

# *Torridonian Reflections*

## *Images from around a Wester Ross sea-lock*

*An exhibition of photographs by Daniel and Clare Gordon,  
centred around Loch Torridon in the North West Highlands  
of Scotland: Vast vistas and hidden details in a great  
mountain fastness, across the seasons.*

*This booklet is a short guide to the Leeds showing, 6th May - 5th June  
2014. If you'd like a copy of this guide, or would like to know more about the  
photos, please contact us at*

*D.R.H.Gordon@leeds.ac.uk*

*You can find out more about Torridon from our website, which has links to local  
community and other websites, recommended books about Torridon, and some  
more photos and writing about some of our travels there:*

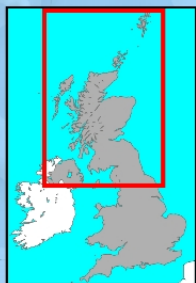
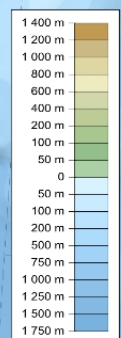
*cdgordon.org.uk/torr*

*From June onwards, this site will also have freely available digital versions of  
the exhibition photos. We hope you find something in the exhibition to enjoy, think  
about, or inspire.*

*Daniel and Clare.*

*Some of these photos will be on show at The Bull Inn at West Tanfield,  
a lovely village in Wensleydale, from 1st August to 24th August 2014.*





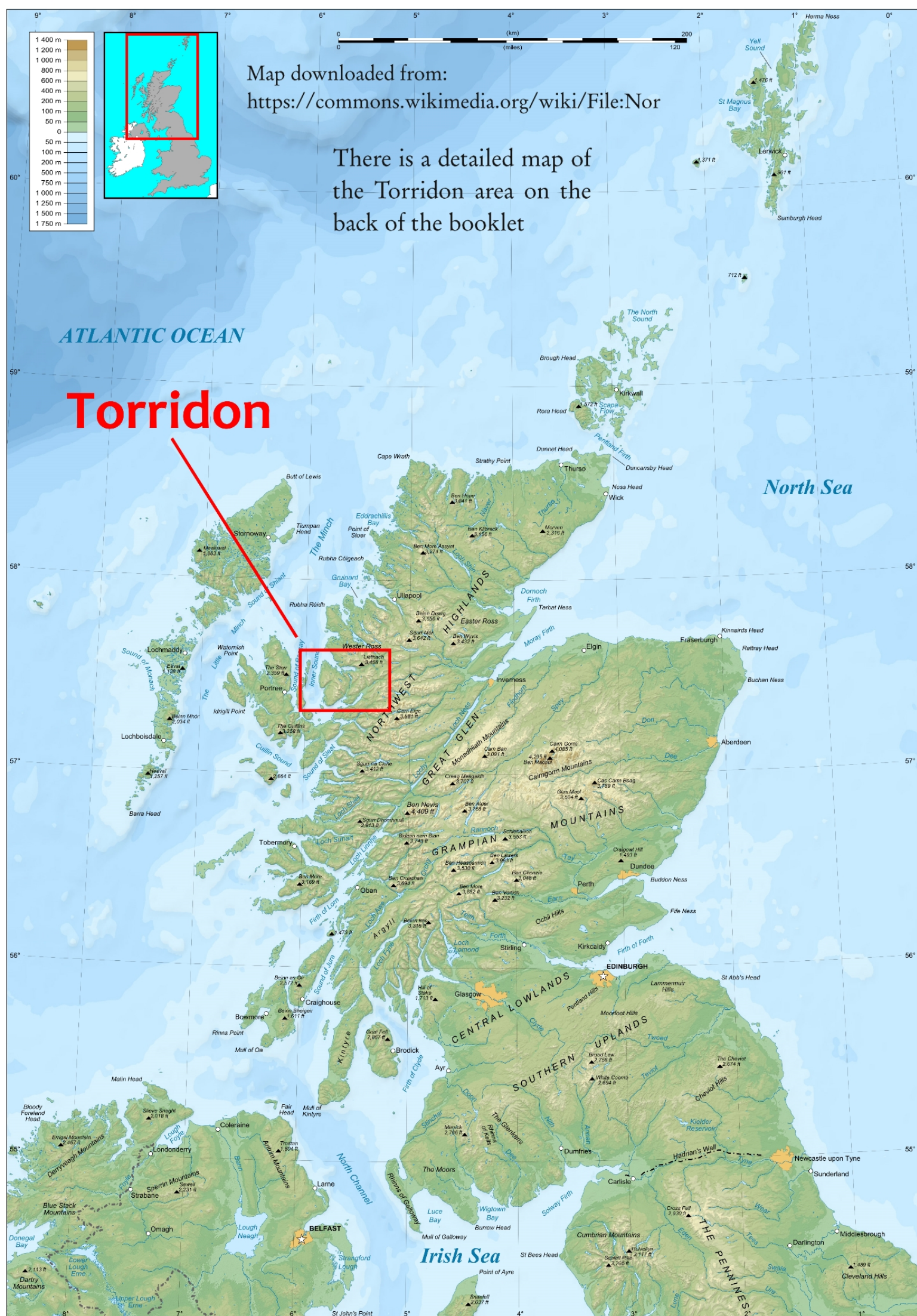
Map downloaded from:  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nor>

