

# GREAT GLEN CANOE TRAIL

A COMPLETE GUIDE TO SCOTLAND'S FIRST FORMAL CANOE TRAIL

DONALD MACPHERSON

SECOND EDITION



GREAT GLEN WAYS



Slighean a' Ghlinne Mhòir

# Trail Safety

## When planning your trail:

- ▶ Remember to register for your FREE canoe registration
- ▶ Read the safety information provided by the Caledonian Canal Team
- ▶ Plan where you are staying and book appropriate accommodation if required

## On the canal remember:

- ▶ Look out for and use the Canoe Trail pontoons
- ▶ Paddle on the right hand side and do not canoe sail
- ▶ Give way to faster traffic
- ▶ Be alert, and be visible to approaching craft
- ▶ Watch out for wake caused by larger boats

## When on open water remember:

- ▶ Ensure you have the latest weather forecast
- ▶ Wear appropriate paddling clothing
- ▶ Choose a shore and stick to it
- ▶ Stay as a group and look out for each other
- ▶ Be prepared to take shelter should the weather change
- ▶ In the event of an emergency on the water, call 999 and ask for the coastguard

**Always wear a personal buoyancy aid when on the canal or open water.**

# Contacts

## VHF Operation Channels

Emergency Channel - CH16  
Scottish Canals Lock Keepers - CH74

## Handy Phone Numbers

Canal Office, Inverness - 01463 725500  
Canal Office, Corpach - 01397 772249  
Inverness Harbour - 01463 715715  
Met Office - 01392 885680  
HM Coast Guard, Aberdeen - 01224 592334  
Police, Fort William - 01397 702361  
Police, Inverness - 01463 715555  
Citylink - 0871 2663333

