

## The Project

In the summer of 2025, I embarked upon a solo adventure to hike and wild camp a distance from my hometown of Milngavie to Aviemore via Fort William, a distance of over 300km along the West and East Highland Ways. I wanted to reclaim my connection to nature, to tell a story of resilience, ecological restoration and adventure as well as raise money for two nature-based projects here in Scotland.

At 31 years old I've had my right hip replaced twice; once when I was 21 and the second at age 30. From 2019 to 2024 I lived with severe chronic pain after my first replacement loosened. I couldn't walk without limping, stopped spending time in nature, lost all my self-confidence, struggled with anxiety and felt miserable. I'd had a deep love for nature and adventure but during these years I completely disconnected from myself.

Thankfully, my second surgery in November 2024 corrected the problem and now I am pain free and mobile again. The future is uncertain and I'll likely need more surgeries throughout my life, but I'm determined to make the most of my mobility and to never lose myself like that again.

Whilst the particulars around my situation are unique, it's thought that 30% of adults aged 18-39 suffer with chronic pain. Even by sharing my story amongst friends and colleagues I have met numerous young people struggling with their own hip problems. Like it did to me, this has a serious impact on their physical and mental wellbeing. The benefits of spending time in nature are well documented, however people living with disabilities face numerous physical and financial barriers to accessing it. This needs to change.



Post revision surgery in November 2024

At the same time, despite its reputation for wildness, Scotland is one of the most nature depleted countries on earth. Shifting baselines have created a false sense of what our landscapes should look like and there is an urgent need to recover our lost biodiversity. The landscapes along the West and East Highland Ways provide perfect examples of ecosystems in desperate need of rehabilitation as well as exciting projects striving to restore biodiversity at scale.

Taking on a challenge like this would not only help me to regain my confidence and independence, but by sharing my story I could inspire others struggling with chronic pain, raise awareness for Scotland's biodiversity crisis and raise money for two worthy causes along the way: Able 2 Adventure and Loch Abar Mor.

Able 2 Adventure are an incredible Highlands based community company supporting people of all abilities to get into the outdoors through adventurous activities like climbing, biking

and paddle boarding (to name a few!). They also work across the outdoor sector to support other organisations to be more accessible to people with disabilities.

Loch Abar Mor is an ambitious, landscape scale ecological restoration partnership supporting biodiversity recovery and rural communities in Lochaber. Over the next 50 years, the project will create a rich mosaic of habitats alive with nature, weaving across boundaries, in which people work and live with a sense of pride and belonging.

### **The Preparation**

To take on this challenge I had a lot to prepare including recovering from surgery and getting fit, researching and planning my route, researching and purchasing kit and planning my filming strategy. Despite being outdoorsy I had never undertaken anything like this before. My only experience of multi day hiking came from my bronze Duke of Edinburgh award when I was 14 and I'd only wild camped a handful of times (with the car about 30 mins away). It was a little daunting to say the least!

I threw myself into physiotherapy to rebuild the strength in my right leg which had been significantly weaker than my left for years. Even basic exercises like lifting my leg or balancing on one side were incredibly challenging at first, but in the weeks that followed I gradually grew stronger. I managed to start swimming. I started going for unaided walks. Then longer walks. Then hills. Then mountains.

I spent hours poring over YouTube videos, books, articles and guidance on the best kit for the job and how to stay safe whilst hiking and camping alone. The Scottish Outdoor Access Code became my bible so I could ensure that I didn't damage the land I so wished to reconnect with.



Getting some gentle walks in

I wanted to reach as wide an audience as possible with my story and engage people who maybe didn't have an interest in nature or were struggling with their own mobility issues. I decided to share my story in two different formats to help achieve this: one would be short, 'vlog' style reels for Instagram and the second would be a YouTube series built of 5/6 longer episodes, which I'm currently editing.



Kit prep

Before long January turned into August and it was almost time to go...

The day before setting off was probably one of the most stressful days of my life. There were so many batteries to charge. Last minute panic purchases. Maps to print. And one very large rucksack to pack – which of course didn't close the first, second or third time I packed it. Then when it finally did close, I could barely lift it, largely due to the fact I'd packed enough snacks to feed a small army for a week.

