



CAIRNGORM MOUNTAIN RANGER SERVICE

Report 2023



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PURPOSE

Cairngorm Estate is one of Scotland's most important upland estates in terms of conservation and recreation. It is the home of rare and internationally protected species and habitats.

The estate lies at the core of the Cairngorms National Park and is its most important visitor attraction. It is a key driver of the surrounding area's economy and a focal point for rural development and recreational activities.

A management plan for the estate has been developed and published. Within the plan's elements, the ranger service assists the landowner in carrying out the aims and objectives of the estate management plan in conjunction with the operator Cairngorm Mountain (Scotland) Limited.

The aims of the Cairngorm Estate management plan are:

- The estate is managed to maintain it as a special place for people and nature.
- People enjoy the estate through outstanding visitor and learning experiences.
- The estate is sustainably managed and supports thriving businesses and communities.

STAFFING

Senior Ranger	Ruari Macdonald
Full-time Ranger	Gemma Karatay
Apprentice Ranger	Matthew Boyd
Seasonal Rangers	Stevie Trinder, Mark Hindley, Joseph Wheeler

The core staff of Ruari Macdonald and Gemma Karatay was supplemented with apprentice Matthew Boyd, who has been working full-time since August 2022. Matthew has been working towards an SVQ2 in countryside management through the Modern Apprenticeship scheme and Rural Skills Scotland.

After an extensive recruitment drive in the spring of 2023, Stevie Trinder and Joseph Wheeler joined the team, working between 2 and 4 days per week.

In September, Joseph left the ranger team to go on to further education. Mark Hindley will assist the ranger team in covering days off throughout the late autumn/winter moving into 2024 while assisting with Ski patrol and other general duties as part of the winter operations team.



A vertical photograph on the left side of the page shows a rocky mountain path leading up a hillside. The path is composed of light-colored gravel and large, grey rocks. The surrounding landscape is rugged and rocky, with sparse, dry vegetation. In the distance, a small structure or peak is visible against a clear, bright blue sky.

DAY-TO-DAY ACTIVITIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

A vital part of the ranger service's duties is promoting responsible access and providing first-hand information for enquiries from visitors.

The ranger base continues to be where visitors can come in and chat with staff or seek information using our multi-media touch screen. The ranger team have several long-established tasks that are carried out in the mornings.

- These include recording Meteorological observations on behalf of the Met Office.
- Checking the main car parks/roadside for overnight vehicles, including campervans.
- Coordinating information on overnight vehicles with any route cards left with the ranger team [electronically].
- If required, contact **PoliceScotland** about any vehicles that have not left a route card or are in the car park for longer than three nights.
- Posting weather and avalanche forecasts on the internal screen and exterior bus timetable screen.
- Operation of the Keep Cairngorm Snow White throughout the summer and winter season.



VISITOR INFORMATION, ENQUIRIES AND ADVICE

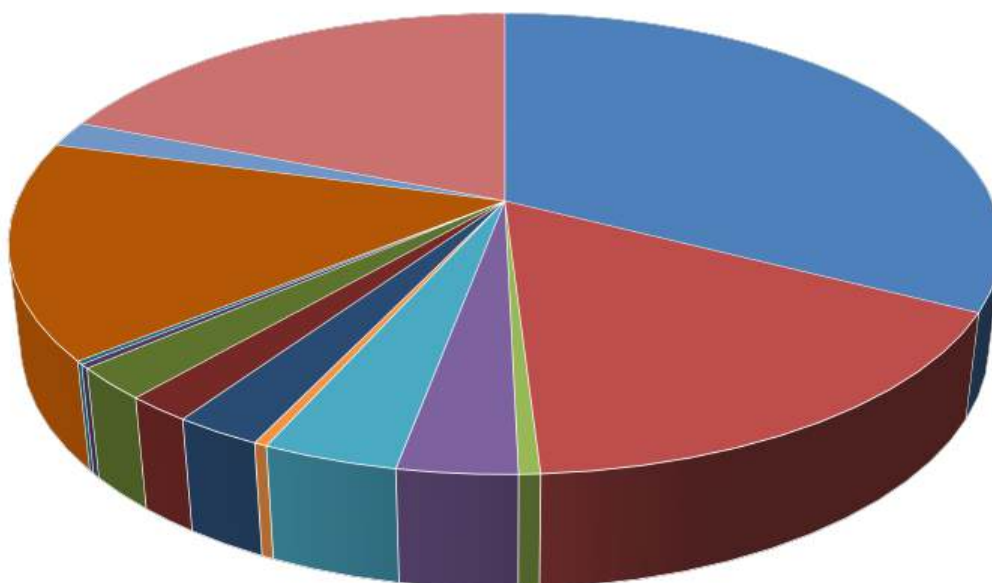
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In 2023, the ranger staff had face-to-face recorded inquiries with around 1500 visitors. As part of data collection for the CNPA, throughout the summer, the ranger team now records, where possible, all engagements with members of the public.