There is a detailed map of  
the Torridon area on the  
back of the booklet

ATLANTIC OCEAN

**Torridon**

North Sea





Torrison is a remote, mountainous part of Scotland's western seaboard, on the Mainland roughly opposite the northern half of Skye. The people are based almost entirely by the coast, but the scattered settlements are well linked, physically and by a strong, active community. Making a living here has never been easy: subsistence was prevalent here till relatively recently, and even today many people juggle several jobs. But there is clearly much resilience here, and clearly also a very open and welcoming culture.

This place has a tough history: much of the turbulence and poverty which characterised the Highlands for many centuries was also suffered here, though there was a lighter side. History has to be sought here, like much else. Wildlife, for example, is remarkable, but the more obvious things, particularly animals and birds, are widely spaced and not often seen.

We have made several visits to Torrison over the last 15 years. In the early days we arrived by postbus, later by bicycle, public minibus, or walking across the hill passes, from various points on the nearest railway line. We have no roots or rights in Torrison, but have tried to prepare well, learn what we can about the place and its people between visits, absorb, observe, enjoy, contemplate and marvel. We have got to know some wonderful people, and had some musical involvement there.

We have also seen some unusual things - in all, we have been greatly blessed, and very much hope that something of whatever encouraged various people to persuade us to publicise some of our photos and thoughts will also find favour with you.

[Digital versions of these photos from our website, and text from this booklet, may be freely used provided we are properly credited (Creative Commons Licence). Thank you. Daniel and Clare].

*With special thanks to:*

*Mary and Christopher Jackson,  
Désirée and the late Lyall Gordon.*

*Murdoch and Mary MacDonald;  
Jo Harris, Emily, Linda, Debs and all the staff of the Torridon Stores, the late  
Donnie "London" and Morag;  
Gemma and Kenny Livingstone, of Torridon Seatours;  
The staff of the Torridon House Estate;  
Tom at the Torridon Hotel;  
The late Gill Beamer.*

*Philip Spellacy and Jillian Johnson;  
Bryan White, Jonathan Tobutt, Richard Rastall, the Leeds University Liturgical  
Choir (now the Clothworkers' Consort of Leeds), Tom Coppin and Jessica Clarke;  
Michael Butler, of Cobblecraft, Knaresborough.*

We hope that the photos can be appreciated in any order: to help navigation, the numbering of framed pictures in this booklet starts from the left-hand end, opposite from the main entrance to the foyer. (At the concert hall end, in other words). Numbers proceed down each column, then onto the top of the next column on the right. The mini-prints of the pictures in this guide will hopefully make things clear. Before that is a map showing the location of Torridon.

There is a simple map of Torridon on the back cover of this booklet (in the paper version, but not online). More detailed maps are in the right-hand display cabinet in the foyer. We've followed current Ordnance Survey place name spellings, except for Loch an Eòin (spelt Eion on the modern OS maps).

