

The Black Cuillin Ridge of Skye in Two Right Boots **Brian Davey**

This article is published as a tribute to Kevin Broadbent, a good friend who shared this adventure with Albert Krawinkel and myself. Kevin died on 16 June 2001 aged 34 years.

A new "feet" for the record books has just been claimed as regards a complete traverse of the Black Cuillin ridge of Skye. This is undoubtedly the most challenging ridge walk/climb in the British Isles and extends for almost 13km across the most spectacular mountains of Scotland, from Gars-bheinn in the south to Sgurr nan Gillean in the north. The traverse of the ridge comprises 18 individual tops, 14 of which are above 3000ft, and of these, 11 are classed as Munros. The new record is definitely not a speed record. Our time for the ridge alone, not counting the walk-in, the walk-out, rest periods and bivvying out on the ridge overnight, was 22 hours, and the total time from the Glen Brittle beach to the Sligachan Hotel was 35½ hours. The present time record for the complete ridge traverse between the two above-named peaks is just under 3½ hours, obviously set up by some super-fit male demi-god with a little help from his friends. In contrast, we took four hours to reach the first top of Gars-bheinn from the Glen Brittle beach. No, this expedition claims a new record on the basis that the traverse was completed by one of its three members wearing two right boots.

Albert Krawinkel, a Scot of part-Flemish descent, is a great companion on the hills. At any time his quick wit and Glaswegian humour enhance that inexplicable perverse pleasure and self-satisfaction we get from the challenge of the mountains in all their vagaries of topography and weather. Albert was dressed in T-shirt, shorts and trainers when we assembled at the Glen Brittle Youth Hostel on the Friday night before our expedition was due to begin. When he announced that he had forgotten to bring his hillwalking jacket, Kevin Broadbent and I thought this was part of a wind-up. The ridge traverse never drops below 760m (approximately 2500 ft). Although I had selected this particular weather window for the trip after waiting for two months, in my opinion temperatures on the summits during the overnight bivvy made a jacket an essential piece of equipment. While the resolution of this problem was still being considered, a few minutes later Albert announced: "You will not believe this, lads, I've brought along two right boots." But "right" enough, his two matching left ones had remained at home in East Kilbride. The Black Cuillin Ridge of Skye is composed mostly of a great jumble of loose rocks, boulders and scree of gabbro which involves quite a bit of

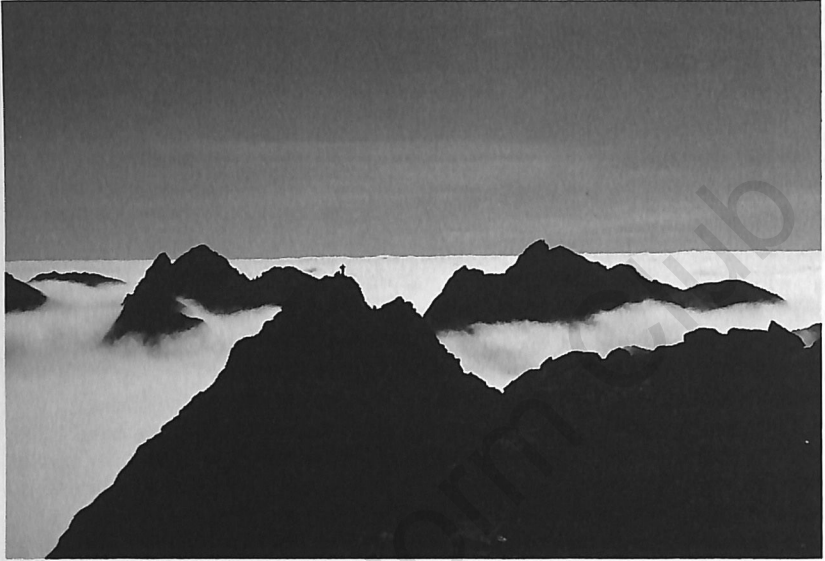
awkward climbing and scrambling. The walk-in involves a long trek across boggy moorland. A good pair of boots is essential. Trainers were unthinkable, two right boots were the only alternative. Kevin and I can vouch for the fact that Albert completed the course not only in two right boots but also without a jacket, despite all our kind offers of sweatshirts and fleeces. Believe it or not, the amazing thing at the end of our journey was that Albert's left foot was in better condition than his right. Maybe we have made a new discovery for the Footwear Research Institute, that it is better to walk/climb wearing your boots on opposite feet. Check it out sometime. Or maybe not.

