



NANCY CHAMBERS

# RIVER SPEY CANOE GUIDE

A CANOEIST AND KAYAKER'S GUIDE TO SCOTLAND'S PREMIER TOURING RIVER





## Section Overview

<b>Upper River</b>	Loch Spey to Lochain Uvie	28km
<b>Section 1</b>	Lochain Uvie to Loch Insh	24km
<b>Section 2</b>	Loch Insh to Aviemore	11.5km
<b>Section 3</b>	Aviemore to Boat of Balliefurth	21km
<b>Section 4</b>	Boat of Balliefurth to Cragganmore	26.5km
<b>Section 5</b>	Cragganmore to Craiggellachie	21.5km
<b>Section 6</b>	Craiggellachie to Spey Bay	28km

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Maps by Bute Cartographic.

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# Foreword

At first fed by only trickling ditches high in the Monadhliath Mountains, then by larger tributaries including the Feshie and Avon, the River Spey gathers momentum as it moves toward sharing its fresh waters with Moray Firth brine.

Scotland's fastest flowing river, stretching for almost 100 miles through beautiful Highland countryside, this natural water path has for centuries been navigated by various forms of floating craft. From the mid-1780s, great trunks from the ancient Forest of Caledon were floated downstream in rafts guided by skilled loggers who risked life and limb manhandling these behemoths to shipyards at Garmouth.

On a smaller scale the locals sculled currachs, constructed of a wooden frame covered by stretched skins. These saucer-like boats needed skill to control, and were used to carry small items or to visit neighbours perhaps situated on the far bank.

In the 20th century log rafts and currachs were replaced by kayaks. Then, in the 1980s came open canoes, probably the most ideal craft for journeying on major Scottish rivers.

Ever-changing scenery surrounds the Spey on its journey to the sea. Cradled first between the Monadhliath and Grampian Mountains, the mighty Spey then meanders through flat agricultural lands towards Grantown. After the majesty of thick forested banks throughout Moray comes the shingle flats from Fochabers to the sea. Proficient paddlers can safely enjoy descents of up to 70 miles. Under terms of Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003, much of the Spey has formal 'Core Path' designation.

The Scottish Canoe Association website carries an informative but informal paddlers' guide to the Spey. However, given the Spey's iconic status in terms of canoe touring, there has been an obvious need for a thoroughly comprehensive publication. Here in this book, Nancy has creatively produced an expansive guide which will help the reader gain better understanding of the River Spey, and facilitate their enjoyment of this majestic water path – without doubt, Britain's most beautiful canoe touring river.

Dave Craig

SCOTTISH CANOE ASSOCIATION ADVISER (RIVER SPEY) 1981 TO PRESENT  
(For further information on canoe/access matters relating to the River Spey contact Dave Craig on 01540 673826 or [dave@spiritofthespey.co.uk](mailto:dave@spiritofthespey.co.uk))



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# Introduction

The River Spey is one of the classic open canoe journeys in the UK. That said, it is increasingly popular with touring kayaks, and if broken down into day trips is very enjoyable in whitewater river kayaks and inflatable canoes. The Spey has stretches of flat water and lochs, gentle moving water and exciting grade 2 rapids. It can be paddled as a complete journey or, if using the agreed access and egress points, can be broken down into superb day paddles. The Spey starts its journey high in the mountains at Loch Spey, and flows and tumbles its way down to the Spey Dam and then across a flatter area passing Laggan village, and down past Lochain Uvie where we start the river description. It then flows down to the sea passing many villages and beautiful rural spots on the way.

There are usually many wonderful wildlife sightings when on the river, ranging from ospreys to dippers, otters and salmon. The wild flowers on the riverbank in summer make a beautiful display, and the fishing huts particularly in the mid to lower sections of the river are manicured to perfection, showing a great diversity in river usage throughout.

The journey down the River Spey from Lochain Uvie to Spey Bay is 135 kilometers and passes over three OS 1:50,000 map sheets, 35 Kingussie and the Monadhliath Mountains, 36 Grantown and Aviemore, and 28 Elgin, Dufftown and surrounding area. It is a stunning journey to complete and should be a must on every paddler's tick list.