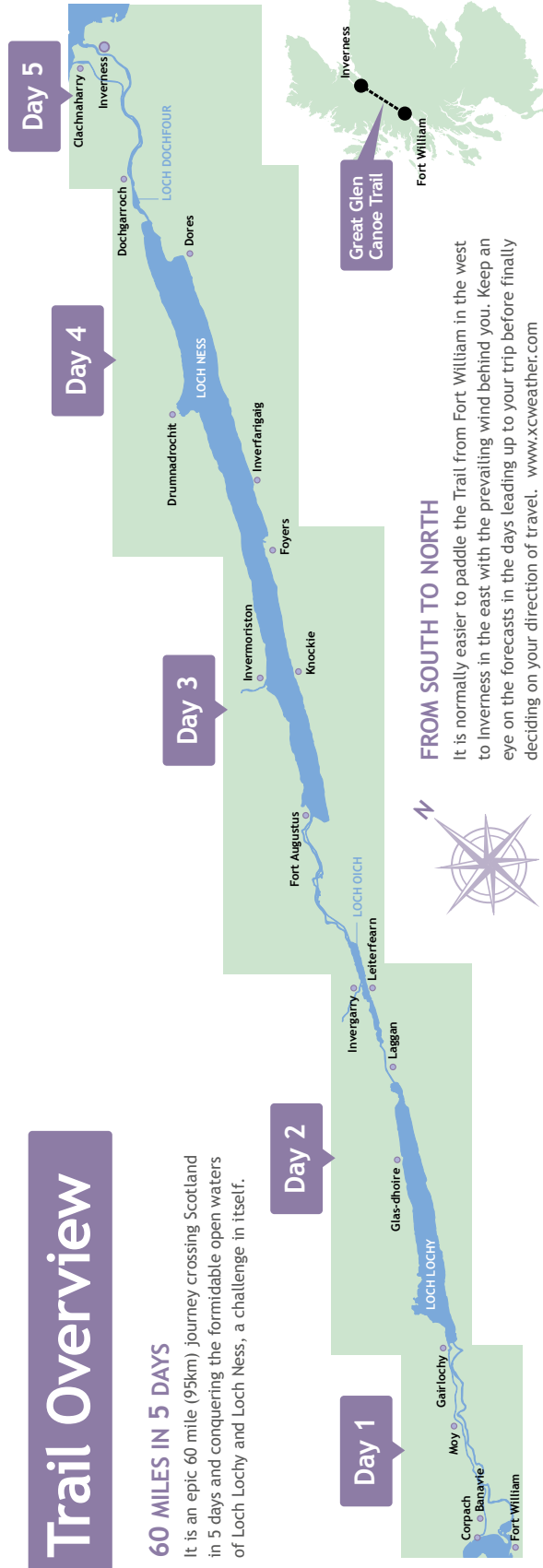
# Key

	Informal Camping		Portage Route
	Commercial Camping		Orientation Panel
	Canoe Rack		Access/Egress Point
	Bunk House		Lock Gates
	Shopping		Swing Bridges
	Parking		A Road
	Drop Off/Pick Up		B Road
	Toilets		Railway
	Trailblazer Rest		Great Glen Way
			River Flow

# Trail Overview

## 60 MILES IN 5 DAYS

It is an epic 60 mile (95km) journey crossing Scotland in 5 days and conquering the formidable open waters of Loch Lochy and Loch Ness, a challenge in itself.



## FROM SOUTH TO NORTH

It is normally easier to paddle the Trail from Fort William in the west to Inverness in the east with the prevailing wind behind you. Keep an eye on the forecasts in the days leading up to your trip before finally deciding on your direction of travel. [www.xcweather.com](http://www.xcweather.com)

**DONALD MACPHERSON**

# **GREAT GLEN CANOE TRAIL**

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**2ND EDITION**

## Important notice – disclaimer

Paddlesports, whether in a loch, river or sea environment, have their inherent risks as do all adventurous activities. This guidebook highlights some considerations to take into account when planning your own Canoe Trail.

While we have included a range of factors to consider; you will need to plan your own trail and within that ensure there is scope to be adaptable to prevailing winds, 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 physical nature of the Great Glen and the varying environmental conditions within the coastal waters, inland lochs and rivers 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, Scottish Canals nor Pesda Press can be held responsible for any decision of whether to paddle or not and any consequences arising from that decision.

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Ceunant

Caernarfon

Gwynedd

LL55 4RN

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# Foreword

I am delighted to be able to report that the Great Glen Canoe Trail has been a success for many years now, and that it offers the paddler a superb experience, and one of the best through canoe routes in the world.

I first paddled the route in 1977 with a group of friends, and in white water racing kayaks – not the best for carrying camping gear! We just drove up from England, camped at Corpach on the former campsite, and set off in the morning with an OS map – and completed the route. Later I did a fast passage in a marathon kayak for a bet, and finally in the 90s paddled the Great Glen at leisure in an open canoe, returning often since to paddle sections while on holiday.

Years later, when working as a consultant, I was contracted by the then Forestry Commission Scotland to research the Great Glen route, as it was thought to be the most paddled bit of Scotland. I therefore, during 2007, spent many happy hours driving up and down the A82, looking for canoeists. Everyone I spoke to thought the route and scenery were fantastic, but that there was an obvious need for greater infrastructure. Local businesses, meanwhile, saw very few canoeists and had no idea of the huge tourism potential.

British Waterways Scotland (now Scottish Canals) then took up the challenge, and so the plan for the Canoe Trail, and the Great Glen Canoe Trail Partnership, and subsequent funding, developed. I was happy to be involved in helping to make this wonderful trail more accessible to paddlers, and the trail is now in the hands of Scottish Canals.

I welcome all of you most warmly to Scotland and the Great Glen, and hope you enjoy your paddling.

Eddie is a kayaker and canoeist with over 60 years' experience, having paddled all over both western and eastern Europe, the USA and Canada and southern Africa. He is a former Board Director and Chairman of the Scottish Canoe Association.



