

The Wild Flowers of Ben Lawers & Perthshire

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Arrive Aberfeldy
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- Day 2/6** Botany excursions around Ben Lawers & Perthshire
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- Day 7** Morning excursion then depart
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Departs

July or August

Focus

Plants and general natural history

Grading

B. A reasonable amount of strenuous hill-walking, but at a slow botanising pace

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code GBR26)

Highlights

- Acid-based flora including Cotton Grass & Bog Asphodel
- Scottish Asphodel, Alpine Saw-wort and rare sedges
- Sought-after gems such as Snow Gentian, Net-leaved Willow & Drooping Saxifrage
- Rock Speedwell & Alpine Forget-me-not in flower, Yellow Mountain Saxifrage & Moonwort
- Stunning mountain scenery
- Visit the famous Birks of Aberfeldy, Rannoch Moor and Ben y Vrackie



From top left: Small Cow-wheat, Scorched Alpine Sedge & Snow Gentian (Courtesy of Paul Harmes & Dave Shute)



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Introduction

Long regarded by botanists as one of the foremost sites in Britain to see alpine plants, and situated in the Breadalbane region of the central Scottish Highlands on the north side of Loch Tay, Ben Lawers (In Gaelic: Beinn Labhair), at 3,984ft (1214m), is the highest peak in the British Isles outside the Ben Nevis and Cairngorm ranges. The mountain is unique for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is a green mountain, unlike its neighbours the hills of Rannoch and Atholl which are purple and brown. Its Pre-Cambrian, metamorphic schists, rich in mineral nutrients, are continually weathering to create fresh soil ideal for its unique flora. Coupled with the altitude and local climatic conditions, these factors provide an ideal environment in which these special plants can thrive. Much of the area around the mountain is now in the ownership of the National Trust for Scotland.

This 7-day break will give us the opportunity to visit the three principal locations of botanical interest in the immediate area, with some quite strenuous mountain walking, as well as a



Ben Lawers

number of other key sites within the region. On one day we will walk to the summit of Ben Lawers via the main track from the car park at 1,200ft, passing through an area of boggy glacial drift. Here we should find a contrasting acid-based flora such as Cotton Grass along the way, but driven on by the prospect of potentially finding, among other gems, Snow Gentian and Drooping Saxifrage. On another day the eastern side of the mountain will be our objective in order to search for a number of Britain's rarer sedges and ferns. We will also spend half a day exploring the rocks of the Creag an Lochan, to the west of the loch by the road into Glen Lyon. Here it may be possible to find Purple Saxifrage in flower and, if we are lucky, the diminutive Moonwort. In addition to the botanical highlights, Ben Lawers is also home to birds such as Raven, Ptarmigan, Red Grouse, Ring Ouzel and Curlew, and some of the burns also support small numbers of Dipper.



Drooping Saxifrage

We will visit Rannoch Moor and search for the eponymously-named Rannoch-rush and the woodland of the Birks of Aberfeldy where Chickweed Wintergreen, Common Wintergreen and Wood Vetch grow. We may also stop in at the more cultivated Clunie House Gardens where the owners' passion for Himalayan plants can be seen. A little further afield we will visit Ben y Vrackie, by Pitlochry, where we can find Alpine Milk Vetch. There may also be time to visit the nearby Monzie flushes too

So, if you like the idea of combining botany with walking and outstanding scenery, why not join our botanical leader on this Highland break.

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Perth to Ben Lawers

For those travelling by public transport, we will meet at the railway station in Perth in the late afternoon (more detailed information about the time and location where the group will meet will be sent to you in your Final Joining Instructions). Your tour leader will drive the group to the hotel in Aberfeldy, which will be our base for the six nights of the tour. Group member who are driving in their own car should make their way directly to the hotel, timing their arrival for late afternoon/early evening.

Day 2

Ben Lawers Mountain

Below Beinn Ghlas



On our first full day we will take our minibus to the car park below the path leading to the summit of Ben Lawers, from where we will set out to explore the walk up to the summit via the main track from the car park at about 1,200ft, passing through an area of boggy glacial drift. Here we should find a contrasting acid-based flora with *Eriophorum angustifolium* (Cotton Grass) and *Narthecium ossifragum* (Bog Asphodel) along the way. As we near the top, the geology changes dramatically where the schists break the surface and the acid rocks of the lower slopes make way for calcareous soils. From here onwards the flora changes to 'upland alpine'. We should now begin to

look for, among other gems, *Gentiana nivalis* (Snow Gentian), *Cochlearia micacea* (Mountain Scurvygrass), *Salix reticulata* (Net-leaved Willow) and *Saxifraga cernua* (Dropping Saxifrage) at one of its only two Scottish stations.

After descending the mountain, we will visit the Falls of Dochart where there will be opportunities to take photographs, as well as seeking out one or two local botanical specialities, before returning to our hotel.