 *Below Aberlour.*



# The author

Nancy is a passionate paddler who is most at home in her canoe. She is also regularly found in a sea kayak and occasionally in a white water kayak. Multi-day journeys are her favourite personal adventure, especially if they are spent on the water with her family and friends.

She has spent her career working in the outdoors and currently works for half her time as an instructor for Glenmore Lodge, the National Outdoor Training Centre, where you will find her delivering a range of paddlesport and mountaineering courses. In addition to this Nancy works for other organisations and occasionally runs bespoke guided or training course for groups. She holds a range of high level outdoor qualifications including the BCU Level 5 Canoe Coach award and enjoys most other outdoor sports.

Nancy visited the Aviemore area as a child and has many happy memories of her holidays here. In her late teens she returned to work as a ski instructor, then moved to the west coast of Scotland before returning to live near Aviemore in 2002. She has been paddling on the River Spey since 1990, when she was introduced to its beauty on a staff training trip from Lowport Outdoor Education Centre. Since then she has paddled regularly in the area and all around Scotland.

 *Nancy Chambers paddling on Loch Spey. Photo | Nick March.*



# Acknowledgements

There are lots of people to thank for their help during the writing and photo taking for this book. Doug Cooper for helping with the initial idea. Dave Craig for being a great font of knowledge on the river. Franco and Vicky at Pesda Press. Donald Macpherson for helping with photos and information about writing a book. Alison Faulconbridge for helping with the photos and just being great craic on the river. Tom and Kate Oxtoby for being models for photos and reading my writing prior to sending it to Franco. Karl and Carol Atherton for suggestions on the upper section. The many landowners and ghillies that I have chatted to on and about the river. The many folks I have paddled with over the years on the Spey who have increased the enthusiasm that I have for the river, and who have been models for the pictures. The biggest thanks need to go to my family, Nick, Olly and Eddy, who have helped and supported me by giving me the time to complete the project, being willing models on the river, and taking some photos as well. If I have missed someone out apologies and many thanks for your help.

All photos taken by Nancy Chambers unless acknowledged in the caption.

## Important notice – disclaimer

Canoeing and kayaking whether in a loch, river or sea environment has its inherent risks as do all adventurous activities. This guidebook highlights some considerations to take into account when planning your own river journey.

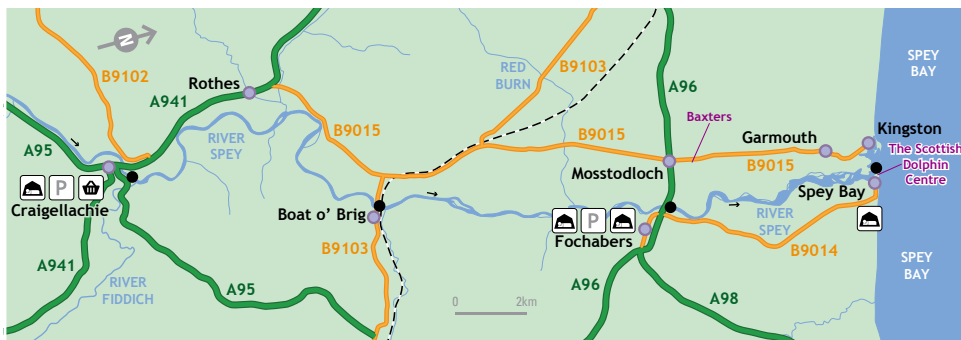
While we have included a range of factors to consider, you will need to plan your own journey and within that ensure there is scope to be adaptable to local tides, weather conditions and ever changing river hazards. This requires knowing your own abilities, then applying your own risk assessment to the conditions that you may encounter. The varying environmental conditions within the river and its lochs means that every day good judgement is required to decide whether to paddle or not.

The information within this book has been well researched, however neither the author, nor Pesda Press can be held responsible for any decision of whether to paddle or not and any consequences arising from that decision.

