

THE CAIRNGORM CLUB JOURNAL  
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## EDITORIAL

The last 2 years have seen significant turmoil in the UK and beyond. Perhaps this goes some way to explain some of the recurring themes in this issue of the Journal. Firstly, we have members' rich and varied accounts of getting away from the grind and concerns of everyday life into the landscape and the sustaining pleasures to be had from Club walking, climbing and social activities. Another theme concerns the underlying concern that we all share for the health of these cherished landscapes and the inter-related and complex issues of climate change, biodiversity and habitat loss. I greatly appreciate the generous contributions from experts describing the projects afoot in the Cairngorms to understand and reverse change. The passion individuals reveal for the detail of our ecological systems, be it fungal, peatland or bee communities and the many species recorded in our own Glen Ey woods is inspiring and instils hope and optimism. As a fact of life, the present becomes the past as represented by a number of historical items.

As we continue to be fortified by our walking and climbing exploits, we might perhaps consider what we can do individually or together to look after and protect the landscapes we all cherish.

Jean Robinson, January 2024.



Beinn Eighe from the summit of Sgurr Dubh

### The Book

Most climbers will be familiar with *Classic Rock (CR)*, a large format, lavishly illustrated anthology compiled by Ken Wilson and first published in October 1978. It comprises a personal essay about each climb supported by a series of photographs by some of the great figures of the climbing world, including some from our own neck of the mountains, such as Bill Brooker and Brian Lawrie. Other writers of note in the book include W.H. Murray, Tom Weir, Jim Perrin, Lord Hunt, Dennis Gray, Donald Bennet, Ken Crocket and Malcolm Slessor. It is one of the most popular and iconic works of climbing literature ever written. Published as a companion volume to *Hard Rock* and followed by *Extreme Rock*, *Cold Climbs* and several walking books in a similar style, it has acquired a legendary status. The price of these books caused "AF" in a review of *Hard Rock* (first in the series) in the Aberdeen Evening Express to write "*the price will rob this excellent book of the success it deserves and make it end up on the coffee table instead of in the well-thumbed category*" (Aberdeen Evening Express, 18.12.74). Of all the books *Classic Rock* was perhaps the "*most inspirational for it encompassed not only climbs that were do-able by the majority but also the wealth of history and anecdote that came with them. It was also about accessible climbing as most of the routes were done prior to "modern protection" so with wires, cams, harnesses they are now a safe introduction to leading*". (Newman, 2008) Sneeringly called *Geriatric Rock* by some, it is not about technical difficulty, it is about the history, character and feel of the climbs.

It was a complete departure from the guidebook format of most climbing guides. The 80 climbs covered are from the whole of the UK and the preface to the book states that it was to be limited to climbs of up to Hard Severe grade (many of these have since been upgraded to Very Severe) as "*these can be tackled by any climber regardless of age, experience or fitness*". Later editions contain additional routes on Hen Cloud in Staffordshire and colour photographs. More than a pitch by pitch, hold by hold description it is a celebration of the climbs and the people who climbed them. The book pays homage to the pioneers who started it all - Shadbolt, Abraham, Collie, O.G. Jones, Kirkus and Bell.

The driving force behind the series was the disputatious, opinionated, highly talented, sadly deceased Ken Wilson. As Walt Unsworth said when presenting

him with an award “*when Ken pours oil on troubled waters it is simply so he can set light to it*”. Wilson had been trained as an architectural photographer and his publications set new standards in mountaineering journalism, particularly in illustration and layout. (Unsworth, 2002).

### **The Routes**

Most of the routes were discovered in the first half of the twentieth century but some were more recent discoveries and often by climbers whose normal level was a far higher standard. Adverikie Wall (1967) was once described by Patey as the finest route he had ever walked past. The Cioch Nose in Applecross (1960) and the elegant Squareface (1953) in the Cairngorms are “*climbs of distinction free from undue difficulty*” (Wilson, 1978). There were also latecomers in the South West of England – Devil’s Slide, Lundy (1961), Demo Route and Doorpost, Cornwall (1955).

Few would contest the choice of routes. It is a consensus that has not been substantially challenged. The 26 in Scotland include the Cuillin Ridge, Cioch Direct, Arrowroot, Integrity, Cioch Nose of Applecross, Long Climb, Tower Ridge, North Face and Agag’s Groove, Chasm of Buachaille Etive Mor, Mitre Ridge, Squareface, Talisman, Clean Sweep, Savage Slit, Eagle Ridge, Ardverikie Wall, Punster’s Crack, Recess Route and Ardgarten Arete on the Cobbler, Sou’Wester Slabs and Labyrinth on Arran and the Glencoe routes of Long Crack, Archer Ridge, Crypt Route and Clachaig Gully. This latter route is the only one that is not included in the modern selected routes guides to Scotland although it is still in the later editions of CR. Better climbers than I assure me that the route is now not considered worthy of inclusion in selected guides due to loose rock, rock fall and vegetation. Perhaps a classic route does not need to be a quality route in the modern sense. Part of what makes a classic is the history and mystique attached to it. Maybe what puts people off the route is the hilarious write up by Allan Austin in CR which includes a brilliant description of a Sassenach (himself) climbing the route in horrendous conditions with a cast of unsympathetic companions (Haston, Marshall, Moriarty and Smith). Rachel Crolla who has completed all the CR routes says: “*However, having re-read Allan Austin’s excellent Classic Rock account of his falls and near drownings in the Clachaig, I felt newly invigorated for attempt number two.*” ([UKC Articles - ARTICLE: Collecting the Classics - Tales from a Classic Rock Completionist - ukclimbing.com](http://ukclimbing.com))

### **My Attempts**

As to my own involvement with Classic Rock. Being rather a trepidatious, feeble climber (the old term was “a Bumbly”) some of the routes I did in CR

were for me a matter of heroic endeavour. But I enjoyed them and that surely gives an idea of the essence of the book.

Completing most of CR probably means little to friends and family. Ken Wilson scornfully labelled those who aimed to complete “*puerile tickers*” so I must confess to being a failed puerile tucker. However, I must let you know that I soloed some of them! This was quite inadvertent as for a period in the late seventies and early eighties I was climbing in Wales before the widespread introduction in this country of harnesses and belay devices with a schoolboy of slight build who used just a waist belay! He would never have been able to hold me on a leader fall. These routes included Nea and Crackstone Rib – no easy touches. I still shudder at the thought. These days things are a little easier because gear is not only more effective and safer, but it is lighter.

The first Classic Rock routes I climbed were in the Peak District and Wales. I failed to record the exact dates of my ascents and I cannot always remember who I climbed them with. Oldham Mountaineering Club figured largely in many of the Welsh ascents and a distinctive memory is setting out on a dark November morning from a club meet at the Crafnant Hut in Snowdonia to climb Amphitheatre Gully on Craig YrYsfa. CR just gives a hint of what to expect on the finish: “*The solution to the final problem is complicated and demanding*”. The reality was a delicate traverse inside a cave to emerge through a hole in an exposed position at the top of the buttress. Done in plastic boots!

Another memory is from sometime in the early 90s on Sron Na Ciche on Skye. We were attempting the Cioch Direct/Arrowroot/Integrity routes. I had previously done the first two but for some reason Integrity (now graded VS) remained to be climbed and the first pitch was my lead. I failed to reach the crucial hold on the bulge and had to retreat to the belay. My companion being an ex-Cambridge blue hurdler was well tall enough to reach the crucial hold and we soon topped out. I climbed Agag’s Groove with the same person around the same time (see photo, Rod Campbell, Agag’s Groove, Buchaille Etive Mor on the following page).

Main Wall of Cryn Las sticks in the mind with its tremendous exposure, air of seriousness, gloomy aspect, lack of escape routes and committing moves.



Agag's Groove

Photo credit John Crossman

They lasted almost to the Gendarme on the West Ridge of Sgurr Nan Gillean that still existed in 1983. The Gendarme collapsed into Harta Corrie shortly afterwards. We took about 19 hours to complete the traverse from Gars Bheinn to Sgurr nan Gillean. We started in the late afternoon from Glenbrittle campsite, went up through Coire a' Ghrunnda, jogged out to Gars Bheinn, returned via the Thearlaich-Dubh gap where even in those days there was a queue and bivvied for a few hours below Sgurr Alasdair before progressing along the ridge.

Again, fortunately I had a good climber to get me up it but there were sometimes problems with that arrangement. I remember climbing Flying Buttress with an E grade climber who simply straightened out the line converting a Diff into a hard to follow HVS!

I did the Cuillin Ridge in June 1983 with someone who told me that it was his seventh attempt, so he was desperately keen to succeed especially as conditions were near perfect. This was my first time on the Cuillin, and without him we would not have finished it. We were so tired and thirsty by the time we reached Naismith's Route (another route to come back to) that we by-passed it and went on to Am Basteir, chancing upon a snowfield on the way from which we were able to make snowballs.

## Recent climbs



Eagle Ridge

Photo credit John Crossman

Around forty years later the Cumming-Crofton route of Mitre Ridge and Eagle Ridge of Lochnagar were climbed courtesy of my “carers” in the Cairngorm Club.( See above: Rod on Eagle Ridge and “carers” in the photographs on the following pages )

I found that the main difficulty of these routes was getting to them and back in one day. Mitre Ridge was 12.5 hours Keiloch to Keiloch with the use of bikes as far as Clach a’ Cleirich. Last year I did Savage Slit on Coire An Lochan and The Cioch Nose of Applecross with Mark Peel, senior citizen and born again climber of this club; a combined age on the rope of nearly 150 years.

**Confessions** I have not completed all the routes, nor have I lead all the pitches. I have climbed 67 of the routes to date and one or two of those we didn’t strictly finish and at my advanced age I can have only a faint hope of



becoming a “Compleator”. “Not finished” routes include the Chasm of Buchaille Etive Mor when we bailed out before the converging walls pitch due to sheer volume of water or perhaps exhaustion. We had started up a perfectly dry stream bed and all went well until the point when it dawned on us that the ever-increasing volume of water was caused by the melting of the massive snow field above us.

Another route we had to abandon after a couple of pitches was the poorly protected Avalanche/Red Wall/Longland’s Continuation route of Y Lliwedd in Snowdonia when strong cross winds threatened to blow us off our precarious perches. My companion of the day still remembers it as a wise decision.

“To do” routes are mainly Scottish as for most of my life I lived “down south” and most of those remaining now require a long day and a good forecast. These include the Cairngorm classics - Clean Sweep and Talisman, Long Climb on the Ben, the Cobbler routes and the Aonach Dubh routes in Glencoe. Medical advances may make them a possibility, but I am not counting on it.



Cairngorm Club Climbing Carers Photo credit Stuart Message



Lunchtime below Yellow Slab, First Pinnacle Rib, Tryfan.

Credit Steve Hoyle

### **Record Attempts**

My pedestrian and long-drawn-out saga is in complete contrast to the amazing records for CR completions that have become common in recent years.

The UK Round. The most recent record for the complete round of the UK is by Anna Taylor which she finished in September 2021. The 23-year-old climbed more than 10,000m ticking off all 83 routes She soloed most of the climbs. Anna also cycled 2400km and carried her kit on the journey that lasted 62 days.

(UKC Articles - INTERVIEW: Anna Taylor on her Classic Rock by Bike Tour - ukclimbing.com)

The Lakes Classic Rock Round is 34 miles of Lakeland terrain with 4,300 metres of ascent, scaling 15 rock routes totalling 70 pitches. On Wednesday 17th August 2022, former professional climber and mountain runner Shane Ohly broke the record on the route, clocking a time of 9 hours and 22 minutes. (Lake District Classic Rock record smashed - UKC News - INTERVIEW: Shane Ohly Smashes the Lakes Classic Rock Challenge Record - ukclimbing.com)  
Lake District Classic Rock record smashed - BASE Magazine (base-mag.com)

The Welsh Classic Rock Round current record is held by Will Birkett who finished an unassisted solo round of the Classic Rock routes in Wales on 28<sup>th</sup> May 2022. He completed all 21 Welsh routes in 21 hours 45 minutes. The round involved around 60 miles of running with 135 pitches (2,335m) of climbing. UKC Articles - INTERVIEW: Will Birkett on his North Wales Classic Rock Record (ukclimbing.com)

The Peak District Classic Rock record is now held by Tom Newberry with a truly astounding time of 3:10:08 set in 2022. The challenge involves climbing 17 pitches across 12 routes and cycling the 55km between three crags. (Peak Classic Rock Round Record Broken by Montane Athlete Tom Newberry - myoutdoors.co.uk)

The Glencoe Classic Rock Round current record is held by Ali Rose and Mark Chambers. Seven routes, fifty-three pitches, 3,000 metres of elevation, and twenty-three kilometres on foot in 12 hours 56 minutes on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2023. (UKC News - Glencoe 'Classic Rock' Link-up for Ali Rose and Matt Rowbottom - ukclimbing.com)

The Cairngorm Classic Rock Link Up. In the Cairngorms we have a somewhat bigger challenge. Massive distances and hard climbs mean that records are fewer. Mark Chambers and Ali Rose hold the fastest known time of 17 hours 28 minutes on 12<sup>th</sup> July 2020. The route was from Loch Muick to Cairngorm ski car park. They commented that "it would be possible to do it a fair bit faster ... We weren't quite comfortable with soloing some of the routes ... (I don't think I'd solo Talisman or Clean Sweep anyway) and we certainly weren't running the whole time".

(In a Day the Cairngorm Classic Rock link up - YouTube)

By the time of publication of this article some more records may have been broken. Keep up to date on the UK Climbing website.

### **Acknowledgements**

National Library of Scotland and the Alpine Club Library for help with references.

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<https://myoutdoors.co.uk/>

## ADVENTURES ON THE BLACK CUILLIN OF SKYE

MARK NORRIS

*'All is sheer rock, black, wrinkled, chaotic, torn and shattered into every conceivable shape. You seem to stand in nature's primeval workshop; here are the very bones of the old earth' - so wrote J.A. McCulloch of the Cuillin in 1905.*

Having read many compelling writings of Skye's mountains over the years (the above is an extract from Simon Ridge's excellent book - *The Black Ridge*), I have always wanted to climb in the footsteps and footholds of Mackenzie and Collie and their peers and experience these unique mountains for myself. Moving back home to Scotland in 2021 allowed me to do just that. These are the tales of my adventures on the Cuillin over 2022 and 2023.

### **The Dubh Slabs and Sgurr Dubh Mhor**

One of the first things I did when moving to Aberdeenshire was to join a climbing club, and what better than Scotland's oldest - The Cairngorm Club - right on my doorstep. And when the opportunity to head to Skye with the Club for a weekend in May 2022 and stay in the legendary JMCS hut at Loch Coruisk arose, I grabbed it with both hands.

Taking the boat from Elgol over Loch Scavaig to Loch Coruisk on the Saturday morning, provided my first real view of the Cuillin which was everything I expected it to be - dark, grey, and cloud covered with the broken teeth of the Ridge showing through in only a few places.

Saturday was Scotland at its dreichest best, so when the various Club members headed off in small parties in different directions, it was always unlikely that we would get up to the ridge line itself. A few of us headed along the shoreline of Loch Coruisk and as we approached the iconic and massive Dubh Slabs of gabbro rock, we could see fellow Club member Kolbjorn in his red hill jacket away high up on the slopes of Coir Uisg at the end of the loch. Given the famous grippiness of gabbro, our small group briefly considered ascending the steep wet rock, but wisdom won over valor, and we postponed the Slabs until the next day. Instead, we headed up the nearby flanks of An Garbh-choire, contoured around to the south and then back down to the loch, getting back to the hut for tea - and chats on ideas and plans for the day to come.

Come Sunday, club colleagues Vicky, Forbes and I gathered to depart for the Slabs with a rope and a few nuts and slings for the abseil off Sgurr Dubh Beag. The Slabs were all they promised to be - a kilometre of 45–50-degree incline,

amazing grip, and a lovely long ascent with Loch Coruisk way below us. Although the Slabs are generally rated 'Moderate', careful balanced movement was required on a few sections to safely make it to the top. Then it was the abseil off Sgurr Dubh Beag - Vicky leading the way, followed by me then Forbes. The 2 overhangs on the way down made it an (h)airy and lively descent down onto the ridge line. Then it was a straightforward scramble to gain my first Skye Munro - Sgurr Dubh Mor, (see photo below) the black shattered rocks typifying the ancient Cuillin Ridge.

What seemed like a long route back via one of the many rotten gullies (loose scree and boulders, with little help from the sides of the gully) we eventually returned to An Garbh-choire and then back to the hut along the lochside, to review a brilliant day over dinner and a dram or two with the rest of our Club colleagues.



