

HIGH CAMPING ON THE CAIRNGORMS.

THE impression one gets of the hills from periods of camping above three thousand feet on the higher Cairngorms is much finer than that derived from one-day excursions. The reason is that they are seen under more varied aspects. One looks back with rare pleasure on the days and nights spent in the pure, crisp air of mountain and corrie.

We found that by using a tent we could avoid the repeated long tramps in the glens, and have more time on hand for exploration other than by the stereotyped routes.

June is the best month, both for daylight and high temperature. The sun is never far below the horizon, and excursions can be made at any hour one chooses.

The weight of the rucksacks to be carried is essentially heavy, even with the minimum of camping accessories required for a period away from civilisation, but one is well repaid when the high ground is reached.

The tent used has a jointed pole at each end, four feet high, ground space 6' x 6', holds three men comfortably, and weighs eighteen pounds. We carry up firewood from where the trees cease, but in bad weather a spirit lamp instead does duty in the tent.

One evening in June we were on the shore of Loch Coire an Lochan, 3250 feet, the largest loch in Britain at so high an altitude. Around the loch it is wild and bare, there being little vegetation then, as it is usually covered with snow, and frozen over till the middle of May. A platform of moss was made to pitch the tent on. So rough is the corrie where the burn leaves the loch that a level space large enough for the purpose could not be found.

All the afternoon it had been exceedingly sultry. A great mass of black cloud hung over Lochan nan Gnapan, but the tent was up, supper over, and we snugly inside, before a tremendous peal of thunder broke over us, which was the beginning of a prolonged thunderstorm. Thick mist came down, the wind rose, and rain fell in torrents. The

thunder had a double echo in the corrie, and incessant lightning caused a long snow slope near to us to take on a curious bluey appearance. A rumble of falling rock caused us to think the crags had been struck, and certainly the lightning was near. What a storm! It continued with unabated force all through the night and next day. Sometimes it blew a hurricane, and we were afraid the tent would be blown over, but it stood the strain. We purposely selected the wildest camping site possible, but under such conditions this place was found amply sufficient.

Towards evening Carn Elrick began to show, the rain ceased, and there was great stillness, so we tumbled out, stiff, but well rested and dry. As the ridge on the west side of the loch was ascended at 10.30 p.m., it could be seen that a view of exceptional clearness was to be had from the plateau. There was not the faintest zephyr, the sky was cloudless, and of a brilliant orange, which reflected a bright glare over all.

The Eunach Cairn, 4061 feet, was reached at midnight. The light was excellent, few stars were visible, for it was the longest day of the year. Ben Nevis was silhouetted against the horizon, and all the mountains to the far west were quite distinctly seen. From the north and west came a bright crimson afterglow, which was softly reflected on each hill-top, including our mountain, and also those to the east of us. The valleys were a bluey purple, and some carried bands of white mist. The combined effect was that of a dark sea, dotted with islands of a delicate pink. The curious midnight light, the unique surroundings, and a storm of such magnitude only a few hours previous made thoughts arise, and what we felt we could not tell aloud. We do not remember having seen anything so fine in this locality, except perhaps a view obtained from Mount Keen of the sun setting over the snows of the Cairngorms in March.

Reluctantly we turned away, and passed the Wells of Dee *en route* for the highest cairn of Braeriach, 4248 feet. We sat there in perfect peacefulness perched on the lip of

Corrie Brochain, gazing across at Cairn Toul and Sgoran Lochan Uaine, the twin sentinels of Glen Dee, that summer night. What a contrast to a visit here on a winter day! The rough face of the corries are long snow slopes, accessible only with rope and axe, and the wind drives particles of ice in one's face over the precipice edge.

We strolled back to the tent by the loch, getting a rapid snow glissade on the way, and delighted with our night's walk.

While taking early morning breakfast the sun caught the crags on Sgoran Dubh (the black peak), turning its vane-like gullies to gold.

By 11 a.m. the tent was pitched by the Wells of Dee, and we were away to the black peak in bright sunlight. Our route lay round the top of Loch Eunach, over the exasperating labyrinth of knaps, and in due course the breakfast well (Fuaran Diotach) was reached. Not far away we found a pool of water with ice six inches in thickness. We supposed its winter mantle of snow had only recently melted. When the skyline was reached we saw a magnificent storm cloud making straight for us from the west, and thunder muttered in its neighbourhood. It enveloped us in the dip of some 250 feet between Sgor Ghaoith, 3658 feet (the windy peak), and Sgoran Dubh Mhor, 3635 feet. It got very dark, and huge hailstones came horizontally at us with great force, covering everything inches deep in a short time, and lightning, flashing between us and Sgoran Dubh Mhor, was much too near for safety. It lasted about an hour, and seemed to break up on Braeriach, proceeding north and south. We could trace it in full fury away down the Spey valley, and in the vicinity of Ben a' Ghlo. From the windy peak we had most ravishing views of Braeriach and the loch, as the mist opened and closed.

Carn Ban was crossed on the way back, and one of us held a young ptarmigan temporary prisoner. He was struck on the shoulder by the mother, who flew close round his head till the young one was released.

It is quite amusing to see how the parents try to attract one's attention away from their brood till they get hidden from view.

At the wells, just under 4000 feet, our tent was standing in a wreath of new snow. It kept out the wind, so we didn't mind.

Although the temperature fell very much during the night we were quite comfortable, and spent eight hours in refreshing slumber.

From here Cairntoul and others were traversed. We could encircle the saucer corrie, and be back again in time for mid-day hot lunch, prepared by our excellent chef, one of the party.

Grand days were spent in and around the Gharbhchoire, but we were ultimately driven off the high ground by heavy rain, after a stay of five days above the magic 3000 feet line. Our next camp was near some dwarf willows in Glen Dee, opposite Glen Geusachan.

The first visit to Loch Etchachan with the tent was under fine conditions. We breakfasted at 3.30 a.m. every morning, and often did not turn in again till after midnight, a nap being taken in the sun at noon. We wandered for a week on end on the immense plateaus, when they quivered in a heat haze. Clear views were obtained, and a dozen "Munros" were visited. In the evening the 688 feet to Cairngorm of Derry might be ascended, or perhaps a walk up Beinn Mheadoin would be taken.

We used to watch the early morning gossamer mists crawl over the crags in waterfall-like form, the sun playing through, and showing up the colour of the rock behind, which was mirrored in the water below.

In exploring around Carn Etchachan we discovered a fine situation for a view. We followed the grassy upward ledge from the Loch Etchachan level for about 150 feet, and found ourselves about three-quarters up the crags at the foot of a series of vertical rock chimneys, with a couch of soft moss, and clusters of the Tasteless Mountain Stonecrop (*sedum saxungulare*). The colossal slabs of rock

from which the Shelter Stone found birth are better realised from here than elsewhere, and Loch Avon and all the crags are in full view.

We encamped last June at Loch Etchachan in very cold weather. During the first night snow whitened the hills down to the 2000 feet line. The tent was frozen hard, and the cold was intense. We stayed up for four days, and were many hours in thick mist. The sound of the burns and the croak of the ptarmigan was the only entertainment.

On our way from the high ground we camped in Glen Lui, and felt exceedingly comfortable there. Next day we shouldered our rucksacks and marched down the glen, with its beautiful expanse of green and wandering burn. Many a backward glance was taken of the hills, still wrapt in mist. The oyster-catcher gave us a parting call, and the glens and corries were left behind.