Doing the ridge in one expedition was one of the most challenging experiences of my entire life, both mentally and physically. Mentally because during the complete route a rope was used only twice as an aid on ascent, and four times to abseil on descents. All this with the knowledge that one wrong unroped move on the countless extreme exposures would be fatal. Adrenalin must have helped to concentrate our minds. The physical aspect involved not just the 16 miles distance from Glen Brittle to Sligachan, but also a total ascent of over 10,000ft including 12 Munros - our chosen route took us over Sgurr nan Eag twice. In fact a strict traverse does not necessarily entail the ascent of all 11 Munros since Sgurr Alasdair and Sgurr Dubh Mor actually lie off the main ridge. In other words doing the ridge is not necessarily doing the Munros and vice versa.

In order to avoid a long slog across Coire nan Laogh and a relentless 500 metre steep ascent through large scree we had decided to reach the start point of the ridge at Gars-bheinn summit by the geologically magnificent Coir' a' Ghrunnda. This involves a steep climb across some massive sections of glaciated boiler-plate rock with some easy scrambling to the beautiful crystal-clear Loch Coir' a' Ghrunnda where we drank our fill and topped up all our water bottles at what was the last watering point before the ridge. Then another steep climb and scramble up to Bealach a' Garbh-choire, the Pass of the Rough Corrie, a very appropriate name. Here we thankfully dumped our packs and set off with renewed vigour. The early morning cloud and hill fog had become broken by this stage and our route took us along the ridge over Sgurr nan Eag en route to the start at the distant Gars-bheinn. We had to retrace our steps over Sgurr nan Eag and 2 ½ km of ridge a short time later, but without our heavy rucksacks it was a pleasant walk/scramble. Some good views of the ridge and surrounding area, including Loch Brittle, Rubh' an Dunain, Soay, Loch Scavaig, Loch Coruisk and even Rum and Canna, were possible through patchy hill fog. This helped our navigation; the magnetic nature of the rock in many parts of the Cuillin renders the compass useless on many occasions. Added to this, the rough nature of the rock makes paths difficult to detect, and the inadequacies of the Ordnance Survey maps in representing the actual contours of the craggy terrain makes for difficult

route finding. The rough nature of the gabbro rock also demanded a high price, though when dry it gave a sandpaper-like grip to our boots. Apart from the leather and rubber wear, the skin on our hands was nearly worn down to the bone and it took us a few weeks after the expedition to re-grow our fingerprints. This despite the fact that I wore gloves on some of the less demanding climbing pitches.

Although Kevin and I had between us walked/climbed the complete ridge before in sections and climbed all the Skye Munros, Albert had still to bag Sgurr nan Eag, Sgurr na Banachdich, Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh and Sgurr a' Mhadaidh. Our intentions were not to break any time records (fat chance), or to stick religiously to every single rock pinnacle along the crest, but to complete the traverse while savouring and relishing the mountains in reasonably good weather. A settled spell of dry weather with light winds is essential for a successful completion of the traverse, and Saturday and Sunday 10-11 July 1999 presented such suitable conditions. A cold front clearing eastwards across Skye on the Saturday morning was followed by a ridge of high pressure on the Sunday. Thankfully my predictions proved true - only too true as far as temperatures were concerned. The high pressure produced shade temperatures up to 26° C (77° F) as measured on my rucksack thermometer. Another essential requirement is an adequate supply of water. No water source exists on the ridge, except for very tiny, doubtful-looking pools of water, trapped in a few basin-shaped rocks from the rainfall of Friday night. The only other water was in the form of early morning dew, on the very sparse tufts of grass. All this we utilised when it presented itself, at least Kevin and Albert did. I abstained from the rock pools, although I must admit I did try sucking on the odd blade of grass just out of curiosity. Andrew Dempster in his book on *Classic Mountain Scrambles in Scotland* states that two to three litres of water would seem to be a reasonable amount for a warm summer's day. But six litres might have been a better estimate, given the way we were sweating. However the amount of water carried must be equated to the weight of one's rucksack - a gallon of water weighs ten pounds! Other essentials to be carried were climbing helmet, climbing harness, karabiners, abseiling devices, slings, ropes, survival bags, sleeping bag, first aid kit, sunscreen, food, extra clothing including hat and gloves, not to mention my hip flask. With weight in mind I decided that I would sacrifice my camera in lieu of a little extra water, which I came to regret at one part of the traverse. When the hill fog cleared around 9.00 p.m. on Saturday evening, we had just arrived at the summit of Sgurr Mhic Choinnich. The cloud evaporated to reveal an ocean of stratus below us, with all the Cuillin peaks protruding a few hundred feet above the cloud inversion. As we watched the cloud continuing to break up below, we saw a magnificent Brocken Spectre appear.



