

Climb every mountain

Walking the Scottish hills can be enjoyed by dogs just as much as it is by humans. Hillwalker **Moira Beaton** meets some pets who've taken on the challenge of the Munros.

Every weekend, the hills are alive with keen walkers climbing the 283 highest peaks in Scotland. Known collectively as The Munros, the hills were named after Sir Hugh Munro, who compiled the original list of Scottish hills over 3,000ft in 1891. The most famous Munro is Ben Nevis, which, at 4,099ft, is the highest mountain in Britain. 'Munro baggers' record each successful ascent and when they have 'compleated' the list, their achievement is recorded in the official list of 'Munroists' which today stands at over 4,000.

However, there are many 'compleatists' not recognised for their achievements, nor given the coveted title of Munroists. These are the dogs who faithfully accompany their owners

Photo: Jackie Campbell



Jackie Campbell and Blaven bag a Munro.

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up the Munros in all weathers and over all types of terrain. For them, there is no official list. Possibly the most famous canine 'compleatist' is Kitchy, the Shetland Sheepdog belonging to author and multi-Munroist Hamish Brown. Kitchy isn't only well known for 'compleating' the Munros but for having his achievement entered on to the official list in 1979 under his proper name, Ketchil San, Munroist 323. Sometime later, when it was discovered that Ketchil San had four legs instead of two, his name was removed.

Many people have the romantic idea that Scotland's hills are just wide open, empty spaces where they and their dogs can roam freely, but the hills are full of wildlife, some of it hidden, such as ground-nesting birds. There are also

people who live on the land, including farmers and gamekeepers, and for them the hills are a resource, rather than merely a source of enjoyment.

It's important, therefore, to read the Scottish Access Code guidelines for keeping a dog under proper control in open spaces, before setting out on an adventure with your dog. The code isn't only concerned with your dog's behaviour but also with his safety.

Munro bagger Blaven

One dog who loves getting out on the hills is six-year-old chocolate Labrador, Blaven. "He knows when it's the weekend and exactly where we're going," said his owner Jackie Campbell, from Glasgow. "As soon

as he sees the rucksacks, he gets very excited and by the time we reach the hills, he's ecstatic.

"He's confident most of the time, but there are some hills that are too difficult for him and I wouldn't take him up just to bag a Munro. Also, in Scotland, the weather can suddenly change, from brilliant sunshine to driving rain and strong winds. I'd turn back rather than take him further on. If he doesn't enjoy the climb, neither do I."

Blaven, named after Bla Bheinn, a Munro on the Isle of Skye, has already bagged more than 120 Munros. He climbed his first two in 2005 when he was 18 months old — Beinn Dubhchraig and Ben Oss, both at Tyndrum in Perthshire.

Jackie said: "Although he's very fit — he gets about two hours walking every day and sometimes joins me on a run — I'm responsible for him on the hills, so I have to make sure that he's not only enjoying himself but also not getting into difficulties."

Sense of freedom

Heather Morning, mountain safety adviser with the Mountaineering Council of Scotland and a volunteer with the Mountain Rescue Service, is out on the hills with her Search and Rescue Dog Association-trained collie, Milly, every day.

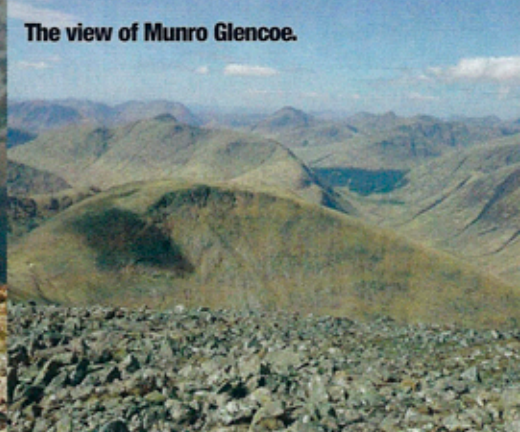
"Domestic dogs aren't used to going out on the hills, and it's a massively exciting place for them with all the freedom and new smells," she said.

"You have to be one step ahead of your dog at all times. Always know where he is and what he's doing, particularly around

An extra use for a dog up a Munro — looking after the rucksack.