Loch Torridon, both the Outer Loch and the Inner, or Upper, Loch, and the intervening Loch Shildaig, is a complex arm of the sea. Sometimes we abbreviate it to "the Loch"!



## A brief note about Torridon's rocks

In Torridon, the effect of the geology on the landscape is very striking.

Above Diabaig and across the Narrows between Upper and Outer Loch Torridon, the Lewisian Gneiss is some of the oldest rock in the world - formed about 3,000 million years ago. It forms a very distinctive landscape known as "Cnoc and Lochan" - myriad rounded hillocks and hollows full of water. Walking in gneiss areas can make for tricky navigation and much up and down, but also a remarkable feeling of seclusion. Photo 17a shows an example of complex gneiss topography.

The predominant rock type is Torridonian Sandstone - a very hard, reddish, blocky sandstone, which forms the strong horizontal lines in the landscape that you can see clearly on Liathach, Beinn Damh, Beinn Shildaig and other mountains. Torridonian rocks form the bulk of most of the hills here, the layers often forming towering crags and precipices. You can see this on several of the photos, e.g. 35, 40 and 43.

The Gaelic names of the mountains reflect the geology too - for example, Maol Chean-dearg translates as "Bald Red Head", referring to the red sandstone at the top. The Torridonian here is mainly between 800 and 1,000 million years old.

The younger Cambrian quartzite formations show as white tops to some mountains, such as Beinn Eighe. Close up, as with all the rocks, there is much subtle variation in colour. The Gaelic name Beinn Liath Mhòr translates as "The big grey hill" and from Torridon the quartzite hills high above the head of the Loch do indeed look distinctively grey. In some places the rock has a pinkish colour - see for example photo 14. 5 and 26 also feature quartzite.

The quartzite is typically in the region of 500 million years old. In places they include the distinctive "pipe" rock - fossilised remains of ancient worm burrows.



*The photographs*

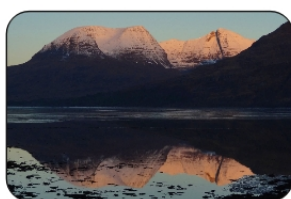




(1) <sup>[column 1]</sup> We start with some morning light on Loch Torridon itself. This is the view from the north shore, towards Beinn Damh and Beinn na h-Eaglaise, on a perfect July day.



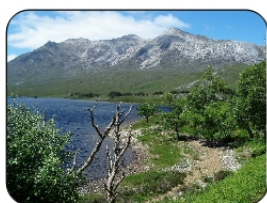
(2) Later on the same day: the head of upper Loch Torridon, from the summit of Sgorr a' Chadail - the west end of the Liathach ridge.



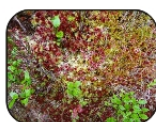
(3) A very different reflection, in December: Beinn Alligin (Tom na Gruagaich and Sgurr Mor - the Horns are hidden behind Sgorr a' Chadail), seen from Annat, the southern corner of the head of Loch Torridon, not long after sunrise.



(4) <sup>[col. 2]</sup> A typical Torridon hill is mainly Torridonian sandstone - a rich brown with hints of red and purple, well layered, and very hard. Most of the highest hills are topped by light-coloured quartzite. The two types of rock are well contrasted here, looking north from the top of Mullach an Rathain, Liathach's western summit, to Beinn Dearg and Beinn Alligin. July.



(5) The graceful curves of Beinn Eighe's quartzite ridge, seen from Loch Clair in June. Close to, though, the top is a similar jumble of sharp-edged rocks to the previous photo!



(6) The first of the "group photos": mosses and lichens from various parts of Torridon. These small, often overlooked, plants are ubiquitous and can collectively form striking patterns, and much colour, throughout the year.





(7) <sup>[col. 3]</sup> A bright April day on the south side of Liathach. Viewed from the road along the head of the Loch, near the Fasag junction.



(8) The Narrows - as the border between Upper Loch Torridon and Loch Shiel is known - with Eilean a' Chaoil, seen from the Leacan Bàna on the north side: September evening.