Summary of enquiries on chart below.

ENQUIRIES



- | | |
|---|--------------------------------|
| ■ WINDY RIDGE / CAIRN GORM | ■ BEN MACDUI |
| ■ LOWER COIRE CAS LOOP / COIRE CAS MOUNTAIN TRAIL | ■ WILDLIFE |
| ■ WEATHER & SNOW CONDITIONS | ■ CAMPING & SNOWHOLING |
| ■ SNOWSPORTS | ■ BUS |
| ■ MAPS | ■ CAIRNGORM SNOW WHITE |
| ■ MOUNTAIN BIKING | ■ OTHER GENERAL ENQUIRIES |
| ■ FUNICULAR | ■ GENERAL CHAT OUT ON THE HILL |



VISITOR INFORMATION, ENQUIRIES AND ADVICE

2023 has seen an increase in enquiries, as mentioned above, regarding permission and access for scattering ashes either on the general Estate or higher up the mountain by using the Funicular to gain access out of the top station.

In many cases, general advice is given about the Cairngorm Conservation System with the funicular operation and that they would have to be joined by a staff member if they were to request a guided walk to carry out the interment of ashes. Respectful guidance on how and where to inter ashes is given to those who enquired; example below:

We find or ask the families to pick a quiet, peaceful, respectful spot off the beaten track. We kindly request that the scattering of the remains is not left all in one place [emptying the casket of the remains on one spot] as this affects the underlying vegetation; in addition, it is not placed in a highly public spot such as a footpath, summit cairn, around the buildings & car parks, so the ash can gently breakdown in a respectful and restful final resting place.

In 2023, several bouquets have been removed from the hill. Unfortunately, these bouquets have all been left with plastic wrapping, which, ultimately, scatters across the hillside as litter and, as it happened in the past, self-seeds into the ground and non-native plants start growing.

VISITOR INFORMATION, ENQUIRIES AND ADVICE

With the increased usage of mobile devices utilised for navigation (mobile phones), a large portion of visitors were intercepted by ranger staff several times, either passing the front of the ranger base and looking for the start of the path to Ben Macdui or between the base station and the beginning of the windy ridge path.

The software app indicated multiple routes around and back and forth in the car park before leading out on either of the routes. These interactions would often lead to long discussions about route choice, the merits of having a map and compass, and the potential pitfalls of relying solely on their mobile devices.

On a few occasions, discussions out on the hill with visitors following GPS watches / mobile phones ended up going in the entirely wrong direction or following routes downloaded that have not existed for decades on the ground.

On one occasion, a visitor came in to complain to the ranger staff that there was not a path where it was marked on his App and that there should be a sign saying that this route does not exist on the actual hillside.

The ranger team assisted several production crews throughout the year, including being interviewed on camera or assisting with group management and information while recording. This included production companies for the BBC, Sky TV & Channel 4.

Occasionally, crews had to be transported around the hill via the funicular railway and utilising the cabin cat piste machine in the winter months.

Additional filming for TV commercials was also carried out on the access road and car parks during 2023 with no direct involvement with the ranger team.

Images - BBC Red Nose Day event filming, Cairn Gorm / Filming UK National Parks with Caroline Quentin (Channel 4)/ Painting Birds with Jim & Nancy Moir (Sky TV)



VISITOR INFORMATION, ENQUIRIES AND ADVICE

On several occasions through 2023, the ranger team have been approached by members of the public to assist in finding specific locations of family photos, campsites, and memorial locations relating to past family members who have passed away while in the mountains in and around the Northern Corries.



FOOTPATH REPAIRS

Highlands and Islands Enterprise continue to fund path repairs across the Cairngorm Estate. CMSL posted two work contracts through the competitive tender process on Public Contracts Scotland. The first of the contracts was to complete the stone pitching on the western approach to Coire an Lochain.

This work was the continuation of work from the previous year, which, due to contractor commitments and the onset of the winter, the repairs still needed to be completed.

The other awarded contract was for general maintenance covering several footpaths across the Estate, including work on the plateau section of the summit path to Cairn Gorm.

Repairs included deroughening path surfaces/landscaping path verges / installing waterbars & anchor bars & cross drain repairs.

ACT Heritage carried a total of 100 man-days of repairs and completed the schedule in the hottest and driest of weeks in September.



GROUND RESTORATION

The construction of the new mountain bike trail park started in April 2023. CMSL employed a ground staff team to assist contractors with the work on the bike park and the funicular reinstatement, with the ranger team helping primarily on the bike park.

This work involved raking and preparing landscaped areas before fertiliser, grass seed and seed-aide application. The site reinstatement works were completed by October, and further reinstatement works will continue in the summer of 2024.

