

IN AND AROUND GLEN SPEAN

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WHEN one of us had to buy O.S. Sheet No. 48 to complete the set of maps for the midnight excursion over the Minigaig Pass, he felt it was rather a useless expense, for he did not see much hope of using it. Then we discovered it covered Ben Alder and that reconciled the extravagance. Arranging hotels for the Easter Meet of 1950 put us in touch with Glen Spean Lodge—the most delightful climbing hotel we have so far come across; with its host and hostess—Major Andrew and Mrs Thomson—and a view from its doorstep of hills and hills from the westerly peaks of the Ben Alder Forest to the top of Aonach Beag. In fixing up accommodation for the Club for Easter we also arranged for a holiday in July, to explore the Grey Corries. The material for this article is the outcome. The climbs described are not long days, nor is it a case of climbing as many “Munros” as possible in one day, but in climbing them as gently and easily as can be, and always leaving an excuse for a return visit.

The Grey Corries

The first day out was to the hills on the west side of Loch Treig. We left the car at the dam beyond Fersit and struck up the ridge to Stob a' Choire Mheadhoin (3,610 feet) and from there to Stob Coire Easain (3,658 feet), the last part being over a fairly steep climb to the summit. These two Munros were climbed in mist, but the journey back to the comfort of the Lodge was enjoyed in sunshine and good visibility.

Our next excursion carried us by car to Spean Bridge and up the left-hand bank of the River Spean, past Corrie Coillie and over the light railway that runs from Loch Treig at Fersit to the aluminium works at Fort William. This railway is sometimes referred to in the S.M.C. Guides as being out of use, but we would not care to be on one of the many viaducts on certain days when the upkeep gang are on their way by diesel truck to visit the various maintenance jobs on dam, pipeline, and track. It has since suggested itself to us that

it would offer an excellent opportunity for developing the holiday attractions for Fort William if that Corporation would buy Emmett's railway at Battersea Pleasure Gardens and run it here as an excursion tour for some of their Sassenach visitors!

We crossed the railway, and as both the car (a 1936 Alvis Crested Eagle) and the driver decided we had had enough, we continued on foot through the Lairig Leachdach for a further mile and so on to the ridge of Beinn Bhan. From there to Stob Coire na Ceannain and so to Stob Choire Claurigh (3,858 feet), the highest point in the Grey Corries, were just steps. The ridge was well defined and the views in every direction magnificent. On round to Stob Coire an Laoigh (3,659 feet)—a Munro not named in the O.S. Map—and from there on to Sgùrr Chòinnich Mòr (3,603 feet) concluded our outward journey. The return was made over the ridge of Stob Coire an Easain till we picked up the headwaters of Allt Choimhlidh, which we followed until we came again to the light railway—a sight which pleased us very much, for it led back to the car.

Stob Bàn was still left, and it meant another visit to Glen Spean Lodge to bag that Munro. Meantime we decided to go farther afield to climb Ben Nevis and if possible Carn Mòr Dearg. We took the car to Glen Nevis and started up to Allt Corrie Eòghainn direct to the Observatory, which we found in mist. Needless to say we did not stay long and made down with difficulty to the Carn Mòr Dearg ridge. The weather now completely deteriorated, and in a thunderstorm we decided to get back to the car by the most direct route.

On our return visit in the spring to Glen Spean Lodge and to the Grey Corries we made another journey to the Lairig Leachdach and followed the pass for about 3 miles before our objective, the shapely peak of Stob Bàn, came into sight. Looking like a small edition of the Matterhorn, it was clear that a firm snow slope would easily take us to the summit, and the climb and return was done in five and a half hours from the gate on the Lairig Leachdach—two hours up and down from the cottage.

Next day being fine, we climbed the Loch Treig hills from Fersit, where we made our first acquaintance of the pony track which leads to Loch Ossian and from this path we made a bee-line for the summit of Chno Dearg (3,433 feet) then westward on to Stob Coire Sgriodain (3,211 feet). Having "knocked off" the Grey Corries and Loch Treig hills we ventured farther afield.