Photo | Polly Pullar

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# The Author

Having been born and brought up in Inverness, the Highland Capital, I have regularly travelled the Great Glen by boat, by boot and by bike. Being offered the opportunity to develop and promote what I now refer to as 'my back garden' has been a fantastic opportunity because I was already established in the local outdoor industry with my own paddlesport business Explore Highland, and as a freelance instructor for a number of local paddlesports providers.

The post of Project Officer for the Great Glen Canoe Trail was always going to be exciting and challenging, while working with five publicly-funded organisations has itself been interesting! The two-year post from 2010–2012 included everything from negotiating with local landowners and passing on key information to the canal's lock keepers as well as supervising contractors' work. It was non-stop and although my two years passed very quickly I have made many friends and hopefully left a long-lasting legacy for all paddlers when they visit the Great Glen.

I do hope that my work and knowledge of the Great Glen, as demonstrated in this 2nd edition and online at [www.greatglencanoetrail.info](http://www.greatglencanoetrail.info) will help you to plan a safe journey through the Great Glen. It is a privilege to promote the Scottish Highlands as a fantastic paddling destination. Stay safe, respect and enjoy the trail!



**Donald Macpherson**

EXPLORE HIGHLAND - OWNER  
SCA GREAT GLEN, RIVER OICH & RIVER NESS ADVISOR



📷 Canoeing out onto the open waters of Loch Lochy. Photo | Donald Macpherson

# Acknowledgements

A big thank you to everyone who has helped in compiling both the first edition and this second edition of the guidebook.

Thanks are also due to all those who have donated their time to help with the original photo shoot back in September 2010, and all my clients who have joined my many adventures since across the Great Glen and allowed me to use their photos in this second edition.

All photos are credited to the photographer within the captions in this second edition.

# Using this Trail Guide

The Great Glen Canoe Trail is a fantastic 96km (60 miles) coast-to-coast journey that takes you through the very heart of the Scottish Highlands. Usually starting off in the west (Fort William) the Canoe Trail follows the Caledonian Canal eastwards to Inverness. With the current explosion in the popularity of paddle sports and the fantastic scenery and wildlife to be explored, it's no wonder over 4,000 paddlers a year are taking to this Canoe Trail. Though you may not be alone on the trail, you'll find plenty of space to experience that wilderness feeling when taking to the lochs.

With a choice of paddling the canal sections or running the Rivers Oich, Ness and Lochy, the Canoe Trail has plenty to offer paddlers of all abilities.

Although weather conditions can sometimes be very challenging, with proper planning, good local information and a safe, sensible approach to paddling, the Canoe Trail can be completed over three to five days. Some may plan longer to allow for taking their time and enjoying more of the local area and sights.

This book can be used in various ways. If you're experienced in multi-day paddling journeys, expeditions and being in the great outdoors, you may prefer to skip through some of the general sections and use the journey description to plan your route. Others with less experience may prefer to work through the 'Planning your Canoe Trail' section before moving on to the journey itself.

This book links in with the Great Glen Canoe Trail website which gives local resources and contact information, listing local canoe outfitters and services providers.

[www.greatglencanoetrail.info](http://www.greatglencanoetrail.info)

Another useful and up-to-date resource is:

[www.explorehighland.com/great-glen-canoe-trail-map/](http://www.explorehighland.com/great-glen-canoe-trail-map/)

## Trip grading

In order to give you some idea of the type of trip and conditions you might experience the trips are graded from A (easiest) to C (most difficult), based on the Scottish Canoe Association's open water trip grading. If you are a newcomer to paddling you should start off on a grade A trip so that you can judge your capabilities against other paddlers and minimise the risk to yourself.

- Grade A is in sheltered water. Participants should be capable of paddling 20km (12 miles) per day in Force 2/3 conditions.
- Grade B is in more challenging waters and may include tidal streams, exposed headlands, and open crossings between islands. Participants should be capable of paddling 25km (16 miles) per day in up to Force 4 conditions.
- Grade C participants should be capable of paddling in more difficult conditions than grade B for a longer time.

