

A DAY ON THE SGÒRAN DUBH RIDGE.

THE Sgòran Dubh ridge is the most north-westerly section of the Cairngorms. It lies between Glen Eunach to the east and Glen Feshie to the west, and is probably the least visited of any part of the Cairngorms. This is perhaps partly because there is no very direct access to it except by Glen Eunach, the road up which is claimed as private by those interested in the deer-stalking, and partly also because the guide books say little or nothing about it. But the ridge is eminently worth a visit, both for its own sake and for the fine views to be obtained from it. For details of these latter I refer readers to Munro's article on page 26 of Volume I. of this Journal, and for a general account of the ridge to McConnochie's article on page 38 of Volume II.

For several years the Sgòran Dubh ridge had attracted me from a distance. As seen from the Feshie side, its bold lateral ridges, its crags above Lagganlia, and such gorges as that of the Garbhlach make fine mountain-scapes. But finer are the aspects it presents to Glen Eunach. The long ridge of Inchriach borders the northern half of that Glen, while the southern half, in which the loch lies, is literally walled in on the west by the dark crags from which the ridge gets its finely descriptive name. Across the loch are the answering steeps of the west side of Braeriach, and from the track up Coire Dhonndail perhaps the finest view of the Sgòran Dubh is to be obtained, heightened in effective detail by a sprinkling of snow. From the northern part of the Learg Ghruamach track, a little south of Carn Elrick, is a striking view of the highest points of the Sgòran Dubh ridge, seen over the lower ground between Carn Elrick and the Sron na Leirg; and as seen from here one may appreciate the difficulty that has been felt as to their proper naming.

And here we may as well at once say that the Ordnance Surveyors appear to have fallen into considerable error in this matter, and, of course, have been followed by most map-

makers and writers treating of the hills. Even the C. C. map is wrong, and only in M'Connochie's recent article, already referred to, do some tops get their proper names. We shall take occasion to note these errors as we proceed.

These various views of the ridge, and this discussion as to their proper naming, together with their innate attractiveness as a distinct individual section of the Cairngorms, led to my making a visit to them during the past summer, in company with my wife and the amateur Photographer.

As seen from the neighbourhood of beautiful Loch an Eilein, the most northerly spur of the ridge shows a distinct pathway leading most invitingly upwards, and it seemed desirable to use this pathway if possible. But information as to it was scarcely to be obtained, and one evening the Photographer and I devoted some time to preliminary explorations. We judged that the pathway must come out somewhere on to the driving road leading east from Loch an Eilein, and, finding a foot-track by the side of the small stream about one-third of a mile from the loch, we followed it towards the ridge, and after several false leads found one of its ramifications leading in the right direction. We followed it far enough to see that it was the track we wanted, marked it at its chief turns so as readily to follow it on the morrow, and then returned to finish our arrangements for the outing.

It may be well to note here that this track follows the left bank of the burn for a few yards, then crosses it, and runs due east for about a hundred yards; then turns towards the hill, and after it has begun to rise sharply, zig-zags up its west side. It is hereabouts somewhat intermittent, but on the whole gives very much help in the ascent, which otherwise would be very difficult in the long heather.

We failed to make an early start, but 9:30 saw us pass the Loch and take to the track through the heather. This was deep, in places very deep, the morning was hot, the path steep, rough and intermittent, and the flies—oh! the *Rothiemurchus* flies—so many, so busy, so persistent; our backs carried hundreds, and our faces and heads were haunted by scores. We were thankful when, after some hard

work, we reached our first little "top", cleared the trees, got a touch of breeze, and lost our tormenting attendants.

And now we were fairly on our way, having risen some 900 feet from the level of the loch, and being well on the ridge, the ups and downs of which we intended to follow. In front of us rose Cadha Mor, a fairly easy slope of not very rough ground; two deer approached us, making for the Coire Buidhe on our right, and were soon lost to view. At the top of Cadha Mor (2313), we found a cairn with a slender fallen staff, which we re-erected. Here we were glad to sit awhile and cool down from the exertion of the ascent. At this height also we could appreciate the beauty of the day; for sunshine, a moderate breeze and very clear air, all went to make an ideal walking day.

A slight descent from Cadha Mor and a more rapid ascent over easy ground covered with moss, short grass and scattered heather, brought us on to the next top, which it seems ought to bear the name Inchriach, though this name is printed on the O. S. maps considerably to the south of the top. Here for some distance the going was over rough granite blocks; but in front was the "Argyll Stone" (2766), and to it we quickly made our way. The "Argyll Stone" is a natural granite tor, rising some twelve feet above the plateau, and bearing a stout staff, which was decayed and fallen. We paused awhile to look at the widespread panorama, and then, passing the cairn close at hand, went on to the "Atholl Stone", nearly a quarter of a mile further south. This is another tor, smaller, but more curiously shaped. The eastern side overhangs, and the shelter has been increased by rough walls on the north and south sides; in the recess so formed a large block of stone makes a good seat, screened on all sides but the east. The O.S. 6-in. map calls this stone "Clach Mhic Ailein". Now "Mhic Ailein", or Macallum, is a well-known name of Argyll, and it seems as though the surveyors had applied the name to the wrong tor. The Atholl Stone is scarcely to be seen from the surrounding lower land, while the Argyll Stone is so prominent as to be a well-marked feature of the Inchriach ridge.

