

Introduction

To enjoy this route, it is important to approach it with the right expectations. It is not the John Muir Trail (JMT), the world-famous hiking trail that runs for 215 miles through the Californian wilderness: see page 15. In sharp contrast, it's a low-level route across central Scotland that will appeal as strongly to cyclists as to walkers.

Over 134 miles (215 km) the John Muir Way (JMW) traverses the country from the Firth of Clyde at Helensburgh to John Muir's birth town Dunbar on the North Sea. As such, it passes through many villages and towns, as well as the capital city of Edinburgh, never rising above 275 m/900 ft. It appeals equally to those seeking the challenge of a single coast-to-coast expedition and to those who prefer to tackle it in sections.

On the Californian JMT, hikers must carry their own tents and keep food in bearproof canisters. By contrast, the Scottish Way is blessed with welcoming pubs, cafés and accommodation throughout its length. This appeals to those who enjoy creature comforts such as a soft bed at the end of the day. And unlike the JMT, parts of which are impassable from snow for much of the year, the JMW is a route for all seasons. It also offers endless chances to chat with local people that you meet along the Way.

For John Muir, mountains were spiritually important. He advised 'Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees.' The canyons, glaciers and lofty pinnacles of Yosemite fired his enthusiasm and he was extremely self-reliant as a hiker. 'I am hopelessly and forever a mountaineer. I care to live only to entice people to look at Nature's loveliness.' His boyhood explorations in and around Dunbar were the wellspring of his lifelong passion for nature.

The John Muir Way includes some surprisingly remote stretches both in and around its towns. You don't really know a place until you have walked through it. Starting from the domestic architecture of Helensburgh, it passes through Scotland's first National Park (Loch Lomond & The Trossachs), alongside the historic canals of central Scotland, past the engineering wonder of the Falkirk Wheel, the Roman Antonine Wall, Linlithgow Palace, the Forth Bridges, through Edinburgh's capital attractions to the coastal expanses of East Lothian, ending at John Muir's Birthplace in Dunbar.

Dunbar's rugged coastline



1 Planning to walk the Way

Best time of year and weather

The ideal time to enjoy the John Muir Way is between May and September. In Scotland, hours of daylight are long in summer, especially from late May to late July. These months offer better chances of good weather for the 5-10 days that most people will need to complete the route.

Winter is better avoided, at least for a complete coast-to-coast expedition, because poor weather is more likely and short days are certain. But if you live within striking distance and wish to complete the Way in sections, you could set off at short notice, whenever the immediate weather forecast is favourable. It is vital to make best use of the very limited daylight hours on such winter forays.

Parts of the Way run through productive forest and felling operations can affect the route. This creates periodic diversions for walkers in two main areas: from the start of the route in Helensburgh (follow the Three Lochs Way instead, see page 23) and also the high route around Burncrooks Reservoir (follow the cyclist route instead, see page 27). These diversions are posted locally when in force, but check www.johnmuirway.org before you set out.

The weather in Scotland is highly variable. Statistically, the best months are May and September but good or bad weather can occur at any time of year. Conditions can change very fast: you may feel you're facing all four seasons in one day. The Way is viable in all weathers, but you must be prepared. Check the weather forecast (see page 82) and carry appropriate clothing and equipment.

Which direction?

This guidebook is written for a west to east traverse from Helensburgh to Dunbar. This is the recommended direction because it puts the prevailing south-westerly wind behind you – important for walkers and even more so for cyclists. If for whatever reason you choose to traverse a section from east to west, you will find the waymarking equally helpful either way, and our mapping also works even-handedly.



Getting there and away

For most people connections with Helensburgh are easiest via Glasgow and with Dunbar via Edinburgh. Both Glasgow and Edinburgh have good rail connections with the rest of the UK, with the West Coast mainline (Virgin Trains) to London Euston and the East Coast via King's Cross. Overnight sleeper trains run daily (except Saturdays) to and from London Euston.



Getting to Helensburgh from Glasgow is easy by train, but take care to alight at the correct Helensburgh station. The train you want is from Glasgow Queen Street (low-level) to Helensburgh Central, it takes 45 minutes and there are about two trains per hour. The bus service is irregular, takes nearly two hours and is not recommended.

Getting away from Dunbar is also fast by train, with a journey time to Edinburgh of only 20 minutes and a service that is roughly hourly. (Although Dunbar is on the east coast mainline, very few intercity trains stop there, so for London and the south you may need to head first for Edinburgh.) The Edinburgh/Dunbar bus service is more frequent, about two an hour, but with a longer journey time (about 60 minutes).

For people breaking the route into sections, the public transport options are varied. Here are some pointers for access to intermediate places: note that the Glasgow-Edinburgh mainline is fast and frequent (four trains per hour).