## River grading

For the options that involve paddling on rivers the international river grading system is used. A river that can be grade 2 or 3 depending on water levels would be indicated with 2/3. Where a river is grade 1 but has short sections of grade 2 that could be avoided by portaging, this would be shown by using brackets, e.g. 1 (2).

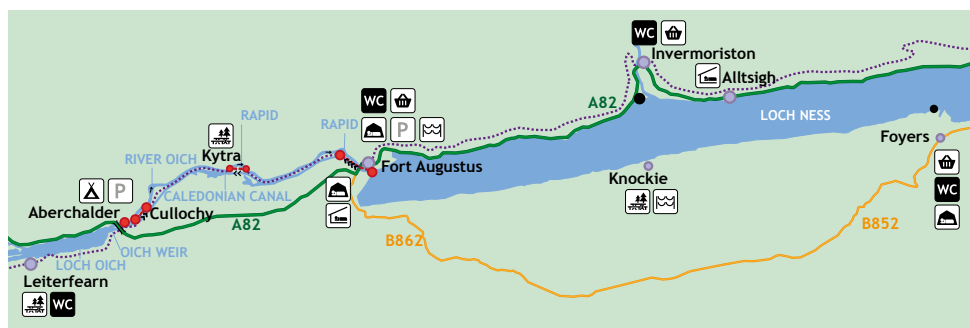
- Grade 1, Easy. Occasional small rapids or riffles, waves regular and low. Most appropriate course, with deepest water, easy to see from canoe or kayak and steer down. Obstacles, e.g. pebble banks, very easy to see. Presents no problems to paddlers able to steer canoes and kayaks. Steering is needed, especially on narrow rivers.
- Grade 2, Medium. Fairly frequent rapids, usually with regular waves, easy eddies, and small whirlpools and boils. Course generally easy to recognise, but may meander around gravel banks and trees, etc. Paddlers in kayaks may get wet, those in open canoes much less so.
- Grade 3, Difficult. Rapids numerous, and can be continuous. Course more difficult to see, landing to inspect may be wise. Drops may be high enough not to see water below, with high and irregular waves, broken water, eddies and whirlpools/boils.

There are no waters with rapids of above grade 3 advised in this guide. Where there are grade 3 rapids, avoiding or portaging is possible.





📷 A scree slope on the south side of Loch Ness, an example of some of the less accessible lands in this area  
Photo | John Macpherson Photography



## Day 3

# Loch Oich to Foyers

**Distance** 26.5km

**Grade** B – Loch Oich C – Loch Ness

**OS Sheet** 34 + 26

**Start** NN 327 013 (Leiterfearn Trailblazer Rest)

**Finish** NH 492 211 (Loch Ness Shores Campsite, near Foyers)

**Portages** NH 341 041 to 341 043 Culloch Locks 200m

NH 352 067 to 353 068 Kytra Locks 200m

NH 376 092 to 382 093 Ft Augustus Lock Flight 750m

This is a serious day's paddling that takes you from the calm canal into the unforgiving open-water conditions of Loch Ness. Make sure you feel prepared, take rests when needed and keep your energy levels topped up.

The day starts as you launch back onto Loch Oich (the highest part of the trail) for a 2.5km paddle into Aberchalder. Be careful of the weir leading to the River Oich on your approach and keep right of the navigation marker.

At Aberchalder the A82 main road crosses the canal – paddlers can pass safely under the swing bridge when it is fully closed.

Just past the swing bridge there is a low level Canoe Trail pontoon at NH 339 037. Here you can get out, stretch your legs and read the orientation panel, visit the Old Bridge of Oich, check the River Oich level indicator and decide if you wish to paddle the river or take the much more gentle canal route.



For experienced paddlers, the River Oich is an option that avoids portages at Cullochy, Kytra and Fort Augustus, but it shouldn't be undertaken lightly. Paddling a river with a loaded canoe should only be attempted if you have white water paddling experience. Sea kayaks, paddleboards and less experienced canoeists should stick to the canal.

