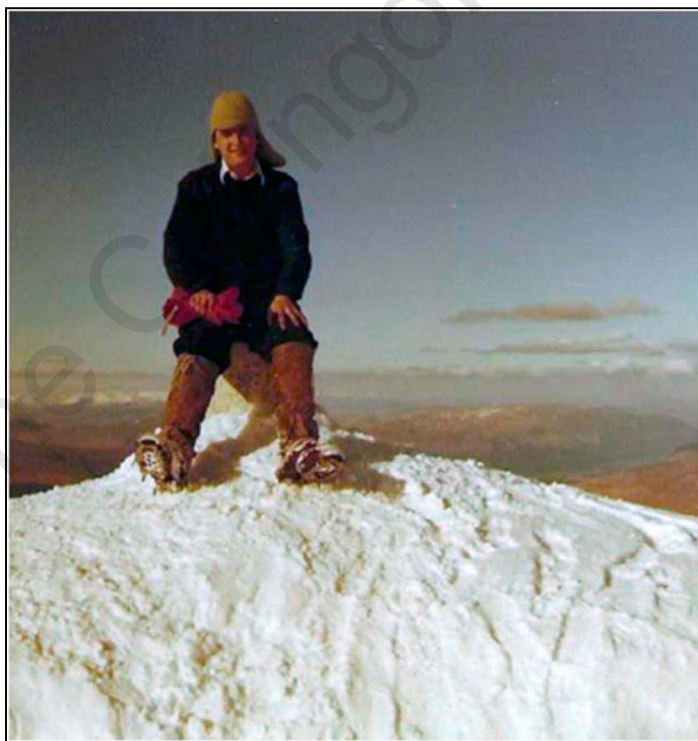


A COVID YEAR COMPLETION – A MUNRO JOURNEY FROM BEN NEVIS TO MULL

COLIN BROWN

In 1979, and indeed until around 1998, I had not heard of ‘the Munros’ and little did I know back then that an ascent of Ben Nevis would lead 41 years later to my Munro completion in Mull during a global pandemic.

My Munro journey began while I was working as an invoice clerk with Grampian Regional Council. The Divisional Road Surveyor for Kincardine and Deeside at that time, John Adams (a member of the Club and Munro Compleater) called me into his office to ask if I would like to take up one of two places given to the Council by Outward Bound, on a three-week course at their Loch Eil centre, near Fort William. I agreed to go and on Wednesday 14th Feb 1979 in brilliant sunshine, with the mountain covered in snow, I ascended my first Munro, Ben Nevis via Coire Leis (photograph1 below).



1 Ben Nevis 14th February 1979

attribution unknown

Although I thoroughly enjoyed the day and the sense of achievement, it was around 18 years before I went up another ‘3000-footer’. This was in 1996/97 (exact date not known) and it was Mount Keen via Glen Tanar. Lochnagar was climbed the following year and in 2000 I was given a gift of Cameron McNeish’s book ‘The Munros’.

Back then, with no intention of ever Compleating, I, then Doris and I, set off on walking trips just enjoying parts of Scotland we had never been to before. The Munros around the Cairngorms, Arrochar and Crianlarich were some of the first.