Finally, at about 1am after one final repack it was time for my last night in a proper bed for almost 3

weeks, but I was too highly strung to sleep. With a mix of nerves and excitement I simply lay and waited till morning.

### The Journey Part 1: The West Highland Way

Thankfully, having lived in Milngavie for the last year, I didn't have far to go to get started on my journey. A quick lift to the official start-point, some photos and hugs with family, and away I went.

There was something incredibly surreal about those first few hours on the trail. I grew up next to the West Highland Way and the path felt as familiar as the back of my hand. I could even wave at my childhood house from various points. In a lot of ways, it felt like just another local wander. However, the gigantic weight on my back served as an impossible to ignore reminder that this time was different.

Summer of 2025 saw some of the hottest, sunniest weather Scotland has seen in years, and my first days on the trail were no exception. With temperatures predicted to reach the mid-20s with minimal wind I knew I was in for a beautiful but challenging time. But with the sun shining, the flowers blooming and the insects buzzing I couldn't help but feel a deep joy to finally be on my way. It was tricky to find the balance between filming myself and walking with a fair amount of doubling back to pick up my tripod and cringing when people caught me talking to my phone. But as the day went on, I found my rhythm.



Setting off on the WHW

In the 25km I covered on day one I passed through a remarkable variety of habitats: ancient woodland, scrubland, forestry plantation, farming and grassland. This led to a variety of wildlife encounters: dozens of swallows chattered overhead, dragonflies zoomed past and I even got my second ever sighting of an adder basking in the sun. The land felt *alive* and so did I.

I knew I wanted the adventure and immersion of wild camping as part of my journey, but one of my biggest worries was being able to find suitable camping spots each night. I'd already picked out my spot for my first night on the trail near the foot of Conic Hill, an iconic little hill marking the geological fault line separating the highlands from the lowlands of Scotland. I was not exactly 'efficient' when it came to pitching my tent that evening and the entire contents of my bag got strewn across the grass in a matter of minutes. But the tent got pitched. I successfully filtered water from a stream for drinking and cooking. I ate my dehydrated meal and actually enjoyed it. I sat with a hot chocolate and watched the changing colours on Loch Lomond as the sun set. And most importantly, there wasn't a midge in sight. Maybe this wouldn't be so hard after all..?



(Plot twist, it got harder. Much harder.)

Day 2 dawned as sunny and warm as its predecessor. I'd not slept particularly well and my shoulders, back and hips were quietly aching from the weight of my pack, but I felt excited to continue. Much like pitching my tent the night before, breakfast and packing up in the morning were far from efficient. But I finally got myself together and set off to tackle the summit ahead of me.

One sweaty, breathless climb later I'd made it to the top of Conic Hill. The views across Loch Lomond, its many islands and the surrounding mountains were spectacular. It also gave me a

birds eye view of where my journey would take me for the next two days – all the way up the eastern side of the loch through gorgeous native woodland. It didn't escape my notice that the rest of the landscape was dominated by bare moorland and non-native forestry plantations, two environments that struggle to support an abundance of biodiversity. But I put it to the back of my mind and continued onwards.

The rest of the day was long and very, very hot even with the shade of the forest. The trees themselves were magnificent. Huge, towering oaks glittered in the sun and I wondered how many walkers they'd seen pass beneath their leaves. It was August so the birdlife was quiet after a summer of breeding, but I still saw robins, wrens and treecreepers darting between bushes and branches.



The top of Conic Hill



Camping in the management zone

By late afternoon my glee at being on the trail had worn off and the tiredness had set in. My camp spot for that night was again planned as I had entered the Loch Lomond Camping Management Zone which restricts wild camping to designated areas between March and September. My joy returned when I reached my pre-booked destination and found myself on a stunning, pebbled beach by the lochside. I pitched up, had a swim and a wash and enjoyed my dinner with a view. Another successful day.

I knew that day 3 was potentially going to be my most physically challenging day of walking. The trail itself was notoriously rough underfoot with continuous ups and downs along the whole 20km stretch. It fully lived up to its reputation.

