

Photographing Sutherland

Love seriously wild, remote places? Don't mind walking a few miles to have little-photographed landscapes all to yourself? Sutherland should be top of your bucket list. Join Mark Ferguson for a whistle-stop tour of this glorious county

The historic county of Sutherland, one of the two most northernmost counties on the Scottish mainland, offers the landscape photographer a whole gamut of subjects, from long, unspoilt stretches of sandy bays and sand dunes, to rugged, wildly remote, ancient mountains and glacial landscapes. In between lie vast carbon-rich blanket bogs, engraved with crystal-clear rivers.

This region is ideal for anyone who, like me, seeks out wild, remote spaces. Thanks to its remoteness, Sutherland has few honeypot sites – you will often have the whole landscape to yourself – yet there is no shortage of viewpoints to choose from. The north coast is best for sandy bays and deep-sea lochs.

Sandwood Bay is one of the least accessible bays, but if you undertake the four-mile walk from Oldshoremore, you will be rewarded with

one of the most remote and beautiful beaches in Europe. The scenic sea lochs of Loch Eriboll and the Kyles of Tongue and Durness boast magnificent mountain backdrops. The west of the county offers mountains such as Suilven, Quinag, Foinaven and Arkle, which shadow quaint fishing villages such as Lochinver, while in the east you can explore the blanket bogs of the Flow Country and the historic coastal villages of Helmsdale and Golspie.

Where to shoot

Lochinver

Sutherland has a small, mainly coastal population of 12,000, with the fishing village of Lochinver being the largest on its west coast. From here, you can access Glencanisp to the east for spectacular views of Suilven mountain from Loch Druim Suardalain, and Inverkirkaig to the south where there is a splendid waterfall worthy of a visit, especially in winter. To the west, just off the Baddidarroch road, is the best spot to capture the village, with Suilven and Canisp guarding the bay. Try a zoom lens here; afternoons and evenings are best. I have seen dramatic shots of Lochinver with a snow-covered Quinag as a backdrop that may have been taken from the headland south of the village.

Arkle

The North West Highlands Geopark straddles Wester Ross and the North West Sutherland National Scenic Area and is predominantly composed of ancient three-billion-year-old Lewisian Gneiss. Distinctive quartzite mountain Arkle rises majestically from the surrounding rocky landscape, with Loch Stack below. Follow the A838 from Laxford Bridge to get the best views of this unique area. Elsewhere in the Geopark, you will encounter ancient rock formations, caves, waterfalls and glaciated landscapes. At Knockan Crag, there is a visitor centre and an interpretative trail that brings the geology of the landscape to life and offers spectacular views.

Loch Syre

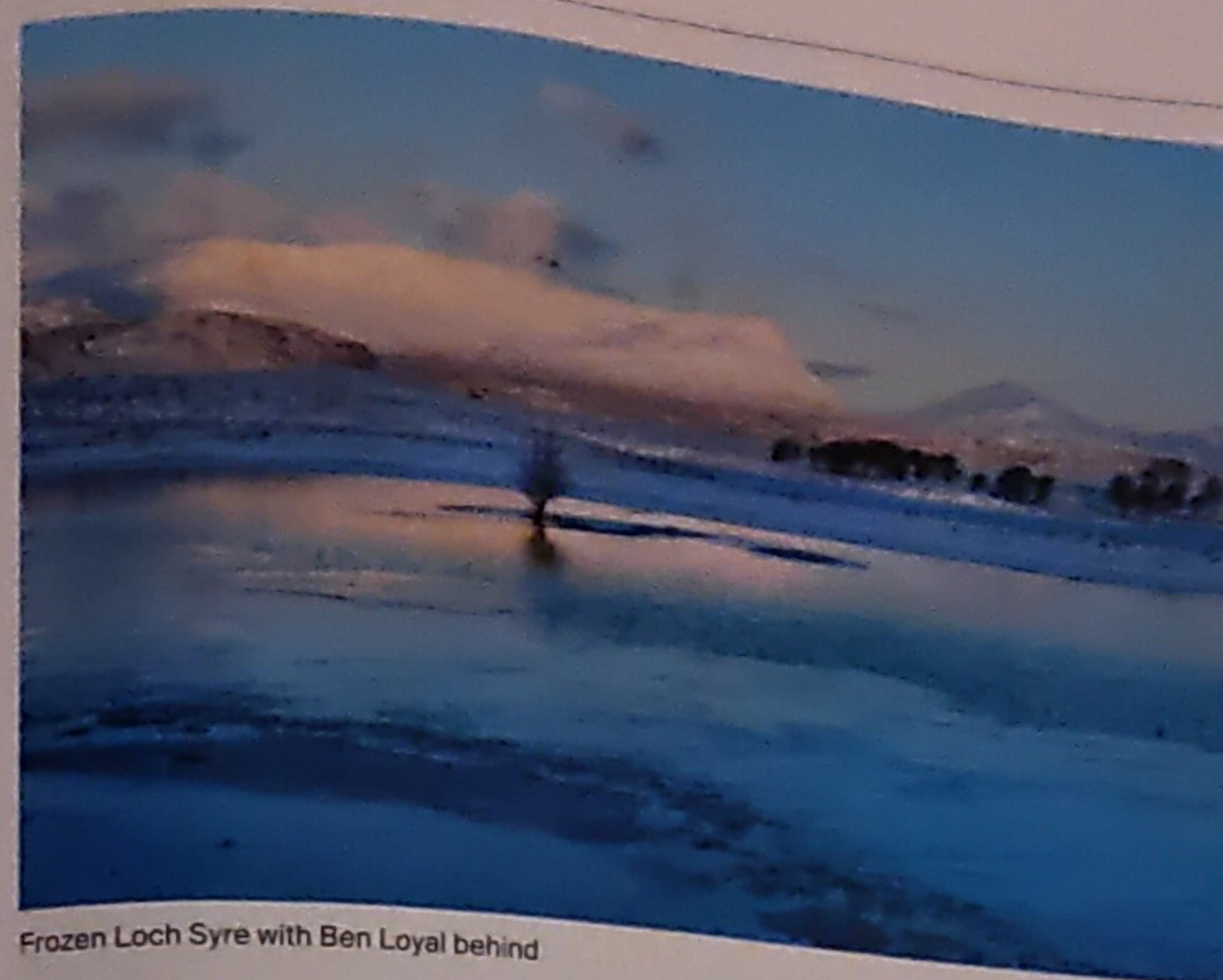
I have included this location to illustrate the vast wilderness which can be experienced inland away from the coast. My photo is of a frozen Loch Syre with Ben Loyal, accessed from a short track off the single-track road at Syre, 10 miles south of Bettyhill. There are many such tracks in the north Highlands, and the outdoor access laws in Scotland allow you to explore at will – provided you respect the basic requirements of the Scottish Outdoor Access Code.