(9) Just a few minutes later, looking in the opposite direction, towards Beinn Alligin. Skeins of geese - probably greylags, can be seen top right, flying east.



(10) <sup>[col. 4]</sup> Beinn Liath Mhòr viewed across Coire Lair from Sgorr Ruadh: these two hills in the Coulin Forest form a prominent backdrop to the head of Loch Torridon.



(11) The panorama to the west of the bealach (saddle) between Fuar Tholl and Sgorr Ruadh: Maol Chean-dearg, which we'll meet later on, is right-hand of the two prominent hills in the middle, with Loch Coire Fionnaraich just below and to its right.



(12) Fuar Tholl, from Sgorr Ruadh. September.



(13) <sup>[col. 5]</sup> Beinn Damh with a brief spell of sunshine between squalls, seen from the north shore of the Upper Loch. December.



(14) Stream flowing over quartzite rock, on the steep western slopes between Beinn Liath Mhòr and Sgorr nan Lochan Uaine: here the quartzite has a pinker hue. Quartzite seems to give extra clarity to the water.



(15) Fleeting brightness at the head of Loch Torridon, looking towards Ben Shieldaig. So fleeting that this was snapped from inside the cafe window, sensing that it wouldn't last! At the time, we didn't see the two children just visible on the bottom right - they don't seem worried by the approaching rain.



(16) <sup>[col. 6]</sup> Looking towards Ben Shieldaig (left), and The Narrows (right), from the road between Coire Mhic Nòbail and Alligin: another bright spell between two very wet ones. September.



(17) Three coastal outlines round Loch Torridon. Firstly, the archetypal gneiss scenery round Loch Diabaig, viewed from Outer Loch Torridon. The shaft of light in the second photo is between Beinn Damh (left) and Ben Shieldaig (right), viewed from the Leacan Bàna: looking a bit more eastwards than photo 8. Finally, the distinctive outline of Beinn Alligin (left), Beinn Dearg (centre, and the west half of Liathach (right), from near Balgy on the south side of the loch.



(18) Bays off the Dubh-Àird, near Annat on the south shore of the Upper Loch, looking west. April.





(19) <sup>[col. 7]</sup> Shieling sites are common round Torridon. Many are not marked on any public maps, but Murdoch MacDonald's writing leads to some fine ones, and we have stumbled across some others. These remains of tiny drystone dwellings and fertile ground high in the valleys were used for summer pasturing until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, when the Clearances forced their abandonment. This one is on the Abhainn Thràil, near the mouth of the Allt Beithe, on the way to Lochan Neimhe. June.



(20) These photos show some outdoor religious sites. (a) War memorials are always thought-provoking places: here you see many names from a community that is small and so remote - remoteness that didn't confer safety. This memorial at Fasag (Torridon village), has one of the most dramatic backgrounds:

Mullach an Rathain. (b) The preaching wall and seats at Am-ploc, at the head of the Loch. It is thought to have once been a Viking meeting place. (c) Church Cave, South Rona: this Island is to the west of the Outer Loch. There are many caves in the west Highlands that have been used as churches. Although the island's wardens are the only inhabitants, this rough place was used for a wedding a few months before we saw it: reached only over steep rocky ground and a long walk from the nearest anchorage - it is another poignant place. (d) The cross on the floor of the Rona cave.



(21) Blue elements: (a) A perfect midsummer day, looking across the head of the Upper Loch at low tide, Fasag village, towards Seana Mheallan (left), Beinn Liath Mhòr (left of centre) and Sgorr Ruadh (right of centre), which we'll see in more detail in photo 26. Also Beinn na h-Eaglaise (right). (b) Midsummer riches on the shore

road, below Sgorr a' Chadail; (c) Milkwort, a tiny deep blue, common moorland plant here in June and July, sometimes seen in other colours; (d) Lichen near the Bealach a'Chomhla, April.



(22) [col. 8] September sunset from Lochside Cottage, on the north shore of the Loch, looking towards Ben Shieldaig (left), the Narrows and the north end of the Applecross peninsula.