Cloud Sea on the Skye Ridge

On the summit cairn of Sgurr Mhic Chonnich there is a poignant memorial plaque to a Lewis Mac Donald, dated 25 July 1958, which reads: "One whose hands these rocks has grasped, the joys of climbing unsurpassed." This I consider a very fitting memorial to a climber, but one which I found a little spooky when I climbed this particular mountain alone in thick hill fog in July 1998. Also spooky was the sea gull which suddenly appeared out of the fog on that occasion to share my lunch, and again on this occasion approximately one year later, another gull, or maybe the same one, appeared again. We did not see it go away hungry. After we had fed the bird and ourselves, we set off in bright late evening sunshine for Sgurr Dearg and the Inaccessible Pinnacle. However before we had reached this point of the ridge a few memorable obstacles had been encountered which are worth recounting.

The traverse from Gars-bheinn to Sgurr Dearg and the Inaccessible Pinnacle is exhilarating, with first a fairly easy start, walking and scrambling over the rough top of Sgurr a Choire Bhig. We then dropped down to a col and scrambled up the shattered rocks of Sgurr nan Eag. After this came the first difficult bit of scrambling as we made our way back to Bealach a' Garbh-choire and our rucksacks. This was good practice for what lay ahead, Caisteal a' Garbh-choire and Sgurr Dubh an Da Bheinn, and the diversion down the lateral east ridge to Sgurr Dubh Mor, a mountain whose north face had presented me with no little difficulty and some considerable grief on a previous occasion. But that's

another tale. This time it was just another steep scramble. Soon we were retracing our steps or handholds back over Sgurr Dubh an Da Bheinn to reach the much-talked about Thearlaich-Dubh Gap. This is a giant cleft in the main ridge at 2950 ft (899m), where you scramble up the steep crags from Sgurr Dubh an Da Bheinn to a pinnacle above the short side of the Gap. Then you abseil down the slightly overhanging 30-foot drop to the base of the cleft, before climbing the almost vertical 80-foot upper side. The difficulty of the climb was immediately obvious and Kevin led the way using a rope and various climbing paraphernalia, with me belaying him from below. He managed to secure an anchor for the rope around a suitable rock at the top, and Albert, rucksacks and myself followed. The security of the rope made it easier, but the climb was still quite difficult where the smooth rock face presented no suitable handholds. At this point the technique for me was to jam my leg into a narrow vertical fissure in the rock and claw my way upward to a useful left-handhold above. Then I was able to lever myself up to what looked from below an impossible-to-reach hold on the right. After that pitch the rest seemed relatively easy. Before long we were on our way to Sgurr Thearlaich, but first we made a slight diversion across the top of the 1300ft scree of the Great Stone Chute to the highest Munro on Skye. This is Sgurr Alasdair, 3258ft, named after Alexander Nicolson who was said to have been the first to climb it as recently as 1873.

A slightly awkward initial scramble took us back to the main ridge and the steep ascent to the cairn on the Sgurr Mhic Choinnich col. From here the mountain ahead soars menacingly skywards, so we opted to take the not-so-obvious Collie's Ledge Route. This starts after a very steep climb of about 20 feet from the base of the col and slants up to the left around the soaring rock knob, bringing us up to the ridge just to the north of the summit. As explained above, here we rested, refuelled, fed the seagull and admired the scenery and optics with great elation.

Beyond Sgurr Mhic Choinnich the ridge leads sharply downwards to the Bealach Coire Lagan, then an exhausting climb around the steep buttress of An Stac reaches the Inaccessible Pinnacle, projecting above the summit of Sgurr Dearg. The time being 10.30 p.m., we had the luxury of having the In-Pin to ourselves - on a fine day it is usually besieged by hordes of people waiting their turn to climb it. So after depositing our rucksacks at its base, we quickly scaled this famous sliver of rock without ropes, climbing up the "easy" East Ridge. This is in fact classed as a moderate rock climb, with plenty of handholds and footholds, but with frightening exposure on each side of its steep and narrow arête. A fast abseil down the other steeper 80-foot west face saw us on our way again, just as the sun was dipping below the Atlantic horizon, beyond a clearly visible Harris and Lewis. Heading for Sgurr na Banachdich, we were now on the lookout for a suitable bivouac spot. By very good luck we soon

