

Laggan Wood: divide your journey into legs with a distinctive contour feature or landmark like this as a target.



# Women's navigation

SARAH STIRLING

A course in Scotland claims that women's brains navigate differently to men's. **Sarah Stirling** discovers how to make the most of her navigational talents.

Stand-up comics in the 1970s might have used differences between the sexes as a rich seam of comedy entertainment – but we live in more enlightened times now, surely. Leaning on their mic stands in smoke-filled night clubs, they could get away with jokes about women drivers, mothers-in-law and much worse.

But it's the 21st century now, we've grown up and out on the hill there's no room for gender stereotypes – unless, that is, it comes to navigation. There is still a tendency for some men to hold a little too tightly onto the map. So, ladies, if you've always been happy to let your partner take the lead, generally to keep the peace, how do you start making up for lost compass time when you want to head out alone?

The first thing to do is to realise that men and women take a subtly different approach to map-reading. So says Fran Loots, a Mountain Leader who runs

## Route planning

**Fran says** "Many women find visualising maps in 3D and mentally rotating them difficult. However, women are generally good at reading a route descriptively and memorising it."

**Use it** Before you go walking, plan ahead to save time flapping with a map in the hills. Study map symbols and 'translate' your route into descriptive language. Think about how scree, a section of forest or a steep hill might affect your walk. Then divide your journey into 'legs' and make the target of each leg a distinctive landmark or contour feature to look out for.

**Tip** The distance between each contour line on most maps is 10m. If you find that hard to visualise, it's the size of a double-storey house with a roof on it.

women-only navigation courses in the Scottish Highlands. "It's important not to generalise too much as there are huge overlaps in the ways men and women think," says Fran. "However, scientific research does prove the sexes generally

think in different ways and have different strengths. This means they do tend to use different skills to find their way.

"Psychological studies show men have more spatial awareness than women. Men can generally visualise shapes and angles in 3D, and mentally rotate them more easily than women, too. These skills relate quite obviously to map-reading. However, women are typically better than men at tuning in to their senses and the environment, reading and understanding descriptive language, memorising things and communicating with others. These are all brilliant map-reading skills as well."

Intrigued, I book myself a place on Fran's next 'Women Can Read Maps' course.

Two weeks later I meet six like-minded females who've come to Perthshire to learn more. From the first lesson we're being shown how to tap into women-specific navigational skills. "You can look at maps



# 14 TRAIL ROUTE EAST HIGHLANDS

as systems of symbols and lines or as collections of geographical descriptions that you can read," Fran explains. "Most women prefer the latter."

Fran distributes map symbol indexes and we begin to translate the map from secret code into a tale of coniferous forests, rounded hills and rocky outcrops. With a little encouragement, six heads soon pore over the map, coffees are drained, and we head outside to put it all into action.

First we orientate our maps – turning them around to match Comrie's hills and forests. "If you find mental rotation difficult, it makes sense to do this," says Fran. "It's easier to move maps than hills." Next, we count our paces over 100m, time ourselves over 1km and discover how to use these numbers to keep track of distances. We learn how to find a grid reference, and huddle over the map to discuss just how we could break the route down into more manageable chunks.

"There's a weir there," says Ann. "We could follow that river to get to it."

"How far away is the weir?" asks Fran. We measure the path with our compass strings, then measure the string with compass rulers, to get the answer.

We have lunch at a viewpoint which we tracked down ourselves. "Women are usually excellent at observing and listening," says Fran. She points out a subtle detail: the point where a coniferous forest meets a non-coniferous one. The kind of feature that could be used to help navigate. Later we hear a river, which is out of sight running through the trees. Even though we can't see it, we can happily find it on our map and it's yet another check on our location.

The next morning Fran shows us the route she has chosen for the day and encourages us to help with route-planning. "Most men are good at visualising

## Using landmarks

**Fran says** "Women generally have a keener eye and ear for detail than men."  
**Use it** Find subtle features to look out for on your walk, such as a change from a coniferous forest to a non-coniferous one or the distinctive shape of a gully. Remember you can listen for road traffic or rivers even if you can't see them.  
**Tip** Be aware of the limitations of your map. Map quality varies: sometimes additional surveying has been done on the ground, sometimes not. How old is your map? Could trees, paths or walls have sprung up or disappeared? Mountains, hills and contours are your most reliable landmarks.



Fran points out exactly where the trees change from coniferous to non-coniferous in the wood.



The group on Dun More, looking towards Loch Earn.

## Set the map

**Fran says** "Turn the map round if it helps. If you find mental rotation difficult – and a lot of women do – then it makes sense to turn your map round to align it with the landscape. Use your compass to help you do this."  
**Use it** Keep your map folded to the right place and in a waterproof case (maps are easier to fold if you remove the cardboard outer) and your compass in your pocket or attached to your rucksack, rather than restricted round your neck. That way it is easy to walk with a set map.  
**Tip** Practise walking with a set map. Lay out a 'nine tree wood' of old CDs on the floor. Map a route around the 'wood' on paper and practise walking with the map orientated so that it is always pointing in the direction that you are facing.