Photo credit Mark Norris

### **Sgurr Nan Eag to the Inaccessible Pinnacle, Banachdaich, and Pinnacle Ridge**

The 2022 trip got the Cuillin under my skin, and I knew I had to return. And so May 2023 saw me back on the Ridge again - this time with a guide (Alex Kay, [www.alexanderkay.co.uk](http://www.alexanderkay.co.uk)) to climb the rest of the southern Munros of the Ridge.

An early start on Day 1 was made and we were on our way to Sgurr Nan Eag from Glenbrittle campsite at 6am. There is no single description which can capture the Cuillin, much of this being down to the weather on the day. And on this day, the conditions could not have been better, with clear blue skies, a light breeze, no midge and warm spring sunshine providing stunningly clear views over Soay and beyond to Skye's sister Cuillin peaks on Rhum.

The morning saw us heading up Coir' a' Ghrunnda to reach the summit of Sgurr Nan Eag (see photograph below), and then on to Skye's highest Munro Sgurr Alasdair, via the Thearlich Dubh (TD) Gap. The famous TD Gap requires an abseil down to the bottom followed by a climb up the crack on the other side.



Photo credit  
Alex Kay

If you read the climbing guides, the Gap is a wee bit challenging and knowing or seeing (or guessing!) where to put a foot or a hand at key points is the key to a successful ascent. After an ungainly wrestle to the top, (see following page) roped up to Alex, he mentioned it was at least a grade above its general reference of 'Severe' because of its 'polished' condition after seeing so much traffic over the years. I didn't feel quite so embarrassed after that!

Then it was onto and along Collie's famous ledge. The route to the ledge is not easily found and it must have been a wonderful discovery in the day (1832) when Hart first came across it, only for it to be then made famous by Norman Collie. The ledge gives an exhilarating walk and scramble along the flank of Sgurr Mhic Choinnich with the corrie a long way below, and then we were onwards and up to gain the peak. (continued on next page).



Our last Munro of the day was to be the Inaccessible Pinnacle - probably the most famous of the Cuillin mountains. The weather was still perfect and starting from the base of An Stac, the scramble up the 'shark's fin' of the pinnacle offered fantastic exposure and views along the Ridge, across the island and beyond. An abseil off the top down to the ridge below (see following page), and it was then back down the scree path from Sgurr Dearg and back to Glenbrittle

Photo credit Alex Kay

Day 2 on the trip was supposed to be a rest day, but feeling pretty energised come lunchtime I headed off solo and up Banachdaich (one of the Cuillin's easier Munros) from the Glenbrittle Youth Hostel start point. Unlike the day before the weather was somewhat 'inclement' with the sky a gunmetal grey and low-level cloud scudding across the Ridge, and the castellated ramparts of the Banachdaich looked all the more imposing for it. Sitting in cloud on my own on the summit, knowing and feeling that there was a rather large drop to Coireachan Ruadha just yards to the east, was a strange, discomforting and unforgettable experience. A glimpse of the steely Loch Coruisk below, then it was a quick turnaround to get off the hill in worsening visibility.





Photo credit Alex Kay



Pinnacle Ridge

Photo credit Mark Norris

Day 3 and I was back with Alex, this time for a scramble up and down and along Pinnacle Ridge of Sgurr Nan Gillean (see photo on the left) and to the summit itself. Walking in from the Sligachan Hotel we arrived at the base of the

first pinnacle on another slightly damp and overcast day. A few hours, four pinnacles and a couple of abseils later we were on our way up to the summit via the famous 'keyhole' (see photo on the right) in the rocky outcrop of the top ridge. At the summit, passing low cloud meant only fleeting glimpses of Am Basteir next door and once again I had that feeling that this place could become inhospitable at short notice. Off we went heading for Corrie a' Bhashtier and to shortcut the downclimb we abseiled down to the corrie floor via one of the many chimneys on Sgurr nan Gillean. A long walk back to the hotel for a welcome beer and fish supper at the hotel, and a look back on another great day, and the end of my second visit to the Cuillin.



The Keyhole

Photo credit Mark Norris

## **Sgurr a Mhadaidh, Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh and Am Basteir**

As I have said, the Cuillin gets to you, so it was somewhat inevitable that I would return for a third visit - this time in September 2023 to climb with my daughter Christie - and the increased responsibility that goes with that!

Christie was on the Island for a friend's (owner of Cafe Cuil, Carbost - see <https://www.cafecuil.com>) wedding at the weekend - but not before we were to ascend Sgurr a' Mhadaidh, Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh and Am Basteir on the Thursday and Friday.

We parked up in the campervan at Glenbrittle in the late summer evening, with a beer and campfire on the beach - perfect preparation for the day to follow. In the morning we met up with Christie's friend, Iseabel who was joining us for the day (as an aside, Iseabel makes handcrafted leather goods on the shores of Loch Torridon (<https://www.iseabalhendry.com>) - it's great to see young Scots doing well in their own business - in Scotland!). Leaving from the Youth Hostel we headed up the path through Coire An Dorus and then on to An Dorus itself - a distinctive cleft in the ridge between Sgurr a Mhadaidh and Sgurr a Ghreadaidh. As we scrambled up the scree path our anticipation increased the closer, we got to the ridge line. The girls were ahead and got to the cleft first and I could hear their shouts of delight. When I got there, I could see why it is called 'The Door' - we were greeted by a wonderful vista across to Blabheinn and southwest down Coire Uisg with Loch Coruisk looking absolutely stunning. We were then quickly up on to Sgurr a' Mhadaidh, back to An Dorus and then up onto Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh bypassing the appropriately named outcrop of 'the Wart' on the way. The grit floors and shallow boulder walls of the Ridge's most popular overnight bivvy points were there to see too. A cup of coffee and energy bar and we were off back down to the corrie via a different but not particularly enjoyable route - the basalt staircase of Eag Dubh ('Black Cleft'). All that they say about wet basalt is true! Back at the Youth Hostel and yet another memorable day was done.

On our way to the Youth Hostel start that morning Christie and I had bumped into one of Skye's best known guides Adrian Trendall (who lives in Glenbrittle and is author of 'Skye's Cuillin Ridge Traverse' published by Cicerone). When I called in to share a dram that evening with Adrian, he helpfully provided a few tips for our next day's adventure, and we were all set for Am Basteir.

After the walk in from Sligachan and up to Corrie a' Bhashtier, it was up the scree path to the bealach between Am Basteir and Sgurr nan Gillean - to be met by the watchful gaze of a couple of the (in)famous Basteir ravens perched

on the crags. They are my favourite mountain birds, with their distinctive 'croaking' calls, a high degree of intelligence, and plumage 'as black as the deil's waistcoat'.

Am Basteir ranks behind only the Inaccessible Pinnacle in terms of the Skye Munros, mostly I think because of the short but nasty 'bad step' which has to be navigated close to the summit. Off we went on the final ascent, from the bealach, looking and waiting for the bad step to appear. And when we got to it, we could see why - it is only maybe 15 feet of a drop, but the drops on each side to Lota Corrie and Coire a' Bhasteir are somewhat greater! For downclimbing, the footholds are also 'blind' given the slight overhang at the top, so a short abseil took us down safely. We were on the summit only 10



Bruach na Frithe

Photo credit Christie Norris

minutes later to be greeted by wonderful views of all the Cuillin peaks to the south and Bruach na Frithe directly opposite. It looked almost alpine. (see photo on the left) As we enjoyed some refreshment and food, a couple of climbers and their guide (who we had encountered the day before on Ghreadaidh) crested the summit, one lady being fairly senior - with the biggest grin as she made the summit. We flirted briefly with the thought of seeking out the hidden tunnel to the King's cave chimney at the western edge of Am Basteir for a 50m abseil down but felt the safer route

of re-tracing our path to the bealach and down to the corrie was the better option. Arriving back at Sligachan I dropped Christie off at her wedding accommodation to meet up with the rest of her friends, and I headed back to the campsite for my last night on Skye - until next time.

And I shall return. Not just to finish the Skye Munros but more so to experience again what the Cuillin offers the climber - challenging navigation

and route finding, exposure, and stunning views all round - a wonderful combination of the 'macro' and the 'micro'.

The great thing after days like these is that long after, you can close your eyes, and still see and remember each highlight vividly. This is what's best about being in the mountains of Scotland.



Looking South Back Along the Ridge

Photo credit Alex Kay

## THE ROLE OF MID WEEK WALK (MWW) COORDINATOR THROUGH COVID AND BEYOND

JOYCE RITCHIE

For many years I looked enviously at the Cairngorm Club calendar and wished that I could go on the midweek walks. The appeal of a local walk which meant that you didn't have to get up too early and arrived home in plenty of time for your tea was very attractive. However, teaching 5 days a week prevented this. It wasn't until I dropped from a full-time teaching commitment to part time that I was able to go along on my first midweek walk. On the evening before my first midweek walk, I wondered who might be there and if I would know anyone. But I was pleased to see a lot of familiar faces and to reconnect with some Cairngorm Club friends whom I hadn't seen for many years.

Right from the start I felt comfortable walking with this relaxed and friendly group and as I approached retirement, I was looking forward to the Thursday walks becoming a regular fixture in my schedule. At this time the Co-ordinator for the midweek walks was Marion White. I heard rumours that Marion, after coordinating the midweek walks for some years, was hoping to stand down in the near future. My good friend and, at the time, Club President, Marj Ewan, alluded to the fact that the Club might have difficulty finding someone to fill the position. If this was a hint that I might like to take the job on now that I had retired, I decided to ignore it. After all, I was far too busy enjoying my retirement- travelling to exotic destinations outwith the school holidays, meeting friends for lunch and not having to get up at 6.20am each morning. Then in June 2018 Eilidh Scobbie, Sue Miller, Marj Ewan and I went on a trip to Shetland. We set sail from Aberdeen on a gloriously, sunny evening heading north through (thankfully) calm water to Lerwick. I can't recall exactly how it happened but by the time we berthed early the next morning I had somehow agreed to be the Midweek Walks Co-ordinator and Eilidh had agreed to be the Social Secretary. All I can say is that there was definitely no alcohol involved.

In the event I did not officially start in the role until after the AGM in November 2019. This allowed me to have a handover from the outgoing post holder. Initially I worried that I did not have enough knowledge of local walks. What would happen if the Meets Organiser (M.O) was sick on the day? Would I be expected to step in at the last moment? This could be disastrous! Would there be enough people coming forward with walk suggestions for the next year's calendar? Or too many? In reality all my worries were unfounded. Amongst the group there are a host of seasoned and knowledgeable walkers who have ideas for walks in abundance.

One of my first jobs was to build the calendar for 2020. Fired up with enthusiasm I set up a meeting in the Grammar School FP club and invited along anyone who was interested. Being a typical, albeit retired, primary teacher I tried to be well prepared so turned up with a 2020 calendar on A3 paper, pens, post it notes, a map of the northeast made using pages out of an old road atlas, and a packet of Skittles (sweeties). There was method in my madness! Everyone scribbled their walk ideas on the post-it notes. Then we marked each walk location on the map using a Skittle. This was to ensure that over the course of the year we offered walks in a range of different locations. Once we had agreed on our 12 walks, we built up the programme by allocating each month a walk using the post-it notes. After a bit of negotiation and moving post-it notes around, we had come up with the programme for 2020. I was pleasantly relieved, and everyone went home after finishing off the skittles.

2020 dawned and things in the midweek walks were going to plan. There was a good attendance on the January walk, and no-one got lost or injured. It was during the February walk, a wonderful walk from Cruden Bay to Peterhead via the spectacular Bullers of Buchan ably organised by Ian Murray, that I heard the words Covid, and Corona virus in people's conversations. Sadly, before too long these words became part of our everyday vocabulary. Like most other people I thought that this was something that would happen to other people in another part of the world. I was wrong and Covid and a strict lockdown put paid to much of the 2020 midweek walking calendar. As time passed walking in groups became possible, although subject to restrictions. For a time, numbers on walks were capped and travelling limited, so City and Shire dwellers walked separately.

However, by October 2020 things were looking hopeful and for the rest of the year things went as planned. A programme for 2021 was planned in good faith. This time via emails rather than a face-to-face meeting – a system that worked remarkably well. But just as 2021 dawned we went into lockdown 2 and it wasn't until April 2021 that we had our first "normal" midweek walk of the year. This was a walk from Aboyne to the Bell Wood organised by Gill and Richard Shirreffs. It was a glorious Spring day. The sun shone, the birds sang and I'm sure that like me, the 20+ walkers who attended that day enjoyed the feeling of freedom and walking with friends again. Over the years, the Thursday walks have evolved from a walking group initiated by Gill Shirreffs for mothers of school aged children and the demography has shifted but the format remains broadly the same. Midweek walks: start no more than 1.5 hours' drive from Aberdeen, are around 7-8 miles in length and are shorter, lower and

closer to home at the start and end of the year Over time some traditions have grown up. The May walk is usually held out towards Braemar and coincides with the Club Work Weekend at Muir. Traditionally tea, coffee and home bakes are laid on at Muir Cottage after the walk and a band of dedicated midweek walkers always stay on at Muir to help give the Club Hut its annual make over.

As Covid restrictions were relaxed we were once again able to include a “bus meet” in the programme. The first post Covid bus meet was organised by Eilidh Scobbie in August 2022. A bus picked walkers up in either Aberdeen or Banchory and dropped them off at the carpark for Clachnaben. The group walked from there to Charr bothy. Here we had lunch and were joined by a representative from Scottish Woodlands Ltd, the project partners for Aviva, who came to talk about and answer questions on the woodland creation and peatland restoration planned for carbon capture in the area. From there we walked on to the Clatterin’ Brig Tearoom in Cairn O’Mount for tea and scones before the bus transported us home.

The 2024 calendar combines a walk with a Christmas lunch. If successful,

this too will become an annual event. What is notable is the amount of research and preparation the M.Os put into each walk. As well as checking out the route, often several times, M.Os prepare a write up about the walk which covers not only all the



essential details e.g. starting time, route and usually a map, but also includes any notable things of interest ( see above) that we might see en route such as a historical site or geographical feature. In addition, they do a “recce” of the nearest, suitable café, as the post-walk coffee, cake and chat is an important feature of the midweek walks. If I was asked to choose a favourite midweek walk, I would struggle as they are all memorable and enjoyable in their own



way. However, this 2023's April walk to the summit of The Coyles of Muick is memorable. In the weeks leading up to the walk there was some online discussion between Club members about the Meall Dubh Howff on the Coyles of Muick. This was a revelation to me as I had already reccied the walk 3 times and never set eyes on it! In addition, a Google search on the Coyles of Muick revealed that there was a GEOCACHE named "Danish Affair" hidden just below the summit. (For those who haven't heard of Geocaching, it is a kind of global treasure hunt. Seekers use a GPS and a grid reference to find a hidden cache. The "treasure" is not gold or silver coins but small, rather inconsequential tokens such as a keyring. The idea being that if you find the cache, you take something out and add something new.) Fired up with enthusiasm I set off determined to find both. As it turned out I managed to locate the Meall Dubh howff relatively easily thanks to Mike Duguid's very clear instructions. The small stone structure, which if you know where to look can easily be seen from the path, has room for about 4 people and there is a visitors' book in a plastic box which makes interesting reading. Finding the Geocache, even with my G.P.S proved to be more challenging. For nearly 30 minutes I scoured the area below the summit, and just as I was about to admit defeat miraculously found it. I added my own "treasure" to the box and carefully returned it to the exact spot before heading for home. The next week on the midweek walk we all visited the Meall Dubh howff and then a small, but enthusiastic, group set off to find the prize in the Geocache box. While the rest of us enjoyed lunch at the summit cairn the group, armed with G.P.S , a grid reference and tenacity searched the area below us. Just as we were finishing off our sandwiches the triumphant party joined us with their newly found treasure- a Cairngorm Club badge! Well done Kate Brockman who located the Geocache box.

While it's true that I took on the job of midweek walk co-ordinator somewhat reluctantly I have grown to enjoy the role. While I was busy bagging Munros I ignored what was on my doorstep. Thanks to the midweek walks my knowledge and appreciation of local walks (and cafes) has broadened and improved. I now no longer worry about trying to build the next year's programme or what will happen if, at the last minute, a M.O can't be there for their walk, as there is always someone willing to step in and help out. Finally, I would like to say a big thank you to all those who organise and attend the walks. New faces are always warmly welcomed and many of us enjoy the opportunity to catch up with friends while exploring this corner of the north east. Hope to see you on the next one!

## THE IRISH MUNROS

BRIAN DAVEY

A recent surprise discovery of a few boxes of photographic slides in a bedroom cupboard has rekindled happy memories of a great trip to Ireland in June 1999 to climb the Irish Munros or Furths of Ireland.

