

## Running the Cairngorm Munros

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*Editor's note:* Hill running, Trail running and, in England, Fell running, are terms used to describe an endurance sport of which few of us have much knowledge. In the following article Paul describes, in his breathless style, a non stop run over ground that would provide some of us with a week long walking holiday.

### Before the run

Tuesday is a good day; running the Glenfeshie training 13.1 mile loop in 77mins, a PB by 1minute. Wednesdays is another day entirely, the run home from Aviemore to Kincaig via Cairngorm is abandoned at Loch Morlich and the remainder of the run is full of stops, knackered, the run nearly becomes a walk. Eilidh suggests a weekend camping trip to Glenmore. Saturday's mountain forecast is for 80% chance of cloud free Munros and wind of 10-15 mph; there is a deep low moving into the North-Western Highlands Saturday night - it's going to be tight. Thursday night is spent computing bearings and drawing them onto an extended 1:50000 (7 Tops map); the pressure begins to build. A cut off time time for Ben MacDui of 13:45hrs is computed based on a 03:00hrs start. 3hrs of Friday morning is spent packing family and camping kit into the car for the 15 minute drive up to Glenmore; such is camping with kids! Eilidh's parents, Ewan and Isobel, on hearing the plan kindly offer to play with the kids on Saturday, abandoning their planned walk on Braeriach. Ewan (Paterson) comments that Saturday will be my last chance of the round in 2012. Father and daughter Paterson are top mountain runners and are generally pretty 'cool' to the whole affair, Eilidh does not even ask my route.

We are moving to Oslo in November and left with 2 kids for the next 24 hrs she has more pressing issues. A 3 week offshore trip looms in 4 days. A return attempt in 2013 will be very expensive and not just 15 minutes up the road. The window in which to complete the 5 Cairngorm Long Distance running records is closing. The desire to possess the finished article is there, but is the strength of will to complete it? This question will soon be answered.

The alarm comes as a surprise; it implies that there has been some sleep. It also means that it is 02:55hrs. Remembering the mobile's low battery necessitates some fumbling in the half-light swapping out for Eilidh's fresh battery (the mobile will be used for the splits and to provide Eilidh with updates in the later part of the run). Creeping out of the tent and pushing a route map back inside, it's already too light. The fact that the dog has not barked is scant consolation. At the toilet block there are a few late night weak bladders being emptied. The head torch is removed for the rest of the day.

Gear and food is sorted into bum bag and camel back (minus bladder) respectively. Suntan lotion and Vaseline is applied. Cereal and banana are consumed. Compression calf guards and Nike Lunaracers are donned. It feels like a very early race morning.

### **The Start**

Standing at the entrance to the Youth Hostel the sky is clear and there is good natural light. Earlier worries for nav'ing off the back of Cairngorm were misplaced. Mobile and Stop watch are synced and started. 03:49hrs 5 steps down the YH path and something hits the ground behind. It's the spare map that has jumped out of the open pack sleeve. Good start. It is re-gathered and stuffed into tiny pocket on the front of the pack where it will stay.

Ski road is easy, 2 days off running has aided freshness to a degree. The Allt Mor trail is pleasant and eminently runnable. The first tent of the day is passed in the lower tier of the upper car park. Then it's day lodge, access road, White Lady tow - occasional stream line, exiting beneath the Ptarmigan and up the roped access path into the cloud base and to the summit. Cairngorm 01:16 (1min behind schedule). Finding a hopeful line to the tor and a bit below the cloud base is left for the first and last time till Braeriach. The choice of racing flat Lunaracers over studded X-tallon 190's (sitting back at the campsite) is immediately regretted upon hitting the wet grass down to the saddle. This footwear decision will loom ominously from now till Carn a Mhain Larig descent.

From the saddle a second tent is passed and Bynack More 02:18 is reached. Staying high along the ridge gives a strong sense of free running over fast gravelly ground past the fantastic Bynack Tors. The Eastern Cairngorms provide faultless granite plateau rock architecture. Staying on Bynack for too long leads to a steep heathery

descent into the Larig an Laoigh. Drumlin and hag navigation to the refurbished Fords of Avon Refuge, over the stepping stones and then the drag up Beinn a' Chaorainn, 03:18.