(23) Nacreous clouds, seen from Lochside in the gaps between frequent squalls. Looking across from the north shore at Lochside, towards the south part of the head of the Loch. The snowy, pointed peak on the left is Sgorr Ruadh. This was the first of a sequence of amazing things we experienced in four unforgettable days in midwinter.



a



b



c



d



e



f



g

(24) Summer flowers: (a) Grass of Parnassus at the lime-rich Rassal Ashwood, near Tornapress, September; (b) Lousewort - a common flower on the moorland here: we have also seen a pure white form on a high pass in nearby Kintail; (c) There are many vetches, trefoils, clover, etc. on low-lying hedgerows and verges, which can be

really colourful in June and July. This one is on the shore road, right by the sea, at the foot of Liathach's west end (Sgorr a' Chadail). (d) Scabious is the dominant flower in mid-September, growing on open places and also, as here in Coire Roill, in mixed woodland. (e) We've seen roseroot at all levels: low on sea cliffs, and this one at the other extreme, just below the summit of Beinn Eighe, more than 3,000 feet up, in subarctic tundra conditions. It's under snow and ice much of the year, and fierce gales for most of the rest of it. The quartzite gravel here harbours miniature alpine gardens; (f) and (g) Orchids abound in the valleys and lower hills here, sometimes flowering in drifts on grassy areas.



(25) [col. 9] Though much of the land here is open, there are many woodlands, and some of the finest relict pine forest in Scotland. They complement the richness of small plants - flowers in the grassland and moors, lichens and mosses on the

peat and the rocks. Woodland is on the increase as large areas of previously grazed lower hillside are being protected from deer. This photo is at Coire Mhic Nòbaill, near the road bridge. July.





(26) This photo is also taken from Coire Mhic Nòbail, looking towards the head of Loch Torridon, with Beinn Liath Mhòr and Sgorr Ruadh again showing their geological identity against a dark sky, and above the nearer Torridonian. Can you spot the heron?



a



b



c



d



e

(27) Red plants: we've hardly ever seen full-bodied red in flower petals here, but certainly have in lichens - (a) and (e) were near the foot of Loch Damh, and in leaves: the deep red in (c) is the leaves of tormentil, a common moorland flower here. We've even seen it with all-red leaves and stems in midsummer. This photo is high on the south slope

of Sgorr Ruadh in September; (d) is the tiny round-leaved sundew: the droplets are secretions from the plant designed to catch small insects; Finally (b): one of the great delights of walking in the Highlands is the bog myrtle, with its heady scent of spicy nutmeg. These are new leaf buds in April, fragrant and resinous, on the flats at the bottom of Tom na Gruagaich, just above the woods at Coire Mhic Nòbail.



(28) <sup>[col. 10]</sup> Sunset from the roadside viewpoint between Annat and Shieldaig, a spot usually used to look directly across the Loch at the characteristic outlines on the north side. Here Ben Shieldaig is on the left, the Alligin gneiss on the right.



(29) Views from the mouth of outer Loch Torridon: (a) looking out to sea, towards the Western Isles; (b) looking back towards the open moors north of Diabaig: Craig River (centre), and Beinn Dearg and Beinn Alligin (right), with the Flowerdale hills on the left. This area sees very few people now, and we are yet to explore it on foot, having seen it from

several of the hills that overlook it. There is much history here - Neolithic rock shelters, what was the mainland's remotest youth hostel, shielings and crop-fields... and a ruin intriguingly close to the site of an ancient legend. The contrast between brilliant sun over the sea and overcast inland is something we see quite often here.



(30) The small islands of rock in the outer Loch, shown in the previous photo, often have seals on them (top centre, September). The other photos are of sea otters on the upper Loch, hunting, playing, and icebreaking - from below and above!

It was the noise, above the gentle and quirkily varied sounds of the ice moving and reforming with the tide, which alerted us to them. December glory.