The Irish Munros like the Scottish, English and Welsh Munros not to mention the Spanish Metric Munros get their name from Sir Hugh Thomas Munro 1856-1919 who although born in London came from a Scottish family with an estate near Kirriemuir about 20 kilometres north of Dundee in Forfarshire. Sir Hugh was an original member of the Scottish Mountaineering Club which was founded in 1889 in Glasgow a few years after the Cairngorm Club was established in 1887. He became forever famous when the sixth edition of the Scottish Mountaineering Journal published his now legendary Tables of Heights of mountains over 3000 feet in September 1891 in Volume 1 with a total of 283 separate 3000-foot mountains in Scotland. However, with the increasing accuracy of Ordnance Survey technology over the years there have been many revisions to this original list with numerous mountains having been promoted and many others demoted with the current total now standing at 282 for Scottish Munros at present.

Likewise with the Irish Munros when an expedition of 17 members from the Cairngorm Club and Westhill Walkers, including two past presidents of the Cairngorm Club, namely Judy Middleton and Ian Bryce, set off from Troon on the Firth of Clyde onboard a Seacat Catamaran bound for Belfast on Saturday 5th June 1999.

Our plan for the following week with overnight accommodation mainly in Youth Hostels was to climb all of Ireland's five Real Munros or Furths, that is, all of Ireland's mountains higher than 3000 feet above mean sea level with a prominence of 150 metres. The target mountains were Carrauntoohil, County Kerry, 3407 feet; Knocknapeasta, County Kerry, 3241 feet; Brandon, County Kerry, 3123 feet; Lugnaquilla, County Wicklow, 3035 feet and Galtymore, County Limerick/Tipperary, 3012 feet.

The Irish mountains with an elevation of over 3000 feet 914 metres and a minimum prominence of just 15 metres, number 13 peaks. These tops are spread out over four mountain ranges, all situated in the Republic of Ireland: The Wicklow Mountains situated just south of Dublin, The Galtee Mountain Range on the border of Counties Tipperary and Limerick, MacGillycuddy's Reeks in County Kerry, and the Brandon Group also in County Kerry.

With Ireland being a less mountainous country than Scotland the prospect of climbing all the Real Irish Munros in one week was a viable ambition depending on favourable weather. As luck would decide, that week we were blessed with a very dry week bestowed by a large developing anticyclone which recent research had shown to be centered in the Atlantic just west of Ireland with a high-pressure value of 1033 millibars at midday on Wednesday 9th June 1999. This was the day we climbed Ireland's highest mountain in the MacGillycuddy's Reeks of County Kerry, Carrauntoohil 3414 feet. That day we also climbed two other nearby peaks namely Caher East at 3300 feet and Beenkeragh at 3308 feet. These were not on our original list of peaks to be climbed that week with a prominence of 100 metres and 92 metres respectively. Also climbed on our return journey to Scotland on Saturday 12th June were the two highest mountains in Northern Ireland namely Slieve Donard at 2790 feet 850 metre and Slieve Commedagh at 2516 feet 767 metres where the Mountains of Mourne sweep down to the nearby Irish Sea above the pretty County Down, town of Newcastle. Here we celebrated our successful Irish Munro bagging week that Saturday night in a nearby hostelry with my retired BBC Weatherman cousin Bernard Davey who had guided us on our final Mourne Mountain hike earlier that day and the following day we returned to Scotland having spent a wonderful week in Ireland.



The summit of Galtymore 7/06/1999 Photo credit Liz McKenzie

## MULTI- DAY EXPEDITIONS: AMBITION, PRAGMATISM AND REALITY

GUY BROMBY

Heather: *“Screeching with fear, ripping the zip and hurling out the reptile. Tents are claustrophobic but a lizard inside is unbearable: thank goodness it wasn’t an adder which had crept inside my rucksack. Contrast with joyful ptarmigan hens, and their chicks, and deer swimming across Cranstackie’s corrie lochan.”*

These trips may be unpleasant, but what makes them type two fun is that in retrospect, they do seem kind of fun....stay with us for the ride and photographs.

## WHAT'S THIS ABOUT?

Nearly 100 person days; a dozen expeditions of three to six days long in the three years to August 2023. Most were with a dozen other Cairngorm Club members. Four were alone, four in Winter and one sleeping in bothies. And all were low-cost staycations.

I wanted to be distinctive and occasionally controversial. My experience of Arctic and Scandinavian expeditions, mostly on ski, created ambitions for Scottish multi-day expeditions. We sought well fed adventures in stunning mountain camps, preferably in a windy, midge free place. “Carrying less, and roaming further”, seeking fresh routes between mountain ranges including low grade, ropeless, winter routes where the gradation from steep walk to low grade climb should be seamless but sometimes isn’t.

## EXTRACTS/NOTES FROM EXPEDITION LOGS

1. PART OF THE RAMSAY ROUND, two of us, December. Staying together close to the mountains the night before allows earlier starts, time to thin out duplicated equipment and share expectations. Steven and I were brutal in challenging everything the other carried, but it reduced our weight by several kilogrammes each and, critically, increased mobility and speed in days with less than eight hours light.

Monday 27<sup>th</sup> December: The Ben and the Carn Mor Dearg arete finished with another, delightful, easterly ridge descent to the 831 m elevation bealach camp, collected drinking water half a kilometre South, to the West of the Aonach plateau.



*From the West face of the Aonachs looking back at The Ben and the line of various aretes from yesterday, radiating from Carn Mhor Dearg. Pleasantly technical. December 2021. Photo credit Steven Pollock*

Tuesday: West face of the Aonachs: Missing contours and Steven peering at, and route scouting the easier ground in the nautical dawn, whilst striking the tent. As a climber, Steven usually seeks the harder ground. Started on neve over turf then friable and slabby rock. Feeling and then gradually enjoying the steeper exposure.

Then a descent of the ridge on the East Side of Aonach Beag and drop into Coire na Bhuic's southmost gully and some unexpected consequential ground 400 m NW of the gully. Both descended facing in.

The second night on the bealach at 900m elevation between Beag and Mor of Sgurr Choinich, first collecting water from the streams near the lochan around 720 metres height.

Wednesday: This expedition was supposed to continue anti clockwise along the Grey Corries and then West along the Mamores. The challenge is getting an updated weather forecast after several days with no mobile data, we received an "over the 'phone" met office forecast for our mountain at 5.30 am, thank you Lesley, confirming that the rising Easterly gale against our Black Label Hilleberg tent, now 40 mph, would double, making the ridge-like Grey Corries over-challenging. Bail! We packed everything inside, memorised the route until dawn and pre-set stopwatch and compass bearings. Donning balaclavas, hood, buff, helmet, torch and goggles. Crampons on in the porch, emerging from the flapping tunnel into the gale, striking and packing the tent in just three minutes in the 7 am murk. (Remember the three minutes for later).

We read the compass twice, but mainly used the angle of the slope to navigate as we headed round the South side of Sgurr Choinnich Beag, checking the fall line for the third time, down towards the burn in Upper Glen Nevis. Crampons off at 600 metres, running out of snow at 500 metres, for the first time in 50 hours. Raining past Steall, to the car park and road head, and then a “tarmac slog” to a vehicle near Glen Nevis hostel.



Two was an efficient team size, especially with one tent between us, whilst polishing expedition and camping skills, revelling in a grade I arete, another grade I ascent and some consequential facing in descents. The cache at the East end of Glen Nevis is buried and unused, in the peat, inside Rizza’s six litre tubs.

*“Rain girl and bow” on a Loch Ossian promontory after placing food 15km to the West, for a Ramsey round two months later. October 2021 Photo credit Guy Bromby*

It includes three 100 cl bottles of vintage port to celebrate a jubilee birthday. We can complete the Ramsey round, in the 2023/4 Winter though we suspect that the tortilla wraps will be past their best. However, port freezes at minus 10 degrees Celsius, and even if it has partly frozen, perhaps the alcohol will separate and improve the slushy treat.

Lesley, with grit and stamina, and I carried in the 10 kilogrammes of food for four people, in October 21, the day after Heather’s last Munro on Beinn na Lap. We hitched a lift in Rob’s swanky all-terrain vehicle to the South end of Loch Treig, just East of a hermit’s dwelling. (Not mine). Then a ten-hour return walk, with spade, arriving at Corroul railway station for coffee and on to our tent pitched on one of the Loch Ossian promontories (see above).

2. BLAIR ATHOLL TO INVEREY, seven of us, August.

*Mark: 35 miles from Blair Atholl to Inverey, with some Munros thrown in for good measure during several days of mixed Scottish summer weather, dreich then sunny. A strong achievement. But it was the experience of freedom and peace from being in remote and wild places which will live longest in the memory - carrying all you need to walk, stop for a break, or set up camp in stunningly beautiful scenery .*



*Loch Loch, home of Arctic Char, North of Beinn a' Ghlo, and seldom visited except by mountain bikers. October 2020*  
*Photo credit Guy Bromby*

*Day one, the effort getting from Blair Atholl over Carn Liath ( see above) and on to Loch Loch was rewarded by the sight of a short eared owl on its silent night hunt as we set up camp in the dark, seeing the twinkling head torches of the other half of our group navigating off Beinn a' Ghlo down to the end of the loch in the far distance, and then waking in the morning to the quiet of the surrounds with light rain falling.*

*Day two, took us south of Carn an Rìgh (Hill of the King) to a beautiful camp spot on Gleann Mor where we enjoyed cooking our well-earned dinners including dahl and nan bread made from first principles, sharing a few drams and chatting by the river in the evening sun. In the morning the inevitable 'attack of the killer midges' meant we struck camp in record time and headed out for our last day up and over Beinn Iutharn Mhor with fine views of our favourite mountains all around us, then down into Glen Ey, past the ruins of Altanour Lodge, and finally onwards to the best cup of tea and hot shower ever at Muir Cottage. Hard work, but good for the soul.*



*Garron ponies emerge from the gloom: a Tolkienesque scene North of Beinn a' Ghlo. October 2020. Hours before, the stags had signed away their modelling rights. Photo credit Guy Bromby 3.CAIRNGORMS, solo, November.*

Diagonal Gully has a South East aspect, and compared with the other routes out of the West end of Loch Avon was more favourable that day for avoiding avalanches: too early in the season for an Scottish Avalanche Information Service (SAIS) forecast and cross loading apparent on the final 50 metres of the climb with drier, looser wind slab. The lower part was wet, heavy snow poorly bonded to the turf, wet moss and rock. I decided not to put on crampons wanting to protect the wet turf, regretted it, and changed my mind halfway up. Early foot stances involved sweeping away some of the snow before placing the foot on a slithery slope. Then the snow covered a burn and the story became soaking Dachstein mitts but dry feet under effective gaiters. In places, axe plants were through wet snow to unfrozen turf, with firm pick hold. Spare hand rammed onto and into and through whatever I could grip optimally. I wrung out Dachsteins, before the final 50 metres ascent on drier snow and the wind dispelling the moisture. As common on these top outs, feet pushed down compressing the snow, before biting firm.

In Corrie Domhain I met three who had ascended Coire Raibert to the East of Diagonal Gully. They had seen me from Loch Avon below and were unimpressed with my route choice. Agreed: Guilty as charged but getting these Grade I winter climbs, and more, under my belt, means seeking opportunities. To anyone who says this doesn't "count": I'll see you in court.

#### 4. CAIRNGORMS, three of us, December

Silver Chimney is three sided and 100 metres high. The lead-in, main route and top out is between 620 and 820 metres high, on the East spur of Carn a' Mhaim, with a spur to its left. Today there was half a metre of wind slab on a slightly denser lower layer. The slab slid, if "forced" but on the steeper approach was not sliding with our adjacent, fence-posted foot plunges and that, with a



moderate avalanche forecast, led to the finely balanced decision to continue. As the angle increased, snow was pushed onto the two lower, helmeted, others. As the third person reached the steepest sections much of the snow had fallen down the chimney leaving bare rock for crampons. Hands on snow-covered rock outside the chimney. Some jamming of back and rucksack against the left-hand wall. This route is like a high ladder but missing its foot rungs and



the spine of the back scratcher. At these cruxes it felt higher than grade I and we used a sling around a planted ice axe pick as some "aid". Tiring and a 2-hour 40-minute duration from crampons on. A great early Winter steal carrying overnight gear. Three people, weary at the top (see Left), re-fuelled and descended to Glen Luibeg along the SE ridge of the mountain.

5. QUOICH - AVON - BYNACK to DERRY, three of us, July. 6.5 km per hour, speed march, along upper Strath Avon at 8.30 pm: We'd covered 24 km in 12 hours and now, keeping

*Topping out Silver Chimney above Glen Luibeg. Dec 21*

*Photo credit Rikki Foulger*

up; map reading and eating hot food simultaneously. Arriving at the Loch Dagram grid reference at 10.15 pm. It's dark. Where's Esperanza? Both parties rushing to meet in daylight and missed each other on opposite sides of this lochan. (Aide memoire: Be precise, and accurate, with meeting place grid references). 6.45 am: "Hi Guys". It was lovely to speak: 10 minutes later she's away as it's too hot to continue the planned route.

The trio headed across to the Cathedral like, Barns of Bynack and Craig Mhor. Already amongst the summits, without a glen start and finish each day, there may be time to dawdle, unwind, chat, and without the rush of making the last bus back to town. Rough and long days are rewarded by exploring fresh

and untravalled terrain with delightful flora uneaten by ungulates. Then it's down past Lochs Avon and Etchachan and the "Hutchy". A cool start to the third day, in the mists of Glen Derry and a feast of Quoich blaeberreries. Mike's hungry.



*Linn of Quoich on the fourth day before the ascent of the East Spur of Creag Bhalg, with its waist high heather. Mike made a camera tripod from walking poles, topped with an inverted boot. Patent applied for. July 2022.*

*Photo credit Mike Duguid*

## LESSONS LEARNT AND RELEARNT

### 1. TIME SCHEDULES

Some days don't go to plan. Such as an absence of taxis so a five-kilometre road hike from Blair Atholl, at the middle of long day, already after a five hour train journey from Aberdeen to the start point. Many of our multi-day plans have probably been too long in distance, given that much of the route is on rough and pathless ground.

Critically, these trips need a long weekend plus travel time and so pre-planned time off work. We sought an early commitment so that a myriad of tasks were shared out-with just one or two people. Joining the group a few days beforehand needs focussed integration.

### 2. BALANCING AMBITION AND REALITY IN ROUTE PLANNING (THE FAR NORTH TRIP).

Vay: *Route planning flows in stages: ambition, pragmatism, and reality. Guy had the first covered and outlined an enthusiastic route for us to give a thumbs up to: It's easy to say 'yes' when you won't be confronted with the reality for many months.*

*As the date grew closer, I wanted to understand the practical reality. After all, "the map is not the ground". It's inviting to draw a perpendicular line down steep-looking contours. 'That looks doable'. But it's worth challenging that assumption with what information is available. I referred to some old forum posts, photos from [geograph.org.uk](http://geograph.org.uk), area guidebooks and first-hand comments from people who had visited the area. Sometimes the biggest challenge is just parking!*

*From this I made a series of adjustments: a starting point with less walk-in and better parking; reduced daily distance to improve feasibility on tough ground; and likely camping spots pre-scouted (using FatMap's excellent 3D models). GPX files overlaid on various map layers can then be printed, so that everyone has something to look over. We finished with some impressive A2 and A3 waterproof maps, printed at 1:25,000 and 1:50,000 or 1:40,000 scales, with a possible route overlay in blue and potential camp sites.*

*In the process of pragmatizing the route - preserving as much of the original ambition as possible - you build a natural awareness of potential lines through the terrain. The result is a suite of alternative workarounds and/or escapes for the most ambitious elements of the plan. Useful to have when you are weary and may overlook a good option in the moment.*

*But of course, we also enjoyed the freedom of getting off the 'map': for example, a steep slope ascending away from our first night's camp; and I indulged in an easy undocumented scramble, which looked just right, and something you just can't spot on a map. We each have our own preference for spontaneity versus rigid preparations, but I enjoy the process of setting out on an ambitious target; pulling it in by challenging its assumptions; and then using all that was learned in the process as options to follow - or subvert (continued).*



West Face of Ben Hope in the June '23 heat

Photo credit Vay Mutch

The reality Guy: *Dehydrated frogs; vibram edges scrunching through arid sphagnum; scarce and acidic "water" pools and the optimism of two km per hour. Cooking on rocks, mid-stream, keeping flame away from vegetation. And George and Susan's vehicle and driving for drop off at the start and pick up at the finish. Thank you.*

### 3.WEIGHT REDUCTION

Food caches may reduce flexibility: however, it's sometimes better to cut weight in other areas by tent sharing, especially in Winter, and thinning out excess chattels everywhere. On a seven person trip we took six tents, stoves, gas cans and pans which was ridiculous from a weight perspective.