came upon what must be one of the best on the ridge, just beyond Bealach Coire na Banachdich. This crude shelter was a low wall of rocks about three feet high, constructed for three people by some master stone-dyke builder. For these parts it had the rare luxury of a flat earth floor with only one projecting rock, which Albert soon ejected. Our arrival time at this well-appointed residence was 11.10 p.m., exactly 14 hours after we had left the Glen Brittle Beach. Quite pleased that we had reached the halfway point of the ridge and survived to find such desirable accommodation, we celebrated with an Irish coffee and quickly made ourselves as comfortable as possible under the fading twilight and the awakening stars.

Bivvying out on the Black Cuillin Ridge of Skye cannot be regarded as the most comfortable way to spend a night in the mountains, but if you are tired enough you *will* sleep, albeit fitfully. By 4.30 a.m. we were all awake, somewhat rested and covered by heavy dew. After a quick breakfast we were underway again on what is widely acknowledged to be the more difficult half of the ridge. A blanket of hill fog, which temporarily broke up as we climbed the three tops of Sgurr na Banachdich, had replaced the clear starry skies. Unfortunately the overnight condensation had left the rocks slightly wet and slippery, which made the scrambling tricky in places. After the peaks of Sgurr Na Banachdich and Sgurr Thormaoid had been scaled, the route became more familiar to me. During one of the very memorable days of a 1999 Spring Holiday Meeting, I had led seven intrepid Westhill Walkers along this section of the ridge only a few months before. This helped to speed our progress. We were soon skirting around the narrow gap of Eag Dubh and climbing backwards down the 20-foot wall to the floor of An Dorus chasm and col. The south-west peak of Sgurr a Mhadaidh rises steeply on the other side of this gap. We kept to the axis of the ridge until we reached the first and highest of the four tops of Sgurr a Mhadaidh. On our previous visit to this part of the ridge in the springtime we had enjoyed brilliant sunshine and magnificent views of the vast basin of Loch Coruisk immediately below. However on this occasion the hill fog was still pea-soup thick when we reached the 30-foot horizontal crest of rock, which is the summit.

The next section of the route between the first top of Sgurr a' Mhadaidh and Bruach na Frithe was new territory to Albert and me. The fact that it does not have any Munro peaks may have been one reason for this, but that certainly did not make it any easier. Fortunately Kevin had traversed it alone with great fortitude during the Spring Meet and so I was forewarned. Beyond the main top of Sgurr a Mhadaidh, where the buttress from Sgurr Thuilm joins the main ridge, the route turns sharply to the east. At this point came some exposed climbing and scrambling as we traversed the other three subsidiary tops of Sgurr a Mhadaidh, with a gendarme on the second top and a steep rocky descent after the third top to Bealach na

Glac Moire, the Pass of the Great Defile. This is the lowest place on the ridge at 2492ft (760m).

The next part of our route involved not just some rough scrambling and rock climbing, but also some tricky navigation over the triple summits of Bidein Druim nan Ramh (Peak of the Ridge of Oars), whose three tops form a rough triangle. The transverse ridge resembling oars at this point is said to be associated with Viking mariners who, experts now generally agree, gave the Cuillin their name from the Norse word "kjolen" which denotes not only a high mountain ridge but also the keel of a boat. The topography here is well worthy of note because Bidein Druim Nan Ramh is the only peak in the Cuillin supported by four ridges. These may seem well-defined on the map but, in the thick hill fog, which still enveloped us at this stage, they were anything but. After a hard bit of climbing and scrambling we came to the edge of a deep chasm, where someone had left a sling anchored around a suitable rock. A nervous glance down the seemingly endless cliff below, and a quick checking of compasses, told us we had taken a wrong turn, so we had to do some difficult and time-consuming back-tracking. The western Bidein peak was relatively easy, then came the central peak, which we reached, by a series of zigzags up rocky terraces. This was followed by an awkward descent, one of the most difficult of the entire Main Ridge. Here we used the rope to descend safely in two separate abseils to reach the col below and thence attain the North Peak. From Bealach Harta below, the route leads to An Caisteal (the Castle), where a conspicuous feature is a 200-foot gash in the ridge. At one point an exciting four-foot jump was made across a deep, vertical-sided notch to save time and some difficult climbing. It was somewhere along this part of the route that the discovery of an old, faded label from a lemonade bottle led us to a secret cache of two litres of water in plastic bottles. Judging by the state of the labels they had been there for some considerable time. Many people who attempt the entire ridge, and have the time and energy, take the sensible precaution of depositing a secret water supply somewhere near or beyond the halfway stage, and it is well known that a high proportion of people fail in their attempt. So it didn't take much debate in our dehydrated state to come to the conclusion that this water had been abandoned. I was pretty certain of this when I noticed the floating pieces of fungus in the first bottle when Kevin put the bottle to his lips and took the first drink. The second bottle looked less contaminated and although Kevin and Albert indulged their thirst, I reluctantly refused. Besides the risk of typhoid, or something worse, I still had about a half-litre of water in reserve while their personal supplies were almost finished. With slight tinges of conscience, about one litre of water was replaced in the secret hidey-hole for some other poor unfortunate dehydrated souls to discover. We then proceeded along the ridge, still very

