

The Hare and the Tortoise

by Marcus Risdell

My plan to leave London after 28 years had been fraught with anxious moments, all the more so due to the pandemic and lock-down. With most of my belongings left behind in storage, I returned the key for my home of many years and boarded the train to Scotland. The cottage I was to share on the farm on the Black Isle was idyllic but cold in mid-February. Another volunteer was already in residence and huddled around the stove, we chatted late into the night. I was looking forward to some hard work in the fields.

We were planting willows, the going tough as we dug into the still frozen ground. Despite the exhilaration of gulping in the cold, clean air, I had a nagging pain in my abdomen. At the end of my first week I was rushed into Raigmore hospital and had my burst appendix removed! I was there for ten days.

As I slowly regained strength the nurses encouraged me onto my feet and I began to explore more of the hospital. By the lifts I found a large window overlooking Inverness and there to my surprise was this massive snow-covered mountain, glowing red in the sunset. Captivated by the spectacle I gazed on until forced back to the warmth of my bed in the ward. The map on my phone told me it was Ben Wyvis. On its north side is Loch nan Druidean. These names held magic in my imagination and I knew then that as soon as I could, I would climb the mountain and camp by the side of the loch.

Discharged and back in front of the stove in the cottage on the Black Isle, I realised my healing was only just beginning. The pain was not too bad, but any swift movement jiggled all my bits around inside. I was bloated and had to hold up my trousers with a bit of old rope. A short stroll to visit new neighbours, the sheep and the cows, left me exhausted: I had to rebuild myself, and I needed to eat. Oh, how I needed to eat!

I set myself the task of walking a little further each day. After two weeks I made it as far as the A9 and the man that sold goose eggs. Another week and I was on top of Ord Hill, all 191 meters of hard-won ascent: hill fitness must be stored in the appendix. And there in the distance was Ben Wyvis again, still a glorious white above the dreary browns of the moors. As my

explorations of the Black Isle became more ambitious, I began to appreciate how the mountain unexpectedly pops up here and there as you pass over the crown of a hill or reach a clearing in the woods. I visited ruined neolithic tombs and Pictish hillforts. Here I felt a deep sense of awe



that the ancients must have known as the mysterious massif, shining white in its winter blanket, floated in and out of their landscape. Indeed, its name derives from the Gaelic *fuathais*, with its meaning of terror, dismal and gloom. Yet it also carries another meaning of great quantity or size, just as does the English word awesome. It is sometimes likened to a beached whale, but I feel that does it an injustice. I saw it as a massive mountain hare, ears tucked in and curled up in its form in the heather.

In April I returned to work on the farm. Organic soil requires a lot of weeding, but bending over still caused a lot of pain in my still tender belly. I preferred to volunteer for all the heavy jobs, the shovelling, digging and turning the compost, as this made me feel stronger. May was approaching and the days lengthening. Lock-down restrictions were being eased. I pulled out my big pack; it was time to go for it and begin the ascent to Ben Wyvis.

My choice of a high camp at Loch nan Druidean was fortuitous: public transport options suggested a start from Evanton in the east. My route would be broken into stages which could be easily reversed should I find my body or my stamina were not yet ready. I was even concerned that the hip belt of my pack, heavy with winter gear, would irritate my scar tissue and make the journey impossible. This would be tested on the first stage, a shortcut struggling over the broken ground and stumps of a cleared plantation and onto the bus stop at Tore roundabout.

I couldn't resist including a quick visit to the chambered cairn at Drum Mor and the Black Rock Gorge of Harry Potter fame. It's a long old plod up Glen Glass to the road end at Eileanach Lodge, but that suited me fine, as did the lochside track to the incongruous Tudor revival Wyvis Lodge. It felt like a long time since I'd been in big boots and my feet dragged heavy, but other than this I felt fabulous as I turned up the stalker's path to Carn Gorm. To reach my camp at the upper Loch I had to struggle through thick heather and clamber over deep peat hags, tricky with a big pack at the best of times, and I remained mindful of my condition. The ridge of Glas Leathad Beag gleamed white across the water with old snow piled deeply



in hollows round the corrie. I got the tent up for an early night.

Sleep came fitfully. Snug in my winter bag I had fulfilled one part of the challenge I had set myself in the hospital just ten weeks before. Perhaps that was enough, and in the morning I should descend? Then it started to snow. Every now and then I had to whack the sides of the tent to stop them folding in on me. I found the sound of fluttering flakes and swoosh of snow as it sougled off the fabric soothing and drifted away into dreams full of druids and stone circles. Before I knew it, it was dawn. Loch nan Druidean was like a mirror and everything was white, light flurries adding to the beauty of the scene rather than showing malice. I decided to go on.

It was as the path disappeared under the ever-deepening snow that I met the tracks. The mountain hare had bounded straight up the cone of Tom a' Chònich, leaving distinctive footprints in the now deepening snow, its forepaws seemingly behind its rear.



The steepening slope forced me into a staggered zig zag and I could only marvel at the speed and agility as it had raced up the slope.

My progress may have been that of a tortoise, but I felt so alive. Despite the unusual exertion required I was at peace with myself, my mind, my body, and the mountain. It all made perfect sense. I would climb Tom a' Chònich and then make a decision about continuing to the higher summit on Ben Wyvis, Glas Leathad Mòr. Deep down I believed the hare had already made the decision for me.

After parting company with the tracks, the snow lay undisturbed across the bealach separating the two peaks. I was now alone in a pristine snowscape, with gentle flurries flitting around my face, melting on my tongue as I struggled to regain my breath. The hare's excellent adaptation to this winter mountain-scape inspired me and the lure of Ben Wyvis called me on. Over to the east, brooding beneath a glowering grey cloud

ceiling, mothballed rigs lay moored in the Cromarty Firth. These dark hulking sea-monsters jutted abruptly into the sky, potent symbols of our thirst for oil and the race to destroy our world. Such a contrast from the pure soft curves of the summit plateau ahead, a seemingly pristine home for the mountain hare. But this too has been tainted. Already global warming is stripping away the snows, leaving the hare naked and vulnerable in its white winter coat. How many aeons will it take for the hare to adapt to the destruction we have caused in such a short time since our industrial revolution.

Lost in my thoughts as I plodded through the snow. I disappeared into a heavy snow squall with a brief white-out. One last test. I took a hasty bearing on the trig point and panting from the exertion arrived at the summit just minutes before midday on the first of May.



I wish I could have lingered longer, but I still had a way to go. I was tired and needed one more camp by Loch Glass before my bus home from Evanton. My journey to full health and hill fitness was still a long way from being over. It had taken me three days to climb a mountain that most people easily summit in a day. But what a momentous little expedition it had been. It was as if the hare and the mountain had invited me to become part of them.

I've now moved on from the farm and the Black Isle, starting out on a new life in Inverness. Every time I cross the River Ness I glance over to "The Ben" as they affectionately call it round here. I smile and the mountain pricks up its ears and smiles back.

The Cairngorm Club