

AMPHIBIANS IN THE CAIRNGORMS

LAUREN SMITH

A movement catches my eye as I head down from Beinn a' Bhuid, another frog (*Rana temporaria*), probably the most frequently sighted amphibian in the Cairngorms although the toad, *Bufo bufo* and the palmate newt *Lissotriton helveticus* are also seen in good numbers.



1 Cairngorm Frog

Lauren Smith

Today has been what my friends and I would call a classic Cairngorms session, a 35km loop taking in Beinn Bhreac, Beinn a' Chaorainn and Beinn a' Bhuid, clear skies for the most part and what cloud did sweep in had the decency to stay high level.

I crouch down to take a quick picture of the frog (photograph1 above) before continuing on my way. I would send that photograph to Ivor later, together with some other landscape shots from today. Ivor Howitt is my friend with a fascinating history which inextricably links the Cairngorm Club with a small group of adventurers who formed the first post-war recreational SCUBA diving club in the UK, the Amphibians Club.

In order to explain this, I will start with how I first came to be in contact with Ivor thanks to a chance encounter at a dive show in late 2014. At the show I visited the Historical Diving Society's stand (I was attracted by the books they had for sale, and was ecstatic to find Cousteau's *The Silent World*, Hans Hass' *Diving to Adventure* and Eugenie Clark's *Lady with a Spear*), where I started to chat to someone about where I was currently living (Aberdeen), and they mentioned Ivor's name and his early experiments with homemade SCUBA set-ups.

Upon my return to Aberdeen, I trawled the internet and found a link with Ivor's email address, and so began our correspondence half a world away from one another; between Scotland and New Zealand, where Ivor emigrated in the 1950's.

A teenager at the end of the Second World War, enthused by William Beebe's underwater descriptions, Ivor was determined to go diving. The Scottish temperatures, lack of equipment and training did little to put him off. Instead, Ivor improvised with materials to hand, he modified a civil defence gas mask and connected it to a motor car foot pump with a length of rubber tubing. Then together with a friend Hamish Gavin, went to a farm dam on a cold wintry day with frost on the ground, where they stripped off and took it in turns to submerge in the icy water with teeth chattering, almost paralysed with cold to complete their inaugural dives.

Following this there were plenty more inventions and adventures that followed including a 1920's style diving helmet made from a sheet of copper wrapped around a dustbin lid, with 60 pounds of lead weights bolted in place. Air was supplied via a garden hose connected to two pairs of trusty car tyre foot pumps, all of which were transported on push bikes to Souterhead, a sheltered inlet just a few miles south of Aberdeen, which became a favoured spot to test out equipment (photograph 2 the following page).

Diving was fast becoming a core pursuit of Ivor and his friends (Les McCoss, Hamish Gavin, Alf Goodwin, Hamish McIntyre, John Gavin, Laurie Donald, Ken Fraser and Ron Macdonald) together with their other main focus, mountaineering with some rock climbing on sea cliffs, caving, skiing and canoeing thrown in for good measure. Together the friends decided that the name 'Amphibians' was an obvious choice to cover their above and below water pursuits and so in 1948 The Amphibians Club was made official.



2 Testing the Helmet at Souterhead photograph attribution unknown

A giant leap forward came in late 1948 when Ivor purchased the British version of the French Cousteau-Gagnan aqualung from Siebe, Gorman and Co. Getting the cylinders filled was not straight forward, Home Office regulations wouldn't allow the cylinders to be filled with air for civilian use and so instead the British Oxygen Company supplied pure oxygen which meant dives were limited to less than 10m.

Ivor revelled in the task of designing and making all the club's underwater breathing equipment. In 1949 Ivor wrote to the Dunlop Rubber company enquiring about the production of fins, as they had made the naval frogmen's fins during the war. They did reply, but incredibly said that "they could see no commercial market for swim fins in peacetime". A response Ivor notes, that reflected the virtual non-existence of sport diving in the UK at that time.

By late 1950 Ivor decided to emigrate to Australia, it was time to realise his dream and try-out his Siebe-Gorman in warmer waters! By May 1952 Ivor took his first colour shots whilst diving off Lindeman Island, in The Whitsundays. His precious camera and film encased within his homemade 'cooking pot' housing. In November 1953, together with Bill Young, Ivor took some of the first underwater colour photographs of the Great Barrier Reef.

In late 1954, a family emergency saw him return to Scotland. After this Ivor travelled to New Zealand where he settled in 1956 with his wife Mary, and his and the other Amphibians' pioneering exploits remained dormant until 1999, when Dive New Zealand published Ivor's 'Memories of an Aberdeen Amphibian'. This was later followed by Ivor's publication of his book in 2007, '*Fathomeering – An Amphibian's Tale*'. Shortly after I first contacted Ivor, he was kind enough to send me a copy of this (there is also a copy in the Cairngorm Club library).

Whilst reading *Fathomeering* I soon discovered that when not underwater I, like Ivor and his friends would head to the hills. Throughout Ivor's book the hills mainly the Cairngorms (thanks to their relative proximity), are a regular feature of those early years prior to Ivor moving away. His descriptions of cycling for miles to reach a different hill whenever he had a free Sunday are as inspiring as they are sobering. He says that these experiences developed his ability to look after himself in remote areas, and in all weathers.

The River Dee and the Lui Burn featured as part of the Amphibians' exploits, with a pool where they would dive if the sea was too rough. Further up the burn Luibeg Cottage and Corrour Bothy feature in his writing where in 1946 Ivor and friends sought shelter after escaping a white-out on the Ben Macdui plateau (photograph 3 on page 165).

