

Gaelic Place-Names: Words meaning 'green'

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Speakers of the Gaelic language divide the colour spectrum differently to English speakers, and as such there is no single word equivalent to 'green'. Instead, the colour green is represented by three distinct terms, *uaine*, *gorm* and *glas*.

The word *uaine* (pronounced **oo**-in-ya) is used to refer to a bright, vivid green colour, and although this is the most commonly-used term for 'green' in spoken Gaelic it is actually relatively rare in place-names. It does feature in hill names such as *Meall Uaine* 'rounded green hill' in the Cairngorm mountains, *Monadh Uaine* 'green mountain' on the Isle of Skye, *Ruighe Uaine* 'green slope' in Glen Esk in the North-East, and *Sgeir Uaine* 'green skerry' in northern Argyllshire. *Uaine* is also sometimes found in names referring to water, such as *Allt Uaine* 'green stream' at Glenquoich in the western Highlands, *An Lochan Uaine* 'little green loch' in the Cairngorms, *Oban Uaine* 'little green bay' in South Uist, *Loch Uaine* 'green loch' in the western Highlands and *Bagh Uaine* 'green bay' in North Uist.

Gorm (pronounced **gorr**-um) is a term which is usually translated into English as 'blue'. However, it can also mean blue-green, and when applied to grass or other vegetation, it can be translated as 'green'. Thus although *An Càrn Gorm*, the mountain which gave its name to the Cairngorm range, is usually translated as 'blue mountain', *Meall Gorm* near Applecross is instead usually translated as 'rounded green hill'. Similarly *Glen Gorm* on the island of Mull is 'green glen', *Torgorm* in Easter Ross is 'green hill', *Loinn Ghorm* in Upper Deeside is 'green enclosure', and *Sròn Gorm* and *Càrn gormloch*, both in Easter Ross, can be translated as 'green point' and 'cairn of the green loch' respectively.

The Gaelic word *glas* is often translated as 'grey' but can also mean a pale or greyish green. It is commonly found in place-names in reference to grass or grassy slopes. Examples include *Meall Glas* in Breadalbane which is 'rounded green hill', *Creag Ghlas* 'green crag' in the western Highlands and *Beinn*

Ghlas 'green mountain' above Loch Tay. This element is also sometimes compounded with *uaine* in place-names to mean 'grey-green' more specifically, with examples including *Creag Ghlas-uaine* 'grey-green crag' in the Cairngorms, *Meall Glas-uaine Mor* 'big rounded grey-green hill' and *Coire Glas-uaine beag* 'little grey-green hollow' both of which are above Loch Ossian.

Of these three colour terms, *gorm* and *glas* are generally used to describe natural colours in the landscape, whereas the use of *uaine* frequently indicates a brighter shade of green which is perceived to be unnatural or even supernatural. This is especially true of water-names, where *uaine* is applied to lochs and pools whose vivid green hue may indicate the presence of algae or a strong mineral content, although local legends often offer alternative explanations for the colour of the water.

For example, there is a legend that *An Lochan Uaine* in Glenmore Forest Park acquired its conspicuous green colour when *Dòmhnall Mòr*, the king of the fairies, washed his clothes in the water. There is another *Lochan Uaine* near Loch Lomond, which is also known locally as the *Fairy Loch*, whose version of the legend relates how the local people would leave wool and cloth by the loch and the fairies would dye it for them overnight. Similarly, *Lag Uaine* 'green hollow' near Arrochar contains a pool is also reputed to be the site of a secret fairy dye-factory. When the people of the district became curious about the fairies' work, and came up *Beinn Ime* to spy on them, the fairies quickly dumped their dye in the pool, turning it a bright green colour.

References & Further Information

Bibliography

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