Typical food weights per person day range from 0.6 to 1 kg. Rucksack weights range, in Summer, from 8.5 kg (congratulations Vay) to 16kg (you know who you are), perhaps packing their fears. The strong carry a heavier rucksack easily. But when someone else is sick or injured, and you need to carry their rucksack also, that extra weight seems needless. Clearly, lower weights carried increase mobility.

#### 4. SLEEPING AND HIGH-LEVEL SHELTERS

Multi-nights “sleeping” in a bivvy bag works with clement weather and midge free months. Many of your lightest, “on paper” tents, endure neither storms nor insects. Yours should be strong, dependable, comfortable and durable. There may be lighter tents, but are these better?

Typical tent weights on these expeditions were for three season: solo: 1 Kg plus. For four seasons: duo: 3 kg. , trio, with extended vestibule: 4 kg. The larger tents encourage discussion and sharing of kit, expedition skills and teamwork. Accepting that their bigger, level ground, footprint needs more time to find. However, the seamless three-minute bail out in a freezing gale, described earlier, would take five times longer if striking multiple tents with individual occupants. Tent capacity concerns arising from a single person “bailing out” may be over-stated. If necessary, all bail out: “One for all and all for one”. Two-layer tents, with inner tent temporarily removed, create relaxed multi-person meeting spaces as mood and expectations change with the harder physical and, sometimes, mental reality of expeditions. Unrushed sharing of concerns and ideas and their respectful debate and plan revision are critical for team resilience.

Ear plugs and eye masks help: even the deniers snore and sleep talk.

It’s easy to buy cheap. Tents must withstand a buffeting 40 mph gust on top of a 40-mph baseline wind strength. That’s 80 mph! Who has had a tangled mess of broken poles and torn tent fabric, limiting options in darkness and foul weather? And a long way from anywhere? Ultimately, you depend on your shelter whatever the weather throws at you. Expedition tents have all those things a house has, keeping you dry and cosy and holding their second-hand value, because they are good. They are easy to pitch and strike, superbly made and adaptable. And little goes wrong. But you only can decide which tent is right for you and your companions. Choose wisely.

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Acknowledgements: Individual’s diaries and logs and Hilleberg 2022 catalogue.

## PLANT OBSERVATIONS FROM MULTI-DAY CAMPING TRIPS

DEBBIE FIELDING

The multi-day trips described in Guy Bromby's article on Multi-Day Trips in this issue provided an ideal opportunity to witness the vast array of plants found in the Scottish uplands. The routes took us from the lower ground, in woodlands and alongside rivers, up beside burns on to the open plateau. This provided opportunities to experience a range of habitats on our journeys. Partaking in trips both within the Cairngorms and the Northwest Highlands highlighted the influence of geology and climate on the landscape and the resident plant life we encountered.

### Trees and scrub

The Scottish uplands are often considered an impoverished environment due to over grazing by deer and domestic stock and intense management for red grouse shooting. However, we came across some nice finds on our trips. The efforts from the Mar lodge estate to reduce deer numbers and thus lower grazing pressure appear to be paying off with patches of dwarf birch *Betula nana* present on the slopes of Sgor Mor and Creagan nan Gabhar (see below). This species forms a component of our montane scrub.

We were further rewarded with the sight of regenerating pine trees in Glen Luibeg as we descended from Carn a' Mhaim to avoid the worst of the weather. On another leg of our journey, we encountered 'blue tipped' pines in Glen Quoich (see following page). Blue plastic bud caps had been placed on young trees to discourage browsing by deer. Apparently, this has led to a 50 % reduction in browsing of young trees and helps in more remote areas where it is difficult to control deer numbers.



Dwarf Birch Photo credit Debbie Fielding



Pines with bud caps in Glen Quoich

Photo credit Debbie Fielding

In the Northwest Highlands the trees were not faring as well, although we found a heavily browsed Rowan *sorbus acuparia* clinging on to the Arkle ridge. Lack of soil may have also been an issue here in this rocky environment as well as hungry animals. Prostrate growth forms of juniper were occasionally found on exposed ground and dwarf willow *salix herbacea* was seen growing on the slopes of Cranstackie. (See below)



Dwarf Willow on Cranstackie

Photo credit Debbie Fielding

Not much time was spent observing this as we could hear rumbles of thunder in the distance and wanted to bag Beinn Spionnaidh before heading home.

Dry heath, grassy slopes and exposed summits

We travelled across vast areas of exposed mountain plateau where the vegetation remains short due to the harsh weather conditions. Heather *Calluna vulgaris*, just a few centimetres tall, interspersed with patches of lichen and tussocks of deer grass *Tricophorum germanicum* were seen on Sgòr Dubh in the Cairngorms as well as in many other areas. In the Northwest Highlands, Thrift *Armeria maritima* filled the gaps between rocks on Sàbhal Beag and was displaying its pale pink flowers when we passed by in June (see below) On closer inspection we also found moss campion *Silene acaulis*, another cushion forming plant with pink flowers also sharing the rocky summits. Mountain everlasting with its hairy leaves and tightly clustered flowers was present on the Southwest ridge of Sàbhal Beag . While Woolly fringe-moss *Racomitrium lanuginosum* also adorned the high mountain tops. Dwarf cornel *Cornus suecica* with its delicate white flowers was found growing through the *Racomitrium* on the ridge descending from Ben Hee. While a pair of Heath spotted orchids *Dactylorhiza maculate* emerged through the moss on Arkle (see next page). The lower, more grassy slopes displayed the yellow flowers of



Thrift on the L and Moss Campion on the R Photo credit Debbie Fielding

Tormentil *potentilla erecta* and milkwort *Polygala serpyllifolia* with its small blue flowers wound between the grasses. Taller heather was common on the lower slopes in the Cairngorms mixed with Blaeberry.





Heath spotted orchids Photo credit Debbie Fielding

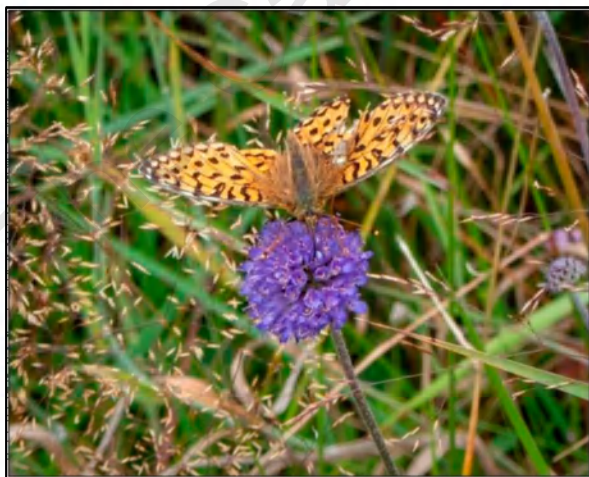
### Wet ground, springs and flushes

Our trips also took us across large expanses of wet ground where we saw swathes of yellow Bog asphodel *Narthecium ossifragum* brightening up the ground (see next page).



Bog Asphodel

Photo credit Mike Duguid



Devil's bit scabious

Photo credit Mike Duguid

The purple pom pom flowers of Devil's bit scabious *Succisa pratensis* were seen in the wet grassland beside the Lui water providing an important nectar source for the Fritillary butterflies (see left). While higher up the hill the springs and wet flushes on Ben Avon gave rise to bright green patches, surrounded by darker red

and black hummocks, comprising a range of mosses and liverworts (see below). Carnivorous plants such as Common Butterwort *Pinguicula vulgaris* and Sundews *Drosera spp.* (see following page) frequented the wet patches. Although attractive, crossing these areas without getting wet feet was a challenge!

Our trip to the Northwest Highlands was super-hot and even the wet ground was dry. The sphagnum moss was crisp and pale, and we happily pitched our tents amongst the Cotton grass *Eriophorum vaginatum* without any encroaching dampness. However, the north facing slopes on approach to Cranstackie were still moist and Opposite-leaved Golden saxifrage and Starry saxifrage were found near wet flushes on our ascent (see following page).



Bryophyte rich spring/wet flush

Photo credit Debbie Fielding



Sundew

Photo credit Mike Duguid



Opposite-leaved Golden saxifrage; R: Starry saxifrage

Photo credit Debbie Fielding

## Foraging

Some members of the party did a bit of foraging to supplement meals. Blaeberrries *Vaccinium myrtillus* were abundant, and a localised supply of wild strawberries were found surrounding an old ruin in Gleann an Slugain. Leaves of Cloudberrries *Rubus chamaemorus* were common, but fruit was only found in abundance on Carn na Criche where we stopped for a feast. Crowberry *Empetrum nigrum* and Cowberry *Vaccinium vitis-idea* were also found, but less desirable (see below).



a) Strawberry, b) Crowberry, c) Blaeberry, d) Cowberry, e) Cloudberry Photo credits Mike Duguid

On the whole, multiday trips provide an ideal opportunity to explore the mountains. Enabling coverage of wider areas than would be possible on single day trips, and greater time flexibility allows for unplanned stops to look at whatever takes you interest. I would highly recommend taking a few days to get deep into the mountains and see what lies under our feet.

“HOW ARE YOU GETTING BACK?”  
THE GREAT OUTDOOR CHALLENGE 2023

SUE CHALMERS

“How are you getting back?” asked the driver of the 08.00 Arbroath to Oban service. On a bus full of day-trippers, I was one of the few without a return booking. “I’m walking,” I replied, nervously pointing at my pack. “Yes, all the way”.



After months of planning, I was finally heading for the start of my 12-day backpacking journey from the west to the east coast of Scotland. The rules of the The Great Outdoor(TGO) Challenge are straightforward: “Challengers” set off from one of 14 starting points, between Portavadie in the south and Torridon in the north and must follow their planned route all the way to their chosen point on the east coast between Fraserburgh and Montrose, within a 15-day window in May. The whole journey must be completed on foot and be self-supported. It was a relief finally to set off from Oban, (see photo to the left) and my route through rolling hills dotted with gorse bushes was unexpectedly pretty, but the

bright Spring morning rapidly developed into three hot days. The heat, the pack and the road-walking resulted in aches and pains everywhere to the extent that I began to doubt my ability to keep to my scheduled daily distance and to consider rationing my five Nurofen tablets.

By Day 5, I had completed the long haul up the north-west shore of Loch Etive, (see below) up to the King’s House, across Rannoch Moor and north-west over *Beinn Mholach* (841m) to Loch Garry.



Photo credit Sue Chalmers

I had regretfully refused the offer of a lift in a boat up Loch Etive from Cadderlies Bothy and walked above the clouds on *Beinn Maol Chaluim* (846m) and enjoyed cake at Rannoch Station, where I also picked up my first resupply parcel. Perhaps one of the most unexpected highlights of my trip was arriving hot and tired on the shores of Loch Rannoch, gratefully dropping my pack beside a picnic table, only to be offered a gin and tonic by a friendly campervan owner!

The weather was now a little cooler but remained dry, my aches and pains had eased, and I had settled into a routine of an early start, a long day's walk, dinner and sleep. My hopes of a successful crossing rose, only to be dashed in Dalnaspidal when a painful, swollen ankle halted progress. Fearing that my Challenge was over, I limped back to a suitable camp spot, threw up the tent beside a phone mast, sought sympathy via WhatsApp, and fell asleep.

A good night's rest brought some relief, and I headed north into the remote Gaick Pass shod in one boot and one Croc taking every opportunity to soak my ankle in cooling burns. Very early in the morning of Day 7, I stood on the summit of *A'Chaoirnich* (875m) the second of my Gaick Corbetts, both ferociously steep hills with tops which look as if they have been smoothed off with a pallet knife. I was 52 km from Muir Cottage and suddenly confident of success. After such a dry Spring, the Feshie was easily forded (another source of earlier anxiety) and I knew I was homeward bound.

I don't think I have ever been quite as happy to see Muir Cottage as I was on this occasion. The familiar surroundings and the chance to shower, wash clothes, pack the contents of my last resupply parcel and sleep in a bed were all wonderfully refreshing.

Although I still had four days of walking ahead of me, I felt relaxed about this final section on familiar territory. After an afternoon enjoying the sunshine filtering through the pines of the Balmoral Estate, I decided to press on to Gelder Shiel in the hope that I would meet other Challengers there. Arriving at the bothy around 8.30 pm, I found one gently snoring tent and one person fast asleep in the bothy. Ah well, so much for the famous TGO camaraderie!

The last three days passed in a now agreeably familiar way. In the dense network of tracks between Tarfside and Glen Dye, I met a well-meaning hill



walker who could not be convinced that I was not lost or in danger. Charr Bothy offered the chance of a night under a roof, but I opted for one last nostalgic, if damp, camp in Glen Dye. Then came the last 30 km through Fetteresso, a long day with little water en route. Both of these factors had worried me at the planning stage but neither mattered in the end. A final brew used my last teabag. As I ticked off the kilometres, friends texted, impatient to help me with the pack I no longer noticed. All the planning, which had soaked up January days, the trips to drop off supplies and the twelve absorbing, birdsong-filled days of walking ended almost abruptly as I stood on the beach at Stonehaven. And yes, I walked all the way!

Stonehaven Beach



## NAE MANY MORE

MARK PEEL



Photo credit J Robinson

Brian Purves and Mark Peel on the summit of Beinn Bhuidhie, during the Knoydart Club meet, September 2023.

Unbeknown to Brian, Mark had only five more Corbetts to do. Compleating on Cnoc Coinnich at the end of October in very wet conditions.

## BUMBLEBEES IN THE CAIRNGORMS

ANNIE IVES

## Introduction

You might be wondering... why bumblebees? I hope that I can enlighten you about these fantastic, but declining, cold-adapted mountain creatures, and how you could help us learn more about rare bumblebees in the Cairngorms.

The Bumblebee Conservation Trust was established in 2006 by two leading bumblebee scientists, Professor Dave Goulson & Dr Ben Darvill, in response to worrying evidence of bumblebee declines. From these beginnings to now, the Bumblebee Conservation Trust emphasises an evidence-based and science-led approach to conservation. The project that I work on, *Skills for Bees: Scotland*, focuses on monitoring bumblebee populations in the Cairngorms through training and supporting people living, working and visiting the National Park to look out for and look after bumblebees.

There are three groups of bees in Britain – honeybees, bumblebees, and solitary bees. Honeybees (*Apis mellifera*) live in hives and are looked after by beekeepers, they make honey, and they die if they use their sting. They are the only bees in the UK that do any of these typical ‘bee things’. The vast majority of honeybees in Britain belong to hobbyist or commercial beekeepers, though occasionally swarms will leave the hive and set up nests in hollow trees or even chimneys, as feral honeybee colonies.

Truly wild bees in the UK can be split into two groups – solitary bees and bumblebees. Most bee species in the UK are solitary, with approximately 80 solitary bee species in Scotland and over 250 species across the UK. Solitary bees lead an independent life. Individual females look after their own nest, without co-operation from others, although other females often will nest nearby on the same patch. Nests are small tunnels, from the size of a woodworm hole up to about the width of a pencil. Evidence of solitary bee nests can often be seen where tracks in the moorland have eroded and exposed soil or created south-facing banks. On warm, bright summer days, look out for aggregations of hundreds of male Heather Colletes (*Colletes succinctus*) hovering around small holes in the track surface or edges, waiting for females to emerge and mate. The Cairngorms is home to some particularly rare species of solitary bee, including the Small Scabious mining bee (*Andrena marginata*).

By contrast, bumblebees are generally social insects which means that individuals work together within a nest to ensure success. Like honeybees, they form colonies with two types of female bee (queens and workers), and males, each playing a different role. Some bumblebee species choose to nest in old

mouse or vole holes (recycling the rodent's nest) while others prefer grass tussocks, long vegetation, compost heaps, bird boxes or even in loft insulation. The number of bumblebees in a nest varies from around 50 to 400 depending on species, but each begins in spring with a single queen. Nests last for around three months, before new queens are produced, which mate and then go into hibernation, searching out north-facing banks to spend the winter. All of the other bumblebees (males, workers, and the old queen) die off, while the hibernating new queens hope to survive until the following spring to set up nests and start a new generation of bumblebees. A bumblebee's lifespan is around 12 months for a queen (including 6-9 months in hibernation), 4-6 weeks for workers and just 1-2 weeks for males.