Leaving this higher level, still walking southward, we

descended somewhat rapidly. The warmth and the dryness of the air had induced thirst; further, lunch time was felt to be approaching, as it was now past mid-day, and as we reached the *col* we looked eagerly for springs. In a pretty, sheltered nook we found abundant water, evidently much frequented by deer, and at the well-eye we drank, and near it we rested awhile. This spring is the source of the Allt Ruigh na Sroine of Glen Eunach.

There now lay before us the towering bulk of Sgor Dubh Mhor, with a clearly-marked track leading towards its cairn-crowned top. Our way lay near the top of the steep crags and screes that drop into Glen Eunach along its western side south of Loch Mhic Ghille-chaoile, and the view into and across the glen was very fine. The going was easy, though the ascent was decided, and just when we began to feel the pull getting steeper and heavier, a fine mass of rock showed itself immediately to our left. This was obviously Sgor Dubh Bheag (3443), a subsidiary peak of Sgor Dubh Mhor, and to it we turned aside. It proved to be a noble pile of rock, dropping very steeply into the glen, with an admirable platform on the top from which to enjoy the superb view of Loch Eunach and Braeriach, and with also a fine buttress running out on its northern side, from which a good near view could be obtained of itself. The Photographer insisted on a prolonged halt here, while he took pictures. The rest of the company fell in with his suggestion amiably, and we spent some time in keen enjoyment. But the greater height was yet to win, and we pushed on. At one point the track skirted the very edge of the steep fall, and walking was cautiously done. A few yards below I saw a fine spring in a steep gully, but as the thirstier member of the company was far ahead we did not visit it. Now the track gradually bore away from the crag edge, the surface became barer and rougher, and we found the top of Sgor Dubh Mhor with its cairn (3635), not suggesting at all its fine, craggy edge, but showing only a rounded swelling top. Here a somewhat longer halt was made, and map and compass called into requisition, while we emulated Munro, and tried to localise and identify the surrounding moun-

tains. The view on such a day is exceedingly fine, both in the strongly marked nearer features and in the distant outlines delicately pencilled along the horizon. The Ordnance Surveyors have omitted to name Sgor Dubh Bheag, and do not put any name to Sgor Dubh Mhor. On their maps "Sgòran Dubh" is printed about a mile to the south of Sgor Dubh Mhor, and is applied to the next top, now seen ahead beyond an easy dip. This top is the striking Sgor Ghaoith (3658) (the windy peak), which we found well named, for the breeze was stronger and keener there than anywhere else that day. As we approached it two eagles rose from it, flew towards us, and then, as taking umbrage at our intrusion, sailed swiftly and easily away towards Glen Feshie. On the Sgor we found traces of their presence in small scattered feathers. It is said that they breed on the crags below this peak. The crag stands out as a bold rocky pinnacle, falling very steeply to the level of Loch Eunach, the drop being more than 1900 feet. Close to the peak is a small shelter hut for keepers, and a semaphore signal post, by which the whereabouts of deer could be signalled to the loch bothy. We sat awhile on the topmost rock, where the eagles had preceded us, and enjoyed the impressive view of the Eunach Corrie, with its enclasping precipices. Then the Photographer scrambled down and out on to a buttress to get a picture of the peak, while we others pushed on to find more water. We soon descended an easy grassy slope quite near the crag edge, and came among the head waters of the Allt na Coire Odhar, the stream that throws itself down into the S. W. corner of the loch. Here we found abundant fine springs, and settled down by one of the nearest and finest, in a little grassy hollow. Near by was a ruined bothy which was at one time used by deer-stalkers. The spring by which we rested is called Fuaran Diotach (the breakfast well).

When we left this we approached the end of our ridge walk, for the ridge itself now joined round the south end of the Eunach Corrie with the mightier mass that includes Braeriach and Cairn Toul, and so merged into the great plateau that lies between the Feshie, the Geldie and the Dee.

At the south-west corner of the Eunach Corrie we descended by "Ross's Path", named after Horatio Ross, who was in his day one of Scotland's most ardent sportsmen and able shots. The upper part of this path speedily becomes very steep, and needs careful walking in the descent. But a little lower the gradient is less steep, and by the time it meets the stream we saw above, it is almost on the level. Just here it becomes very indefinite for a short distance, but by turning due east for a hundred yards we reach the tops of its second part, where the excessive steepness is overcome by zig-zagging. Thence it drops by a fairly easy gradient to the north end of the loch. All along this part of our walk we were delighted by getting many pretty pieces of white heather.

When we reached the outlet of the loch, there remained but the steady march down the glen along the admirable driving road. This we made with great satisfaction, as our expedition along the Sgòran Dubh ridge was successfully made; and we turned now and again to look back at the corrie, and saw it grow darker and darker as the gloom of evening and of threatening clouds fell on it. But no rain came, and the contrast with the bright sunshine of the earlier part of the day did but heighten the pleasure of our memories.