As part of the Cairngorm Masterplan, the major refurbishment of the Coire Cas car park was completed in 2023. The ranger team were heavily involved in the final landscaping of the car park, such as the vegetation islands, car park edging, water course landscaping and tree planting and reseeding. Several grown Scot's pine trees were transplanted into the vegetation islands and banks along the car park as part of the electrical supply upgrade work completed in 2023 by McGowans Environment Engineering (on behalf of SSEN).

In addition to the mountain bike site and car park landscaping, the ranger team reinstated some path margins. Those included a section of the windy ridge path, where previous damage was caused by visitors walking off the path (to avoid the large steps on the constructed path). The cause of the damage (large step risers) has now all been rebuilt, with a much more user-friendly section of stone pitching. Further landscaping will continue in the summer of 2024.

For an area of the path leading to Cairn Lochain and Ben Macdui, which passes over the Miadan, path definition works were carried out and continued in 2023; once this was completed, with consent from NatureScot, a very light application of a unique grass seed mixture was sown to assist vegetation growth on the verges and reprofiled path.

The reseeding will help to knit the bare ground together, allowing a temporary sward of vegetation to flourish, which in years to come will allow a more significant amount of natural seed to re-establish in these damaged areas





HABITAT RESTORATION

Initial discussions took place with local stakeholders at the end of 2023 regarding the feasibility of mass tree planting across suitable habitats on the Cairngorm Estate.

This additional work would see the lower edges of the Cairngorm Estate planted up with a range of tree species to encourage further the formation of the montane scrub ecosystem that has been slowly regenerating across the Cairngorm Estate over the last 40 years.

As of 2023, some 12000 saplings of native tree species have been planted mainly in Coire Cas since early 2003. The local school children planted many of these saplings between 2003 and 2017. Since then, ranger staff and volunteers have carried out any further planting.

Habitat regeneration and restoration are key parts of HIE's masterplan vision for the Cairngorm Estate over the next 25 years.

Peat restoration work has started on the upper reaches of FLS Glenmore, which lies north of the Cairngorm Estate but directly opposite the Coire Cas car park. During 2024, this work will continue back in the direction of the ski area and has already become a talking point for visitors and hillwalkers who have observed the machines reprofiling the large areas of peatland.

CMSL, in partnership with FLS and CNPA, is designing and producing interpretation points along the western edge of the Coire Cas Car Park. These points will inform and educate visitors about the process of peatland restoration and the benefits of reducing carbon release from the peat, particularly when it becomes increasingly visible from the car park as workers cross the HIE boundary.

This work is crucial to working towards the Net Zero emissions policy driven by the Scottish Government and, subsequently, HIE.

MONITORING

With the funicular railway back in operation in January 2023, elements of the Detail Monitoring Scheme (DMS) were restarted, such as recording downhill funicular ticket sales, exit incidents of the top station and some on-the-ground monitoring.

As part of the restarting of the DMS, in conjunction with NatureScot, all the path routes identified in the DMS were reviewed to ascertain which ones have been either rebuilt or repaired, fallen out of use (some have overgrown and have very little use) or continue to be affected directly by the operation of the railway.

Three key path routes were identified to continue monitoring for 2023: Miadan to Lochain Buidhe, 1141m to Windy Col and the Rampart. The rampart path survey is part of monitoring and managing the new mountain bike facility built in Coire Cas in the spring and early summer of 2023.

The monitoring technique on these routes was carried out by photography only.

The recording of the number of visitors using the path network across the Cairngorm Estate has continued throughout the years that the Funicular has not been operational.

This has given insight into the numbers of visitors pre & post-COVID-19 epidemic and visitor usage while the Funicular has been out of operation. The summary of the path data is below, with the Northern Corries Path, & Lochain Lurchers Ridge path counters showing high numbers again.

Repeated problems plagued the Cairn Gorm summit path counter in 2023, with the counter and calibration being reset. Additional landscaping at the counter site was carried out in August.

Observations established that several visitors were jumping over the counter pad, which was located on a small section of aggregate path on an otherwise stone-built path. Other observations showed that visitors walked out with the path ropes and on the verges.



MONITORING

Other monitoring recorded by the ranger team included the number of bikes either visiting the car park/ski road or mountain bikes initially in the ski area and the wider estate, then outwith the lower part of the ski area after the MTB facility opened in July.





GUIDED ACTIVITIES

The summer of 2023 saw the return of a guided walk programme within the Cairngorm Estate. The guided walk programme ran from mid-May till mid-October.

On Thursdays, a 3.5hour walk into Coire an t-Sneachda was advertised, which takes visitors with a ranger team member on a mixture of constructed footpaths and slightly rougher ground into Coire an t-Sneachda, traversing out over the Fiacail a' Choire Chais and returning through the ski area to the car park level.

With the reopening of the funicular railway, the walk at the top guided activities restarted, utilising the Marquis wells and summit path as the main route for ascent/descent. This walk at the top was staffed with a mix of ranger team members and walk guides who have previously worked as walk guides or within the ranger team.

Both activities required a minimum number of attendants to make them viable. Therefore, several walks had to be cancelled due to insufficient bookings.

