



Cape Wrath Trail 2019
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Introducing the Cape Wrath Trail

Andy Mayhew

In September 2018, just months after having his stomach removed due to malignant melanoma, Martyn Wells walked the Severn Way; over 220 miles from the river's source on Pumlumon Fawr in mid Wales, to its mouth by the Severn Bridge. He did it in just 10 days.

This year he has upped the stakes slightly, and intends to walk the Cape Wrath Trail (CWT) in Scotland, from Fort William to Cape Wrath, the northwestern most tip of Britain. And this time I'll be accompanying him. We'll be covering a similar distance in, hopefully, about the same number of days - which is where the similarities end.

Because the CWT is very much just like the Severn Way, in the same way a Siberian tiger is very much just like a dormouse



The arduous, leg-breaking, Severn Way (A Mayhew)



The gentle, undulating, landscape through which the Cape Wrath Trail slowly wends

Unlike the Severn Way, the CWT does not follow waymarked paths. There is no path. It's down to the individual to find a route, stringing together stalker's paths and deer tracks through some of the wildest, remotest landscape in the British Isles. Through a land not of gentle fields and riverside pubs, but rock and water and soul-sapping peat hags, and very little else. And an awful lot of ups and downs - the equivalent, in fact, of climbing Everest. From sea level. And not many people can do that in 10 days Oh, and on top of that we'll be carrying everything we need for the duration of the walk with us, every day - food, tent, sleeping bags, waterproofs, midge repellent and maybe just a wee dram for the evening.

The walk commences easily enough with a ferry ride from Fort William, across Loch Linnhe. From here, Cape Wrath, in a straight line, is due north-northwest. So we immediately set off heading south. Six miles of road walking mark the start of the trail before we finally leave civilisation behind at last and strike up remote, lonely, Cona Glen; a place that sees few visitors except for CWTers. It a long, straight, glen and goes on forever, as the landscape turns ever more desolate and even a dead tree becomes a notable feature in the landscape.



A gentle introduction though, compared with what is to come, and there's a good path all the way, eventually rising to cross a 380m pass as our route finally turns north and we descend to the hustle and bustle of Glenfinnan (pop. 120 + several thousand Harry Potter fans).



If we time it right we'll get to see the "Hogwart's Express" cross the famous viaduct, before starting the final few miles to our first night's camp by Corryhully. This is our last chance to discover we've forgotten our tent pegs or discover we accidentally packed the kitchen sink, before we get into really wild territory: the Rough Bounds of Knoydart.

At this stage it's worth pointing out that the biggest risk to the success of this venture is rain. Or, rather, what happens to rain after it has fallen. Getting wet isn't the problem. Crossing mountain streams when in spate is. And for the next few days there are numerous such streams which, after heavy rain, become wholly impassable. Just a raging torrent of white water, tumbling boulders to the sea. For in most cases there are no bridges. Even in fine weather wet feet are guaranteed. In heavy rain there may be no option but to pitch camp in a sodden bog and wait for the water levels to drop. So we'll be praying for dry weather!

On Day 2 the walk really begins in earnest with an ascent over the Streap Pass (appropriately, streap is Gaelic for climb) at the head of Glenfinnan and then down to Glen Pean. Here we have a brief respite as we walk on forestry tracks for a few miles before taking up the old military path that runs over the Mam na cloiche-airde, pass of the high stones. It's a boggy walk in places and far, far from civilisation. A steep drop, on a rocky path, slippery when wet, brings us back to the sea at Sourlies (a big feature of the walk is that we are constantly going from sea shore to sea shore via high mountain passes). Sourlies is where most CWTERS finish their day's walk. But we still have another day's worth of walking still to go. Hopefully the new bridge over the Carnach River will be in place as this is a very major river. We follow the Carnach through the Rough Bounds along animal tracks and then cut up the hillside to the Mam Unndalain, a climb from sea level of over 500m, before finally catching a distant glimpse of our destination for the night, the green meadows of Barrisdale (which is, of course, back down at sea level again).



It's still many miles down a faint stalker's path before we pitch tents for the night though. By which time we will have covered nearly 50 miles in 2 days. That's almost a quarter of the way to Cape Wrath. Hoorah!

Day 3 is a much shorter day, and by the end of it we will be glad of that. It's not as easy as the map and mileage might suggest. We start along rough, stony track on the south side of Loch Hourn, the loch of hell, which goes up and down and up and down and up and down and up and down Quite hellish indeed if the midges are out in force (which if it's not pouring with rain, they probably will be - today and every day). But at the end we finally return to civilisation, sort of. Kinlochhourn is one of the remotest settlements in Britain; just a couple of farms at the end of a narrow 20 mile dead end road. Earlier this year it was completely cut off for several weeks by a landslide. This is where many CWT walkers bale out, overcome by rain and midges and blisters. But we'll stop just for a bacon butty before heading up the slopes north of Loch Hourn for the highest climb of the route, almost to the summit of the Saddle, one of Scotland's highest mountains. And for most of the way there's no path to follow. Just tussocky grass and bog. And unless the weather is fine, we'll be in the clouds as well. Getting lost here will be about as easy as sitting down in a nice comfy armchair (something we will not have done for days, and won't yet for an even longer time to come)



Having finally climbed over 2,000 sweaty feet from the sea we then descend 2,000 feet back down to the sea at Shiel Bridge where we have the luxury of pitching our tents on a proper camp site and the chance our first shower! Which we will probably need.... We hope to meet friends here as well, bringing much needed supplies and some dry socks!