Forgetting about any pre-calculated efficient lines to Beinn a' Bhuid the running takes a snaky route through light boulders and hag trying to minimise disturbance to 2 large herds of deer. Missing the Aghaigh lochans is a bit confusing but the summit of Beinn a' Bhuid 04:17 comes quickly.

Having messed up this next section in cloud during the November round of the 7 Tops, the clear air over to Ben Avon is a welcome sight. This section provides the best running ground of the day and following a (luxurious) pause to remove stones following a scree run down to the saddle it's up and over to the Ben Avon Tor 04:54. A fine dry scramble to the tor summit - far more pleasant than in November's hoar frost. In theory straight back via Beinn a' Bhuid but as ever the corrie's edge seems to suck you in and you end up rimming it.

The run over Moinne Bhealaidh is initially great, then boggy, then good as the walkers' path to the rolling lowly top of Beinn Bhreac 06:31 is reached, ultimately, much faster than you would think.

Again a theoretical re-trace of steps and then more Moinne bog action over to the descent into the Larig an Laoigh again. First luck of the day as a faint but genuine path is located, thus avoiding further bum sliding action. A steep heathery line to the left of the main burn flowing off Beinn Mheadhoin Eastern slopes. Then a traverse over to the scrabbly grand summit Tor of Beinn Mheadhoin 07:55 and the first humans of the day. (from earlier saddle tent?). More fine running over a sausage in a roll to a Loch Etchacan descent.

A brief climb then the Macdui path is left for the coll over to Derry. Boulder fields are mixed with handfuls of trail mix. A busy summit at Derry Cairngorm 08:51 then back over boulders to the Macdui path. Suddenly the mental state changes. Thoughts of bailing at Macdui, which have been slowly hatching over the preceding hours, begin to fade as thoughts of life across the Lairig Ghru come to the fore. Timing is crucial; the 13:45hrs cut off (based on a 03:00hrs start) now seems extremely conservative. It would be crazy to bail now carrying a potential 1hr of bonus time over onto the Western tops. Arriving Ben Macdui 09:36 summit at 13:25hrs the

call is made to Eilidh to tell her: "Going for it, Ben Macdui...it's 13:25hrs ....all's going well ...hoping to be back before midnight.. started late...". That's it, decision made. Leaving at 09:42, 13:31hrs; shit...6 minutes for a phone call and some pasta and peanuts, cursing the inefficient use of time - the race against the sun is truly on. Never will such a long stop be taken again.

Why would you look at a map when you can see the ridge of Carn a' Mhain straight ahead? Because if you did it would stop you trying to run down the Taillear Burn. A bit more rimming action leads to the boulder ridge that drops 500m down to the main ridge. 30 minutes were allocated for this entire leg in my head but it drags and drags. Carn a' Mhain 10:29 feeling the pressure again and knowing the grip 'crux' is approaching. Returning back along the ridge to the first low section the gentle entry slopes of the top of the gully are located (I try to link the photo from the internet in my head to the convex slope ahead). Some loose ground action and memories of Castlegates stone falls abound. Terrain like this is much better descended solo. Keeping (descenders) left seems to work then breaking out further left onto more open ground avoids the steepening / seepage point at the 'narrows'. Stay focussed to the Lairig track and then over the bridge past the Corrou hut and up an excellent new track to water. Kind walkers politely step aside and pass comments about knackered knees (during previous encounters the path had been left to avoid such communication but now direct lines are best). Stop thinking about the Ramsey - you have not even finished this you fool! Devil's point 11:21 and then the grassier track up to Cairn Toul's boulder ring. Lots of walkers and boulders, Cairn Toul 12:12. More boulders and slight drop and fast climb back to Sgurr Lochain Uaine 12:29. For the first time the 1 top per hour barrier is broken. The Lunaracers have come into their own through the boulders and will continue to repay the faith placed in them over the forthcoming hours. Let's just hope they don't disintegrate (this is their 3<sup>rd</sup> ever outing and they have just doubled their mileage).