There were numerous requests for exceptions to access the upper mountain via the funicular railway for walking, spreading ashes and joining organised groups. Some of these requests were fulfilled with a member of the ranger team accompanying the individual/s, to which the conditions of the Visitor management plan operated by CMSL were kept intact.

A small number of bird-watching companies undertook an induction for guiding groups from the top station to the summit of Cairn Gorm. The induction clearly states the conditions and protocol for leading groups out of the top station under licence.

In addition to the bird guides, a local activity provider specialises in enabling people with disabilities to access/participate in outdoor activities using specialised equipment attended the induction sessions.

This led to a small number of disabled individuals reaching the summit of Cairn Gorm by using the adapted equipment and the leaders' help.



VOLUNTEERS

We have again been fortunate to have several volunteers attend open days to assist with estate management. These have been coordinated through the CNPA team with volunteers from the CNPA volunteer rangers team and the junior rangers.

Two event days were completed with the CNPA volunteer rangers, with a total of 5 people attending. 1 day with 14 high school children from Kingussie & Grantown secondary schools saw the team carry out path maintenance on the path routes leading up from the top station to the summit of Cairn Gorm and working down the Windy Ridge path. Several planned events have been cancelled due to poor weather or no uptake in places.

The planning of volunteer days for 2024 is already in the diary.

Throughout 2023, Carol Parsons has been volunteering in our wild mountain garden. Carol has volunteered over 220 hours throughout the year, helping keep the mountain garden and the car park planter features in beautiful condition.

We thank all the volunteers for their time, cooperation and dedication.

PARTNERSHIP

Cairngorm Mountain Ranger Service continues to keep in touch with the CNPA Ranger Services through open channel WhatsApp communication and direct liaison through the Ranger Manager.

In September, the ranger team attended a Rangers gathering at Glenmore Lodge. This event allowed the ranger team to meet many neighbouring Ranger teams across the Cairngorms National Park and briefly share experiences and ideas across various subjects.

As an outcome of the gathering, the CNPA has created a programme where ranger teams can visit sites in the early and late summer months. Cairngorm Mountain will host its first visit day in May 2024.

For the last few summer seasons, RSPB Abernethy have successfully funded two staff positions for mountain rangers covering the high plateau across to Ben Macdui, into the Loch Avon basin and across towards Bynack Mor.

The appointments has been an valuable tool to observe behavior across the plateau and showing presence across the Northern Cairngorms with ranger staff. The staff from RSPB would often pop in to share observations of wildlife, people and dog behaviour and any issues that the team on the Cairngorm Estate needed to be aware of and vice versa.

This collaberation included the observations of a small flock of sheep that grazed between Coire an t-Sneachda and the Loch Avon basin. The sheep were finally gathered in the autumn when staff from Strath Avon estate came across with sheep dogs to drive them down to the awaiting vehicles in the lower coire cas car park.



WINTER OPERATIONS

The ranger team is diverse during winter operations and assists in other roles and departments. Senior Ranger, Ruari spends a large part of the winter months operating the piste machines, while Gemma and Matthew assist with duties such as lunch cover on uplift, assisting the snowmaking, car parking, queue management and management of water runoff on the pistes during heavy rain and thaw periods.

Much of the summer sign maintenance is done through the winter season.

The winter daily tasks remain the same: daily posting weather and avalanche forecasts, car park checks, and weather observations.

In addition, the water monitoring tends to take a bit more time as after any snowfall, the solar panels require to be cleaned, and also, the batteries of the units need to be periodically recharged back at the base due to the low amount of direct sunlight over the darker winter months.



Cairngorm Funicular Railway in operation



Clearing the remainder of the winter snow off the access track to the top station

Ants nest	1
Beetle	8
Black grouse	4
Black headed gull	4
BlackBird	1
Bumblebee	35
Capercaillie	1
Chaffinch	3
Coal Tit	3
Crow	8
Cuckoo	4
Dipper	3
Dotterel	3
Dunnock	4
Field mouse	18
Fieldfare	87
Fox	2
Frog	14
Golden Eagle	2
Goose	147
Heron	1
House Martins	22
Jumping spider	1
Lizard	2
Meadow pipit	26
Mole	1
Mountain Hare	31
Pergrine falcon	2
Pied Wagtail	8
Pine marten	2
Ptarmigan	11
Rat	1
Raven	32
Red grouse	44
Red wing	25
Reindeer	9
Ring Ouzel	16
Sexton beetle	1
sheep	36
Snowbunting	138
Song thrush	1
Stoat	2
Tortoiseshell butterfly	1
Water vole	4
Weasel	4
Wheatear	8
Willow warbler	2
Wood pigeon	4
Wren	2

wildlife RECORDS

Every year, the ranger team records wildlife observations across the Estate. All observations are documented and passed to the North East Scotland Biological Records Centre (NESBReC).