 Paddling past Orton earth pillars.







## Section 6

# Craigellachie to Spey Bay

- Distance** 28km
- Start** Craigellachie, NJ 290 452
- Finish** Spey Bay, NJ 348 654
- Difficulty** Grade 1 and grade 2 rapids

### Agreed access points

Craigellachie, NJ 290 452 – river right near a fishing hut, there is an L-shaped boat park to tie boats to and a quick walk upstream to the Speyside Way. Then turn left on the path and follow it to Fiddich Park where there is good car parking as well as the camp site.

Boat o’ Brig, NJ 318 517 – river left at the bridge, access via the track leading past the water board building. There is a small car park between the bridges.

Fochabers, NJ 341 595 – river right, below the road bridge. The parking lay by is situated on the Spey Bay road (B9104) giving access to a track to the river.

Spey Bay, NJ 348 654 – river right next to the buildings and car park, marked as Tugnet on the map.

### Nearby attractions

Baxters, Fochabers, The Scottish Dolphin Centre, Spey Bay.

### Accommodation

The following campsites are within easy walking distance of the river: Burnside Caravan Park, Fochabers. Spey Bay Golf Club and Caravan Site. For B&B and hotel accommodation contact Elgin Tourist Information Centre on 01343 562608.



📷 Near Craigellachie Bridge.

## Description

As you leaving the riverbank at Craigellachie, stay on the right-hand side, if possible, until you are at the next rapid. Enjoy the last day of paddling. You are going to pass through some superb scenery and beautifully manicured lawns of fishing estates and huts. The river continues dropping downhill at a great rate and continues offering you rapids of grade 1 to 2 throughout the day.

At the island opposite Rothes (NJ 286 498) there is often a tree (or tree debris) which overhangs the main low water channel on the left-hand side. This means that this is an area to be very aware of, particularly in low water where you are channelled very close to the edge of the island. From here down you continue meandering along the river from rapid to rapid (all grade 1 to 2, but very easy to read) .

Just before you arrive at Boat o' Brig, there is a rapid at NJ 312 506. This has a nasty boulder in the middle of the river which should be avoided; it has been the scene of many upsets in a canoe. The river then continues from one easy rapid to the next until you get to the road and rail bridges at Boat o' Brig.


Haugh Island is your next decision, you can go down either side, but again be aware of tree debris that can collect in this area. Just below here you have some stunning crags along the right riverbank, and another good rapid where the river funnels through a smaller gap. Then the land opens out again until you reach the Orton earth pillars (sometimes known as the Seven Pillars of Hercules) which are red, clay pillars sticking out into the river. There is a small recirculating eddy near one of them that



can have you going around for a wee while in high water. You can also sometimes get some strong gusts of wind around the cliffs in this area. When you see the huge power lines crossing above the river you have 3km to go until you reach Fochabers.

The run into Fochabers has a few interesting rapids on it with two to note. Just after the huge sandstone cliffs at NJ 339 575 (again look out for the sand martin colonies that inhabit here), there are two large rock dykes in the water on the right-hand side, these are a major hazard to a paddler. Make sure you give them a wide berth on their left-hand side. There is then another right-hand bend rapid, and then after a few more rapids you turn another sharp corner to the left coming

towards Fochabers. Here, particularly in low water, you have to be active in your paddling to avoid the wall and the trees. You then follow the river into the final section to the bridges at Fochabers. You can get access onto the river just below the bridge here. At this point you can often smell what is cooking in the Baxters' factory. The factory shop has a good cake stop and is just a short walk from here. Between Fochabers and Spey Bay the river changes on a regular basis, with tree debris getting washed down and the gravel banks changing the river flow each flood. The rapids are still mostly around grade 1 to 2 depending on the water level, and in high water this section can be quite exciting and dangerous due to the debris.

 Lunch stop below the Orton earth pillars.