If you do want to run the river, it is advisable to paddle back up to the weir for a clear run down to Fort Augustus, finishing up at Loch Ness. For more details see page 68 of the river journeys section.

Most paddlers will follow the canal route and enjoy a very easy 500m paddle to Cullochy Upper – the next portage point and the first lock on the canal's descent towards the Moray Firth and the North Sea.

You'll find the low-level pontoon at the far end at the north side of the canal and the 200m portage along the towpath is fairly easy. Please remember to keep the towpath clear for canal operations and to allow Great Glen

Way walkers and cyclists to pass freely.

Once you're safely back on the canal, a scenic paddle takes you to Kytra Upper. As long as it is safe to do so, please give wildlife in this area a wide berth. The swans here aren't just wild, they can be aggressive!

The portage at Kytra is again on the north towpath. If the area is busy with motorboats, paddlers can get off the water at the emergency overflow weir for the canal. There is enough space for three craft to exit here, but it does mean a slightly longer portage than from the low level pontoon. Portage 200m along the north towpath to the low-level pontoon at Kytra Lower.

The beautiful surroundings of Kytra are a lovely stopping-off point and it is a good chance to stretch your legs. If you fancy staying the night, informal camping is allowed on the other side of the canal.

The gentle paddle from Kytra Lower to Fort Augustus Upper is 3.5km.

Fort Augustus is bustling with visitors all year,

 *Relaxing setting at Kytra Locks. Photo | Peter Sandground Photography*



and is particularly busy in the summer season. The canal's staircase of five locks is at the heart of this picturesque village's appeal and draws many visitors to relax and watch the boats go up or down the 12 metre (40ft) change in height.

Congratulations – you've reached the halfway point of the Great Glen Canoe Trail! Give yourself a pat on the back and take time to make sure you feel properly prepared and fit before you tackle the challenge of Loch Ness.

The Canoe Trail pontoon is the last pontoon on the north side of the canal. If you are planning on portaging through Fort Augustus, this is where you should get out.

If you plan to stay in Fort Augustus overnight, a canoe rack is located on the south side beside the rubbish bin area and paddlers should get off the canal on that side to reduce the amount of lifting you have to do. There is also a small store to the left of the canoe rack where paddlers can leave paddles and some barrels, saving having to carry everything to their local accommodation. The code is the

same as the Banavie Changing area given to you by the Canal team along with the facilities key. Remember your padlock to lock up your canoes and kayaks. There are Caledonian Canal toilet facilities here to the right.

When exiting at Fort Augustus Upper, please don't leave your canoes on the road as this is frequently used by cars and other vehicles. You can use the clear area near the village to rest kit and canoes while setting up your portage trolleys.

The flight of locks at Fort Augustus is the longest portage at 750m but there is good news – it's mostly downhill! When portaging down to the village please use the pavement to allow traffic to pass on the single lane road.

There is plenty to do in Fort Augustus, and lively waterside restaurants and pub. It's also a good opportunity to visit the Caledonian Canal Visitor Centre for an insight into the history and workings of the canal.

This is the main stopping point between Fort William and Inverness and a good chance to

 *Wee Nessie. Photo | Scott Rawstorne*

### The Loch Ness Monster

The elusive Nessie has been making waves since photos taken in the 1930s made her a worldwide celebrity. The famous monster continues to attract visitors to the shores and waters of the loch in the hope of a glimpse. Keep your eyes peeled.





📷 Limited landing spots for resting or taking shelter should conditions deteriorate. Photo | Donald Macpherson

stock up on fresh food for the rest of the trip. From the village you need to cross the road carefully and follow the towpath down to Oich Pier. On your way down you will find rubbish bins and toilet facilities. These are your last toilets until Loch Ness Shores commercial campsite, if you are planning to stay there.