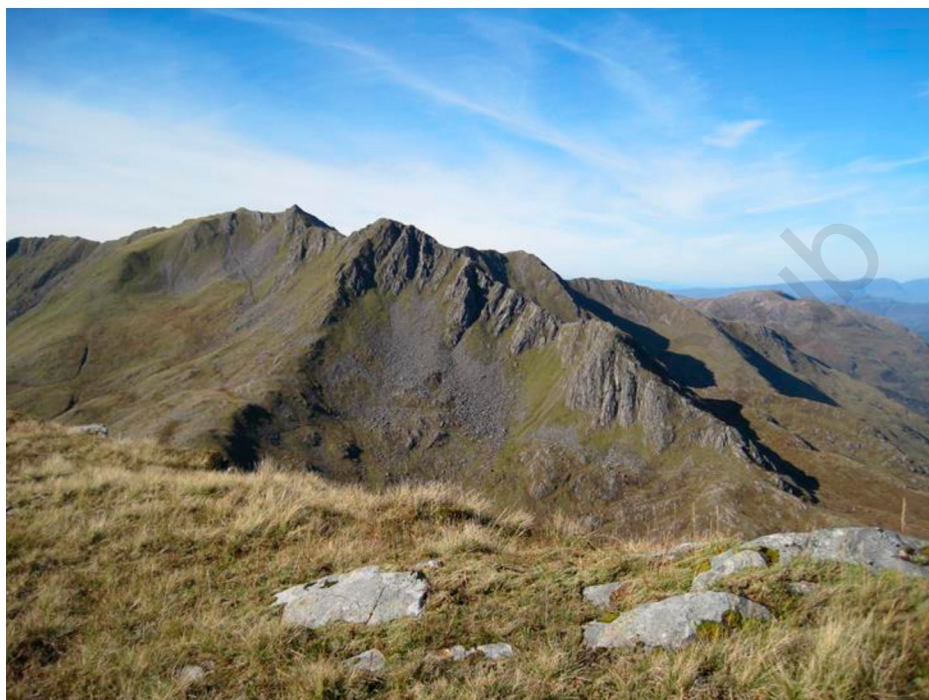
Quite soon it became obvious that we required some navigation “training” so I bought the excellent Peter Cliff book, Mountain Navigation. We also attended one of Club member, Malcolm Duckworth’s excellent navigation courses at the College of Education at Hilton. It was also about this time that Garry Wardrope, who I worked with, suggested that I join the Club. I learned a lot of hill-craft from other members whilst partaking in Day Meets, then run by Graeme Ewen.

Armed with this new knowledge I felt confident to venture out alone and for several years went on weeklong bagging trips (usually in May before the midge appeared) logging sometimes up to twenty summits in the week. On several of these trips I joined volunteer work parties on the Loch Quoich Munros, organised by Lea McNally, son of the writer of the same name. The remainder of these years were spent picking up a few more first ascents and repeating some climbed in May, with Doris.

After 3 years, in June 2003, I chalked up my 100th Munro. We decided to ascend Ben Hope to see the mid-summer sunrise from the summit, before heading to Orkney for a short holiday. However, it drizzled all the way up and the summit was in cloud from sunrise so all we saw was a faint glow to the east. We did however partake in a small bottle of Champagne, and strawberries and cream, on the summit.

As the years progressed, I still had no intention of Compleating, as I had heard horror stories of the Skye ridge (from sane people!) and its eleven Munros. Also, work and life have a habit of getting in the way.

I became more involved in the Club and started to go on Weekend Meets and Overnights on which I was able to get to some remote locations and pick off the Munros. These included Knoydart and Glen Affric where some of my best days and nights on the hills have taken



2 The Saddle in Glen Shiel

Colin Brown

place. I also particularly liked the Glen Shiel area (photograph 2 above) where over twenty Munros are within easy reach of Ratagan Youth Hostel and Morvich. Three Overnights saw me pick off eleven Munros, three of which I had done before on the south Glen Shiel ridge. It was not all Munro bagging, however, with another memorable Overnighter seeing four of us go over Meall Mheinnidh & Beinn Lair on a traverse from Poolewe to Kinlochewe.

Approaching my 50th I tried to get up to 200 Munros by my birthday and this I did with only days to spare on Stob Ban (photographs 3&4 on the following page) in the Grey Corries from the Lairig Leacach.

After 2010, my pace slowed considerably as we chose to undertake walks on long distance paths, and abroad in Mallorca, Poland and Corfu. At the time I had reached 200, I had also made successful forays to Skye and remarkably, in only two trips, I had done nine of the twelve Munros,