Left: A queen White-tailed bumblebee (*Bombus lucorum agg.*) feeding on Devil's-bit scabious at Glenmore Forest Park. Top right: A Heather colletes (*Colletes succinctus*) solitary bee excavating a nest in a soil bank. Bottom right: An escaped swarm of honeybees being collected from a churchyard by a local beekeeper. Photo credit Annie Ives

Sadly, many bumblebee species are declining in numbers, across the UK and across the globe. Within the last century, two species have gone extinct and more than a third of social species have declined by over 70% in the UK. Habitat

loss is the main cause – bumblebees need flowers to feed from but across the UK at least 97% of our wildflower-rich grassland habitat has disappeared since the 1930s, mainly as the result of intensive farming practices and urbanisation. This means there are fewer suitable nesting spaces and fewer flowers to feed our bumblebees. Global warming is likely to increase the pressure on these cold-adapted insects, particularly for upland species - as the cooler climes they need shift northwards and to higher altitudes, the bees must follow to survive (Powney et al., 2019). The increasing frequency and severity of extreme weather events, caused by climate change, are another concern. Summer flooding can destroy underground bumblebee nests, while heatwaves and droughts desiccate the flowers they rely on for food. Research also shows that keeping honeybees could have a detrimental effect on wild pollinators, as diseases jump from domesticated honeybee hives into wild bumblebee populations, passed from bee to bee when they visit the same flowers (Mallinger et al., 2017).

Why are bumblebees so important?

Pollination of flowers and trees produces fruits and seeds – enabling reproduction of the plant itself, while also supporting biodiversity: from the birds and mice that feed on fruits and seeds, to the larger predators that feed on those small animals. Over 87% of flowers globally are pollinated by animals, and in the UK, its mostly bees and other insects that carry out this important work (Ollerton et al., 2011).

On top of this, bees and other pollinators are estimated to contribute more than £500 million per year to the UK economy through pollination of crops (Breeze et al., 2011, as updated). In parts of China, where bumblebees have been wiped out, this service is replicated by people, paid to move pollen from flower to flower with tiny paintbrushes!

Bumblebees are among the best pollinators and are well adapted for this purpose. From the static electricity on their hairy coats attracting pollen, to the variety of tongue lengths across species which enables them to visit a greater diversity of flowers. Without them, our environment would be very different, and our food choices would be limited and expensive.

A brief evolutionary history of bumblebees

Around 130 million years ago, in the Cretaceous period, insect life included large, carnivorous insects such as hunting wasps, which caught and killed smaller insects for food. However, as flowering plants came into being and started producing pollen for the first time, some meat-eating wasps changed their eating habits. They chose pollen from these flowers as a more convenient

source of protein – flowers tend to be easier to catch than prey insects! These newly vegetarian wasps gradually became what we now know as bees.

Fast-forward to around 25-40 million years ago, and some of the bees living in colder climates of the Tibetan Plateau, surrounded by the Himalaya and other mountain ranges, evolved new ways to keep warm. They became large and hairy, essentially developing their own belay jackets – a vital piece of kit for mountain life! They became bumblebees.

Bumblebees even evolved an unusual skill in the insect world: a form of thermoregulation. Incredibly, they create heat within their bodies by detaching and vibrating their wing muscles, essentially shivering (much like mammals) to create the 30°C internal temperature that they need to take flight.

Bumblebees on Everest!

From the high Himalaya where they originated, these cold-adapted bumblebees gradually spread out across Eurasia and North America and then south to the Andes, thriving in cool climates and at high altitudes.

The highest altitude confirmed record of a bumblebee was collected on the 1921 Everest Expedition, at 5,640m (18,500 ft) above sea level and is still held in the Natural History Museum's collections (Richards, 1930; Williams, 2018). In those days, it was (commendably!) common practice to have a naturalist involved in expeditions. In 1921, this duty fell to Dr. A. F. R. Wollaston - the expedition medic. It seems that natural history was of interest to other members of the expedition party as well, as shown by G. H. Bullock's extensive diary of the reconnaissance mission:

*"Friday July 1st. Mallory off early after a disastrous struggle with the primus, and a somewhat similar experience the night before. Got up at 8.15 and had a good wash. Caught 3 butterflies and some flies and bees."*

*"Thursday July 14th. Rested. Caught a number of butterflies and bees in the morning. Wandered around the camp. There are a number of little streams and shelves watered from the small glacier above us."*

[Extracts from The Everest Expedition, 1921. Diary of G. H. Bullock, presented to the Alpine Club by Bullock's wife in 1960 (Bullock, 1962)].

Glacial outlets in the Himalaya, such as those described in Bullock's diary, are still key habitats for bumblebees today, with this region home to the greatest diversity of different bumblebee species in the world. Closer to home, we might think of bumblebees as being garden or grassland animals (which many are), but it's not uncommon to find certain species on or close to mountain summits. Bumblebee sightings have been reported at over 1000m

altitude in the Cairngorms, but the inaccessibility of these habitats makes monitoring them a challenge.

### Bumblebees in the Cairngorms

Today, there are more than 270 species of bumblebee worldwide. 24 of these are found within the UK, and Scotland is home to 20 species. Within the Cairngorms, we have 15 species of bumblebee confirmed, with potential for three more which are expanding their range northwards and may already be here in small numbers but are yet to be found and recorded.

The Cairngorms is a beautiful and unique place, home to so many types of wildlife and habitats – some of which cannot be found anywhere else in the UK and are globally threatened. Much of this wildlife is well-documented and researched through various monitoring programmes run by organisations and volunteers, such as red squirrel surveys, butterfly surveys, wetland bird surveys, and even botanical surveys on mountain summits. Unfortunately, in this region, bumblebees seem to have fallen through the net. We know that the Cairngorms has the right habitat and climate for some rare, conservation-priority bumblebee species, but it's an area that has historically been under-recorded, so we have very little data on bumblebees here. Biological recording is a vital part of conservation. We can't protect what we don't know about, and we need data to both focus conservation efforts, and measure impact.

The 'Everest Bumblebee' record is an example of an early biological record, which was catalogued and included a museum specimen. These days, a biological record can be submitted by anyone and there are some very useful apps made specifically for this purpose. Our favourite is iRecord ([www.irecord.org.uk](http://www.irecord.org.uk)), which transforms your wildlife sighting into valuable data that can be used by local and national conservation, planning and research organisations. You can also email or write directly to your local records centre. In the Cairngorms, these are North East Scotland Biological Records Centre (NESBReC) and Highland Biological Recording Group (HBRG). A biological record consists of four key pieces of information –

what? (identify what you've seen, take a photo if you can)

where? (a six-figure grid reference)

when? (the date)

who? (your name as the recorder)

Casual, one-off wildlife sightings are a fantastic way to contribute to knowledge and conservation in your local area but to study changes and trends over time, we need standardised monitoring schemes. This is why the Bumblebee

Conservation Trust runs the national monitoring scheme for bumblebee abundance – BeeWalk.

A BeeWalk is a fixed route, walked monthly between March & October by volunteers who count and identify the bumblebees they see and submit their sightings to us. This helps us to measure how bumblebees are managing overall. Over the past two years, our project has seen the number of BeeWalks in the Cairngorms grow significantly, establishing new survey routes through our work with partners at Cairngorms National Park Authority, Glenlivet Estate, Muir of Dinnet National Nature Reserve, Mar Lodge and Abernethy as well as other local farmers and landowners. Importantly, I've been supporting local communities and individuals who have turned their regular walking routes in to their own 'BeeWalk' once a month. This is replicated across the rest of Scotland, England & Wales, where hundreds of volunteers collectively count and identify hundreds of thousands of bees on BeeWalk routes each year!

My work on the Skills for Bees: Scotland project involves supporting locals and visitors in the Cairngorms National Park to look out for bumblebees by building skills in identification and surveying. I have been running practical training courses enabling anyone to start identifying the bumblebees they see: from their gardens to the summit of Ben Macdui! I also demonstrate different survey techniques from recording using mobile phone apps, to more regular surveying through BeeWalks.



Teaching basic bumblebee identification and searching for Blaeberry bumblebees on the Mar Lodge estate. Photo credit: Robert Pineda

Our activities also include carrying out targeted surveys to fill in data gaps and find out more about how rare local bumblebee species are faring in the Cairngorms. I have been gathering volunteers to search for bumblebees in key locations that we've identified as being suitable for rare species. So far, we've found two out of our three rare target species in new areas across the Cairngorms, including Blaeberry bumblebees (*Bombus monticola*) and Broken-belted bumblebees (*Bombus soroensis*) on the Glenlivet Estate, the Mar Lodge Estate (not far from Muir Cottage!) and even a carpark in Ballater. We're yet to confirm records of our third target species, the Moss carder bumblebee (*Bombus muscorum*), but we are continuing our surveys for all three species across the Cairngorms into 2024 and hopefully beyond.

### The mountain bumblebee

There is one particular species of bumblebee that I would encourage anyone who spends time in the mountains to get to know. It has many names depending on where you come from but in Scotland, it's generally known as the Blaeberry bumblebee because of its association with higher altitude blaeberry-rich moorland. Its scientific name - *Bombus monticola* - translates roughly to the mountaineer or highlander bumblebee, so you will have plenty in common! It is a bright and beautiful bee, with a distinctive appearance: small with two yellow stripes and a fiery orange-red tail that covers more than half of the bee's abdomen. It's the extent of this red tail which helps the Blaeberry bumblebee stand out from similar bumblebees, and – along with the environment where it's found - makes it easy to recognise.

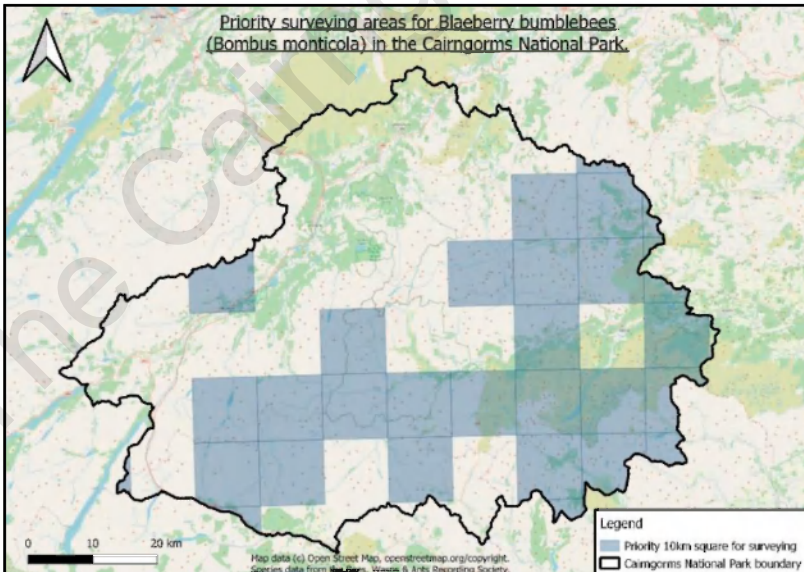


A Blaeberry bumblebee flying in a previously unrecorded location, near Balmoral Castle in 2023.  
Photo credit: Annie Ives



The Blaeberry bumblebee is one of four bumblebee species on the Scottish Biodiversity List – meaning that it is a conservation priority for the Scottish Government. It was added to the list because of concerns that sightings have declined by more than a quarter over a 25-year period, and because of the potential future impact of climate change on this upland species. In a UK context, it's rather scarce, but in the Cairngorms, it could be one of the most common bumblebees you see when you are walking through blaeberry carpeted forest floors, or heather-clad moorland between April and July. We are lucky to have one of the few strongholds for this species in the UK, and therefore we are in a very important position to support its conservation.

We have mapped out priority areas where there is suitable habitat for Blaeberry bumblebees, but where we have no recent records of the species, we don't know whether they are present or not. Hillwalkers can really help with this work by keeping an eye out for bumblebees on your routes wherever you walk or climb and submitting photos and records of bumblebees either directly to the iRecord website, to your local records centre (North East Scotland Biological Records Centre or Highland Biological Recording Group) or sending your photos to the Bumblebee Conservation Trust for identification help.



The blue squares show our priority areas to survey for Blaeberry bumblebees within the Cairngorms National Park # . Photo credit: Bumblebee Conservation Trust.

For more information about bumblebees, our project work in the Cairngorms or how to get involved, please contact Annie by email ([annie.ives@bumblebeeconservation.org](mailto:annie.ives@bumblebeeconservation.org))

You can also visit the Bumblebee Conservation Trust [www.bumblebeeconservation.org](http://www.bumblebeeconservation.org)

Annie Ives is Project Officer for Skills for Bees: Scotland, a Bumblebee Conservation Trust project working in partnership with the Cairngorms National Park Authority, local estates, landowners, community groups and individuals to increase and improve long-term recording of bumblebees in the Cairngorms.

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## UNEARTHING THE DIVERSITY OF ALPINE FUNGI IN THE CAIRNGORMS ANDREA BRITTON AND ANDY TAYLOR

Soil is one of the last great frontiers for biodiversity exploration on planet earth. In 2021, scientists from the James Hutton Institute in Aberdeen worked with the plant and fungi conservation charity Plantlife and volunteers from the mountaineering community in and around north-east Scotland to explore the belowground biodiversity of the Cairngorms National Park.

Recent estimates suggest that around 60% of all terrestrial biodiversity resides in the soil, encompassing all types of life forms, from microbes to mammals, making the soil the singular, most biodiverse habitat on Earth. Despite this, and despite our growing understanding of the importance of soil biodiversity in the functioning of ecosystems and the services they provide to human societies, we know far more about aboveground biodiversity than we do about what inhabits the ground beneath our feet.

This huge knowledge gap is particularly acute for our most remote and inaccessible habitats, such as those found in the alpine zone, with much of our present knowledge derived from lowland and agricultural habitats. Given the rapid pace of climate change and the impacts of other drivers such as nitrogen pollution, our mountain habitats are under greater pressure than ever before. Now is a critical time to fully explore the unique biodiversity they support, both

above and below ground, before that biodiversity is potentially lost.



High alpine plateau on Ben Avon. The mosaic of different plant species and habitats is clearly visible, but what about the biodiversity below ground? Photo credit Andrea Britton

## Soil fungi

Fungi are an essential component of soil biodiversity and play critical roles in ecosystem functioning. Many species are decomposers of organic materials, some form mutualistic associations with plants, while others are parasites or pathogens of other organisms. Decomposer fungi play a particularly important role in carbon and nutrient cycling, breaking down complex organic matter into simpler molecules which are then consumed or re-cycled within the ecosystem. Their activity is an important control on the amount of carbon which is stored in the soil or released to the atmosphere. Mutualistic fungi include many species that colonise the roots of plants forming arbuscular, ericoid, or ectomycorrhizal associations. Arbuscular and ericoid mycorrhizal fungi make structures inside the root cells which look like little trees (arbuscules) or coils respectively, while ectomycorrhizal fungi make dense sheath of fungal threads around the root tips. These mutualistic associations are essential for plant growth, with the fungi supplying nutrients and water to plants in exchange for sugars from photosynthesis. Neither the plants nor the fungi can survive in the absence of the other. While some mycorrhizal fungi are able to associate with a wide range of plant partners, other species are specialists on particular plant hosts. In many cases, establishment and growth of a plant is only possible if a suitable fungal partner is present in the soil.

Despite the clear functional importance of fungi, our knowledge of their diversity and distribution is still very limited. There are currently thought to be around 2.5 million species of fungi globally (although some estimates are as high as 165 million) with around 90% yet to be described and named. With the vast majority of fungi living in soil, this means that there could be literally millions of unknown species in our soils, waiting to be discovered.



Foxy bolete (*Leccinum vulpinum*) in alpine dwarf-shrub heath in the Cairngorms. This is a mycorrhizal species that commonly grows with Scots pine, but which also grows with bearberry and has been recorded at several locations around the Cairngorms. Photo credit Andrea Britton

Soil fungi can usually only be detected visually when they produce aboveground macroscopic structures – the fruit bodies (i.e., ‘mushrooms’). But the great majority of species either fruit infrequently, or not at all, or actually produce fruit bodies underground (e.g., truffles). Even if the fungi do produce above ground fruit bodies, their detection and recording require that a person is present to see the fruit body *and* that they have the necessary skills to identify the species or can pass information on to someone who does. Despite the UK being a country with a strong tradition of amateur naturalists and biological recording, skilled field-mycologists are few and far between and the likelihood of the right person being in the right place at the right time to detect a species is usually very low. This is particularly true for our alpine habitats where large areas may be rarely visited.