thirsty, with the knowledge that we would need another water supply if we were to survive and succeed in reaching Sgurr nan Gillean.

Although we were still highly determined at this stage, I must admit that because of our water shortage some slight self doubts were beginning to creep into the back of my mind. By this time the hill fog was beginning to break up with bursts of warm sunshine quickly pushing up the temperature. Happily the way ahead could at last be seen, rising over Sgurr na Bhairnich and beyond to the rocky summit of Bruach na Frithe. This presented nothing worse than a good scramble, but the lengthening sunny spells increased our dehydration and by the time I reached the summit cairn of Bruach na Frithe I was feeling not only very thirsty and hungry but also very tired. At this time the shade temperature on my rucksack thermometer was reading a very warm 26° C. It was at this point that Kevin and Albert decided that the only solution to the water problem was to drop down a few hundred feet to the burn in Fionn Choire, refill their water bottles and drink the rest of the burn completely dry. For myself, I decided that my first priority was to get some renewed energy into my system by eating some food, washed down by my last few meagre drops of water. It was during this process that six strapping young Scots appeared on the summit, loaded with copious supplies of cool bottled water, which I subsequently discovered had been very recently filled on their ascent. My insatiable thirst then inspired what I now regard as the miracle on the Black Cuillin Ridge, the turning of whisky into water. Remembering my whisky-filled hip flask, I hastily enquired if anyone would like to swap whisky for water. I was suddenly inundated with more than two litres! After a short rest, any doubts of not completing the whole ridge traverse were readily dispelled and I soon rejoined Kevin and Albert a little further along the ridge at Bealach nan Lice. Now fully refreshed with plenty of food and water we were all brimming with renewed confidence. Especially since our final peak of Sgurr nan Gillean was in sight, we found that the traverse of Am Basteir presented us with no real problems.

To save time and energy we decided to leave our rucksacks at Bealach a' Bhasteir when scaling Sgurr nan Gillean (the Peak of the Young Men), carrying only harnesses, slings and a rope. Also conveyed was a metal water-bottle which dangled from my belt and clanged against the rocks, making me sound like a Pyrenean mountain sheep as we made our way up the steep western ridge to the pointed peak above. An exciting climb just to the right of Nicolson's Chimney brought us to a horrendously exposed part of the ridge where the now collapsed gendarme once menacingly stood. Albert was fearlessly across the breach almost without thinking. Coming up close behind, Kevin and I decided after some reflection that it was better to set up some protection at this point by using the rope to guard against a possible slip. Safely across this hazard we

made our way further upwards, crawling through a curious hole in the rock face while noting that this was only the second time we had used the rope for ascent along the whole route. Following the crest of the ridge we finally reached the summit cairn at 965m, built on a small platform. This represented the end of the traverse for us. Elated by the view, the self-satisfaction of success and our great sense of achievement, we had to remind ourselves not to be too complacent during our steep descent back down the west ridge. This time we opted to abseil down Nicolson's Chimney and we were soon back at Bealach a' Bhasteir and our rucksacks.

Flushed with success, the long two-hour walkout to the Sligachan Inn was a tedious but happy unwinding affair. The thought of that cool pint of beer at the end of our adventure spurred us onwards, and it wasn't long before we were slaking our thirst and reflecting on what had been one of our most demanding physical and psychological exercises ever. Would we do it again? Well maybe someday, but not too soon. And certainly not in two right boots!