As in previous years, small numbers of Ptarmigan, Red Grouse and Dotterel continue to be recorded this year. We are still determining the reason for the apparent number reduction.

On several occasions this summer, sheep from a neighbouring estate east of the Cairngorm plateau, found their way into Coire an t-Sneachda and the high plateau.

The sheep flock were finally removed by the estate shepherds from Glen Avon estate in autumn 2023.

There is no specific monitoring programme for recording wildlife, just passing observations.

The records for 2023 is listed to the left.

An online recording form for the Ranger team is being developed, moving into 2024.



A Pine Marten snacking on the bird feeding tables in the mountain garden.

snow white RECORDS

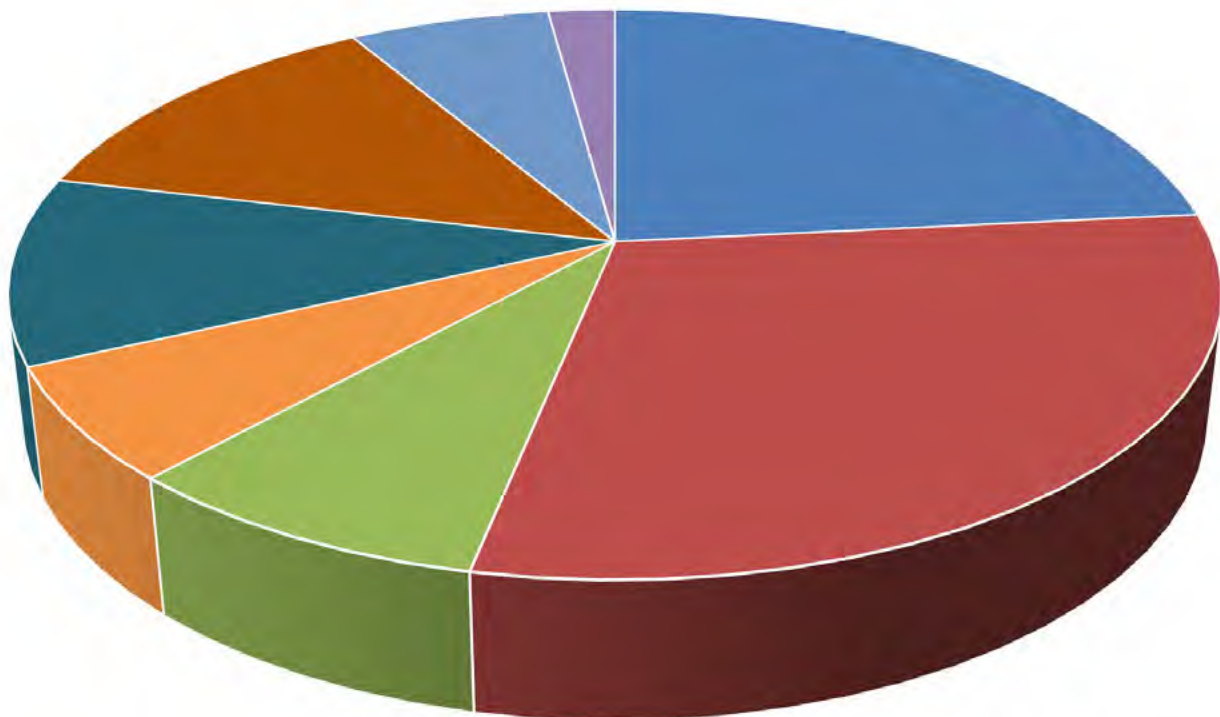
The Keep Cairngorm Snow White project continues to operate throughout the year, where mountaineers can obtain an air-tight pot and biobags to remove their human waste off the mountain and deposit it in the CMSL's wastewater treatment plant in lower Coire Cas free of charge.

As part of the logging out process for the pots, mountaineers are requested to give locations where they are intending to visit for their overnight camp.

Much of the time, mountaineers are using sites beyond the Cairngorm Estate boundary. A summary of site usage is shown below.

A total of 30 poo pots were logged out with 15 returned unused.

Locations of intended overnight camps using snow white project



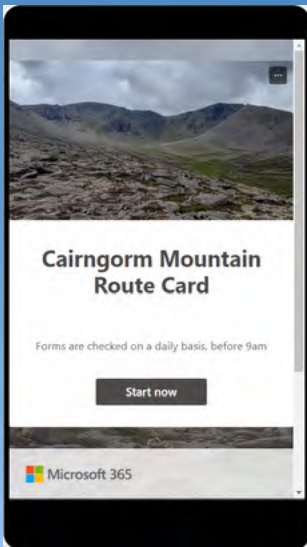
- Ciste Mhearad
- Coire Domhain
- Garbh Uisge Beag
- Garbh Uisge Mor
- 4 zeros
- Loch Avon
- Ben Macdui
- Loch Etchachan
- Coire an t-Sneachda
- Lairig Ghru
- Hutchison Hut
- Corroul Bothy
- Bob Scott Hut
- Shelterstone
- Other locations
- Unknown

route card RECORDS

The Ranger team continues monitoring route cards filled in digitally using QR codes. The form links are available inside/outside the ranger base, outside the shop on the ground level of the day lodge, Coire na Ciste car park entrance, and on the CMSL website.