#### Environmental DNA

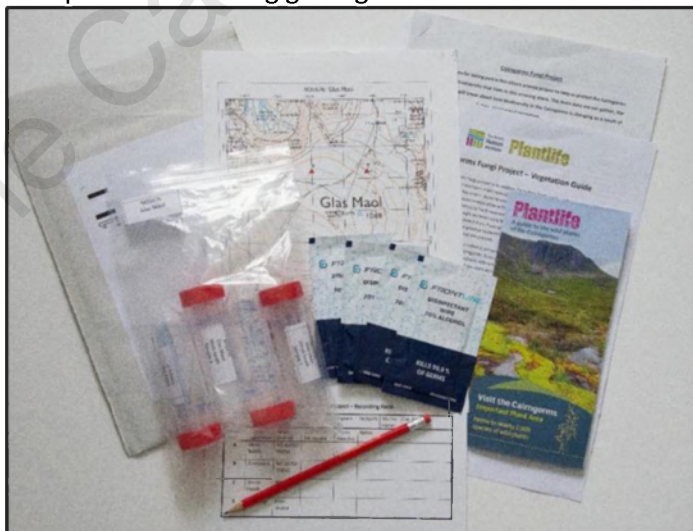
In the past 10 years or so, the analysis of DNA from environmental samples such as soil and water (so-called eDNA) has started to transform our ability to detect organisms which may leave few visible clues of their presence. DNA of organisms living in the soil is present both in the living organisms and in dead cells shed into the soil and can be extracted and used for identification purposes. Identification relies upon extracting DNA and then selectively generating short DNA sequences of the organisms of interest. These short sequences are called barcodes, and function in much the same way as the unique barcodes on produce in supermarkets. The number of different barcode sequences detected in a sample indicates the number of species which are present. Individual barcodes generated from environmental samples are compared and identified using reference barcodes in online databases. The reference barcodes are derived from previously identified fungi. The major drawback of this is that only a tiny fraction of the vast diversity of fungal species are actually represented in databases, which means that only a small number of barcodes can usually be identified to species. The majority of the barcodes remain unidentified – sometimes all we can say is simply that they are fungi.

While DNA analysis of environmental samples was initially very expensive, rapid advances in sequencing technology have greatly reduced the costs involved, to the point where it is now possible to extract and analyse DNA from large numbers of environmental samples, providing a cost-effective method of characterising soil biodiversity. The greatest barrier to fully exploring soil biodiversity in alpine habitats is now the logistical challenge of obtaining soil samples from remote areas.

### The Cairngorms Fungi project

In Scotland, completing a round of the Munros is a popular objective for an ever-increasing number of people. Popular summits and those in the more accessible mountain regions may receive many thousands of visits per year. If these mountain visits could be used to gather biodiversity data, we could vastly increase our understanding of the species present in our alpine habitats. In 2021, the Cairngorms Fungi project was conceived to test whether scientists and the hill-going public could work together utilising eDNA methods to explore alpine soil biodiversity.

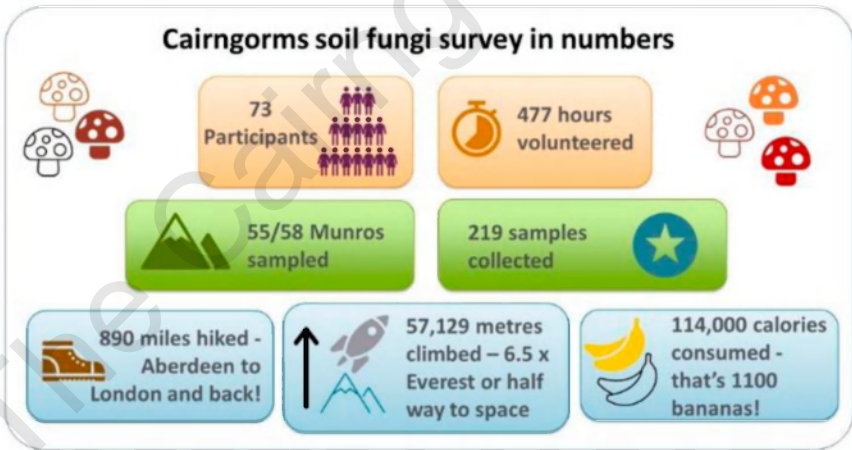
The project aimed to collect soil samples from the 58 Munros located within the Cairngorms National Park boundary and to identify the fungi present in the soil using DNA analysis. Volunteers could 'adopt' a Munro of their choice and were sent a sampling pack with instructions on how to collect a soil sample for DNA analysis and a map with three pre-defined locations for sampling. DNA analysis uses a very small amount of soil and so volunteers only needed to collect a 50ml sample which was sufficient for both DNA extraction and chemical analysis of soil pH and carbon and nitrogen contents. Their small size also meant that samples could be collected with negligible damage to the environment. The DNA analysis technique is very sensitive, so it is important to avoid any contamination of the samples. Volunteers were provided with alcohol wipes to clean sampling implements between samples and instructions on how to sample while avoiding getting their own DNA into the tube.



Example of a sampling pack sent out to volunteer citizen scientists. Photo credit Andrea Britton

The sampling was targeted at three of the most widespread alpine habitats in the Cairngorm National Park, namely Woolly fringe moss (*Racomitrium lanuginosum*) moss heath, alpine dwarf-shrub heath, and Mat grass (*Nardus stricta*) grassland. High resolution aerial photography and pre-existing habitat maps were used to locate areas of these three habitats on each Munro and grid references for suitable sampling points were supplied to the volunteers. In addition, the volunteers were supplied with a fourth sampling tube for them to collect a 'lucky dip' soil sample from a location and habitat of their choice (wherever they thought would be interesting).

The project was launched in July 2021. This was a nervous moment for the project team while we waited to find out if the project would appeal to the hill-going public – would people be prepared to take time out of their walk to collect a sample? Would finding out about soil fungi be interesting to them? Fortunately, the answer to both questions was a resounding yes, and, over the following 3 months, a total of 73 volunteers hiked, biked and ran up 55 of the 58 Munros in the park and gathered a total of 219 samples.



Collection of the samples represented a huge input of time and effort from our dedicated group of volunteers. Photo credit Andrea Britton



Volunteer sampling soil from *Racomitrium* moss heath, one of the target habitats for the survey, on Glas Maol. Photo credit Andrea Britton

### The results

So, what did the survey reveal? In total, we obtained more than 9.3 million DNA barcode sequences from the 219 samples, ranging from 18- to 100-thousand sequences per sample. These sequences were grouped into 2748 unique barcodes or taxa, of which 268 (10%) could be given a species name, 304 (11%) could only be identified as a fungus, and the remaining 2176 could be identified to varying taxonomic levels of detail (genus, family etc).

We found between 17 and 160 taxa in each soil sample, with the highest diversity being recorded in a moss heath sample from Beinn a' Bhuid. Only 48 taxa could be classed as common, being present in 25% or more of the samples. Most taxa (2700) were present in less than 25% of samples and an astonishing 45% (1161) were actually only found in a single sample. This type of distribution, with a few common species but many rare species making up the bulk of the biodiversity in a habitat is typical for many communities.

In terms of the total number of fungal taxa found on individual mountain summits, Beinn a' Bhuid came out on top with 359 taxa detected, closely followed by Beinn Mheadhoin (358), Cairn Gorm (352), Broad Cairn (309) and Glas Maol (304). Species found only in a single sample are also an important



component of biodiversity, because they are likely to represent scarce species and those with more specialised habitat requirements. Beinn a' Bhuird also had the greatest number of unique fungi detected (56), followed by Beinn Mheadhoin, Ben Macdui and The Cairnwell (all 49 unique taxa) and Cairn Gorm (45).



A Brittle Gill fungus (*Russula sp.*) fruiting in amongst mosses and lichens on Cairngorm. This species forms a mycorrhizal association with dwarf willow (*Salix herbacea*). Four species of *Russula* were detected in the survey. Photo credit Andrea Britton

The most common fungi detected in the survey were *Solicoccozyma terricola* - which is a common soil yeast, *Mortierella humilis* and *Mortierella macrocystis* - which are part of a group of widespread soil saprotrophs (decomposers of dead organic material), and a species of *Tolypocladium* - a group of species which are saprotrophic, or which live on other fungi. Despite these species being extremely common, found in more than half of the samples in the survey, we know very little about their ecology and some have not been recorded in the UK before.

Of those taxa which could be identified to species level, a number of interesting finds were made which illustrate the variety of life histories found

among our alpine fungi and give some potential insights into the environmental conditions experienced by alpine communities in Scotland and their relationships to extreme habitats in other parts of the world.

#### The Antarctic connection

Perhaps one of the biggest surprises and possibly the rarest fungus we found in the survey was the species *Acrodontium antarcticum*. As far as we know this species was previously only known from one locality in the world - the Danco Coast, in the northern part of the Antarctic continent. The fungus was first described in 1989 by a mycologist called Cabello after being isolated and grown from the Danco Coast soil collected from around the roots of one of the only two native flowering plants which grow on Antarctica, the Antarctic pearlwort (*Colobanthus quitensis*). It is likely that the fungus was surviving partly on decomposing dead plant matter from the Pearlwort while also getting sugars from the plant roots. The appearance of this Antarctic fungus in the survey gives a good indication of the harsh conditions experienced by soil organisms on Scottish mountain summits. The fungus also demonstrates very nicely how little we know about the biodiversity in our alpine soils. However, this fungus may not be as rare as it first appears, as it was found in soil samples from 18 out of the 55 Munros sampled. This would strongly suggest that the fungus may actually be much more widespread than previously thought. This contradiction can partly be explained by the fact that it produces no visible structures above ground which could be seen and recorded, and its detection requires either isolation and identification by an expert fungal taxonomist (who are as rare as many of the fungi they study) or detection by DNA methods.

#### An ancient group of unknown fungi

Most of the fungi we recorded in the samples could not be identified down to the level of species but only to higher levels of classification, such as genus or family. The reason for this is partly due to the fact that most of the amazing diversity of fungi do not yet have a species name: only about 3% of the estimated fungal diversity has been formally described. Coupled with this is the problem that even when a fungus has a species name, only a small proportion of species are actually included in the international reference datasets we use to identify the DNA sequences we retrieve from the soil samples. A very good example which exemplifies the massive challenge we face in the identification of fungi are the group known as the Archaeorhizomycetes (which translates as 'ancient root fungi'). This was a very common group of fungi in our study with 53 taxa found, occurring in 80% of the samples and making up 12% of all the sequences. However, not a single one could be assigned to a species name. It

is thought that globally there may be hundreds if not thousands of undescribed species within this group of fungi – but there is only a single example of a reference barcode and associated species name available in the databases. We also know nothing about what this group of fungi do – for all we know they could be critical for the growth and survival of alpine plants, but currently they are something of a mystery.

#### Arctic-alpine

Mountain habitats in the Cairngorms are often referred to as arctic-alpine, because they support species more commonly found in arctic regions which are present in the UK at the southern edge of their global range, together with species typical of mountain regions on the continent and in Scandinavia which may be at the northern or western edge of their distribution. This combination of species gives rise to the unique character of alpine habitats in the UK and adds to their biodiversity value. We currently know little about how our soil biodiversity compares with that in other alpine or arctic regions of the world, but one species found in the survey which demonstrates this potential arctic connection is *Amanita groenlandica*. As the name suggests, this species was first described from Greenland where it is a common species associated with willow and birch. Although it produces a large fruit body, up to 15 cm tall, this species has not previously been recorded in the UK. It was found on only one mountain in the survey (Mullach Clach a' Bhlair) but given that mountain willows are widespread across Scotland, there is the potential for it to be found in additional locations.

#### A new parasitic fungus for the UK

Many fungi have interesting and sometimes slightly macabre lifestyles. Several groups of parasitic fungi infect the larvae of insects, which they then consume from the inside. Eventually they produce a structure projecting out from the larva which sheds spores into the air with the aim of finding a new victim. The survey found one such parasitic fungal species which is new to the UK, with the wonderful name of *Ophiocordyceps macroacicularis*. This species was only described in 2015 from Japan and is a parasite of moth larvae which inhabit plant tissue. This may be the first record of this fungus in Europe. This species again highlights how little we know about soil biodiversity in alpine systems, and the multitude of complex interactions that occur between different groups of organisms.

### A new strangler in the hills?

Fungi do not only parasitise other types of organisms – many fungi are parasites of other fungi (mycoparasites). One very weird example of this is the group of fungi known as Stranglers. These fungi have a unique approach to fruiting because they develop their own fruit bodies on top of the partly formed fruit bodies of other fungal species. Hence the strangler nickname. The end result is a chimera with the bottom part of the stipe (stalk) belonging to the host fungus, while the upper part of the stipe, the cap and gills beneath are formed by the strangler. This type of mycoparasitism is very unusual and the fruit bodies of stranglers are very rarely observed. There are three strangler species reported from Scotland with only one or two records of each. We found a barcode in the Munro study which strongly supports the idea that there is a fourth species, but one which currently has no name. This is a very exciting find from this bizarre group of globally rare fungi. The unknown strangler was detected on four different Munros and, since the sampling locations were all geopositioned, we could go back to the exact sites where the unknown strangler was detected and if we were unbelievably lucky, we might find the fruit bodies which would allow us to describe a new strangler species.



Scarlet waxcap (*Hygrocybe coccinea*) in grassland at Gleann an t-Slugain. Waxcap fungi are commonly found in nutrient-poor grasslands. Seven species were detected in the survey, including the rare mountain waxcap.  
Photo credit Andrea Britton

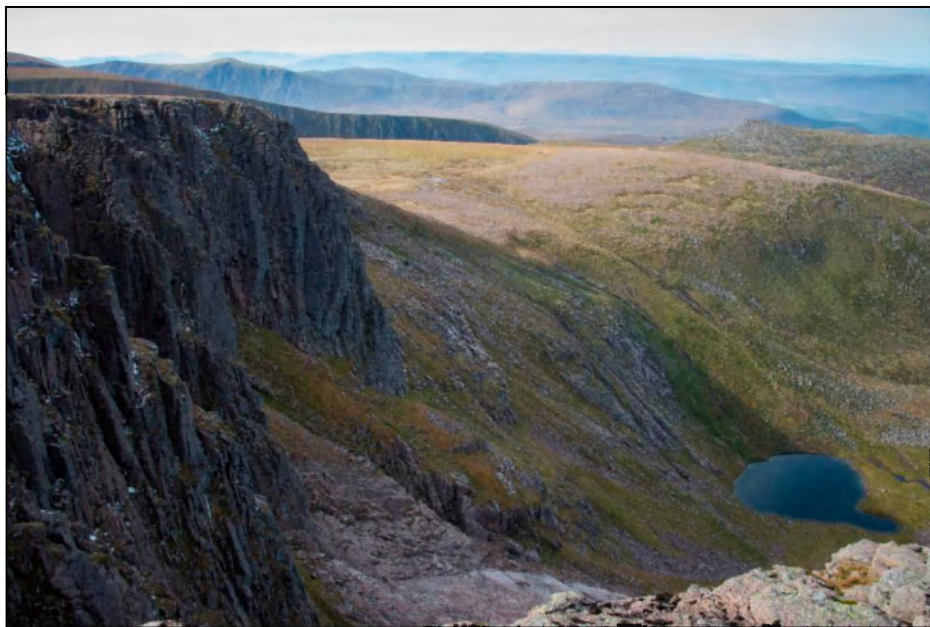
Since the DNA approach is not reliant on finding fungal fruit bodies, it provides a much more comprehensive picture of fungal diversity in soil than was previously possible. As well as identifying which species are present in the soil and finding species new to the UK, this type of data allows us to start investigating how fungal diversity varies with factors such as climate, elevation, habitat type and soil conditions. This type of information could provide a much

more secure basis for conservation decisions than ad hoc records of fruit bodies.

The survey data showed that there were significant differences in the numbers of fungi found between the three target habitats of moss heath, dwarf shrub heath and grassland. Each habitat type also supported a unique group of species. Diversity was highest in the grassland samples (average of 87 taxa per sample) and lower in the shrub heath and moss heath (average of 76 and 75 species per sample respectively). The 'lucky dip' samples chosen by the volunteers, which were located in a wide variety of habitats, also showed that there could be high diversity in wet 'flushed' habitats and in the fell-field habitats of the highest summit areas where bare gravel is interspersed with patches of woolly fringe moss and three-leaved rush. When looking at above ground plant diversity, the number of species present tends to decline with increasing elevation, but we didn't find this pattern for the soil fungi, if anything there was a weak trend for increased number of species per sample in the highest elevation plots.

We also carried out some basic chemical analysis on the soil samples, measuring acidity (pH) and the amounts of carbon and nitrogen contained in the soil. This showed that the total number of fungi present in a sample, and also the number of unique fungi, was higher in less acidic soils. Much of the Cairngorms National Park is underlain by granitic rocks which produce acidic, nutrient-poor soils. This result points to the potential importance of areas such as the Cairnwell and Glas Maol region where limestone and other more base-rich rocks produce less acidic soils. Some of these locations are already well known for the special plants that they support, and it seems likely that they might be important for fungi too. The soil chemical data also showed that the richness of fungi tended to be lower in soils with a very high carbon content, suggesting that the deep peat soils found on lower slopes and in high altitude blanket-bog may be less important for fungal biodiversity than they are for carbon storage.