With my energy levels already depleted from two days of walking in the heat the ups and downs in this section were relentless on my legs. The clouds had moved in to hide the blistering sun, but without any wind the air felt close and sticky. This was also when the midges finally came out to play. If I stopped, even for a brief second to grab a handful of Tangfastics, they appeared in clouds to nip and nibble at my exposed flesh. So, my options weren't great: keep moving and avoid the midges but walk on very tired legs or stop to give my legs a break but be terrorised by midges.

I did have moments where I could appreciate my surroundings, but as the day wore on it became harder and harder to keep my spirits up. As I neared the top of Loch Lomond I felt completely burnt out. This would be my first time finding a suitable camp spot on the fly and

it did fill me with nerves. When I finally rounded a corner to find a secluded spot by the lochside I almost cried with relief. All I wanted was to take my bag off, rest and have a swim in the loch to rinse off the sweat, bug spray, suncream and dead midges that plastered my skin. But the midges weren't done with me yet.

As soon as I put my bag down and to get set up they descended like nothing I've ever seen before. The air was black with midges. It was carnage. My gear was everywhere. My skin burned with bites. I still wasn't efficient when it came to pitching my tent and having had no midges for my first two nights, I hadn't developed any kind of system for keeping them out the tent, so they got everywhere. I went for my planned swim but in my disorganised, panicked state this just led to more bites.

After probably an hour of panic and many, many bites I finally managed to evict the unwanted guests and settled into the tent for the night, emotionally and physically shattered.

In the days that followed the midges did not get better. In fact, they actually got worse! But the experience at Loch Lomond taught me a hard lesson on how to manage them at least. I became seamless at pitching and un-pitching the tent and my trusty midge net and bug spray were never far from reach.

In moments of calm in the tent or whilst charging batteries in cafes, I had started sharing the Instagram side of my journey and the response was amazing! Donations came flooding in and I received incredible comments and messages of support from friends and strangers alike. Some even messaged to share their own stories of hip replacements, joint problems or chronic pain. I was delighted.

On days four and five I left Loch Lomond behind and followed the trail to Tyndrum through Bridge of Orchy and on to Inveroran. I walked with a persistent but mostly manageable level of tiredness. My feet and hips were remarkably resilient to each step but I struggled with pain in my neck and shoulders.

The landscape I'd walked through for days 1-3 had been ever-changing and even when tired there was always a new plant or perspective to look at. This landscape was certainly dramatic with mountain after mountain looming overhead but the energy from the land was gone. There were no insect sounds, very few birds and no matter how far I walked the views remained the same. It wasn't very stimulating and I found myself needing to plug into an audiobook whilst I walked to give me something to occupy my mind.



Midge hell



A beautiful but desolate landscape on leaving Tyndrum

By the time I reached Glen Coe on day six I was struggling not to feel disheartened. Where was the life amongst these mountains? Where was the variety? And most worryingly, how many people passed along this path without realising anything was amiss? That night I pitched up in neighbouring Glen Etive and experienced even worse midges than in Loch Lomond – something I hadn't realised was possible. I went to sleep that need to the quiet but constant sound of them tapping against the lining of my tent.

Up until this point I'd walked entirely by myself. I'd said hello and chatted to people, but I felt more comfortable filming myself when alone. However, quite soon after I set off on day eight I ran into another solo woman hiker and we began chatting. We clicked instantly and I felt my low mood lift. When I found out that she was also called Kristina it seemed a sign from fate! We walked the rest of the day together, tackling the aptly named 'Devils

Staircase', and talked about our lives and what had led us to the trail. From our travels to relationships to careers we covered topic after topic and it struck me that every single person on the trail had some unique calling to the outdoors. Whether it came from joy, grief, frustration, a desire for adventure or learning, our stories for being there bound us together.



Christina and Kristina!

I left Kristina in Kinlochleven with promises to meet up in Fort William feeling 10 times lighter than I had that morning.