Occasionally, the ranger team contacts the phone number given on the form as they did not sign back in on return. Often, they forget to sign back in on their return to the car park or have limited battery power on their mobile device.

In 2023, a total of 300 route cards were filled in.



ROUTE CARDS 

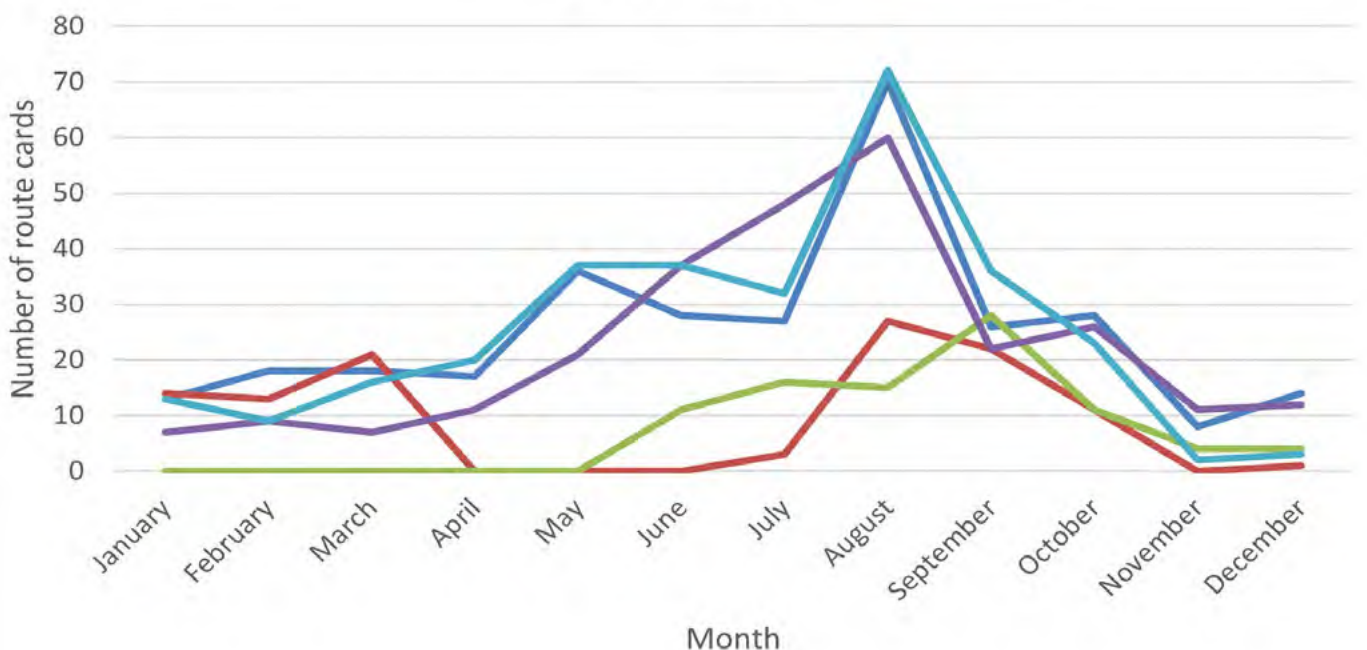
LET US KNOW before you go to the hills. You can scan the QR code below on your mobile device and complete with as much information as possible about your planned adventure.

Please ensure you **LOG BACK IN** on your return.