The discoveries discussed here are only the start for the exploration of soil biodiversity in the Cairngorms. Future analyses will dig deeper into the factors controlling fungal diversity and distributions with the aim that the biodiversity beneath our feet be as well-understood as that we can easily see around us when we are walking in the hills (continued).



The Cairngorm plateau at Cairn Lochan, looking towards Creag an Leth-choin. We now know that our alpine soils support a rich diversity of fungi. Photo credit Andrea Britton

### **What next?**

The data collected by the Cairngorms Soil Fungi project provides a baseline assessment of alpine fungal communities in the Cairngorms, against which the effects of future climate and environmental change could be assessed. As the climate changes, distributions of alpine species are also likely to change, and understanding which species are moving and how fast will be vital to predict how ecosystem function might change in future.

The success of the survey has inspired us to think big and to expand the project to explore soil biodiversity across all of Scotland's Munros. In 2023 we launched 'Mountain Heights, Hidden Depths' – a 4-year citizen science project which aims to work with the hill going public to collect soil samples for DNA analysis from the 270 Munros readily accessible to hillwalkers, building on the 55 Munros already sampled. In this project the DNA analysis will be expanded to include all forms of life in the soil, not just the fungi. We hope that this project will allow us to build a more complete picture of the biodiversity in Scotland's alpine soils and to gain a better understanding of the factors influencing soil biodiversity and the most important areas for its conservation.

## Acknowledgements

This work would not have been possible without the enthusiastic participation of our many volunteer citizen scientists who climbed Munros and gathered soil samples in all weathers – we are immensely grateful to each and every one of them.

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REVIVING RESILIENCE:  
PEATLAND RESTORATION IN THE CAIRNGORMS UPLANDS

MATT WATSON

The Cairngorms, a sprawling expanse of rugged terrain and untamed beauty, is home to some of the most iconic landscapes in Scotland. Nestled within this vast wilderness lies an ecological treasure – the peatlands. These ancient landscapes, with their unique flora and fauna, have long been an integral component in the Cairngorms' ecosystems. However, the resilience of these peatlands has been compromised by various factors, necessitating a concerted effort in peatland restoration. This article explores the role of peatland restoration in enhancing habitat resilience in the uplands of the Cairngorms.

Before delving into the restoration efforts, it is essential to understand a bit more about these peatlands and why they are a vital part of the Cairngorms ecosystem. Peatlands are not mere expanses of waterlogged ground; they are living entities that play a multifaceted role in supporting biodiversity, regulating water flow, and sequestering carbon.

For example, they soak up rainwater, and gradually release it into streams and rivers, thereby regulating water flow. This natural filtration process also helps maintain water quality, benefiting both wildlife and downstream communities. Additionally, peatlands store vast amounts of carbon, making them crucial in the fight against climate change. The unique vegetation that thrives in peatlands, contributes to the overall biodiversity of the region.

Peatland formation in the Cairngorms:

During the glacial periods of the Quaternary, ice sheets covered large portions of the Cairngorms. Glacial activity, such as the carving of valleys and extensive deposition of glacial till shaped this landscape. From the end of the last ice age c.11,700 years ago and through the current Holocene epoch the climate warmed and vegetation began to colonise these exposed landscapes.

Plant communities in the Cairngorms evolved in response to the climatic and environmental conditions with peat-forming vegetation, including sphagnum mosses, sedges, cotton grasses and specialist heath species, dominating in waterlogged areas. These species tolerate nutrient poor waterlogged conditions and help sustain a highly acidic soil profile. All these factors help to create an ecological niche that excludes other upland species and supports communities unique to our peatlands.



The annual biomass of this specialist plant growth falls onto a bog surface that is almost permanently saturated, and this anoxic environment mummifies the organic matter by preventing microbial and chemical decay. As the years pass older material is compressed and transformed into the dark fibrous matter that we know as peat, typically accumulating depth at a rate of c 0.1mm per year.

The Cairngorms, like other regions, has experienced fluctuations in temperature and precipitation over the centuries, with many significant and sustained periods giving rise to notable changes in the habitat dynamics. For example, the Medieval Climatic Optimum or Warm Period (c. 900AD to 1400AD) may well have dried our peatlands, reducing acidity and leading to oxidisation of organic material and release of locked-in nutrients, as well as shrinking and cracking the peat. This may have started or exacerbated erosion processes and supported surface colonisation by trees such as Scots Pine, Birch and Willow, then the following Little Ice Age (c.1600-1850AD) may have led to the reversal of much of this change. This is a possible explanation for some of the preserved stumps that can be seen buried mid-way down the peat profile.

Changes in climate over longer periods significantly influence water balance and vegetation production and hence the rate of peat accumulation. In the Cairngorms this rate of accumulation may be even slower as a result of poorer annual productivity at altitude and more extreme weathering effects, so where we measure peat depths of 4m (which is not uncommon) we may be looking at 8000+ years of peat accumulation.

It's sobering to think that habitat dynamics have been stable enough for this length of accumulation, and that much of the degradation in these habitats has probably occurred in the last 500 years as anthropogenic influences on these habitats have increased.

The challenges facing our peatlands:

Despite their importance, the Cairngorm's peatlands currently still face numerous challenges that compromise their integrity and take their toll on these fragile ecosystems.

Most of the lower and middle altitude peatlands in the Cairngorms have been drained for agricultural or sporting purposes, disrupting the natural hydrology and leading to the degradation of peat layers. Drainage can lead to a transition from more robust bog vegetation towards a lichen dominated sward with poor structure that is not very resilient to weathering or other pressures, a similar effect can occur when peatland is subject to regular muirburn. In the uplands where exposure is a key factor there is a similar effect

but here overuse by herbivores often exacerbates the issue, as trampling and grazing reduce the vegetation cover and open bare patches across the fragile peat surface which can be more easily eroded. Often these factors compound.

With changing climate, these challenges intensify. The trend away from winters with more continuous snow cover leaves degraded peatlands more exposed to the harsh weathering effects. These include more frequent freeze thaw cycles, which give rise to needle ice formation which extrudes bare peat surfaces causing them to exfoliate, wind erosion which scours the surface of layers of poorly bonded peat, or intense rainfall and overland flows which both rapidly erode bare areas. Rain, surface flow and wind erosion effects are also exacerbated by more frequent heavy rain events and increasingly intense rainstorms during the summer months. These factors all increase the need for intervention to re-vegetate bare eroding areas and to improve the hydrology of these systems so that the rate of loss cannot increase.

Facing the challenges:

Recognising the urgent need to safeguard against these challenges most land managers in the Cairngorms are now actively carrying out peatland restoration work, particularly now it is so clear that we are facing both climate and biodiversity crises. There will be many who find irony in the fact that historic land management practices might have contributed to the degraded condition of these habitats, however our understanding of the importance of these habitats has evolved and land management practice is evolving with it. So, it's crucial to put the past aside and look to the future as we strive to repair our peatlands and build increased resilience within this important habitat.

Restoration efforts typically involve blocking drainage ditches and channels, re-vegetating bare areas by translocating vegetation or seedlings of resilient native species, alongside employing techniques to encourage natural water retention, and flow management. Restoration projects aim to restore vegetation cover that can protect the fragile peat beneath and to restore the hydrological balance of the peatlands, recreating conditions that allow these ecosystems to thrive and continue to lock up vast amounts of carbon.

The most effective way to do this, where ground conditions and access allow, is using large, low ground pressure excavators, supported by dedicated teams of hand labourers. In some areas where access is limited the work needs to be done entirely by hand labour teams, and materials may need to be moved in by helicopters. Some question the role of such carbon intensive processes and machinery in support of an activity that is focused on reducing carbon emissions, however the short-term emissions or impacts arising from

the process are far outweighed by the future emissions savings and habitat improvement that should occur.



Aerial view of work in the Cairngorms

Photo credit Matt Watson



Lifting heavy materials into inaccessible spots Photo credit Matt Watson



Monitoring Peatland techniques

Photo credit Matt Watson

Increasingly we find that some of the most engaged workers supporting and delivering peatland restoration come from land management backgrounds and

their deep understanding of how the land and habitats work, helps them with delivery of projects. Their inherent love and appreciation for what to many might seem a bleak workspace, coupled with tenacity for working in challenging weather gives them staying power where others would seek kinder workplaces. This will chime with readers of this journal who surely share this same understanding, love and appreciation of this landscape, though some may balk at spending most of their working days in it.

The environmental benefits:

The environmental benefits of peatland restoration are multifaceted and extend far beyond the immediate rejuvenation of the peatlands themselves.

A primary rationale for Peatland restoration is that it contributes to climate change mitigation. Healthy peatlands sequester carbon, preventing its release into the atmosphere, so by restoring these ecosystems, we play a crucial role in the global effort to combat climate change.

Improved water regulation and quality is another significant advantage. As drainage channels are blocked, flow is slowed and vegetation cover is improved, peatlands increasingly help reduce the risk of flooding downstream

and provide a more sustained source of clean, clear water. Reduced erosion means less acidic material entering river systems which helps ensure these remain within crucial pH margins for successful salmonid reproduction, and less particulate matter in the water helps reduce water colouration and turbidity downstream which enhances freshwater ecology.

The biodiversity benefits:

The Cairngorms are renowned for their diverse and unique ecosystems, and peatlands are no exception. These waterlogged landscapes provide a specialised habitat for a variety of plant and animal species, many of which are uniquely adapted to the challenging conditions of the peatlands.

None is more iconic or visible than the spring flush of cotton grass that blankets swathes of the uplands, but many are more subtle such as the glistening sticky leaved carnivorous Sundews, the glossy red berries of Bog Cranberry, or the pendant yellow flowers of the Bog Asphodel. In the more waterlogged areas, we see rich carpets or hummocks of Sphagnum mosses colouring the surface wine red, apple green and salmon pink and floating in the deeper pools you may find *Sphagnum Cuspidatum* with its likeness to a drowned kitten. Amongst and above these flit the banded and metallic colours of the many Dragonflies and Damselflies that good bog supports as well as iconic upland wading birds like curlew, golden plover and dunlin. Above all soar raptors such as, merlin, hen harrier and short-eared owls.

Peatland restoration projects aim to increase the availability of the conditions that foster the return of this bog-specific vegetation and support the creatures that thrive on it, hence peatland restoration acts as a lifeline for some of the biodiversity that, in part, defines the Cairngorms and this work helps to tackle the biodiversity crises.

Community engagement and education:

An integral aspect of successful peatland restoration is community engagement and education. Local communities, including land managers, landowners, and residents, play a pivotal role in the success of these projects. Understanding the importance of peatlands and the role they play in maintaining a healthy ecosystem encourages a sense of shared responsibility for the environment.

Educational programs, workshops, and guided walks led by experts, outdoor leaders and ranger services provide valuable insights into the significance of peatlands and the ongoing restoration efforts. By fostering a connection between the community and the land, these initiatives help create

more passionate stewards for these important environments, and this in turn helps ensure the long-term success of the projects.

#### Challenges and Solutions in Peatland Restoration:

While the benefits of peatland restoration are evident, the process is not without its challenges.

One of the primary hurdles is securing funding for large-scale restoration projects. Since 2012 most of this funding in Scotland has come through a restoration fund provided by the Scottish Government, through its PeatlandACTION fund, which has a substantial commitment to fund this work through to the early 2030's, but this will fall far short of the sums needed to restore all the country's degraded peatlands. In recognition of this it is hoped that capital funding for future work may be partly or wholly supported by a carbon credit scheme that will provide land managers with a long-term income stream to fund and manage their peatlands. This may be further complemented by a biodiversity credit scheme in the future.

In addition to financial challenges, the restoration process itself requires careful planning, drawing on the peatland specialists, ecologists, geomorphologists and hydrologists to optimise restoration plans. These then rely on the availability of specialist contracting firms who can implement the plans with care and consideration for the fragile habitats they are working in.

Peatland restoration is still a relatively new area of work so there is still much trial-and-error involved in developing solutions to the challenges. This is particularly the case in the higher mountainous areas of Scotland such as the Cairngorms where solutions that have been found to be effective in other parts of the country will simply not work. This is because the environment is so much more challenging, the growing season much shorter and the window for delivering the work is limited.

When developing restoration approaches for sites in the Cairngorms we try to strike a tricky balance between scope, scale and expense, aiming to do just enough work to change the trajectory and stimulate a process of natural recovery, so that time and nature can do the rest of the work.

Examining previous peatland restoration projects in the Cairngorms area provides valuable insights into effective strategies and outcomes. For instance, they have readily demonstrated the positive impact of blocking drainage ditches and translocating re-vegetation onto bare areas. Monitoring efforts have shown improvements in water retention, increased biodiversity, and increased numbers of iconic bird species. Similarly, projects delivered over the past 8 years in the Cairngorms area highlight the importance of collaboration

between stakeholder organisations, landowners, local communities and interest groups. Working together these collaborations have successfully restored around 4000ha of the degraded peatlands with the Cairngorms National Park, with plans to deliver c.2000ha per annum in the near future.

Looking to the Future: Sustaining the Cairngorms Peatlands:

As we navigate the challenges of the 21st century, the restoration and conservation of Cairngorms peatlands stand as a beacon of hope. Through concerted efforts, these vital ecosystems can be preserved and improved, helping to ensure the Cairngorms remain a haven for biodiversity and a stronghold against climate change.

The Cairngorms land managers and advisors continue to lead the way in peatland restoration. By sharing knowledge, engaging in sustainable land management practices, and fostering a sense of responsibility among all stakeholders, they collectively contribute to the resilience of the Cairngorms uplands by helping to restore and sustain a delicate balance that has endured for centuries. The peatlands, with their moss-covered expanses, bobbing cotton heads and crystal-clear pools, are not just a testament to the past but a promise for the future.

Through peatland restoration, we are acting as stewards and ambassadors for a critical component of this majestic landscape, we are healing scars from the past and forging a path toward a more resilient future.

As individuals we can all help in this effort by limiting the need to store carbon, by helping raise awareness of the importance of these areas, by limiting passage damage on newly restored areas and for those of you that like to be up to your elbows in muck, by volunteering to help with the work.

#### About the author

Matt Watson is an ecologist who lives and works in the Cairngorms. He is currently Peatland Programme Manager for the Cairngorms National Park Authority. He has had a lifelong passion for the outdoors and upland wilderness areas and has built a career around surveying and understanding these habitats. He has been involved in research into Peatland dynamics and restoration since the early 2000's and in this time has been instrumental in the development of many of the key restoration techniques used today. Recreationally he spends much of his spare time amongst the hills and peaks of the Cairngorm massif, walking, climbing, skiing the mountains and floating down the rivers and lochs that flow from them.

## GLEN EY WOODS UPDATE

RICHARD SHIRREFFS

When Piper's Wood was enclosed in May 1989 a survey was undertaken to arrive at a list of all of the types of tree and plant then on site. It was always the plan to carry out further surveys at reasonably regular intervals, so as to monitor how these trees and plants fared once no longer regularly nibbled by deer, hares or rabbits and to record any changes in the diversity noted. The survey in 1989 recorded 85 species and within the next few years another 26 were recorded.

An additional area next to Piper's Wood was enclosed in 2013 and when it was surveyed that year, 80 species were recorded, with another 9 recorded two years later.

The two areas at Altanour were fenced in September 2015. A survey in July 2016 recorded 114 species, and 33 more were recorded in August 2019.

The Covid pandemic meant that no re-survey of Piper's Wood was possible when it otherwise might have been done, but plans were formulated and then carried out to have the two areas at Piper's Wood and the two at Altanour surveyed in July 2023 – July being the month when most plants are likely to be visible. Two persons with botanical knowledge were approached and agreed to take on the hoped-for surveys – Andrew Painting, who works a lot with National Trust Scotland (NTS) at Mar Lodge, and David Elston, the Vice-County Recorder for the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland's (BSBI) Kincardineshire and North Aberdeenshire divisions, who worked with Biomathematics and Statistics Scotland (BioSS) and also with the James Hutton Institute.

A mutually acceptable date was agreed – 9 July. It was established that neither surveyor particularly needed Club members to be there. However, having set up the arrangements I decided that I ought to be present, at least at Piper's Wood, and Richard Frimston also volunteered to come, with his Range Rover, which the Mar Estate kindly agreed we could take up the glen.

Over the three or four days before the surveys the weather forecasts were looking most unpromising, but by the day before, the worst forecast was for overnight rain lasting until a little after we planned to start. In fact, by the time that we met up it was dry, and it stayed dry, and indeed mainly sunny, all day, with enough of a breeze to keep any midges at bay. David had his wife, also a knowledgeable botanist with him, partly as an extra pair of eyes, partly to keep notes of what we saw.



