

# Protecting Access and Caring for Ireland's Mountains

*Irish Peaks* is more than a collection of hillwalking routes on Ireland's highest hundred mountains, it is a celebration of the beauty, variety, and character of Ireland's mountains. One of the aims of this book is to promote a deeper engagement with these special places, an engagement that is based on understanding and care.

Whether your objective is physical challenge, or seeking mental and spiritual solace in our upland landscapes, *Irish Peaks* opens up the possibility of countless satisfying days exploring Ireland's highest mountains. The mountains are not a place for rules; hillwalking is underpinned by a strong ethos of personal and collective responsibility - responsibility for our own safety, to care for the natural environment, to engage with landowners, and to contribute to the local economy. Our personal behaviour can be very powerful in influencing the actions of other people. Sometimes we might want to reinforce our actions with an explanation; the information here may be helpful when having those conversations.

Farmer Pat Dunne pointing the way up the Zigzags agreed access route in Glenmalur, Co. Wicklow – Garrett Byrne





# Access – a shared responsibility

It is important to acknowledge that public enjoyment of the vast majority of Ireland’s mountains is due to the goodwill and tolerance of the landowners, rather than access being based on any formal arrangement. Land ownership in Ireland’s upland areas has evolved into a complex jigsaw of individually-owned land and commonage areas where a number of people share grazing or other rights to the land. State-owned lands (e.g. Coillte, National Parks, Forest Service and Northern Ireland Water properties) make up a smaller share of the uplands, yet these areas are significant, not least because forestry often provides access to the mountains without having to go through fields.

Although most of the routes included in this book are well-used, some for many decades, that does not confer a legal right of entry, and access should not be taken for granted. At times, landowners and local residents are inconvenienced as a result of allowing access (e.g. gateways blocked by parked cars, reduced privacy, and sheep disturbed by dogs) so it’s easy to see how tensions could arise.

The lack of clarity in relation to access causes concern for many walkers, especially visitors to an area. The MacGillycuddy’s Reeks in Co. Kerry is one of two pilot areas for a Mountain Access Project which aims to provide clarity on access in defined upland areas, based on a voluntary agreement with landowners in the area. The experience from the two pilot areas is currently being reviewed, with the aim of extending this model of agreed access to other upland areas.

Due to the number of landowners involved, it was not feasible for the contributors, or for Mountaineering Ireland, to seek agreement from every landowner for the publication of the routes in this book. Efforts have been made to avoid situations of known access difficulty, but land ownership changes, landowners on the same mountain may hold different views, incidents occur, and attitudes can change. Given the fluidity of the situation we should never assume that access is certain.

Maintaining access is a shared responsibility. If an opportunity arises to speak with a landowner, stop for a chat and check if access is permitted on your intended route. This type of engagement makes a positive contribution to the relationship between recreational users and the local community. It is even more important for large groups, and especially for organised events, if intending to camp, or where people are leading others for payment.

Increasing participation in hillwalking and outdoor recreation activities, while on many levels a very positive development, is exerting greater pressure on the largely unmanaged access situation in Ireland’s uplands, and on the goodwill of individual landowners. Mountaineering Ireland is actively involved in efforts to improve and secure access for responsible hillwalkers in Ireland, north and south.



Above: Neil Salway (Blackstairs Ramblers) and Mick Monahan (Tullow Mountaineering Club) chatting with Martin Shannon (Chairman, Blackstairs Farming Futures) on Shannon’s Lane in the Blackstairs – *Helen Lawless*

This work is strengthened by up-to-date knowledge of local issues and responsible action by Mountaineering Ireland clubs and individual members. If you become aware of a problem or sensitivity in relation to access, please contact the Mountaineering Ireland office. Mountaineering Ireland has an *Irish Peaks* section on its website ([www.mountaineering.ie](http://www.mountaineering.ie)), where users of this book can check for changes in relation to access on the published routes.