TO LEAVE A ROUTE CARD  <https://tinyurl.com/route-card>

TO LOG BACK IN ON YOUR RETURN  <https://tinyurl.com/returned-safely>

Compare number of route cards per month 2019 -2023



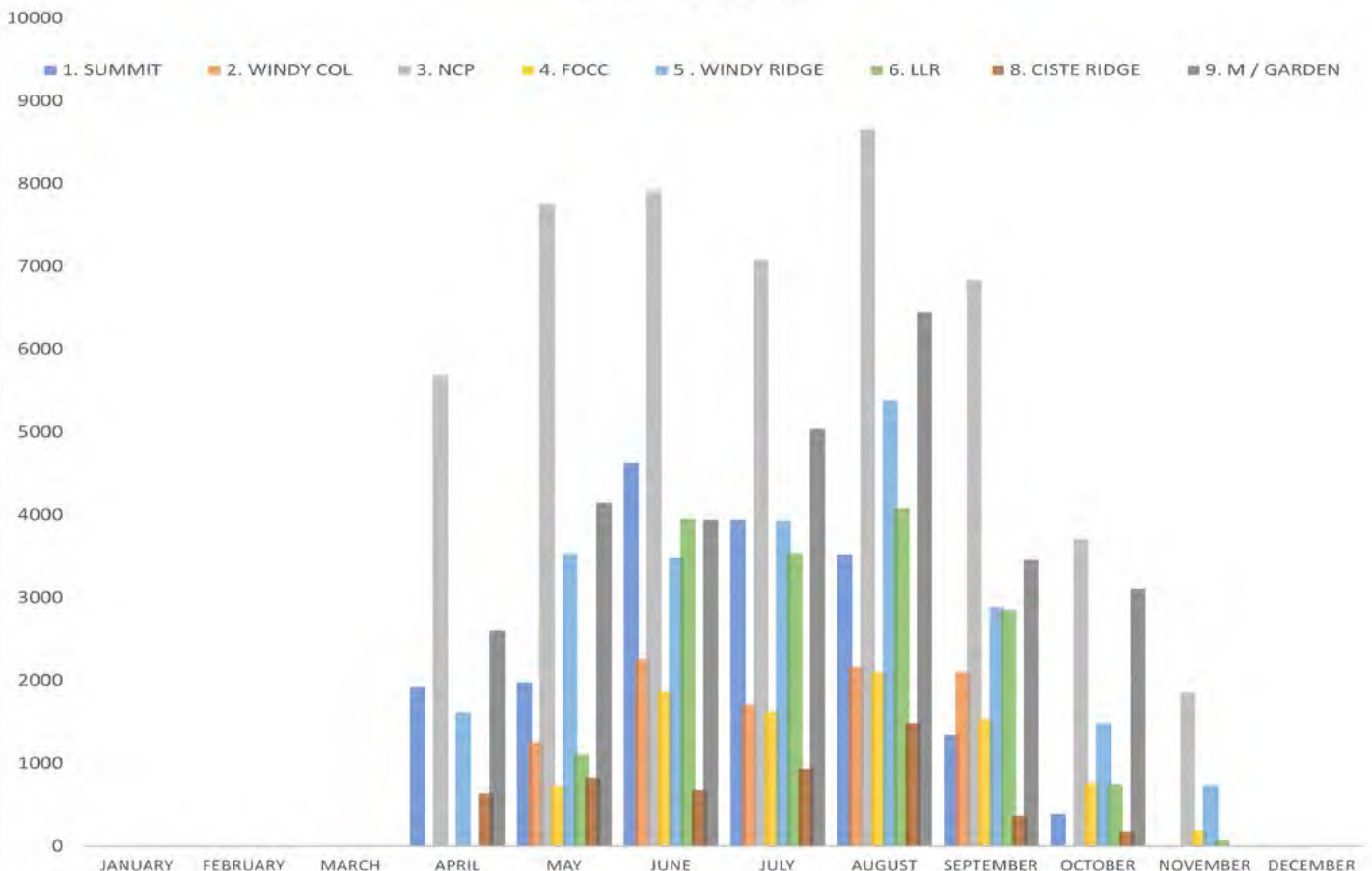
path counter RECORDS

Across the Cairngorm estate, a network of path counters operates mainly from May to October, depending on weather conditions. These counters are vital tools to gauge usage across the site and determine which routes are the most popular. It is a critical part of the Detailed Monitoring Scheme.

The counters are installed underneath the path surface, and as visitors walk across the pressure pad, it will register the number of passes and log the data in a USB data logger device. Weekly and fortnightly, the counters are downloaded onto a small laptop, which can be analysed to see if there are immediate faults or issues.

As technology progresses, the ranger team will look at units where the data can be downloaded via Bluetooth. This, in turn, reduces the number of times the data logger has to be opened (leading to moisture getting in the circuitry) and also reduces wear on the USB connections, which have occasionally plagued this system with the frequent program of downloading.