## Loch Ness

At 37km long, 1.6km wide and up to 230 metres deep, Loch Ness is a serious stretch of water. Conditions on Loch Ness can be more like the open sea than inland water, with waves of over 3 metres possible in bad weather. This is why the loch is home to the only RNLI station on inland water.

Always make sure you get an up-to-date weather forecast before you set off. If in doubt – don't! Depending on the weather conditions you need to carefully plan which side of the

loch to follow. The water temperature here stays between 6–10°C all year so you need to be able to get out of the water quickly if you fall in. Cold-water immersion is a serious consideration (see safety information on page 32). To help speed your progress down the loch, it is a good idea to have your sail at hand.

Loch Ness can be busy with larger boats. Cruise Loch Ness operates a number of cruise boats and fast rib-boats from Fort Augustus up to Urquhart Castle. Stay together as a group, look out for each other and make sure you're visible to fast-moving craft.

## Following the south shore

The south shore is exposed and offers very few places to land or shelter. You can get out at Knockie (NH 438 145) but this is 7.5km along the loch. There are limited facilities but there is a cleared area approximately 50m up the



track where you can pitch tents if you need to take shelter. If planning to stay here overnight, please use the canoe racks to stow away your canoes – this keeps the area around the private boathouse clear for access.

From Knockie, Loch Ness Shores commercial campsite NH 492 211 is a further 9km along the exposed shoreline, with only a few locations along the way that offer shelter.

At Loch Ness Shores commercial campsite, there are set areas for tent camping, toilets and shower facilities, a small shop and café.

If you would like to explore the area a little more, visit the Falls of Foyers, or pop to the local village store.

### The Falls of Foyers

This short but spectacular walk takes you to one of the hidden gems of Loch Ness. Follow the way-marked paths to see the spectacular waterfall cascading down a gorge into the loch.

*Among the heathy hills and  
ragged woods*

*The roaring Foyers pours  
his mossy floods;*

*Till full he dashes on the  
rocky mounds,*

*Where, thro' a shapeless breach,  
his stream rebounds.*

Robert Burns, 1787

### Following the north shore

The north shore route past Cherry Island crannog offers a number of egress points between Fort Augustus and Invermoriston, 8km away. Just before you reach Invermoriston Old Pier (NH 426 157), you can take a 1km walk into the village for supplies at the village shop or to use local accommodation. The river mouth at Invermoriston is a prime spot for fishermen – please show them respect and give them plenty of space.

From Invermoriston you have a 4.5km paddle to Alltsigh, where there is the Lochside Hostel that you can walk to from the shoreline.

After Alltsigh there is little chance to land or exit the loch due to the steep sides. Your next exit is Loch Ness Shores (near Foyers) or if the weather conditions were unsuitable for crossing the loch, you could go on to Loch Ness Bay campsite just past Urquhart Castle in Borlum Bay.



📷 Foyers Falls. Photo | Donald Macpherson



📷 Surfing on the Oich Weir by Aberchalder. Photo | John Macpherson Photography

# River Journeys

This section details the three rivers that can be paddled as part of the Great Glen Canoe Trail. When paddling the trail west to east, you may choose to paddle Rivers Oich and Ness. Those who take on the trail east to west may choose to paddle the River Lochy. Please don't take these river routes unless you are experienced white water paddlers. Remember that loaded craft are harder to control on moving water as they gain momentum very easily, making them harder to run tricky rapids, slow down, and change direction.

For those who do take to the rivers with a loaded craft it makes sense to take safe routes or dry lines down stronger rapids and wave trains. This will reduce the chance of swamping your vessel and the possibility of capsizing with all your kit.

If you fancy running the rivers in a lighter craft, you can always contact a local taxi company in Fort William, Fort Augustus or Inverness to collect your baggage before starting your river trip and then collect it at your destination. Beginners and those using sea kayaks or paddleboards are advised to follow the canal.

**Tip:** Stay safe on the river:

- Wear your helmet and carry a throw bag.
- Ensure your kit is securely attached to your craft.
- Inspect all rapids that you are unfamiliar with before paddling them.