Using a 'nine tree wood' map on the flat top of a spot height.

## DAY 1

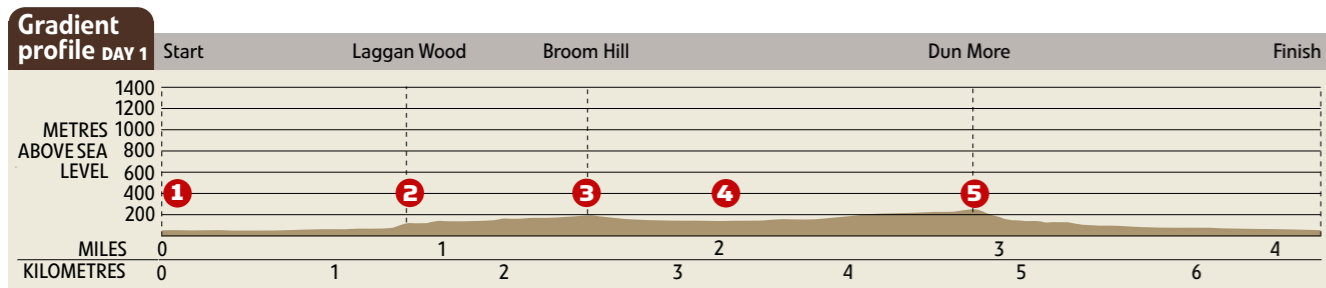
**Distance** 6.7km (4¼ miles)  
**Total ascent** 250m  
**Time** 3-4 hrs (allowing time for navigation practice)

**Strenuousness** ■■■■■  
**Navigation** ■■■■■  
**Technicality** ■■■■■

**Start/finish** park by Laggan Recreation Ground (NN776223, first right as you come into Comrie from Crieff or last on the left as you leave heading towards Crieff), signed to the Golf Club

**1 NN776223** From the car park handrail the river to the weir. The path leaves the river here and climbs uphill. There are some extra paths not on the map. Can you find the unmarked viewpoint at NN771229? Now work out the time and paces it should take to reach the track junction at NN771231. The junction is not marked on the 1:25,000 map but if you are judging distance correctly you will find it.

**2 NN771231** Which direction should you



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## Judging distance

**Fran says** "Spatial awareness doesn't come naturally to all women, but it can be learned. And all walkers benefit from measuring and pacing distances."  
**Use it** Measure 100m and then pace it, counting how many times your left foot touches the ground. For women, the norm is between 60 and 80 paces. Pick up a handful of pebbles and drop one into your pocket every 100m, counting as you go, so



that you don't lose track of where you are, even if you get distracted.  
 Time how long it takes you to walk 1km. Now you can use time as well as pacing to help you keep track of how far you have walked.  
**Tip** Remember that if you are walking uphill, you will take more steps and more time to reach a target.

**Drop a pebble into your pocket every 100m to keep track of distance.**

be walking in now? Set the map and use your compass to check. Be aware of the shape of the land, look out for a view of Lord Melville's Monument and listen for the river below even though you can't see it. How will you know when you are at NN769237? The path leads from forest to the open.

**3 NN769237** Set the map and locate the ring contour at NN770236: climb it. Identify different sections of woodland by their shapes. What is the furthest peak on the horizon? How far is it? Now

go back into the forest and pick up the same path, continuing north out of the woods. What can you hear? Handrail the line feature to NN764243. How will you know when you have reached this point? Here's a clue: what do you think the initials FB mean on the map?

**4 NN764243** Follow the path to reach a road. Do you have the confidence to take a short cut to NN763238? How will you know when you have reached the right place? The answer is – 'trees'. How long will it take to get to the

top of the monument from this point? Work out time, distance and paces, and remember that you also need to account for extra time because you will be going uphill to reach it.

**5 NN766235** Retrace your steps back down from the monument, by taking the track east and dropping down to the road. Turn right and follow the signs to the Deil's Caldron, a stunning waterfall. Continue over the wooden bridge and take the track above the river, through ancient woodlands, back to Comrie.



Following the path through Laggan Wood.

**DAY 2**  
**Distance** 6.7km (4¼ miles)  
**Total ascent** 260m  
**Time** 3-4 hrs (allowing time for navigation practice)

**Strenuousness** ■■■■■  
**Navigation** ■■■■■  
**Technicality** ■■■■■

**Start/finish** Laggan Recreation Ground car park (NN777233).

**1 NN776223** Set the map and take a bearing to the monument at NN779227. Take a bearing from the monument to the track/path junction at NN778228 inside the wood. Now take the right fork to the junction of tracks and paths at NN779229. Orientate your map so that it's facing in the same direction that you are, and try to identify which paths are on the map and which are missing.

**2 NN779229** Take the track to the right, head down towards the sound of the stream, then cross an ancient footbridge. You should now be climbing up a track. More things aren't on your map here, but have confidence. When the main track bends to the right and starts to drop, stop and use landmarks to orientate yourself: there should be a gully to the right of you. Double back a few metres and there is a track junction that is not marked on the map – take the fork to the right as you look at the junction, then turn right

again and stop. Can you use the ring contours at NN783230 to confirm your position?

