach Forest, veer right off the Waterside road onto a forest road going gently uphill. (710 m)



(5) Sharp right up rough track

In 330 m, at an open turning area, go sharp right and up a rough track, effectively reversing your direction. As you gently ascend, ignore a gate on your left which you will return to later. At a point above the church, look out for a viewpoint post on your right. (1.04 km)



(6) Cairngorms Scenic Photo Posts viewpoint

In 420 m, you will have arrived at the Cairngorms Scenic Photo Posts* post and viewpoint, where there are great views down to Bellabeg and up Glen Nocht. When you are ready, carry on for a short distance on the rough road which soon comes to an end. Follow the rough footpath up the grassy bank into trees, where there is a bench and another viewpoint. (1.47 km)

**Note: the Cairngorms Photo Project collects photos from designated viewpoints around the Cairngorms National Park. See: <https://cairngorms.co.uk/photo-posts/>*



(7) Bellabeg-Doone of Invernochty viewpoint

In just over 30 m, you will ascend on the narrow path to an inscribed bench and viewpoint. There is a good view down to the Doone of Invernochty* and a wider vista up Glen Nocht. When you are ready, re-trace your steps, passing the Cairngorms photo post on your left as you return down the grassy track, looking out for the pedestrian gate on your right side, that you passed earlier. (1.5 km)

**Note: In the centre of your view, just over the main A944 road is the Doone of Invernochty, the impressive earthworks remains of a 12th Century castle. "... Invernochty Castle was built upon a natural mound formed from glacial rock. By the ninth century AD it was a Pictish settlement and in the late eleventh or early twelfth centuries it was carved into a substantial Norman-style fortress by the Earl of Mar. The castle itself consists of a mound some twelve metres tall ... Around the early thirteenth century Kildrumny Castle was built as a replacement for Invernochty as it was better located for controlling the key routes into Buchan and Moray. Nevertheless the Parish church, on top of the mound, was still in use during the seventeenth century. The site was briefly used as an observation post during World War II and today it is noteworthy as the only known Norman earthwork castle in Scotland that has a stone structure of Norman origin on its summit ...". Thanks to: http://www.castlesfortsbattles.co.uk/grampian/doone_invernocht_y.html Also see: <https://canmore.org.uk/site/16762/doone-ofinvernocht>*



(8) Right through gate and uphill

In 300 m, go right through the pedestrian gate and start ascending over the wooded shoulder of Tom a'Charraigh hill. This is a fairly long section through mature conifer forest (1.2 km). As at May 2022, there are fallen trees in places that can be readily walked around, including a short section above a minor road where it is necessary to walk over a broken-down fence onto the top of the grassy road embankment to get around the obstruction to the path. (1.8 km)



(9) Right at t-junction

In 1.2 km, the path turns uphill and away from the nearby minor road, back into the forest where there is a walks post and a junction with a grassy forest road. Turn right and gently downhill here to follow the road to a t-junction with another forest road. (3.0 km)



(10) Left up forest road

In 370 m, at a t-junction with a more established forest road where there is another walks post, turn left and follow this road for a short distance looking out for a junction with another forest road on your left. (3.37 km)



(11) Left up grassy road

In 60 m, or so, go left up a grassy forest road that will take you over the pass between Tom a'Charraigh Hill and Coulick Hill. As at May 2022, there are some fallen trees on this section which can be readily negotiated. (3.43 km)



(12) Left on forest road

In 1.15 km, turn left at a wide junction with a more established forest road, beginning a gentle descent back to Waypoint 4, where you entered the Bunzeach Forest. There are increasingly open views of farmland on your right. (4.58 km)



(13) Sharp right onto Waterside Road

In 1.35 km, where the forest road meets the minor tarred road to Waterside, turn sharp right onto the quiet tarred road, following the road as it descends towards the River Don, with fields now on both sides. (5.93 km)



(14) Veer left to cross footbridge

In 480 m, veer left off the tarred road to cross the River Don on the footbridge. Now follow the path as it makes its way to meet the main A944 road. When you arrive at the road, turn right for a very short distance then cross the road with care to take the east-side access road up to the Lonach Highland and Friendly Society Hall (and Steading Bar). You will notice the impressive totem pole in the grassy area to your left. Turn right at a junction to access the car-park beneath the Hall, and then take the steps up to the forecourt area of the Hall.