Aonach Mòr and Aonach Beag

From Glen Spean Lodge these mountains dominate the western horizon. Seen in elevation like a gigantic drop-scene, the steep early ascent is dwarfed and the eye dwells only on the gentle curve of the "Aonach," the ridge.

By taking a car to Lianachan and a little along what must have been once a major road through plantations of non-indigenous trees, an ascent close to the Allt Choille-rai is made. There is a gate in the fence, and this is easier to climb than the fence itself. This first 2,000 feet is steep, but there is a path for part of the way which terminates just before the shoulder of Aonach Mòr is reached. From here it is just a matter of climbing, unless snow provides additional interest, but the slope gets less and less steep, until the gentle bare top of the ridge is traversed.

Here the dotterel may sometimes be seen, on ground which has a familiar resemblance to some of the Cairngorm tops, but the view to south, east, and west has a grandeur surpassing Cairngorm views, a grandeur aided by the sea, whose presence cannot fail but be felt.

Aonach Mòr falls short of 4,000 feet by one miserable foot, and is exceeded in height, but not mass, by Aonach Beag, which has many of its features compressed into smaller space. The summit is quite small and is an excellent platform for studying the Grey Corries. The view to the west is dominated by Ben Nevis, the structure of which is clearly seen.

From Glen Spean to Aonach Beag and back may give you three Munros, but alternative routes for descent may commend themselves to the hardy.

Climbs from Corroul

The grouping together of the hills best reached from Corroul necessarily exists in one's mind, as the rail journey from Roy Bridge or Tulloch, and the return from Corroul, provides an interesting prelude and postlude to each ascent. The railway journey itself did on one particular occasion provide the opportunity which has always enticed the writer—the opportunity to pull the communication cord. On arrival the door on to the platform was locked. The doors on adjacent coaches were also locked. The occupant of Corroul Station was disinterested; the guard was weighing fish; the two

engine drivers were signalling impatience by blowing off steam, and a disinclination to walk the length of the train tempted one to let the thing start and then pull the communication cord. Lack of support, however, led to descent to the ground remote from the platform and a golden opportunity was lost.

There is a road on each side of Loch Ossian on which lie islands where grow trees in which herons nest, their heads sticking out of the tops like umbrella handles. An easy Munro lies on each side of the loch—Beinn na Lap on the north and Càrn Dearg on the south. As Loch Ossian lies at 1,261 feet above the sea, the hills could claim to be easy; a good and not too strenuous day is obtained by including Sgòr Gaibhre (3,124 feet) with Càrn Dearg.

All excursions to Loch Ossian can be varied by returning over the "pony track"—marked on the 1-inch map and previously mentioned—to Tulloch, via Fersit. This pleasant walk takes about three hours from Corrour Lodge, and the last mile and a half can be most interesting if the obvious is not done. This "escape" route becomes more necessary as the hills to the north-east of Ossian, in the Ben Alder forest are climbed, and later returns are envisaged.

Due to rail timing the start of the day's climbing cannot be achieved before 11 A.M. The return train is 7.20 P.M., and the farther out hills make rail return possible only to those members who can time a trip properly—and our experience on club excursions prompts us to add, "if any." However, there are four Munros in a row, one of which, according to the S.M.C. Guide, is named Geal Chàrn, but is not shown on the O.S. 1-inch map. The correct naming, heights, and approximate linear distances from Corrour Station, from which they lie in a north-easterly direction, are:—

Beinn Eibhinn (3,611 feet), 6½ miles.

Aonach Beag (3,646 feet), 7 miles.

Geal Chàrn (3,688 feet), 9 miles.

Càrn Dearg (3,391 feet), 11½ miles.

The route is easy, although the ground may be bad to the south of these hills. The Uisge Labhair is followed until one strikes off to the ascent of the chosen hill. Good views of Ben Alder and Loch Ericht are obtained. Obviously Càrn Dearg presents a problem to the hotel-based mountaineer, but it is manifestly possible to walk 23 miles and climb 2,000 feet in eight and a half hours, even if one had to be lifted into the train on return. As an alternative a traverse

of the group is possible, and a possible overnight club excursion is indicated from Corroul to Dalwhinnie.

