

CLIMBING CORBETTS

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Corbetts are that set of Scottish mountains with heights between 2,500 feet (762 m) and 3,000 feet (914.4 m) above sea level with a drop of at least 500 feet (152.4 m) between each mountain and any adjacent higher one. With this criterion, unlike Munros (mountains above 3,000 feet or 914.4m in height), the large height drop between Corbetts guarantees that they are quite distinct mountains. As such they often present many excellent, demanding climbs of great character and interest; height alone should not be anybody's basis for judgement of the nature or beauty of a hill.

The list number of the Corbetts stands at 222 in September 2016 but has been known to change over the years, like the Munro list numbers (presently standing at 282 after the revision in 2012). This follows changes in hill and bealach (col) heights as measured by the Ordnance Survey. On one mountain range where the drop between peaks is less than 500 feet, nobody was quite certain which summit could claim the title of Corbett because the Ordnance Survey had measured both hills, Sgurr a' Bhac Chaolais (The Peak of the Hollow in the Narrows) and Bhuidhe Bheinn (The Yellow Hill, pronunciation Boo-ie-Ben, in south Glen Shiel) at 885 m! However, a re-survey in September 2012 measured Buidhe Bheinn at 885.5 m which was 0.29 m higher than its rival for Corbett status. This distance separation of the Corbetts resulting from the 500 feet drop criterion has led to the fact that there are few places in Scotland where more than 2 or 3 Corbetts can be climbed in a single day's traverse.

By September 2016 over 6000 names had appeared on the Scottish Mountaineering Club's Munro Compleatist List, with the number of compleatists having almost doubled in the last 10 years. Corbett Compleatists are much rarer making Corbett bagging a minority sport. This has distinct advantages for the Corbett climber who likes to enjoy the mountains in peace and virtual solitude, unlike the crowded noisy bustle of Union Street in Aberdeen on a Saturday afternoon that one is

likely to encounter nowadays on the summit of many Munros. Make a silent prayer that the Corbetts will never become like Scafell Pike, England's highest mountain, where one memorable afternoon in September 2006 on a Cairngorm Club Weekend Meet, I encountered a multitude of several hundred walkers, all converging on the summit cairn around the same time. Another advantage in climbing Corbetts is their height criteria which means that their tops are often cloud-free, affording magnificent views of the surrounding countryside when at the same time the Munro peaks can be shrouded in thick pea-soup hill fog with visibility often down to less than 50 m.

Lapse rate is the rate at which air temperature decreases with height. In the troposphere or lower atmosphere, air temperature at our latitude usually decreases with elevation from sea level up to a height of about 10 km (6 statute miles) since solar radiation or direct sunlight warms the earth's surface and the surface in turn warms the air from below. The average drop in air temperature is about 6.5 degrees Celsius per 1000 metres or about 1 degree Celsius per 500 feet of ascent. This may seem insignificant but along with increased wind speed with height due to the friction effect of an air mass moving over a land surface and the resulting increased wind-chill factor, this presents another reason why climbing Corbetts has many advantages over climbing Munros. Of course, there are some disadvantages also such as the absence of a well-worn path to follow but given the eyesore of path erosion caused by too many boots on Munros such as Schiehallion, this absence of a path may be a blessing in disguise. It is certainly a great bonus for visual and environmental reasons.

When the challenge of climbing all the Munros has been conquered, the logical next challenge in Scotland for a mountaineer must be the climbing of all the Corbetts. The advantage of having reached retirement age is meeting this challenge in a more leisurely way by selecting favourable weather windows and not becoming addicted to list-ticking as is often the case with Munro baggers.

The Corbett Nobody Wanted to Climb

On a recent walking weekend with so many Munros and interesting Corbetts to climb within relatively easy reach of the excellent bunkhouse of Slochd Mhor Lodge, Carrbridge, not to mention numerous other attractive low-level walks within our stunning Cairngorms National Park, it was not surprising that nobody wanted to tackle the rather common-named Corbett Geal Charn. I say common-named because there are four Munros and two Corbetts with the same name as well as another Corbett called Geal Charn Mor. This may seem a little odd, but the translation from Gaelic means White Cairn and with that meaning, given the climate of Scotland in early Spring, Autumn and Winter it's a wonder that there are not more Geal Charns in the country. However, I was soon to discover that the name bestowed by the ancient Celts may have been derived from the extensive ground cover of white lichen which I found to be growing profusely near the summit, or even more likely than the snow cover theory, from the large white quartz cairn (see photographs on opposite page).

So, setting off alone to conquer my final Cairngorm Corbett I was confronted with the rather unwelcome roadside sign of "NO PARKING, TURNING PLACE", at the end of the minor public road to Dorback Lodge. The suggested parking place from the Scottish Mountaineering Club Hillwalkers Guide, of a nearby quarry, is no longer available since the quarry is now the site of a large store or industrial building for road construction or perhaps for snow clearing vehicles. With no other option, given the Dorback Estate sign of "NO UNAUTHORISED VEHICLES BEYOND THIS POINT", this despite another notice from the Dorback Estate which welcomes responsible access, I was obliged to park my car at the edge of the large turning circle with the hope that it would still be there undamaged on my return.

White Lichen-Cladonia sp.



Brian Davey

Quartz Cairn



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My walk-in to this rather unremarkable though quite beautiful hill was not the most direct as suggested by the Scottish Mountaineering Club (SMC) guide which includes at the start of the day, the possibility of a paddle when fording the Dorback Burn. I opted for a slightly longer route up a good land rover track which runs southeastwards parallel to the Allt Mor for about four and a half km until the watershed is reached. At this point, a steep southwest heather bashing ascent took me to the more gently sloping southeast ridge of Geal Charn. Alone with my thoughts of the recent Referendum result and the words of Wordsworth's most famous work, "*I wandered lonely as a cloud that floats on high o'er vales and hills, when all at once I saw a crowd, a host of golden*"... red deer taking off at great speed over the hilly horizon. It was at this point that I discovered a wooden marker post, the top of which looked strikingly like a deer's face, probably shaped by red deer in back-scratching, tick-removing exercise (see photograph on opposite page).

Lunch at the white quartz summit cairn was a relaxing rest, contemplating the rather hazy views of the other Cairngorm hills whilst deciding the best route back towards Dorback Lodge. The temperature at the summit was a cool 8 Celsius but I soon warmed up on my chosen return route which was down the gentle sloping northwest-to-north ridge, then after a steep heathery descent, picking up a good land rover track with a stalker's shelter near the ford on the Allt na h-Eirghe, I continued past a few small fluvioglacial kettle lochs, then past the lonely ruins of Upper Dell farm house.

Given the recent relatively dry weather, the crossing of the Dorback Burn presented no problems. After a wet spell however, fording this might prove difficult. Bright evening sunshine along the burn soon had me back to an undamaged car and the quiet satisfaction of a solitary five-hour sortie in hills where the only living creatures encountered were red deer, a mountain hare, a solitary pheasant, and numerous grouse.

What a great day, followed by a night back at the Carrbridge bunkhouse celebrating with fellow mountaineers and a dram, the smug self-satisfaction of another splendid Corbett climbed.

Marker Post



Brian Davey