**Note: the totem pole is associated with Strathdon School and a Scotland-wide totem pole carving project in 2001/2002. See: <http://www.brotus.co.uk/Brotusfiles/poles/PolesReport2002.pdf> .*

(15) Lonach Hall

In 800 m from the bridge over the River Don you will be standing in front of the Lonach Highland and Friendly Society Hall* (and Steading Bar). When you are ready to move on, turn left to pass the ruin of Colquhonnies Castle** on your right, and the disused (as at May 2022) Colquhonnies Hotel . The Steading Bar is a little further on, past the old hotel and behind an old steading. Walk downhill on the west-side access road to meet the A944 road. (7.21km)

**Note: Colquhonnies Castle is a ruined 16th-century tower house, allegedly never completed. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colquhonnies_Castle*

***Note: The Lonach Highlanders formed in 1823 to preserve highland dress, the Gaelic language, and local community cohesion. The Highlanders parade annually during the annual Lonach Highland Games and Gathering, held on the 4th Saturday of August, to officially open the games. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lonach_Highlanders*



(16) Go right and through gate

In 150 m, or so, at the A944 road, go right and up, to go through a pedestrian gate onto the footpath back to Bellabeg, passing above the back gardens of the houses in the hamlet of Forbestown on the outskirts of Bellabeg. In about 820 m, now on a former forest road) ignore a signed path for Bellabeg on your left (unless you wish to cut out the next uphill section to the viewpoint at Waypoint 17), You will return here at Waypoint 18. Carry on uphill on the forest road, eventually passing a small forestry plantation on your left side before you arrive at a bench overlooking Bellabeg village. (7.36 km)



(17) Bellabeg-River Don viewpoint

In 1.35 km, after ascending past a small forestry plantation on your left side, you will have arrived at a bench with wonderful views down to Bellabeg, the Doune of Nocht and the upper valley of the River Don stretching out to the SW, and the hills of upper Deeside. When you are ready, re-trace you steps back downhill to the footpath signpost to Bellabeg described earlier. (8.71 km)



(18) Sharp right for path to Bellabeg

In 580 m, having descended on the former forest road, you will have arrived at the signpost for Bellabeg. Turn sharp right to follow this footpath down to the A944 main road at Bellabeg. Veer right upon meeting the road to walk along the verge, then pavement, back towards your walk start-point passing the village shop on your right side, then crossing the road-bridge over the Water of Nocty. (9.29 km)