Bristle Sedge

Day 3

Birks of Aberfeldy

This morning we will make our way to the famous Birks o' Aberfeldy. Once called the Dens of Moness it was made known in the song by Robert Burns, which resulted in a change of name. It is a delightful walk



Birks of Aberfeldy

along the banks of the Moness Burn as it tumbles down from the hills, through this gorge, to meet the River Tay. Much of the site is a SSSI due to the botanical interest of its rich plant life. Under the shade of the leafy beach trees we will be looking out for *Trientalis europaea* (Chickweed Wintergreen), *Silene dioica* (Red Campion) and *Lysimachia nemorum* (Yellow Pimpernel). The damp areas around the water are excellent for a variety of mosses, while on the rocks in the streams we can watch out for feeding Dipper and wagtails. As we move up the glen the trees change to birches (both Downy and Silver), or birks, that give the place its name. Here we can look for *Melampyrum sylvaticum* (Small Cow-wheat) and other plants that thrive in moist conditions. At the top of the path we'll be able to cross over the burn via the bridge above the Falls of Moness before meandering back along the other side, watching out for *Pyrola minor* (Common Wintergreen) and *Vicia sylvatica*

(Wood Vetch), as well as the presence of *Galium odoratum* (Sweet Woodruff) and *Ajuga reptans* (Bugle), which although past flowering, should still have visible leaves. On a clear day it's possible to look over Strathtay and get distant views of Ben y Vrackie from some of the more open sections of path.

Depending on time, we may spend part of this afternoon around the Keltney Burn or perhaps stop in at Fortingal to see the several thousand year old Yew tree or visit the more cultivated grounds at Clunie House.

Day 4

The Lawers Burn

Today we will drive to Lawers village, where we will park, keeping an eye out for fishing Osprey as we go. We will follow the public footpath which runs up alongside the Lawers burn from the main road, aiming towards the Lochan nan Cat on the eastern side of the summit of Ben Lawers. At the dam, we will bear northwards to an area below the imposing peak of Meall Garbh, and the pass which crosses into Glen Lyon. Here we will search for a number of Britain's rarer sedges and ferns, as well as *Tofieldia pusilla* (Scottish Asphodel), *Carex capillaris* (Hair Sedge) and *Saussurea alpina* (Alpine Saw-wort), among many others.



Lawers Burn trail by Dave Shute

If time permits, we will also visit Lochan nan Cat. In this different habitat we will explore its margins, in search of marginal and aquatic flora.

Day 5

Rannoch Moor

To the north of Ben Lawers lies Rannoch Moor, often referred to as the country's last wilderness. At around 50 square miles in size, it's Britain's largest area of blanket bog. Among the plants that we hope to find are



Round-leaved Sundew

Scheuchzeria palustris (Rannoch Rush), *Carex hostiana* (Tawney Sedge), *Drosera rotundifolia* (Round-leaved Sundew) and possibly *Betula nana* (Dwarf Birch).

On the southern shore of Loch Rannoch is Black Wood, one of the larger remnants of ancient pine forest that once covered much of Scotland. It's a recognised IPA (Important Plant Area) due to the rich variety of lichens and ancient woodland. As well as magnificent Scots Pine, a number of which are thought to be hundreds of years old, there are Silver Birch, Downy Birch, Rowan, Alder, Juniper, Bird Cherry and Goat Willow. Ling Heather and native blueberry carpet the forest floor, interspersed with Wood Ant mounds. We

may also find the rare *Orthilia secunda* (Serrated Wintergreen) and *Corallorhiza* (Coralroot) here. As we walk we'll keep an eye out for the Red Squirrel that live here and, if we are very fortunate, a glimpse of a Pine Marten. In the trees tops there may be a family of foraging tits or a small flock of Crossbill or Lesser Redpoll, along with woodpeckers, tree creepers, Siskins and finches.

Day 6

Ben y Vrackie

Over by Pitlochry is the mountain of Ben y Vrackie (or Ben Vrackie) where we can find a number of special plants including the restricted *Astragalus alpinus* (Alpine Milk-vetch), and *Oxytropis halleri* (Purple Oxytropis), as well as *Equisetum pratense* (Shady Horsetail), *Equisetum sylvaticum* (Wood Horsetail).

If time permits, we will also aim to visit the Glen Fender Meadows, sometimes called the 'Monzie flushes'. This is an area of base rich fen springs and lowland heath bisected by the Fender Burn, 2km north-east of Blair Atholl, at the top of Glen Fender. This S.S.I. is home a wide array of interesting plants, including *Carex* (*Kobresia*) *simpliciuscula* (False Sedge), *Eleocharis quinqueflora* (Few-flowered Spike-rush), *Equisetum hyemale* (Rough Horsetail), *Trichophorum cespitosum* (Northern Deergrass), *Juncus alpinoarticulatus* (Alpine Rush) along with many others.



Emperor Moth Caterpillar

Day 7

Lochan na Lairige & depart

After breakfast, we will drive north of the Ben Lawers car park to the Lochan na Lairige. Here we will spend time exploring the rocks of the Tarmachan cliffs, to the west of the Loch by the road into Glen Lyon. Here it is sometimes possible to see *Saxifraga oppositifolia* (Purple Saxifrage) which is often still in flower in July and August, *Saxifraga aizoides* (Yellow Mountain Saxifrage) and, if we are lucky, the diminutive *Botrychium lunaria* (Moonwort) and maybe one or two surprises.