Lochinver with Suilven and Canisp mountains



Arkle mountain and deserted croft



Frozen Loch Syre with Ben Loyal behind



Misty Loch Borralan with Suilven behind

Through the seasons

Winter offers ochre-coloured landscapes and snow-covered peaks, which can be an appealing combination. Stormy weather, moody skies and glorious winter light make this season the best. In spring, browns turn to greens and white peaks turn grey, while summer allows one to hike the peaks for those spectacular aerial views. Autumn sees the transition back to browns and yellows, especially on the few deciduous woodlands, such as the Atlantic oak woods at Loch a' Mhuilinn, south of Scourie.

Wildlife

The last wolf was seen in Sutherland around 150 years ago, and as a result there is an overabundance of red deer. With no natural predators, these majestic animals thrive. In winter, they often come down to the roadsides, so beware when driving. Sea and golden eagles, kites, hen harriers and buzzards can be spotted inland, while the west coast teems with puffins, gannets and Atlantic seabirds. At Handa Island Wildlife Reserve you can spot marine mammals, including orca.

Tips and advice

A photography trip to Sutherland requires methodical preparation, especially in winter, as distances are large, days are short and the weather unpredictable. Rewards can be high, so persevere. I have often 'car camped', as accommodation is sparse. It is important to respect local Sutherland communities, particularly if wild camping and using single-track roads.

Near Loch Syre towards Bettyhill lies Achanloch Clearance Village, a reminder of the forced eviction and relocation of local crofters to the inhospitable coastal fringes by wealthy estate landowners in the early 1800s.

Suilven

Suilven is a distinctive inselberg mountain rising steeply to 2,400ft from the surrounding moorland within Inverpolly Nature Reserve near Lochinver. Its sheer-sided elongated profile, with two prominent summits connected by a narrow bealach, make it a dramatic mountain to photograph. One of my favourite viewpoints is from Loch Borralan next to the single-track A837 near Ledmore. If you are lucky and get calm weather, mist and reflections are

possibilities. Further viewpoints abound along the main A837/A835 North Coast 500 road near Eilphin and from Lochinver on the west coast.

Sango Sands

Sango Sands is one of the many wild and unspoilt beaches on the north coast of Sutherland. Located below the cliffs at Durness village, the beach offers photogenic rock stacks, while west along the coast are the massive Faraid Head sand dunes with their warren of tracks and magnificent coastal views. On the east side of Sango Sands, the entrance to Smoo Cave – the largest sea-cave entrance in Britain – opens into a dramatic limestone cavern with subterranean pool and waterfall that can be explored – and photographed – by boat trip.



Summer sunrise at Sango Sands