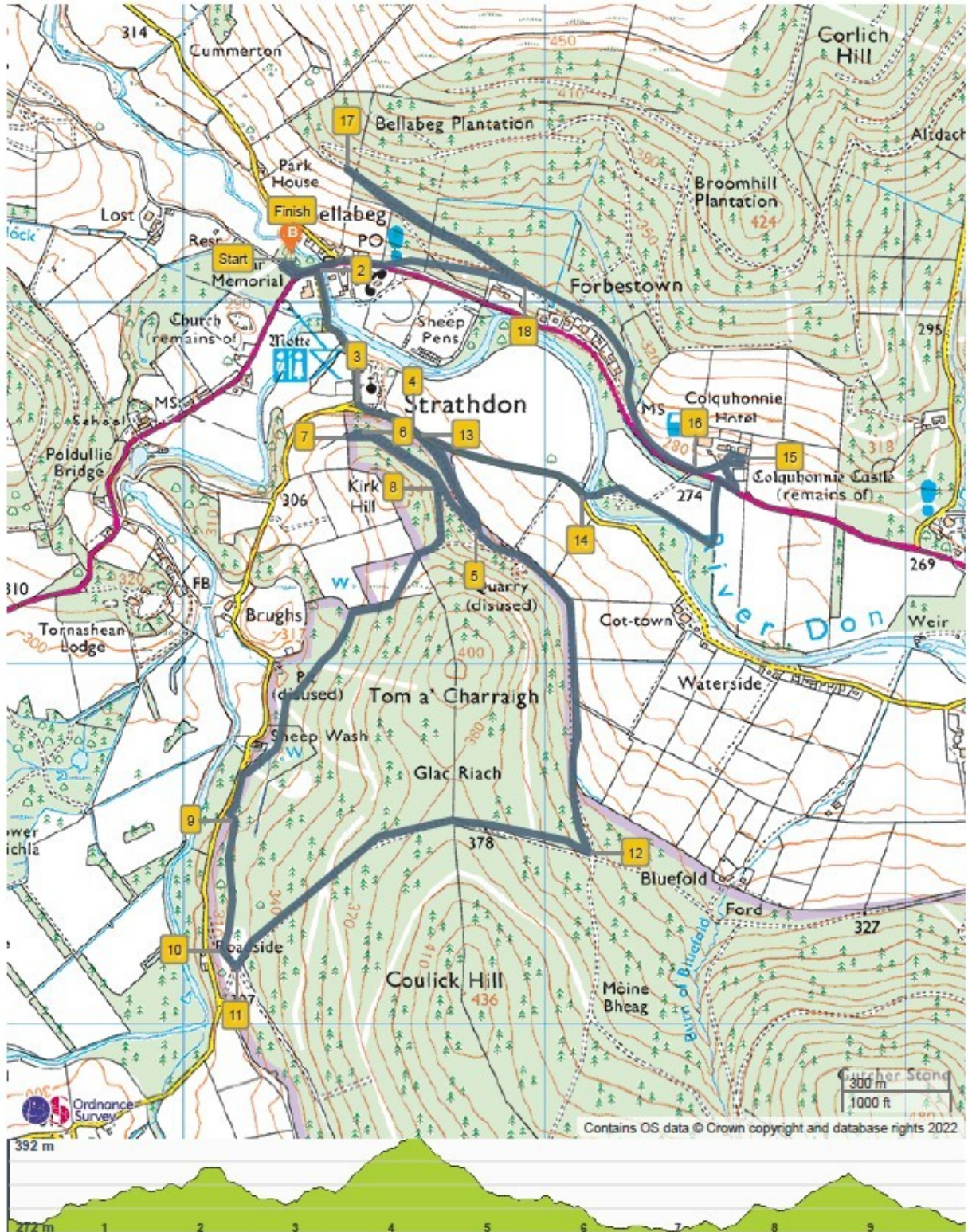
(19) Finish walk back at car-park

In 700 m, you will have arrived back at your start-point in the little car-park off the road to Lost farm. (9.99 km)

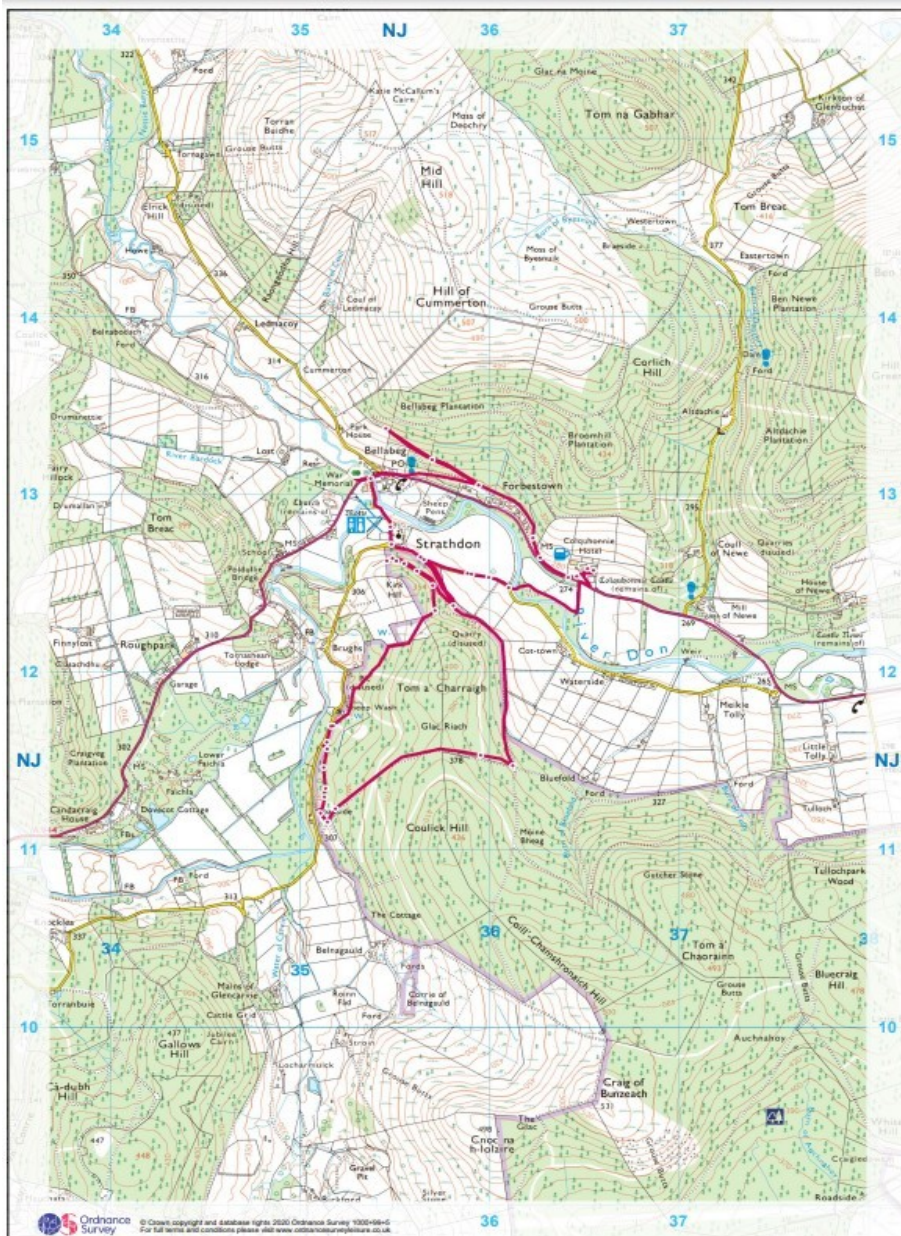


Route Map (with waypoints)

179-Bellabeg-Bunzeach Forest-Lonach Hall Circuit



Route Map



Links:

[Photos from walk](#)

[Download Route Guide](#) (PDF with illustrated Waypoints)

[Download GPX file](#) (GPS Exchange Format)

[Access Walk on OutdoorActive](#)

[Access Walk on OSMaps](#)

[Access Walk on Alltrails](#)

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