A fast line down to the coll at Loch nan Stuirteag. And it is necessary to drop further height to a boggy spring. The last of the pasta is now gone, lucozade powder is taken. Monadh Mhor 13:17; reminisce about a fox spotted in snow free March, thin grass provides fantastic fast running on tiring legs. A short drop to the

Bhrotain coll and then lots of fine flat stable boulders to the summit Beinn Bhrotain 13:46. Back over via the subtle coll on Monadh Mhor, mental tiredness shows its first signs with a lost path and confusion of where my pack and bumbag were dropped (for this out and back leg – a process that had worked successfully at 5 previous out and back legs). Relieved to have resolved a stupid mistake the punishment is in the form of a compass bearing – the first of the day. The viz is great, the terrain OK, just the pressure not to make any more mistakes is growing. Pretending not to look West for the next top as, quite frankly, it is not truly obvious where or what it is.

The Moinne's unsightly landrover track is a very welcome sight! During the run out to the Mullach Clach a'Blair, a rounded top, plans can now be hatched for the route back to Sgorr Gaoith and thoughts can drift to the trip with my father in late 1996. Old snow patches, old sportivas, landrovers and a girl running up here with her collie...came back to me. Think of my father's enthusiasm when telling him of this plan last weekend.... this is going to happen. 3km up the track to Mullach a glider is seen, banking on a thermal over the top of Carn Ban Mhor. Decided not to take the high hagged but direct route on my way back, instead, foolishly, a last shot at hag bashing is pursued in a direct line to the top of Mullach Clach a'Blair 15:13. A lone figure is spotted descending East off the summit.

The track is used for the return leg to Sgorr Gaoith as far as possible then more hag before fine grassy slopes and the eerie Sgorr Gaoith 16:10 summit. Another message is left on Eilidh's phone. These hills will always remain special to us. As the crow flies, home is 9km away; fortunately this thought does not enter my head (it had earlier as a final bail out option). Instead my daughter Sky's songs are in my head now. Try to eat the last sausage in a roll but fail after 2 bites.

The moraines at the head of Glen Einich are normally a nightmare but for some reason tonight they give easy passage. Digestion of crisps also fail at this stage but a Snickers works before all food is abandoned. The grassy slopes up to the Braeriach plateau and Wells of Dee are very friendly. But just as you believe you can drop your guard, cloud rolls in from behind and suddenly the wells and plateau disappear. This same weather hit me during the 4000 round and through fear of losing time to navigating, time was instead lost to

poor route finding (and the 4hr barrier was missed). Some runners never learn. Fortunately tonight Braeriach is kind and as quick as it came it goes. Though this descending cloud sheet has brought on dusk sooner than anticipated.

As ever West Gully is reached (but not investigated tonight) just prior to the summit of Braeriach 17:38, 21:27hrs. The last call is made and a short but failed phone video made. Bizarrely a tent and group of mountain bikers are pitched 10m from the summit. You are real aren't you? Do you want my food? But it's too late and the darkness is pushing me down.

The descent along the Sron na Lairige is pushed hard in fading light. By the time the old Sinclair hut path is located light headedness is setting in. Water at the Lairig spring helps and eating 2 dextrose tablets (1 left) improves matters slightly. The new section of the Lairig path helps and avoiding trips (where my 'under carriage' was nearly removed during 2007's race) is good news. Easily locating the Rothiemurchus lodge track before all light is lost brings more positive thoughts. Some dirty path water drinking is a reflection of where things have got to. A slight detour on the lower path to the lodge frustrates and then relief as the main track is reached 19:01.

Panicking that the 20hr barrier may be slipping, the pace is pushed for the next 3km downhill, then as it flattens the pace slackens. Hitting the main road, thoughts of a 7 minute mile pace are long gone. But it's OK, it's going to happen; only cramp, dis-integrating Lunaracers, getting lost, or a car can stop me now. At 23:22hrs the front door of the Youth hostel is reached. The stopwatch is stopped for the first time in 19hours 33minutes and 50seconds. It's over.

*Summary:* Conditions; no rain, 6 – 12 C, wind 10 - 15 mph NW, wet under foot. Distance 72.95 miles (117.4 km). Ascent 6,974m. Duration 19h 33min 50 sec. Unsupported.

*Postscript.* In the book, "Survival of the Fittest", the physiologist Mike Stroud advocates that the average human is "designed" to cover such distances. Consistent with this is the popularity of jogging and mass marathon running which have greatly increased in recent decades. In the distant past and even in some parts of the world today, distance running was, and is, a practical need and not done for pleasure. We in the West are just fortunate that we can pursue such activities through choice.