I completed the West Highland Way after eight days of walking and wild camping on the 24<sup>th</sup> of August 2025. The walk in had been a mixed bag of emotions. I started off walking through another barren glen with patches of forestry plantation, but as I approached Fort William and the mighty Ben Nevis appeared things started to shift. Glen Nevis is home to a fantastic rewilding project and I watched with joy as native forestry and diversity returned to the landscape.

Even though I was only halfway through my 300km, posing next to the famous statue at the end of the West Highland Way felt really special. The start of the WHW was where I'd learned to ride a bike, where I'd climbed trees and swam in the rivers. It was where my love for nature began. Walking its length with just the strength of my own two legs felt like a fitting tribute to the place that meant so much to me.



Completing the West Highland Way

I had booked myself into the Glen Nevis Campsite for a few nights of non-wild camping before tackling the East Highland Way in a few days time. And what a treat it was. I showered at every available opportunity, did laundry, spent a small fortune at their hot food truck and reunited with Kristina and another friend she'd made along the way. In between, I made preparations and adjustments for the EHW, an unofficial route that was not waymarked like the WHW and would take me to more remote parts of the country.

Before long my three nights were up and it was time to get moving again.

### **The Journey Part 2: The East Highland Way and Glenfeshie**

When telling people that I was going to walk the EHW as part of my journey only one person I told had ever heard of it before. In all honesty, I hadn't heard of it myself until I started researching how I might extend my journey beyond the WHW. It stretches across 134km from Fort William to Aviemore, passing through some truly iconic places in the Cairngorms National Park.

Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park that I passed through on the WHW felt like a best friend, somewhere familiar that I loved and could go to for comfort if I needed it. The

Cairngorms felt like my best friend's older brother, still admired and valued but with a slightly sexy edge. I couldn't wait.

Feeling renewed and revitalised, I set off for the first leg to Spean Bridge.

This first day on the EHW felt similar to my first day on the WHW in a lot of ways. For one, my bag was ridiculously heavy with a vast number of new snacks. And two, this section on the trail took me through a wide variety of different habitats. I passed through gorgeous birch woodland with flurries of coal, long tailed and great tits flying overhead. There were areas of forestry plantation, but these boasted huge verges bursting with native wildflowers. There was one big difference though: I didn't see another living soul on the trail.



Wildflowers on the way to Spean Bridge

It's thought that around 45,000 people complete the WHW each year, whilst the EHW is in the low hundreds. I would miss the feeling of comradery and shared experience on the WHW but also thought a bit of proper alone time in nature could be good.

The other challenge that came with the EHW being less popular is that there were far fewer obvious wild camp spots. Even though previous campers had left no trace it was hard to miss the numerous flattened areas of grass along the WHW where people had recently pitched up. As a novice wild camper, using one of these spots gave me a sense of validation – someone else had chosen to camp there, therefore it must be good! These types of spots were non-existent on the EHW so I was forced to make decisions completely for myself. Gulp.



An army of ticks

After a bit of panic and fruitless searching on arrival to Spean Bridge, I finally pitched up tucked away in the woods. It was an ideal spot, but I felt unsettled and couldn't figure out why. There was no one around and (incredibly) no midges, what could possibly be wrong? Whilst making my dinner on a nearby fallen tree I looked down at my leg and realised what was wrong. There weren't any midges... But there were ticks. A small army of them in fact. And they were crawling over each of my limbs and all over my gear.

I lost count of how many ticks I had to remove from my body after that. I think they still weren't as bad as the midges. But only just.

The next day I pushed on but was followed by unrelenting rain. I'd also reached that

joyous time of the month that every woman looks forward to, so my mood and energy levels were very low. This and the following day were absolutely the toughest of my whole journey. I was burnt out, lonely, sore and the landscape felt like a never-ending non-native plantation with zero wildlife to distract me. My hip continued to hold up well, but the constant pounding on gravel roads left my knees aching. Even though I'd managed to wash my clothes occasionally in lochs and rivers they all stank. I could feel the self-doubt and anxiety that used to plague me lingering at the edges of my mind getting ready to pull me back in.