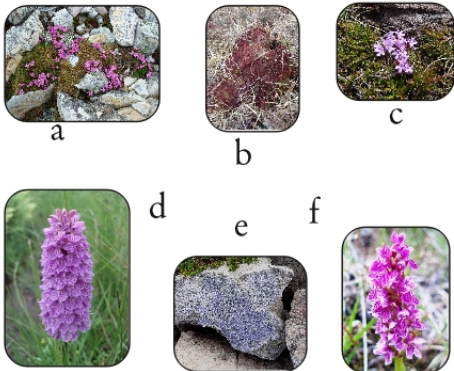


(31) <sup>[col. 11]</sup> Returning to Torridon's highest and most precipitous hill - Liathach: Coire na Caime, from the summit of Mullach an Rathain, with Beinn Eighe beyond. July.



(32) Liathach in full profile from the south, plus a bit of Beinn Eighe's front (far right), viewed from the Annat to Bealach na Lice path, December. This area abounds in huge, flat,

horizontal sandstone slabs, littered with glacially deposited boulders: here they appear to be lined up, but this is partly a matter of perspective.



(33) Purple and pink plants: (a) Like photo 24e, this moss campion was growing in the blasted tundra gravels just below Ruadh-stac Mòr - the summit of Beinn Eighe. But unlike the roseroot, which we've also seen growing in sheltered places by the sea, we've only ever seen moss campion growing in wild exposure more than 3,000 feet up. July. (b) More

sphagnum, this time on the steep tussocky eastern slopes of Beinn Shildaig. (e) Lichen on quartzite, on the east slopes of Sgorr Ruadh, above the top of Coire Làir. (c) Wild thyme, on Sgorr a'Chadail's northern slopes. (d) and (f) More orchids, this time with strong patterns on the petals - these are common and don't usually indicate a different species - just a natural work of art!





(34)

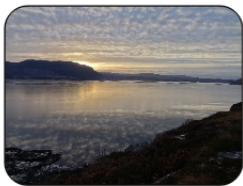
(35)



(36)



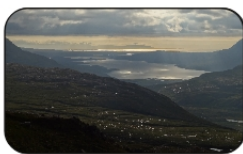
(34) - (36) [col. 12] This column features Maol Chean-dearg: the gaelic epithets "bald" and "red" are certainly true of much this distinctively-shaped hill. Here it is seen from the stepping stones on the Annat to Loch an Eòin path, with a thin layer of sunlit hill-cloud. It's in black and white - partly because this view was a huge contrast of light and dark - not far off monochrome. We hope that conversion of this and photo (36) to black-and-white adds another element to the show: it also helped hide the photographer's problem of flare! (36) shows the stepping stones, also in September. (35) is the view northwards from the summit of Maol Chean-dearg: the structure of the layered Torridonian is striking from here - it's a great viewpoint in other directions as well. June.



(37) [col. 13] Returning to the Loch, and more reflections, here we see December sunset over the partially frozen sea. Viewed from near Rechullin, on the north side of the Loch, December.



(38) The Loch from the summit of Sgorr a' Chadail: similar to photo 2, but here we see the mirror of sky and sea more clearly. July.



(39) Late afternoon - patches of sunlight on the Loch, seen from the western slopes of Beinn Liath Mhor in July.



(40) - (43) [col. 14] Alpenglow in the evening, the same day we'd seen it in the morning (photo 3), all viewed from the eastern flank of Beinn na h-Eaglaise, on the Annat path. Here the sunset and snow pick out the details on Liathach's Mullach an Rathain (40). Liathach is also the subject of (43): the fearsome pinnacles, Am Farasinen, and summit, Spidean a' Choire Lèith. (41) On the right is the last sun on the top of Sgùrr Dubh, with the frozen Lochan Neimhe below, while on the left the distant Fannaichs steal the show; (42) The Fannaichs and Beinn Eighe, whose graceful ridges we first mentioned in photo 5. They are perhaps best seen at this angle and in this light.



(44) [col. 15] Midday, midwinter: reflections high in the hills. Beinn Damh (left) and Beinn na h-Eaglaise (right), looking west across Loch an Eòin.



(45) More bright ice at the top of the day - this time back at the sea: the Upper Loch, from the north shore.



(46) This photo is from earlier the same day as 45: to end the show, we return to early morning, from Lochside Cottage - centre of so much rich experience for us... transcendent Torridon - we hope to return soon...