

Àilean and the Mystery Bog

No, this isn't about sanitation in the Highlands although some fascinating things could be said about that too no doubt.

This is all about the mega-confusion of words pertaining to boggy ground. Not that I have a problem with the fact that there are so many words, after all, we claim that the Inuit have over a hundred words for snow, don't we? So we naturally need a hundred words for all things wet ... Anyway, the problem is partly the large number of words, partly geographical dialect variation and mostly dictionary writers who copy each other.

Try it, it's fun ... bring out all the Gaelic dictionaries you have and look up the word **aconach** for example. You will find that MacLeod & Dewar have it as 'desert, heath, hill, height, steep place', MacLennan as 'heath, hill', MacBain as 'uniting place', Dieckhoff as 'hillside' and good ol' Dwelly as 'desert, heath, hill, moor, steep place'. Notice something? In some ways that is what makes Dwelly's so good, but in many ways this isn't helpful.

Confused? So were we, but here's today's labour of love: a rough and ready guide to wet ground in Scotland.

achadh	field [a field of crops, not with cattle in it]
àilean	meadow [a stretch of "cultivated" grass often relatively close to a house, farm or croft]
aconach	1 high lying heath [ie high lying ground with heather growing on it] 2 a (traditional) meeting place for cattle fairs
beinn	mountain [mountain in general]
blàr	open space, open area [in relation to eg surrounding forests, mountains etc. This occasionally takes on the meaning of battlefields as this was suitable ground for fighting]
blàr-mòine	peat-moss, peat-bog [ie open space but with peat growing on it]
bogan	soft ground, quagmire
boglach	bog, morass [this is REALLY soft ground, you couldn't stand on it]
boglainn	see boglach
buigleag	diminutive of bog(lach) , which means it has the same meaning but is smaller in size
càir	no English equivalent, this relates to the drier parts of a peat-bog
càthar	boggy ground, soft ground [difficult to walk on, but not impossible with wellies]
cluain	field [this time for animals]
dail	dale [but for it to be a dail it needs to be bounded in by hills, mountains, rivers or other features]
faiche	1 meadow [near a house, fairly short grass, regularly tended] 2 fairway (in golf)
fèithe	swamp
garbhlach	1 any rough, stony place 2 the rough (in golf)
innis	1 grazing, pasture 2 resting place for cattle
lèan	wet meadow [this has grass growing on it but is rather wet and floods regularly]
lòn	marsh, morass
lèanag	diminutive of lèana , which means it has the same meaning but is smaller in size

mòine	moss, mossy place [this is generally a place which has peat moss resulting in ground suitable for cutting peat as opposed to a moor in general which does not have peat that can be cut]
mòinteach	peat moss, moorland [this is more general than mòine, it often has peat but not necessarily enough to cut]
monadh	1 mountain moor 2 mountain with moors
mùrach	down(s)
pàirc	paddock [generally walled and grassy, hence the extended meaning of 'park' in the modern English sense]
raon	1 field of grass [without specific use] 2 field of (short) grass used for playing sports
réidhlean	1 village green 2 green [ie VERY neat bit of grass, like a bowling or putting green]
réidh-mhonadh	a level mountain moor [as opposed to one that goes up the slope]
riasm(lach)	marshy land covered in rough grasses
rumach	slough, muddy puddle
seasgann	fen, fenny country
sliabh	hillface, slope
sùil-chruthaich	deep bog

Now for the unavoidable caveats.

The use of these terms often varies depending on the area you're in. To give you but one example, in Lewis people often refer to 'the mountains' as the mòinteach, presumably because most of their high lying ground also happens to be mòinteach. Like calling a vacuum cleaner a Hoover really.

There are obviously more terms for wet ground, but these are the most common one's and you should do fine if you know all the above for starters.

Have fun!