71 years later in 2017 my friends and I left Corrour at just after 4am to start our ascent of the Devil's Point.

In 1947 Ivor describes the deep snow drifts in the Black Spout which meant an attempt instead on Raeburn's Gully, only to be blocked



3 Sheltering at Corrour Bothy in 1946 photo attribution unknown

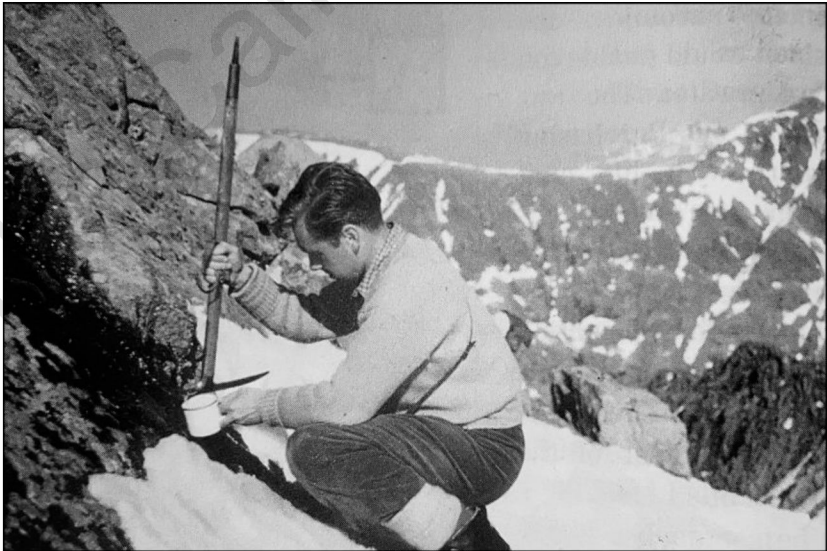
eventually by a polished sheet of glistening black ice sweeping upwards to bulging green ice and clusters of enormous icicles overhanging the full width of the gully (Photographs 4&5 the following page). My husband and I on an unseasonably warm day in early spring 2012, carefully

negotiated the rapidly melting ice that remained in the Black Spout and finished our final scramble to the summit of Lochnagar.



4 Lochnagar 1947

photograph attribution unknown



5 Ivor collects drinking water from moss with the aid of his ice axe.

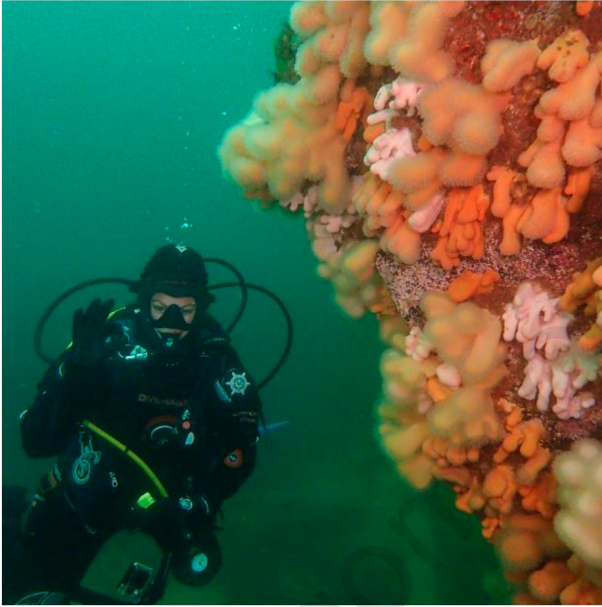
photograph attribution unknown

In a passage of his book Ivor recounts his experience with a Brocken spectre, a phenomenon which gave rise to the legend of Fearlas Mor the ‘Old Grey Man of Ben Macdui’. *I was fortunate to see this apparition for myself on a hillside one day: there was a low sun behind me and downhill from where I stood a giant figure materialised in the mist, created by the refraction of my own shadow through the moist atmosphere. In modern living surrounded by technology we don’t really experience the magical side of nature. This magic is one of the charms of mountaineering. The luminous quivering of the atmosphere over warm heather or perhaps the plaintive whistling cry of a curlew on the moors can evoke a heightened awareness of inner spirit at one with the quietude of the natural world. I have never felt alone when walking the hills of Upper Deeside.*

Ivor is 94 now, but recalls these adventures with absolute clarity, there are many parallels between our interests, having dived and hiked the same locations, albeit many years apart. In 2019 I asked Ivor’s permission to reinstate the Amphibians Club. My mission is to continue the outdoor adventures and to honour the original members’ legacy. If you would like to find out more about the Amphibians Club or get in touch, then please visit www.amphibiansclub.co.uk or catch us on Twitter @AmphibiansClub or Instagram @fathomeering

***Ivor Howitt** was born in Aberdeen in 1927 joining the Cairngorm Club as a Junior Member in 1946. Although living on the other side of the world Ivor maintains contact with the Club Secretary and recently donated to the Club a copy of his 2007 book “An Amphibian’s Tale”. This available in the Club library at Aberdeen University Library*

***Lauren** is a marine biologist and scuba diver, also happy on terra firma - just like amphibians! She spends a lot of time outdoors mountaineering and enjoying wildlife photography” (photographs 6&7)*



6. Lauren diving off Rosehearty

Chris Rickard



7 Lauren with the Ben Lawers range in the background. Gordon Diack

Postscript In the spirit of the Amphibians Club, it has come to the Editor's attention that Cairngorm Club member Anne Pinches has recently added wild swimming (Photograph 1 below) to her list of hillwalking and distance-cycling exploits.



1 Knockburn Loch January 18th, 2022.

Kathleen How