- ◆ From west to east: Balloch is served by rail (Glasgow Queen Street low-level) and bus (First Bus)
- ◆ Lennoxton, Kirkintilloch and Kilsyth are served from Glasgow by bus (First Bus); Croy station (two miles from Kilsyth) is on the Glasgow-Edinburgh mainline
- ◆ Falkirk High and Polmont are on the Glasgow-Edinburgh mainline, and Falkirk also has bus services from Glasgow and Edinburgh (First Bus)
- ◆ Linlithgow is on the Glasgow-Edinburgh mainline and is also served by First Bus; South Queensferry is served by Dalmeny station (from Edinburgh Waverley)
- ◆ Edinburgh has two stations (Haymarket and Waverley) on the Glasgow-Edinburgh mainline and many bus services (from St Andrew's Square and Haymarket)
- ◆ Buses run from Edinburgh via Musselburgh, Prestonpans, Aberlady and Gullane to North Berwick, and also direct to Dunbar (East Coast Buses and Borders Buses)
- ◆ First Scotrail trains run roughly hourly from Edinburgh Waverley (via Musselburgh and Prestonpans) to North Berwick (taking 35 minutes) or to Dunbar (taking 20 minutes).

Contact details for public transport are on pages 82-3. Always check details of your journey before making plans.

North-west from Croy Hill

How long will it take?

The number of days needed to complete the Way varies from person to person, and also depends on whether you will cycle or walk, or a bit of both. This book is arranged in ten sections, each of which can be completed in a single day by a fit hiker, but some of which (for example Balloch to Strathblane) will need to be split if you prefer shorter distances or have to combine your hike with some travel time. Know your own strengths and weaknesses, and plan accordingly.

Table 1

		miles	km		miles	km
3-1	Helensburgh to Balloch	9	 15		27	 44
3-2	Balloch to Strathblane	18	 29			
3-3	Strathblane to Kilsyth area	13	 21		26	 41
3-4	Kilsyth area to Falkirk	13	 21			
3-5	Falkirk to Linlithgow	10	 15			
3-6	Linlithgow to South Queensferry	15	 23		24	 39
3-7	South Queensferry to Edinburgh	16	 25			
3-8	Edinburgh to Prestonpans	10	 16		26	 41
3-9	Prestonpans to North Berwick	16	 26			
3-10	North Berwick to Dunbar	15	 24		31	 50
	Total	134	 215		134	 215
	<i>Average daily distance</i>	<i>13½</i>	 <i>21½</i>		<i>27</i>	 <i>43</i>

Rounding error may create apparent discrepancies; see Part 3 for accurate section distances.

Likewise, many cyclists may take a day for each pair of sections, thus completing the route in five days. However, some cyclists may prefer a slower pace and take up to a week, whereas fit and fast cyclists may complete the entire route in 2-4 days. However, cyclists must obey the *Towpath Code of Conduct* which clearly states 'The towpath is not suitable for cycling fast': see page 10 for more.

All sections except 3-6 and 3-8 offer route options that affect the total distance covered, in most cases by only a mile or two (2-3 km). The actual distance you will ride or walk anyway depends on where you leave or join the route to connect with transport or accommodation. All distances in Table 1 are rounded and should be regarded as rough guidelines. More accurate distances are given at the start of each section in Part 3. It may be better to end 3-8 at Port Seton which (unlike Prestonpans) now has accommodation and spreads the distance better. We have meantime maintained the above breakdown for consistency with the official website.

Various options exist for splitting the strenuous 18.2-mile Balloch-Strathblane section, but there is currently no B&B accommodation on the walking route and very limited options at Croftamie on the cycling branch. A bunkhouse is due to open in 2018 at Edenmill Farm (5 miles/8 km short of Strathblane). All other options involve taxis or lifts from accommodation hosts, unless you are camping or using *airbnb*. One option is to spend two nights at Balloch, another is to shuttle to and from overnight accommodation in nearby Killearn or Drymen, both of which have a wide choice.

Accommodation and refreshments

Accommodation is available at all the overnight stops suggested in this book and at many other places along the Way. Most offer a selection, particularly towns such as Helensburgh, Falkirk, Linlithgow, North Berwick and Dunbar, and of course Scotland's capital Edinburgh has a very wide choice. Smaller places such as Strathblane have limited options and B&Bs are often fully booked long in advance.

Accommodation can be found by searching on the web (e.g. www.johnmuirway.org, VisitScotland or Google maps). However, it is always advisable to book well in advance and if travelling as a group it is essential. There are no hostels on the route outside Edinburgh, albeit a bunkhouse is due to open at Edenmill Farm. Some people favour www.airbnb.co.uk: note that check-in times vary widely and you are unlikely to be able to leave luggage for collection.

Although wild camping is generally allowed in Scotland under the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (see page 9), much of the John Muir Way passes through farmland and urban areas with few if any suitable sites.