It is common courtesy to respect local fishermen by asking them which side of the river they would prefer you to pass by.

Contact the local river adviser for further information on the rivers. Visit the SCA website – [www.canoescotland.org](http://www.canoescotland.org) for a list of the current River Advisers and contact details.



📷 Loch Oich Weir leading onto the River Oich. Photo | Donald Macpherson

# River Oich

**Distance** 9km

**OS Sheet** 34

**Grade** 1(2)

This river flows north-east out of Loch Oich into the south-western end of Loch Ness at Fort Augustus. The Oich flows parallel to the Caledonian Canal for much of its length and offers a more exciting alternative route into Loch Ness for experienced white water paddlers. It also avoids portages at Cullochy, Kytra and Fort Augustus. The river is fairly flat with only a handful of rapids that may require inspection by those unfamiliar with the river. The first of these is at the start of the river, which is marked by a weir where it flows out of Loch Oich. The second is just under the road bridge as the river flows to the right. Close to Kytra and just over 1km further downstream there are two more significant rapids.

## Water level

The river is fairly shallow in places and needs a reasonable flow of water to avoid too

much of a scrape in some sections. Water levels will vary depending on releases from the River Garry hydro-electric scheme and local rainfall.

## Gauge

Look out over the A82 bridge at Bridge of Oich to check the amount of water spilling over the weir out of Loch Oich. If the whole length of the weir is covered with a stopper/wave formed along it the river will be at a good level and most of the rocks in the rapids will be covered. If only a small section, or none, of the weir is covered the rapids will be bumpy – something to be wary of if you are paddling a boat fully loaded with equipment and supplies.

## Route description

This is a pleasant and straightforward paddle that allows you to take in the beauty of





📷 Evidence of canal repairs back in 1947 when river erosion breached the canal. Photo | Donald Macpherson

the Great Glen as you make your way down towards Loch Ness.

The banks of this river are heavily wooded in places so keep a look out ahead for trees both over-hanging the river banks and for any that might have been washed downstream.

As you are nearing Fort Augustus, be cautious of the three bridges that cross the river. Care should be taken to avoid being pushed up against any bridge stanchions/legs. The first bridge is the remains of the old railway bridge, the second is where you pass under

the main A82 road bridge. The third and final bridge before entering into Loch Ness is the old disused wooden bridge. Paddlers, especially when the river is high, should plan to paddle between the middle of the stanchions to prevent broaching.

As you head towards the open waters of Loch Ness, keep close to the right-hand bank as Oich Pier is just around the corner. Here you can land your canoes, use the facilities and take a walk around the village.

📷 Navigating the last river obstacle, Old Fort Augustus bridge, before arriving at Loch Ness. Photo | Donald Macpherson







# GREAT GLEN CANOE TRAIL

A COMPLETE GUIDE TO SCOTLAND'S FIRST FORMAL CANOE TRAIL

This guide is an essential resource to help you plan your journey through the Great Glen across Scotland. As well as the calm waters of the Caledonian Canal there are the challenging open waters of Loch Lochy and Loch Ness. Here you will find advice on how to deal with the conditions as well as food, equipment, safety, communication and rescue. The best craft for the adventure are open canoes, sea kayaks, touring paddleboards or touring kayaks.


There is advice on choosing the right craft, loading it, and the best ways of carrying it over portages. The coast to coast route can normally be completed in three to five days. We have split the route into a five day expedition and each day is described in detail, including camping and other forms of accommodation. There are also numerous single day options and, for the more advanced paddlers, suggested routes that link stretches of river with lochs and canal sections.

DONALD MACPHERSON



SECOND EDITION

**RECOMMENDED CRAFT:**  
**OPEN CANOES**  
**SEA KAYAKS**  
**TOURING PADDLEBOARDS**  
**TOURING KAYAKS**

 *Front cover: Paddlers setting out onto Loch Lochy.*  
*Photo | John Macpherson Photography*