## Enjoying the mountains with care

The quality of the landscape and natural environment is fundamental to the quality of the experiences enjoyed by most hillwalkers. Consider how your joy at reaching the top of a mountain on a clear day, and savouring new views with natural horizons, can be tainted by finding the remains of other people’s lunches when you sit down for a break on the summit. By acting responsibly hillwalkers help to maintain access and protect the mountain environment for future enjoyment.

# Travel and parking

Some routes in this book have limited parking space, and often those with good space are popular and at times crowded. While it might be tempting to park on a verge, in front of a forestry barrier, or at the side of a gateway, doing so could block access for larger vehicles such as an ambulance, or a tractor with a trailer.

When planning your hike take parking into consideration and follow the advice below:

- Carpool if at all possible; this saves valuable space in car parks, it means less congestion on narrow roads, it reduces our carbon footprint and it saves money too;
- Park carefully – avoid wasting space between vehicles when parking in an unmarked car park;
- Avoid parking in front of field gates; remember that most farmers work at the weekend;
- If there isn’t parking space available when you arrive, consider changing your route and starting elsewhere;
- Avoid leaving valuables in parked vehicles – this encourages break-ins to cars;
- Park a little further back from the hills and walk in;
- Ask permission to park outside a house, farm or other premises;
- If part of a group, consider hiring a bus, this is especially useful for linear routes;
- Where there’s an honesty box in a car park, make sure to contribute.



Above: Parking in front of forestry barriers blocks access for the Emergency Services – *Dublin Wicklow Mountain Rescue Team*

## Tread lightly

Most of the paths across the slopes, ridges and summits of Ireland’s mountains are not built or maintained paths, they are informal routes that have evolved over time through repeated footfall wearing away the vegetation. The muddy and eroded scars that have developed, especially on blanket bog and steep ground, are undeniably the most visible impact of increased recreation activity on Ireland’s mountains. Walking on the edge of a path causes damage to vegetation, which in turn results in more soil being washed away and the damaged area



Above: ‘The tramping boot, if thought guides it, need not bruise or wound where it steps’ from *The Mountains of Mourne* by David Kirk

growing wider. We can help to mitigate the spread of path erosion by making good choices about how and where we walk:

- Keep to the centre of paths wherever they exist;
- Walk on robust surfaces like rock, or on vegetation and soil that has already been damaged by footfall;
- Avoid taking short-cuts (e.g. on zigzags);
- Wearing waterproof footwear and gaiters makes it easier to walk along a wet or muddy path;
- Use steep and badly eroded routes in ascent, rather than descent and avoid these routes when ground conditions are wet;
- Keep group sizes small.

Many drier summits have a covering of short vegetation and mosses, which could be the rare montane heath habitat. It may not appear as fragile as blanket bog, but thin soils, high winds and low temperatures mean that life on the summit plateau is precarious – even before we arrive. It is just as important, therefore, that we protect summit vegetation by choosing to walk within established path lines, rather than widening the damage.

In accordance with the Helping the Hills Guiding Principles ([www.helpingthehills.ie](http://www.helpingthehills.ie)) Mountaineering Ireland is working with local members and other stakeholders to agree appropriate solutions in response to the worsening path erosion on some of Ireland’s iconic mountains.

The aim is to repair our major erosion scars with paths that fit into their landscape setting, through sympathetic design, a high standard of construction and the use of natural and local materials. Such work is expensive and Mountaineering Ireland encourages hillwalkers and climbers to consider contributing through either monetary donation or voluntary effort. We will never be able to afford to repair all the eroded lines on Ireland’s mountains, that’s why it’s vitally important that hillwalkers mitigate the spread of erosion by making good choices about how and where we walk.





Above: The Croagh Patrick path team – Matt, David, Bernard, Frank and Tulio – on a section of the hand-built path on the upper part of the mountain – *Helen Lawless*

## Dogs

The presence of any dog close to farmland, or on the hills is a major concern for farmers, and as a result dogs are not welcome across most upland areas in Ireland. Concerns include the stress caused to sheep by chasing, and injury or death from biting, as well as the disturbance of wildlife.