**3 NN783230** Double back, turn right and follow the track (not marked on your map) around to a break in the trees. Can you find where you are on the map? Don't stay rooted to the spot, look for landmarks. Return to the track and keep going, looking out for a gully on your right to confirm your position. Reach the track that is on the map, turn left and follow it out to open land.

**4 NN783235** You have a route choice to reach the spot height at 258m. You can either go direct on a bearing or take the path round. Practise counting paces so you aren't taken in by the false summit.

**5 NN783239** Head west from here to reach the track. Do you need to take a bearing or not? Can you take a short cut from the track to the corner of the wood at NN777238? There's a wall from the corner of the wood which makes an excellent line feature to follow from the wood to the ring contour.

**6 NN779235** Use your compass to take a bearing to the path at NN776233. You should be heading roughly south-west so make sure your bearing is similar. Turn left to walk through the forest. Make your way back to the start.



Always take a map on the hill →



## FACTS



**Nearest town** Comrie  
**Terrain** tracks, paths, woodland and grassland  
**Maps** OS Explorer (1:25,000) 368; OS Landranger (1:50,000) 52

**Accommodation**  
 Mossgiel House B&B in Comrie – www.mossgielhouse.co.uk – tel. (01764) 670438; Comrie Croft Hostel – www.comriecroft.com – tel. (01764) 670140

**Public transport**  
 easiest route is train to Perth – tel. 08457 484950 then the No 15 bus to Comrie (bus station is almost opposite railway station). Stagecoach buses run hourly Monday to Saturday: www.stagecoachbus.com – tel. (01738) 629339

**Tourist info** tourist information centre, High Street, Crieff PH7 3HU – tel. (01764) 652578

**Best pub** Royal Hotel, Comrie; the place everyone goes – tel. (01764) 679200



**MAMMUT**



**Micro-navigation: walking on a bearing to find a spot height at NN782238.**

maps in 3D and mentally rotating shapes, so they find map-reading on the move easy,” says Fran. “Women, on the other hand, are usually good at memorising a route, don’t want to spend the whole walk buried in the map and prefer to plan well in advance.” It sounds good to us, and we divide the day’s route into legs, with a distinctive landmark as the target for each.

Out in the hills, group confidence is tested with a complex-sounding compass bearing. Fran presents the task in steps we can memorise, and soon we are striding off the beaten track with ‘Fred’ – the red end of the compass needle – in his ‘bed’ (the red arrow on the compass housing).

The biggest benefit of a course like this is getting the time to practise. “The most important thing I’ve learnt is that navigation isn’t a skill you either have or don’t,” says fellow student Margaret. “If a man is better at navigation, he’s probably practised more and is more confident, not more able.”

“Women progress with navigation enormously quickly in a same-sex environment,” says Fran. “Whereas men can get competitive, women are generally much better at communicating and working together. I’d like to see a less experienced man try to take the map from them now.”

» Find information about ‘Women Can Read Maps’ courses – tel. (01764) 670541; www.breathingspaceoutdoors.com

## Taking a bearing

**Fran says** “Women generally enjoy using descriptive language and are good at memorising things. Use plays on words to help you remember complex navigational tasks.”

**Remember** “Put Red Fred in his bed”

1. Line your compass edge along the route you wish to travel, with the direction-of-travel arrow on the base plate pointing the way you want to go.
2. Now turn the lines within the compass housing to match the grid lines on the map that point to north.
3. Make your adjustment for magnetic variation (see below).
4. Now put ‘Red Fred’ (the red magnetic needle) in his ‘bed’ (the red orienting arrow in the rotating bezel).
5. When Red Fred is in his bed the direction-of-travel arrow will point in the direction you wish to walk.



Learning how to take a bearing.

## Magnetic variation

Compass needles align themselves with the north/south axis of the Earth’s magnetic field and this changes by a fraction of a degree every year. The

difference between north on your map – which is known as grid north – and magnetic north (which is where a compass needle points) is known as magnetic variation.

In the UK, to convert from a map

bearing to a compass bearing, add the magnetic variation, which is approximately 3 degrees. To convert from a compass to a map bearing, subtract the magnetic variation.

**Remember** Add for mag(netic) – get rid for grid’.

**Tip** Always count paces and time yourself when walking on a bearing.

## Revision

» <http://mapzone.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/mapzone/homeworkhelp.html>

» [www.mountaineering-scotland.org.uk/safety/index.html](http://www.mountaineering-scotland.org.uk/safety/index.html)

» [www.mountaineering-scotland.org.uk/safety/nav\\_dozen.html](http://www.mountaineering-scotland.org.uk/safety/nav_dozen.html)

“The top five tips in ‘navigator’s dozen’ are really good,” advises Fran. “Ignore the silly person with the compass round his neck – stick to keeping it in a pocket or attached to your rucksack.”