3 Stob Ban, my 200th Munro

Colin Brown



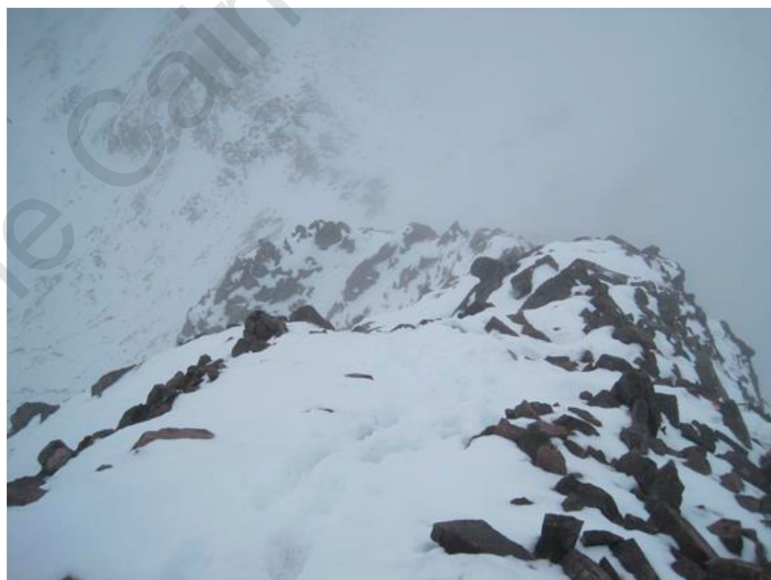
4. Selfie at the Summit of Stob Ban

Colin Brown

including the In Pinn. This was climbed during a memorable week with a mix of Cairngorm Club and Turriff Hillwalking and Mountaineering Club members. These mountains are best done in fine weather, and we certainly got that on the trip. This left three on Skye which were done on Club meets in 2014 and 2015, the latter trip seeing my total Munros reach 258 and, with that, thoughts that a Completion was possible.

To get to this total involved many camping and bothying trips, camping for the Fisherfield 6, the southern Cairngorms hills, Carn an Fhithleir & An Sgarsoch, and a few at Derry Lodge. Bothies used included Ben Alder Cottage (no ghost seen!) and Culra on a 3-day trip, and also Bendronaig for Lurg Mhor and Bidein a' Choire Sheasgaich. Many other bothies were visited, and I also made good use of Scottish Youth Hostel Association establishments.

Days in the hills are not always a bed of roses. In my twenty years of walking the Munros I made many winter ascents, however, turning back was sometimes the best option when alone, as on An Gearanach in the Mamores (photograph 5 below). I also had my fair share of wet and blustery summits in all seasons of the year.



5 An Gearanach Ridge.

Colin Brown

As I crept towards the final few Munros some remote summits were picked off, notably Seana Bhragh and Mullach na Dheiragain. At the start of 2019 with nine still to do I began to hatch a plan to Compleat on Ben More in Mull on my 60th birthday. The aim was to do the other eight in 2019 leaving me 2020 to plan and contemplate my Completion and celebrations in September. However, 2019 seemed to fly past with wet and stormy weekends and family commitments meaning that by the start of 2020 I had only done two of the eight required before Mull.

This meant the schedule changed to get the remaining six done in the spring of 2020; only for a little matter of Covid-19 and lockdown to scupper that plan. In the 3-4 months of 'movement restrictions' it was impossible to get to the hills I needed, and it was only at the beginning of August that a window opened for me to get out to them. In the meantime, I had decided to retire on my 60th so finished work on 7th August and was at the end of Loch Arkaig two days later for a round of four Munros. Sgurr na Ciche, Garbh Choich Mhor, Sgurr nan Corieachan, and Sgurr Mor were completed in a punishing sixteen and a half hours. This left the two Munros on the Aonach Eagach ridge to do. My pal Kevin who was with me at Loch Arkaig had been over the ridge a couple of times before and we agreed to go the following week to do it. However, he developed a painful knee after the last trip, so with days to go till we went to Mull, I went down to Kinlochleven and slept in the car at the Ice Factor. The next day I ascended both summits as up-and-downs from sea-level to make the Completion possible as planned.

On the long-awaited day, a good number of family and friends, including the current and three past Club Presidents, were on the summit of Ben More to witness the end of my 'Munro journey'. I was very lucky with this as within days of getting back from Mull, restrictions were again implemented meaning the six weeks gap I had, and made good use of, was the only time in 2020 that it could have been done.

Over the piece, I have met and enjoyed walking the Munros with, family, Cairngorm Club members, Turriff Club members and others, making many good and lasting friendships. However along with this there is the sadness of those who are no longer with us, notably Club Members: Jim Bryce, Graeme McEwan and my good friend Satej Shirodkar



6 Guard of Honour 5th September 2020

John Kingsley



7 Ben More, Touching Stone, 5th September 2020

John Kingsley

What next, I am often asked, the Corbetts? No, I'm not going to go there but instead I think we will, at our leisure, revisit some Munros and hopefully go to ones we never got a view from first time round, in nice weather obviously! Also, the Aonach Eagach ridge is high on that list of things still to do.



8 The Toast

John Kingsley