FOOTPATH COUNTERS

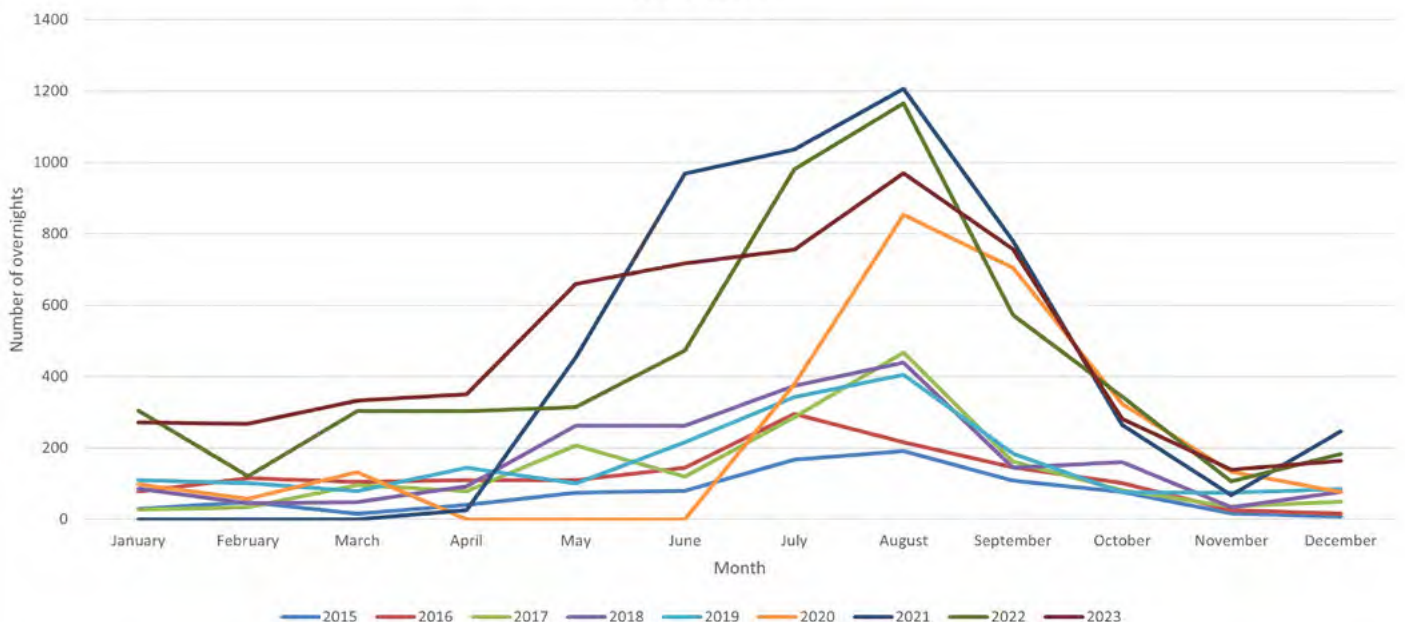


overnight RECORDS

Any vehicle observed in the morning in either the Sugarbowl (Forest and Land Scotland), Coire na Ciste, Coire Cas and by the side of the road in various locations along the road are recorded. With the introduction of car park charging at the Coire Cas car park in previous years has led to many vehicles parking on the approach to the coire cas car park and the various laybys along the descent section of the road.

Date	Coire Cas (upper)	Coire Cas (lower)	Coire na Ciste	Sugar bowl	Road	Total
January	103	57	54	52	5	271
February	30	102	85	43	8	268
March	77	140	85	26	4	332
April	53	88	150	41	19	351
May	149	14	226	101	169	659
June	115	0	266	87	249	717
July	98	0	415	63	180	756
August	167	0	586	77	140	970
September	141	0	346	99	171	757
October	64	0	143	29	46	282
November	57	0	45	18	19	139
December	35	5	95	19	10	164
Total	1089	406	2496	655	1020	5666

Number of overnights in car parks per month
2015 - 2023



cyclists RECORDS

Observations of cyclists were recorded throughout 2023. Data recorded included cyclists travelling to the Coire Cas car park on the main road, outside the ski area, or above the designated bike park.

This data is collected to support the Bike park management plan's planning conditions and record the general use of bikes on the Natura site and within the ski area.

In total, 305 cyclists were observed cycling up the access road to the Coire Cas Car Park from Glenmore, 20 Mountain bike cyclists were observed in the Natura site, outside the ski area and 14 mountain bike cyclists were observed within the ski area, which were not related to the mountain bike park once opened.



Mountain bikers on the new MTB park in Coire Cas (CMSL images)



Looking forward to 2024

As we enter the new year from a very busy year for the ranger service, many of our critical activities mentioned in this report will continue, such as:

- Ensuring a warm and friendly welcome to all visitors to the ranger base.
- We will continue collaborating with volunteers and educational groups visiting the site to carry out work days and learn about the Cairngorms.
- Carrying out all monitoring commitments as part of the Detailed Monitoring Scheme.
- Upkeep of the path network across the Cairngorm Estate.
- Continue close communication across the Cairngorm National Park through the Ranger team comms WhatsApp group highlighting specific or broader issues (*for example, visible smoke/fires*).
- Taking forward the recommendations of a recent independent review of the Cairngorm Visitor Management Plan, in consultation with statutory consultees

With new small projects for 2024:

- Installing a multi-screen bird-watching camera system based in the Camera Obscura building within the Mountain Garden.
- Testing of Bluetooth technology in our path counters, reducing potential connector faults.
- The wildlife gallery is continuing to be developed within the Camera Obscura building.
- Completing ground reinstatement works started in the summer of 2023 on the area above Coire an Lochain and within the ski area.
- Developing a touchscreen information point for the Ptarmigan top station.
- Matthew Boyd completing his SVQ2 qualification, and both Ruari and Matthew working through their SVQ3 Estate Management qualifications through Rural Skills Scotland.

We acknowledge and thank the continuing support of Cairngorm Mountain (Scotland) Limited, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, NatureScot, Cairngorms National Park Authority & Rural Skills Scotland.