Purple Saxifrage

Once again, if time permits, we will cross over into Glen Lyon, which has been described as 'The longest, loneliest and loveliest glen in Scotland', to see some native specimens of *Pinus sylvestris* (Scots Pine), and to take lunch at the famous Glen Lyon Tea Room at Bridge of Balgie.

We will finish our holiday after lunch on Day 7, after which we will return to our hotel, hopefully reflecting on a splendid few days in this beautiful part of Scotland. For those travelling back home by rail from Stirling, you will

be offered a lift with your tour leader to Perth Train Station. All other members of the group will need to depart independently from Aberfeldy.

Images courtesy of Shutterstock, Dave Shute & Paul Harmes

Tour Grading

B. There will be a reasonable amount of quite strenuous walking on this holiday, covering between two and ten miles each day, but this will be at a slow 'botanising pace'. A reasonable degree of physical fitness is required and an enjoyment of hill/mountain walking.

Climate

Please bear in mind that we will be spending our time in mountains and at altitude. Weather conditions, even in July & August, can be cold and inclement, with mist, rain and limited visibility. However, we do hope that the weather will be kind to us during our stay! Please ensure you have adequate wet weather protection, walking boots and gloves and hats. Should we be blessed with good weather then sunscreen and a sunhat will be required.

Food & accommodation

Breakfast and evening meals are included in the holiday cost beginning with the evening meal on Day 1 and finishing with breakfast on Day 7. Accommodation will be in a comfortable, local hotel in double or twin rooms with private facilities. A limited number of rooms will be available for single occupancy. Please note that snacks, drinks (except those provided as part of breakfast) and lunches are NOT included in the

tour cost. Each day, before setting out, we will visit the local shops so that everyone can pick up items for lunch.

Clothing

The average temperature in central Scotland in summer can range from around 10°C to over 20°C, although it may feel colder higher up due to the wind chill factor. We recommend taking a range of clothing for all weathers, including warm, windproof and waterproof clothing with you for your holiday, which can be removed or added in layers as required. A good waterproof jacket and waterproof trousers are essential. It would be useful to have hat, scarf and gloves, as well as a sun hat too! It is recommended to check the weather forecast for the region the week prior to your holiday. Sturdy waterproof footwear such as walking boots or shoes with comfortable socks are recommended. Gaiters can also be useful.

Comfortable, casual clothing and shoes are suggested for the evenings at the hotel.

Equipment

The following is our recommendation of general equipment that you should bring with you.

- Binoculars
- Hand Lens
- Thermos Flask
- Personal first aid kit (including tweezers in case of ticks)
- Trekking poles – many people find these useful for taking weight off the knees, particularly when walking downhill
- Small rucksack/ day pack
- Wash kit and medication
- Camera & accessories (optional)
- Sun protection (if the forecast is for sunny weather)
- Chapstick/ Lip balm
- Insect repellent & sunscreen to protect from UV rays
- Field guide and reading material
- Refillable water bottle

Joining the tour

If you are travelling by public transport, we recommend that you travel by train or coach to Perth. Please make your way to Perth Station by late afternoon (approximately 1600 hours – precise details will be given in your Final Joining Instructions, which are sent out approximately two weeks before departure). Your tour leader will be waiting for you at Perth Train Station and will drive you to Aberfeldy, which is about one hour's drive from Perth.

Transport

The holiday cost includes return minibus transport from Perth Train Station to Aberfeldy, plus all botanical guiding and transport once on the tour. For group members travelling by public transport we recommend that you make your way to Perth Train Station by late afternoon (approximately 1600 hours).

Travel by train: Trains run from London King's Cross to Perth via Edinburgh (or Glasgow). You would need to arrive in good time to meet your tour leader at Perth Train Station. From Perth, those travelling by public transport will be able to have a lift (included in the tour cost) to Aberfeldy (a journey time of approximately an hour).

It is possible to reach Pitlochry from London, possibly requiring a change at Perth for Pitlochry. However, you would then need to get a bus or taxi from there to Aberfeldy. The bus service from Pitlochry to Aberfeldy requires a change in Ballinluig, and services are limited, so we would suggest checking the bus timetables prior to travel to ensure that there is a connection that would work for the times you are travelling (<https://www.stagecoachbus.com/about/east-scotland>).

Bus: There are national bus services that travel to Perth, however local bus services in the Aberfeldy area are limited, so we would recommend checking the bus timetables prior to travel to ensure that there is a connection that would work for the times you are travelling; if you should wish to travel by bus, please do check out www.travelinescotland.com or <https://www.stagecoachbus.com/about/east-scotland> very thoroughly.

Air: The nearest airports for this tour would be either Edinburgh or Glasgow. From there you would need to transfer by train or bus to Perth to meet the group.

Car: You are welcome to make your own way to Aberfeldy and meet the group there. It will be around 1700 hours when the tour vehicle arrives from Perth, however you may prefer to arrive a little earlier. We will confirm the hotel check in time in the final joining instructions.

How to book your place!

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests, at the time of booking.