The view of Munro Glencoe.



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wildlife — you have to see other animals before your dog does."

Sheep chasing is one of the ways your dog can get into serious trouble on the hills, so it's crucial that he is either kept on a lead around sheep or trained to ignore them. Heather trained Milly by using a technique a bitch uses with her pups — growling.

"As soon as Milly showed any interest in sheep, I would growl and bring her in close to me. Dogs have to learn that chasing sheep is an absolute no-no."

More of a challenge

Nick Williams, author of eight guides to hillwalking in Scotland, spent more than 500 hours on the hills researching for his books.

"Not all Munros are the same," he said. "Some hills are easy with paths to follow, while others, such as Schiehallion in Perthshire, are more challenging — it's a boulder field."

"If you go off the main path on Torridon in Ross-shire, there is scree (a mass of loose stones) where it's easy to break an ankle, and bog where you could find yourself in it up to your waist."

"As for the Cuillin Munros on the Isle of Skye, a dog couldn't climb there without assistance."

Sgurr Dearg is the second highest summit in the Cuillin of Skye. Its name in English is the Inaccessible Pinnacle, or In Pinn, and it is thought to be the most difficult Munro to ascend. To reach the top, you have to climb up sheer rock which rises to a sharp pinnacle. It's difficult enough for experienced climbers, but for a dog it's impossible without being harnessed and pulled up. It's not a hill for the faint-hearted or the unfit.

Build up gradually

"If you know your dog has done nothing more challenging than a walk round the park, it's unfair to expect him to go up a Munro," said Mo Clarke, a vet with the Dundas Veterinary Animal Centre in Edinburgh.

Her advice to owners of budding canine Munro baggers is to increase your dog's fitness gradually.

"Start off by taking him on longer walks on the flat," she explained, "and if he's enjoying it and isn't worn out by the end of the day, or sore and stiff the next day, try tackling something more challenging like an undulating, grassy hill and build up from there."



Blaven on Braeriach, the third highest mountain in Scotland.



Up one of the Munros in Kinlochleven.

"It's also important that the dog has finished growing and his joints have settled before you start putting too much strain on them. For any breed, 10 – 12 months is the earliest, and for giant breeds it's 18 months."

Younger dogs are particularly enthusiastic on the hills. "They don't think about how much further they have to go, so you have to be their brains," said Mo. "They want to be part of the pack and probably do about five times the distance running around, and then they tire themselves out."

If you're unsure of your dog's fitness, take him to the vet's for a check-up. If he's old, overweight, or has a heart problem, Mo advised: "Just don't take him."

Even fit dogs can have problems after a walk and they can't always let you know. Mo continued: "Look out for lameness that doesn't pass after a day, or cuts and bruises, and if your dog is miserable, lethargic, and not eating, call the vet."

"Check him over carefully for ticks after a walk. They can cause Lyme disease, which is treatable. The signs are temperature, lethargy, and lameness

that shifts from one leg to the other."

Dogs use more energy on the hills than normal, so feeding them sensibly before and during the walk is important.

"Don't give your dog a huge breakfast before you go, as his digestive system will be struggling with that while his muscles are trying to do something else," Mo advised. "Feed him a light meal and carry a few little snacks to keep him going. Also, take water with you as dogs need it to replace what's lost through heat and panting. But, ultimately, it's important to be willing to turn back if you can see your dog isn't enjoying the walk. Use your head, not just your enthusiasm."

An official list for canine Munroists is, no doubt, the last thing on a dog's mind. Owners might proudly hang their dogs' certificates on the walls, but the pets themselves would probably prefer a pat on the head, a chewy treat, and a good night's sleep dreaming of their next hill!

The Munros are beautiful, challenging, and available to everyone. If you do your research, plan your day, and are aware of others, your dog will enjoy it too.

Useful contacts

For the Mountaineering Council of Scotland visit www.mcofs.org.uk or call 01738 493942.

Information for Munroists and aspiring Munroists, including the official list of Munro 'compleatists', can be found at www.smc.org.uk

To read the Scottish Outdoor Access Code and get advice for taking yourself and your dog on to the Scottish hills, visit www.outdooraccess-scotland.com