The old railway bridge near Garmouth is a really convenient marker that gives you a 1km warning until you reach Spey Bay. There is often tree debris caught on the bridge pillars, so care is required here. This is now used as part of the Moray Coastal Path and you can sometimes see walkers and cyclists travelling across it. If you have chosen to do your shuttle by public transport you will walk across the bridge to get to the village of Garmouth.

This last section of the Spey generally has a lot of fishing going on and it sometimes feels like a slalom course, working out which is the best line down through all of the islands and avoiding the folks fishing. Occasionally if you get the wrong line in low water you may end up having to jump out and portage across to a different channel; don't worry, all of the flowing channels will lead you towards the sea, some go a bit more directly or more easily than others. Often you can see ospreys flying and fishing in the area, which is a real treat at the end of the trip.

When you get to the point that you can see the buildings at Tugnet and further onto the open sea, you know you have completed a really special journey. Far away on the left-hand side of the river you can see Kingston and Garmouth. These were once the major shipping ports that took all of the logs that came from further up the river, off down south. Originally Garmouth was the port, then over the years the river moved away and the port changed to Kingston. Kingston was also a popular ship building port in the late 1700s to late 1800s.


As you reach the lagoons near the sea you start to feel the effect of the tide on your journey, and if you dip your hand into the water at certain points of the tide it is starting to taste salty.

Check the tides for your planned day of arrival at Spey Bay; if the tide is going out when you arrive then be aware of this as you paddle down the last section. Tidal flow and river water make a strong current flowing out of the lagoons and it can be difficult to get back into the shore, especially if there is an offshore wind blowing. If you have tide and river flowing out with an onshore wind (northerly), you can get a line of breaking waves to go through which can be quite daunting as well. When the tide is coming in, and is pushing against the flow of the river, you can again get a line of breaking waves near the mouth of the river. At slack tide and low winds it can be absolutely lovely to get out into the sea and have a short paddle out there to complete your journey. As you return to shore, the river flow often creates an eddy for you to cross when you come back into the lagoon area.

Even if you decide not to go out onto the sea there is a lovely feel to the area at Tugnet and Spey Bay. The shingle banks are beautiful to look at and wander across. On the shingle banks of the shore here there are many remnants of the tree debris that has floated down the river. Most of the logs are bleached by the sunshine and weather. You get frequent sightings of seals, dolphins and occasionally whales in the area.

The buildings at Tugnet started off life as part of the fishing station, including a domed ice-house to preserve the salmon caught when they used to net the river and catch everything that was going up. Some of these buildings have now been converted into the Moray Firth Wildlife Centre, which is part of the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society. They also house a great café for well-earned tea and cakes at the end of your journey. If you want to stay at the seaside for your final night,

a campsite has recently opened at the Spey Bay Golf Course near the old Spey Bay Hotel. The journey down the River Spey is a magical paddle, coming from the high mountains through the long Strathspey with majestic scenery surrounding you, travelling through villages and towns, taking in the history as you go, the mountains gradually shrinking and disappearing as you reach the sea. It is a journey to savour and enjoy throughout. I hope you have as much fun on the river as I do.

 *Paddling across the lagoons.*



- 📖 Front Cover – *Canoeists below Craigellachie.*
- 📖 Back Cover – *Autumn rainbow over the River Spey.*



# RIVER SPEY CANOE GUIDE

A CANOEIST AND KAYAKER'S GUIDE TO SCOTLAND'S PREMIER TOURING RIVER



**This illustrated guide will help you plan your journey along the River Spey, one of the UK's classic canoe and kayak touring rivers.**

The river can be navigated from Loch Spey to Spey Bay, and here is divided into seven sections. These can be paddled as single day trips or combined into multi-day adventures. Each section is described in detail and includes agreed access points, local attractions, and accommodation and camping options. To help you plan your trip there are also eight suggested multi-day itineraries, which range from three to five days.

Whether you opt for a five-day expedition or a scenic day trip, here you will find all the information you need to prepare for your journey. There is advice on equipment, food and safety, as well as information on wildlife, wild camping and navigation skills.

The River Spey is a stunning river that should be on every paddler's tick list and this guide will help you to make the most of your journey.

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