Day 4 is also relatively short and probably the easiest day of all. Phew! But it ends in one of the very remotest spots in Britain. From Morvich we climb up through forestry to open moor before emerging at the top of Britain's biggest waterfall, the impressive but rarely seen, Falls of Glomach. A tricky descent down the side of this brings us down to Glen Elchaig and several easy miles along a good landrover track, but steadily walking further and further and further away from any signs of human life. Our destination, Maol Bhuidhe bothy is one of the remotest buildings anywhere in the country.



From Maol Bhuidhe we have another potentially tricky river crossing to start Day 5 and a few miles of trackless moor and bog, riddled with the bones of ancient trees (this now desolate, empty landscape was covered in forests until a few hundred years ago) peering out of the peat. Picking up tracks we eventually reach Bearnais bothy before the steep climb over Eagan and an equally steep descent to Lair. Which, along with the road, lies on the far side of the River Carron. Across which there is no bridge and a knee-deep wade at best. If the Carron is in spate we have a very long detour here



Another steep climb up through the trees and then a gentler descent towards one of the highlights of the walk. As we approach Coulin we see before us Liathach, one of Torridon's finest wee hills. You don't get views like this in Worcestershire!



Down in the glen we cheat a little: in order to have any chance of reaching Cape Wrath in 10 days it's necessary to cut a few corners and miss out some stretches followed by those taking 3 weeks for the walk. So instead of walking around Beinn Eighe, we just head down the road to the metropolis of Kinlochewe (pop 60). And here there's not only a shop and a tearoom but A pub! This is the halfway stage of the walk and once again we'll hopefully be meeting friends bringing fresh supplies, though the shop will no doubt also provide some welcome additions. A man cannot live on pot noodle and porridge alone! If we stay at the campsite we'll also have the chance of our last hot shower until we get home

From Kinlochewe we head into another of the very remotest parts of the British Isles around Lochan Fada. The Ordnance Survey recently declared that they had calculated that this was the furthest point from a public road anywhere in the country. Nice place to camp, but no time for that, we have a long way to go From Lochan Fada we cross the Bealach na Croise (pass of the cross - which describes those who struggle to find it in the mist yet again there are no paths) before making a little diversion from the usual CWT route and turn east to Lochivroan and eventually reaching the distant road for a couple of miles to the Coireshalloch Gorge. As we drop down to Loch Broom we find ourselves briefly in a more rural landscape, with even a few fields to pass before camping on the tidal flats at the head of Loch Broom. Broom means showers. And not the warm, soapy sort we'll be wishing we could enjoy

Day 7 is likely to be our longest day. But thankfully it's mostly on landrover tracks as we cut over the hillside to Rhidorroch lodge, watching for eagles on the way, and then take the old "herring road" east to Duag bridge - stopping for lunch in a former schoolhouse from whence more landrover tracks bring us down to Oykeall bridge. The hotel here is the usual overnight stopping point but unfortunately we'll have to forego a second pint, and push on a bit further before we set up camp, as the next day is a real toughy! From the River Oykeall

we initially have paths as we head into another seriously remote area. But as Day 8 progresses, landrover tracks become stalkers paths become animal tracks become Nothing.



Several miles of totally pathless wilderness, littered with lochans, have to be negotiated with map and compass skills needed to have any hope of eventually finding the path down to Glencoul - site of Britain's remotest war memorial. Next day, there's quite a nice path - in places - around the headland from Glencoul to Glendhu. But it does keep disappearing However more paths should take us back up yet again for the final high pass of the walk, its summit marked by a ruin known to some as "dreary house".



We drop down to Loch Stack, beneath a hill whose name is well known to horse-racing fans: Arkle. The usual route now crosses more unpathed wilderness and involves a potentially very tricky river crossing. Though slightly longer, it may well be quicker and easier to follow fisherman's paths alongside the Laxford River and then pick up the road to Rhiconich.

After leaving Rhiconich we begin Day 10 with a long, unavoidable, spell of road walking with weary, blistered feet, and sore, aching shoulders, alongside Loch Inchar. A little after passing through Kinlochbervie (which with a huge population of 480 is by far the largest place we pass through on the walk) we finally branch off along a good path to Sandwood Bay, regarded by many as the finest beach in Britain. The haunt of drowned sailors and mermaids and stunning sunsets.



We may end up camping here, at the end of day 10, rather than pushing on to the Cape as this will then mean finishing at lunchtime tomorrow: far more convenient for those we hope may be waiting at the lighthouse to greet us. Plus, this final section reverts to endless, trackless, moor; used only for NATO military exercises and those hoping to get very lost. Better tackled when a little more refreshed?

And finally: out of the heather and peat ridden moor, and the massed clouds of midges, rises the gleaming white tower of Cape Wrath lighthouse. The end of the walk. From whence it's only a minibus ride, ferry crossing and 2 day car journey back home to Worcestershire



So there it is. The toughest trail in the British Isles. The nearest we have to a Siberian tiger. Will we make it? I think we will.

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For more information see: www.capewrathtrail2019.com