Readers are urged to respect farm animals and wildlife, by leaving dogs at home if accessing land where sheep or other livestock may be present, and by observing local signage. Where dogs are welcome, ensure that your dog is under effective control at all times, i.e. they should be on a lead or come at first call.



Above: Due to concern about sheep worrying, dogs are not welcome across most upland areas in Ireland – *Helen Lawless*

## Litter

Thankfully, the vast majority of hillwalkers are careful to take home all their food packaging and other litter. This makes a difference, as litter on the hills can be harmful to wildlife and it takes from the beauty of the outdoors. Even biodegradable items like banana skins are unsightly and take many months to break down in the colder air of the hills. Research has shown that the presence of litter leads to further littering - one person's deliberate decision to leave a teabag on a mountain top could result in the next person consciously, or unconsciously leaving a plastic bottle behind. Carrying a spare bag with you makes it much easier to take your rubbish home and to pick up other litter you may come across.

## Camping

Spending a night in the mountains makes it easier to appreciate two of the most beautiful times of the day - late evening and early morning. Wild camping should be enjoyed with minimal impact on the environment, leaving your campsite as found, or better.

## Connect with the mountains

Deepening our connection with the places where we walk and climb will improve our understanding of these special living landscapes. It will also help us to see how we can enjoy our activities without imposing, and how we can bring greater benefit to Ireland's upland areas.

In the same way that the quality of the natural landscape in the uplands enhances our recreation experiences, so too do the living components of that landscape. A glimpse of a lizard disappearing into the heather, the refreshing taste of berries on the hill, the sound of a skylark singing overhead, pausing to admire the exquisite beauty of a wild orchid – all make for memorable moments. We can go a step beyond noticing and marvelling at flora and fauna; recording a few of the species we come across will add to scientific knowledge of the uplands, or posting a picture on social media could help others see why Ireland's mountains are special.

Ireland's upland areas are also rich in reminders of how previous generations have interacted with the landscapes where we walk and climb. Visible reminders include standing stones, the ruins of old houses, lazy-beds and disused mines, while placenames sometimes provide invisible evidence of historic events or settlement. Finding out about some of the features we come across on the mountains and sharing that information with others is a good way to build understanding of the mountains.

We can put something back into the areas where we walk and climb by making an effort to use pubs, shops and other local services. The extra bit of custom from hillwalkers is noticed and appreciated, and it



Above: The Eisc on Mount Brandon, with Irish Saxifrage (*Saxifraga rosacea*) growing beside the path; keeping within established path lines helps to protect rare plants like this – *Helen Lawless*

Inset: Irish Saxifrage in flower – *Helen Lawless*

could help keep these businesses open, in turn benefitting the wider community. In addition, visiting these premises provides a further opportunity to chat with local people. You might learn more about the area, and you will have a chance to express your appreciation for the enjoyment we get from our time in the mountains.

## Why it's worth it

Ireland's upland areas are important natural assets, with opportunities for recreation being just one of the benefits associated with these landscapes. Although low-intensity agriculture is the primary land-use across most of Ireland's uplands, these areas have a major role in water supply, they assist in flood prevention, store much of our carbon in peat soils and provide valuable space for biodiversity – everyone in society benefits in some way. Pilot projects currently underway in a number of upland areas indicate that with appropriate policy changes, upland farmers could have a valuable role in improving the ability of Ireland's uplands to deliver these vital ecological services.

Our shared responsibility to enjoy the mountains with care incorporates a responsibility to be a voice for Ireland's mountains

and upland areas. To raise concerns when we become aware of something that threatens the mountain landscape, and to be part of a conversation about the future of Ireland's mountains. Doing so will help protect these special places and help protect the quality of future recreation experiences, ours and the generations that follow us.



Above: Members of the Limerick Climbing Club availing of parking and other facilities in King's Yard before a hike in the Galtees – *Frank McMahon*