Creag Meaghaidh and Ben Alder Forest

May of 1952 found us back in our hotel with the Creag Meaghaidh range our principal objective. This we did on three separate days. The first day we made for Aberarder and a direct ascent of Càrn Liath (3,298 feet). The next day we tackled the main top of Creag Meaghaidh (3,700 feet) by the Moy March wall. This wall we hoped would lead to the summit, but it ends about half a mile short of the cairn. The day was misty and the summit, when we did get there, offered no views.

Our next excursion started in rain, but as we parked the car at Aberarder the weather broke and we had a grand walk up Coire Ardair, up over the window to Poite Coire Ardair (3,460 feet), with wonderful views into the headwaters of the Rivers Roy and Spey. To complete the range we had a visit to Beinn a' Chaoruinn (3,437 feet), but here again we encountered mist, and having found the main top we returned by the outward route to the car.

Having consulted the factor of Ardverikie and obtained permission to explore that estate, we spent a couple of days on the hills to the north of the Ben Alder Forest; first to Creag Pitridh (3,031 feet). We left the car at Luiblea, where we found a shepherd to have come out of Mar, and, in fact, he was a nephew of the late Alec Grant of Luibeg. Our road took us to the south-west, to Lochan na h-Earba, round Sgùrr an t'Saighdair, on to Creag Pitridh, and thence to Mullach Coire an Ibhair. We returned down Coire Pitridh, obtaining a fine view of Beinn a' Chlachair (3,569 feet), and it was very lucky that we did, for when we returned there next day in a mist we had to rely on the recollection of our previous day to make the top.

With a change of car our climbing excursions from Glen Spean Lodge took us farther afield. One memorable day we spent on Gulvain (3,224 feet). Major Ewan Cameron, the uncle of the present Cameron of Locheil, got permission for us to use the private road to Wauchan. This road leaves the main Fort William-Mallaig road at the end of Loch Eil and made the day far from hard. The climb to the first top (3,148 feet) is fairly steep, but a gentle walk of about a mile separates this from the main top. The hill can be termed "clean"—no bogs, no deep heather, no screes.

Beinn a' Bheithir

The two Munros of Beinn a' Bheithir can be bagged with ease from Glen Spean and, apart from hazards introduced by the Forestry Commission, are easy to climb.

The major difficulty as one commences to climb Sgòrr Dhearg from near Ballachulish station is to get through the forestry plantations. Probably the best solution to the problem is to circumvent these, ascending the ridge from its extremity; but a passage was forced this year through the narrow part of the belt, overlooking the station, more by luck than navigation or determination. Having cleared the trees, one felt, like any member arriving at Golden Square on the Saturday of the midsummer overnight excursion, that the worst part of the journey was over, and the summit of Sgòrr Dhearg was easily reached.

It is at this stage that the loss of height due to the bealach between two Munros is anxiously determined, and calculations made to give the total climb, which in the case of Beinn a' Bheithir is about 4,000 feet—1,200 feet more than the summit of Ben Macduih from Derry Lodge. The exact ascent is, of course, determined by the tide, and those who are doubtful of their ability should cross Ballachulish Ferry at high tide!

The S.M.C. "Central Highlands" Guide states that "there is no rock climbing on these mountains," but one feels that the vertical slabs dropping from near the summit of Sgòrr Dhonuill may provide "severes" for future generations of rock climbers. That the writer of this particular paragraph refrained from traversing the wide ledge below which these slabs drop cannot be ascribed to his respect for the alpine which may nestle there!

One should conclude this section with some practical and topographical hints, and these can be summarised, perhaps, in tabular form:—

1. The prominent stone shoot west of Sgòrr Dhonuill "goes" both up and down.
2. A road exists a good way up Gleann a' Chaolais, and is very likely to be extended.
3. The ferry ceases to operate at 8 P.M.
4. The total time for a very easy traverse of both Munros is six hours.