	B&B/hotel	hostel/ bunkhouse	pub/café	shop (food)	bike shop
Helensburgh	✓		✓	✓	✓
Balloch	✓		✓	✓	
Croftamie	✓				
Dumgoyne			✓	✓	
Edenmill Farm		✓*	✓	✓	
Strathblane	✓		✓	✓	
Lennoxtown	✓		✓	✓	
Kirkintilloch	✓		✓	✓	✓
Twechar	✓		✓		
Auchinstarry	✓		✓		
Bonnybridge	✓		✓	✓	
Falkirk Wheel			✓		
Falkirk	✓		✓	✓	✓
Polmont	✓		✓	✓	
Linlithgow	✓		✓	✓	✓
Bo'ness	✓		✓	✓	✓
Blackness			✓	✓	
South Queensferry	✓		✓	✓	✓
Cramond	✓		✓	✓	
Edinburgh	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Musselburgh	✓		✓	✓	
Prestonpans			✓	✓	
Cockenzie/Port Seton	✓		✓	✓	
Longniddry	✓		✓		
Gosford Bothy			✓		
Aberlady	✓		✓	✓	
Gullane	✓		✓	✓	
Dirleton	✓		✓		
North Berwick	✓		✓	✓	✓
East Linton	✓		✓	✓	
Tynninghame			✓	✓	
Dunbar	✓		✓	✓	✓

* due to open in 2018

The Scottish Outdoor Access Code

Everyone has the right to be on most land and inland water providing they act responsibly. Your access rights and responsibilities are explained fully in the Scottish Outdoor Access Code

Whether you're in the outdoors or managing the outdoors, the key things are to

- take responsibility for your own actions
- respect the interests of other people
- care for the environment.



**KNOW THE CODE
BEFORE YOU GO**
outdooraccess-scotland.com

Find out more by visiting
www.outdooraccess-scotland.com or
by contacting Scottish Natural Heritage;
see page 82 for details.

Under the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (SOAC), everyone has the statutory right to access to land for recreational purposes. Access rights must be exercised responsibly. They apply to most land in Scotland, including that which is privately owned, with the exceptions of gardens, farmyards and fields with cultivated crops. In several places the Way goes through working farms and fields with livestock. It also crosses estates in which deer roam, and game stalking takes place seasonally. Most difficulties with livestock can be avoided by giving them a wide berth, being alert to their body language and never approaching pregnant animals, let alone those with young.

Taking a dog raises further issues. Dogs must be kept under close control at all times, especially when livestock are around. Never allow your dog to approach sheep or cows which are or may be pregnant, or are with young. In many cases that will mean keeping the dog on a lead as some estate owners request. It is dangerous, as well as foolish, to get close to cattle with young, especially with a dog. Dog owners have other responsibilities. Dogs must be prevented from disturbing ground-nesting birds, especially on coastal sections and from March to August. If your dog makes a mess on the path or pavement, clear up after it. Further practical issues arise for those tackling the Way as a multi-day expedition: you would have to ask your B&B hosts whether they accept dogs – many refuse – and your evening meal options may be very restricted.

For full details of the Code, including a leaflet for dog owners, please visit www.outdooraccess-scotland.com.

Cyclists and walkers

Although in places the route divides, with separate options for cyclists and walkers, for most of its length the route is designed to be shared. This demands consideration from both types of user. Cyclists are rightly concerned about walkers who change direction abruptly with no notice, or whose dogs stray into the path of an oncoming bike. And walkers are understandably indignant when cyclists whisk past without warning, sometimes at excessive or even illegal speed.



Commonsense and courtesy are your best friends on the Way. Cyclists should notify their approach politely and in good time, whether by bell or voice, to allow walkers time to react. Walkers should look behind before making an unexpected move – essential on high-speed commuter cycleways such as the Innocent in Edinburgh.

On canal towpaths, all users should follow the Scottish Canals *Towpath Code of Conduct*. Users joining the towpath should give way to those already on it, avoid distraction by mobiles and headphones and be considerate of other users. Cyclists are asked to drop their pace and to give priority to pedestrians. When approaching, slow down, make yourself heard in good time and pass at slow speed, allowing plenty of space. Before reaching blind corners and other hazards, slow down, be prepared to stop and dismount if need be. Walkers must stay alert for cyclists and their advance warnings, and allow them to pass by moving to one side of the towpath. Please see page 82 for contact details for Scottish Canals.



Union Canal towpath

Within our route description:



- solid bullets denote route sections that are shared
- open blue bullets (plus a bike symbol) indicate bike options
- open pink bullets (plus a boot symbol) identify walker options.

The bike option is always described first, not to imply any priority but because it is usually navigationally simpler and thus more concise. We did our research using a combination of walking and cycling, and that helped us to see the issues from both points of view. It needs only a slight effort on each side to achieve peaceful coexistence.