Very tired and wet

That all changed though as I crossed the boundary into the Cairngorms. When I woke up on day 12 of my hike the clouds had cleared and I was surrounded by native Caledonian forest with birds and colour and glorious natural sound. The energy in the landscape had returned and so had mine. And after a tough few days, it turned into one of my favourite days on the trail.

After a much needed rest in a local café, I realised a very rough weather patch of high winds and heavy rain was due to move in. I'd dealt with rain so far on the trip, but this was not weather I fancied being in a tent for. On checking my guidebook I realised that further along the trail I'd be passing a bothy – a remote shelter open to be used by anyone in the outdoors in need. I'd never stayed in a bothy before but had long aspired to – it felt like the ultimate symbol of adventure and connectedness with Scotland's wild places. The thought of staying with strangers in a tiny, remote shelter as a solo woman did make me feel anxious for my

safety for the first time on the trip, but I decided that all I could do was make my way there, see what it was like and do what felt right.

As the bothy came into view these nerves got stronger and my thoughts whirled. What if it was unusable? Dirty and broken down? Would there be rats? Heart near bursting out my chest I tentatively opened the front door. What greeted me was the most welcoming, charming wee shelter and my worries slowly ebbed away. There were two worn but comfy sofas, a visitors' book filled with messages of walkers who'd come before me, leftover tea, hot chocolate and even some peanut butter, fairy lights and the best thing of all, a huge log



My bothy home for the night

burner with stacks of wood next to it. And I had it all to myself. The relief that flooded through me was so strong I had to sit down.

Yes, this would be my home for the night.

I spent the most glorious, restful evening alone in the bothy, flipping between listening to my audiobook and the pounding rain outside. As sunset neared there was a small break in the weather and I ventured up the hill behind the bothy to take in my surroundings. Orange light spilled through the gaps between clouds and I felt

something shift inside me. I was entirely alone, there wasn't another person or dwelling in sight, but that was ok. Despite all the self-doubt that had haunted me for years, I had made this journey happen. This hard, gruelling challenge that most people would never consider doing. And I had damn near completed it. Grinning from ear to ear I watched the sun set over the bothy, finally feeling like I deserved to be there.

Feeling completely uplifted by my bothy experience and the return of a diverse natural landscape, the next few days passed in bliss (albeit a smelly and sore one). The sun had returned and I passed through wildflower meadows, wetlands, bogs, blossoming heather moorland, birch woods, pine woods, lochs and farmland all bursting with life. I heard buzzards calling overhead again and felt the itch of insects landing on my arms and legs. Not something I expected to welcome back, but in low quantities I did. Many of the thriving landscapes I saw are thanks to the remarkable Cairngorms Connect project: a network of organisations working on a 200-year vision that will transform the park as we know it for the better. Even though it's still in its early stages, the evidence of recovery was so plain to see, that I allowed myself to feel hope again for the future of Scottish biodiversity.



Enjoying the stunning Cairngorms landscape

As Aviemore drew near, I had one final mini adventure in store: a detour into the heart of Glenfeshie.

Glenfeshie is a former shooting estate now managed for nature restoration by WildLand Limited, a partner of Cairngorms Connect. Over the last few decades, they have greatly reduced the deer populations across the estate to enable the depleted forest to restore. Now young trees are everywhere, including marching up the steep slopes of Glenfeshie's mountains, something I had hardly seen anywhere else on my journey. Not only this, but many of Scotland's rarest and iconic wildlife species have returned here including Scottish wildcats, golden eagles and Capercaillie. Glenfeshie is a clear sign that if we help nature to find balance and give it space to heal... It can and it will.



Glenfeshie in all its glory

There was no other word for it, Glenfeshie was beautiful. Not only in the landscape, the wildlife and the light, but in its story of hope. Climate and nature anxiety are very real problems in today's society and is something I still battle on a regular basis: this feeling that the nature that I feel so deeply connected to is going to die, no matter what I do to stop it. Walking through Glenfeshie felt like someone wrapping me in a warm hug and telling me that it was all going to be ok. This feeling got even stronger when I arrived at my accommodation for the night: another bothy! This one pre-planned and a lot more boujee than my first experience.

I was greeted to the Ruigh Aiteachain bothy with a cup of tea by its warm and charismatic caretaker Lindsay. Now in his mid 80s, Lindsay has worked in Glenfeshie for years and I sat happily for hours as he regaled me with tales of the land and its owner, Anders Povlsen. I also shared my story of why I was there and what I hoped to achieve with my journey.



Prosecco with Lindsay

Lindsay pondered this for a time, disappeared, then reappeared with a bottle of prosecco. My jaw just about hit the floor. Of all the things I'd expected from a bothy experience, even one as nice as Ruigh Aiteachain, this was not it. I'd almost cried over a bacon roll somewhere along the WHW, but prosecco? This was cause for a full-on meltdown!

Lindsay revealed he kept a store of fizz in the bothy for people walking the Scottish National Trail, who are at about the halfway mark when they reach Glenfeshie. On hearing my story, he thought I deserved some too. I wasn't about to argue.

That evening we toasted to rewilding, to Scotland and to adventure in the candlelight and my heart felt close to bursting with happiness.

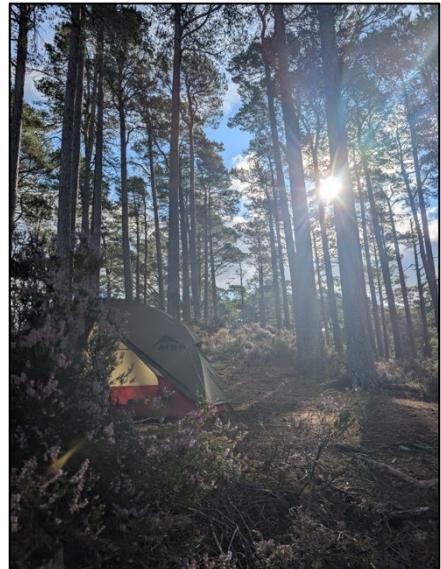
Leaving Glenfeshie behind the next day was sad, not only as I'd miss the place, but because it marked my last full day of walking. Starting the journey felt surreal because I'd never done anything like it before and couldn't imagine what it would feel or look like. Now, having been so immersed in this version of life for almost 3 weeks, I couldn't imagine stopping. I felt so changed on the inside, how could I just go back to normal?

My last wild camp spot didn't disappoint. Far from the path, I found a secluded patch in amongst the pine trees on the banks of Loch an Eilein in Rothiemurchus. I treated myself to a three-course meal with all the food I had left: super noodles for starter, dehydrated meal for main and hot chocolate for dessert. The midges returned for their own last feast of me which, whilst annoying, felt oddly fitting and almost poetic. When all the food was eaten and night had descended, I tucked myself into my sleeping bag and enjoyed one last night under the stars.

## Journeys End

After 17 days and over 300km of walking I made it to Aviemore on the 4<sup>th</sup> of September 2025. I was greeted by my best friend, someone who'd stuck by me through every hospital visit, every lapse in confidence and every moment of planning with the biggest hug. I couldn't have asked for more.

As I walked those final miles I expected to come to some momentous epiphany. Maybe how we could make the outdoors accessible to those with disabilities. Maybe I'd find the key to



Camping at Rothimurchus

fully overcoming my feelings of self-doubt. Or maybe it would be how we get both the public and politicians to care enough to make real change happen for nature.

Sadly, I did not come to any of these realisations. But there were some things I did know:

1. I'd just raised over £3000 for two causes doing truly excellent work to support both people and nature
2. I'd reached tens of thousands of viewers with my videos shared to Instagram, many of which were undergoing chronic health conditions
3. After years of pain and not being able to walk properly, I'd just walked 300km carrying about 20kg on my back and I'd not felt pain in my hip once
4. I was never going to 'fix' my anxiety, but I felt happier, more myself and more confident than I had for years
5. Whatever came next in life, I was ready for it

And somehow, that was enough.

I want to extend the biggest thank you to the Des Rubens and Bill Wallace fund and all at the John Muir Trust for supporting me in this lifechanging.