I went only to Piper Wood. Richard Frimston was able to drive his Range Rover over the ford in the Ey close to the wood, and four of us headed to the stile. I had given David a copy of the sketch map showing the zonation of the original area as noted by Heather Salzen in 1989.



Scouring the Extension Area

Photo credit Richard Shirreffs

He reckoned that we should go along the successive zones in turn, noting what was seen. We had enough prints of the list from past surveys to allow David and his wife to use a separate print for each zone to tick off plants as we saw them. At the end of each pass of a zone, we reviewed the ticks and assessed the abundance of the different plants using the DAFOR scale – for Dominant, Abundant, Frequent, Occasional and Rare. In some cases, the abundant growth of birches made it difficult to work out where the different zones had had their edges. In the Piper’s Wood extension area, we had no zones as such, but every so often we interrupted our looking around to compare notes on how we appraised the relative frequencies.

There were many plants seen which had not been seen before - over 40 in the original Piper’s Wood area and some 30 (including many of the same 40) in the extension. The new finds in the extension which David Elston was most interested in were *Eleocharis quinqueflora* (Five-flowered Spike-Rush), *Selaginella selaginoides* (Lesser Clubmoss), and *Tofieldia pusilla* (Scottish

Asphodel). He also found it noteworthy that *Potentilla crantzii* (Alpine Cinquefoil) was no longer in any of its former three zones of the original area but was found for the first time in the extension, perhaps indicating intolerance of overcrowding. There were in fact almost 40 species previously seen in the original area but not seen on this occasion.

Apart from being the first to spot one or two of the plants, I was not in a



position to contribute much to the botanising. However, I did notice one or two other things and kept a mental note of some things seen by others. We had one encounter with an adder, one with a lizard, and one with a shrew. There were a few frogs. There was rabbit or hare droppings in quite a few places, and there was at least one place (where the stream exits the site

Round Leaved Sundew Photo credit Richard Shirreffs

on the north boundary) where rabbits or hares would be able to get in or out, and another place where they could move between the original Piper's Wood area and the extension; there was however no particular sign of damage to the vegetation. One of the party saw what she thought was an owl and I certainly saw an owl pellet. I also saw what I think was a pine marten droppings, though it struck me that the area might not be all that rich in pine marten prey. In the Piper's Wood extension, I was impressed at how abundant the birches were becoming. There was a definite pattern, as if the greatest deposit of seeds was in the direction that a SW wind would blow them from the densest part of the original area. But the soil/ground conditions may also have had something to do with this pattern.

The last CCJ article about Piper's Wood, written by Lydia Thomson and Hazel Witte, and printed in issue 112, ended "Access to this extension can only be made through the original Piper's Wood, which means forcing a route through well grown birch trees with entwining branches. Has the time come for the Club to consider whether there is a continuing need to exclude deer from this area?" As noted in the Projects section of the following issue of CCJ, there is in fact now a stile giving direct access to the extension on its south boundary, one constructed by Ken Thomson and Richard Frimston in 2019. And in relation to

the question of excluding deer my own inexpert opinion is that the birch and more mature rowans could well withstand a bit of browsing by deer but that there are other flora which might disappear (or just be cropped back to be invisible) if deer had free access.

For Altanour Andrew Painting kindly provided a detailed report of his survey. This now appears on the Club website, but the key points are recorded here. The survey in July 2016 recorded 114 species, and 33 more were recorded in August 2019. The 2023 survey recorded another 4. More significantly as many as 228 larch seedlings were now visible above the height of adjacent vegetation, some reaching over 3.5m in height. There were also a few birch, rowan and willow seedlings. The clear implication was that the fencing at Altanour had been successful in its aim of kickstarting woodland regeneration there.



Altanour Larches, Birch and Heather

Additionally, Andrew drew attention to some changes to the Altanour plant flora with the enclosed areas generally improving for heathland and tall herb species, whilst reducing in utility for species which demand short sward and disturbance. He felt that this reduction was of minimal conservation concern, as the species declining within the fenced areas remain common outside them. The increase in tall herb communities he saw as particularly welcome, as these are among the most threatened in Scotland's uplands.

There were also animal species noted at Altanour. Water vole, field vole, mole, and signs of mountain hare were recorded within the survey area, also common lizard and adder. A merlin was heard nearby, suggesting that there is a breeding pair in the area, and a pair of spotted flycatchers was seen - a species which needs mature trees for breeding, and so, is indicative of the importance of woodland areas within otherwise open landscapes.

All in all, the surveys carried out in 2023 were not only successful as surveys, but they have borne out that the regeneration concept which inspired the original enclosure at Piper's Wood is one of considerable ongoing value. Indeed, Andrew Painting made the observation "Every time I go past Piper's Wood, I see black grouse using it, and that is the best sign of success that I can think of."

For anyone wishing more detailed information, lists of the species seen in the different areas in the different survey years are now to be found on the Club's website, at

[www.cairngormclub.org.uk/miscellaneous/gleneywoods/gleneywoods.htm](http://www.cairngormclub.org.uk/miscellaneous/gleneywoods/gleneywoods.htm)

## SEVEN WATTS AND FOUR GENERATIONS IN THE CAIRNGORM CLUB

GRAHAM WATT

A highlight of 2022 for me was returning to the summit of Ben Macdhui. I had been there four times before, firstly in 1960 aged 8, but not since July 1970. After several years plundering Munros in the West of Scotland it was exhilarating to be re-acquainted with the massive Cairngorm plateau, pointed out in all directions by the Cairngorm Club indicator.

On viewing the indicator, I wondered if any of my Aberdeen forebears had attended the unveiling ceremony on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1925. A search on-line of the Cairngorm Club Journal for 1926 established that four Watts had been there – my great uncle Edward (47), his wife Alice (44), son Murray (12) and daughter Marjorie (10)(see below).



Unveiling the Ben Macdhui Indicator, August 1, 1925

The photo shows the company of 136 that day, surrounding the indicator and including 15 women, with knee length gabardine Mackintoshes the order of the day. CC Photo Archive

### William, Edward and Theodore Watt

Edward Watt had climbed Ben Macdhui at least once before, on 29 July 1895, as recorded in his diary. Over a century later, via a circuitous and unexplained route, Edward's diary for 1895 came into the hands of Ken Thomson, Cairngorm Club librarian, who transcribed, with notes (in brackets), the following details of a Watt family holiday at Braemar, involving Edward's father William Watt (48), his fourth wife Agnes (49) and sons Edward (17), George (16) and Theodore (11). Their travel was by train, coach, carriage and foot.

### **A Climbing Holiday at Braemar – 128 years ago.**

From Edward Watt's Diary for 1895, transcribed by Ken Thomson

*Monday 15 July 1895: Started a holiday at Braemar, while Papa (Joint Editor of the Aberdeen Free Press) stayed on in Aberdeen for the general election. On the Monday, after a "cold and windy" drive to Braemar from the station at Ballater, Theodore, George and Edward went up Morrone, getting a good many plants including avens and the globe flower. Good view but very windy. Went up by the path but came down to the east past a pond.*

*Wednesday 17 July: At Garrawalt Falls (in Ballochbuie) with George and Theodore – 10 miles – Saw a ghillie capture a salmon above Invercauld bridge. Came round by the Clunie – 5 mls.*

*Thursday 18 July: Started with George at 6:15 on our expedition to Loch Ceann-Mor (the King's Loch, nowadays Loch Kander). Misty all the morning. At Loch Callater 8:15; never walked over such rugged ground or saw such steep and grand mountains as in the three miles up to the Loch which is itself a magnificent sight – surrounded as it is by precipitous hills, 800 feet high which run down to the water's edge, making it impossible to walk round the loch. Home at 2:15.*

*Friday 19 July: Heavy rain all morning, but after tea walked with Papa to Corriemulzie (3 miles west of Braemar) round by the low path. Saw a herd of deer. Visited the ruins of Mar Lodge and the Eagle.*

*Saturday 20 July: After various hitches the planned expedition to Glas Maol came off, at least a start was made ... Rained hard most of the time and so we turned back at the point where the Blairgowrie road crosses the Allt Bhuaidh. Distance 15 miles. We were all thoroughly soaked. I finished up with a cold bath which was pronounced "very dangerous". Fished in the Clunie.*

*Tuesday 23 July: Edward and George started – rather late, due to morning mist and rain – in "a conveyance", and "got out at the Shan Spital, and crossed the bridge on the old road and began the ascent of the old smuggler's path to Glen Isla. The first mile is stiff. We met a shepherd on the level ground before we came to the boundary fence between Aberdeenshire and Forfarshire. We went straight on from the fence for ¼ ml. to see down into Caenlochan 1000 feet below and then turned sharply to the right and soon reached the top of Glas Maol. We went down to the Spital road on the Cairnwell and landed at the top of the long brae which we foolishly descended passing the coach and meeting our carriage near the foot. We had to walk up again from below the Devil's Elbow (see below). Rained all the way home. Stood on three counties at once near the top of the hill.*



The Devil's Elbow, before the road was straightened in the late 1960s.

Photo provided by courtesy of the Mount Blair Community Archive

*Wednesday 24 July: Intended to go to Lochnagar but was deterred by a slight mist. Ferried the River Dee in Lamont's boat en route for the Linn of Quoich. We walked up till we were opposite Inverey where we forded the river with some difficulty. Visited the Eagle and Mar Lodge.*

*Thursday 25 July: Started for Lochnagar at 8.50. Went by the usual route. Lunch at the well. Saw a herd of deer on the White Mounth. Owing to mist did not get higher than Cac Carn Mor (3768, 18 feet below the highest top). While carefully steering our way with the compass we heard someone shouting and soon came upon two fellows (who said they were arguing which way they should go). We walked back the whole way with them to Auchallater where we crossed the Clunie. We cut off a good bit by going down the face of the hill to Loch Callater. Home 7.15. Ben Macdui tomorrow – start at 8.*

*Friday 26 and Saturday 27 July: Mist and rain both days. Ben Muich Dhui abandoned.*

*Monday 29 July: Ben Muich Dhui. Drove to Derry Lodge and ascended by the usual route. Several showers. Saw Bennachie. Theodore was with us. 18 miles.*

*Wednesday 31 July: Left Braemar at 12:40 in waggonette for Aberdeen. Came by 3.30 train from Ballater.*

William Watt, Joint Proprietor and Editor of the *Aberdeen Free Press*, lived at 17 Queens Road (now part of Albyn School for Girls) and was recorded as a member of the Cairngorm Club in the 1896 Journal. His sons Edward and Theodore joined the Club in 1911.



Left: Edward and Theodore's wives, Alice and Mabel Murray pose with their mother and a friend by the Devil's Punchbowl at the Linn of Quoich on a date probably not far from their marriages in 1909 and 1911. Alice Watt was present at the unveiling of both the Lochnagar and Ben Macdhui Indicators; Right: The present author, Graham Watt (Mabel Murray's grandson) re-created the picture over 100 years later. CC Photo Archive

Edward Watt edited the Cairngorm Club Journal from 1927 to 1934. He was a Lt Colonel in the Gordon Highlanders during World War I, had just retired from a career in journalism and was entering local politics as the local councillor for Rubislaw Ward. He later became City Treasurer and then Lord Provost of Aberdeen, officiating at the formal opening of the Aberdeen Royal Infirmary at Foresterhill in 1936.

His younger brother Theodore Watt (see below) was also a keen hillwalker and is shown below in the foreground wearing the standard gear of plus fours, tweed jacket and tie .



Theodore Watt in the foreground with his son George Watt 3<sup>rd</sup> from the left

Dressed this way, on 3-5 April 1920 he attended the Easter meet of the Cairngorm Club at Crianlarich, climbing No 6 Gully on Ben Lui, the Central Gully



of Cruach Ardrain, both with ropes and axes, before finishing off with Beinn Dorain and Beinn an Dothaidh on the final day.

On 12 July 1924 Theodore accompanied his eldest son George (11), niece Marjorie (9), nephew Murray (11) and sister-in-law Alice (43) up Lochnagar, along with over 138 other members and non-members for the unveiling at the top of the new Cairngorm Club Indicator (see below). Marjorie is shown below inspecting the indicator.



Unveiling of the Cairngorm Club Indicator on Lochnagar, 12 July 1924 CC Photo Archive  
George Watt

George (named after his Uncle George, as mentioned in the diary extract above, who had died in Darjeeling in 1908) continued hillwalking with the Aberdeen Grammar School Scouts and joined the Cairngorm Club in 1933 while a medical student at Aberdeen University. The picture shows members of the 17<sup>th</sup> Scout group walking past Loch Etchachan, whose surface was frozen over, on their way to the Shelter (see following page).



Scout group walking past Loch Etchachan



As in the 1925 group photograph at the top of Ben Macdhui, a gabardine Mackintosh was an essential piece of kit).



George Watt shaving at the Shelter Stone

After the unveiling of the Indicator on Lochnagar in 1924, and the “truly tremendous thunderstorm” which followed, George stayed in Ballater with the Gray family while the other Watts returned to Aberdeen. It was the beginning of a long friendship and hillwalking partnership with Hector Gray (later, an Aberdeen solicitor with Gray and Kellas).

Hector wrote,

*During that summer, in 1924, I went to stay with the Watt family at Braemar. There was a boy there called Ignatius who kept a pet jackdaw which used to perch on his shoulders. That trip was the real beginning of my hill-climbing*

*expeditions. Theodore led a small party of six to climb An Sgarsoch and Carn Ealar. It was a perfect day, and we had some glorious views of the Cairngorm massif. It must have been fairly late in August as there were deer stalkers on the hill and when we came down to Geldie Lodge we saw two stags that had been shot that afternoon.*

*When George and I were fifteen, in 1928, we pushed our way on bicycles round Skye and suffered quite indescribable hardships from the rough weather and rough roads. We did not climb in Skye as we had promised our mothers not to do so, but we camped for two nights near Fort William and scaled the heights of Ben Nevis in the interval.*

*It was perhaps five years later that we paid a second visit to the Ben Nevis and this time we did the thing in style. We camped in Glen Nevis and our first expedition was “one of the biggest days” that I have ever spent on the hills. We were late in starting as neither of us were very good at rising in the morning, and it was almost 7 o’clock in the evening when we reached the summit of the Ben. We had, of course, conquered Aonach Beag, Aonach Mor and Carn Mor Dearg on the way.*

*Owing to an unfortunate arrangement which we had made with our too anxious mothers, I had to run all the way from the top of Ben Nevis to the Post Office in Fort William in order to send a telegram, which was to be the signal of our safe descent. The Post Office was closed when I got there but a kindly official let me in at the back door and the telegram was despatched. I was then faced with a six mile walk back to camp. George met me half-way, however, and I got a "lift" on the carrier of his motor bicycle. During the same visit to Glen Nevis, we also climbed Sgurr a'Mhaim.*

*On another occasion I had three Watt brothers for companions, and we climbed Sgoran Dubh. I might as well have gone climbing with a herd of deer for all that I saw of my companions who were always half a hill ahead.*

*Needless to say, I had a car on this expedition, for on the following day George and I climbed Ben Wyvis and on the day after, An Teallach. This last ascent was a triumph of navigation and fortitude. We were determined not to break our tour and we climbed in an absolute blizzard. We steered our way to the highest point on the hill with the aid of a compass, map and aneroid. We saw nothing of the ridge. We were absolutely soaked to the skin when we got back to the Inn at Dundonnell.*

*During the last holiday which George and I had together, shortly before the outbreak of war we did not climb any mountains, but I happen to know that on the day that George met me at Garve he had been to the top of Quinag.*

*We had many a Saturday afternoon's scramble on Kerloch, Clachnaben, Mount Battock, Bennachie and the Hill of Fare. When I stand on the top of the Brimmond Hill it is my proud boast that I have been on the summit of every hill visible on the horizon. I am sure George could have made the same claim and, in fact, we did most of it together.*

Letter from Hector Gray to Theodore Watt, George Watt's father, 1941

In 1941 Hector wrote the following in the Aberdeen Grammar School magazine,

*George loved freedom, and for him to tramp the heather was the greatest freedom. Some of my happiest memories are of holidays spent with him among the hills. Only a few days before the outbreak of war we were lying on the braes above Loch Ewe. The sun was shining, and nothing was there to disturb our peace but the lazy drone of insects, the occasional scream of a gull fishing on the loch, or the steady lap of waters on the shore. But although our bodies were at rest that August afternoon, our minds were rarely more active. We knew that Britain was on the brink of war, and it was impossible for us not to wonder*

what was going to happen next. "What is the first thing you will do when the war is over?" I asked in a cheerful attempt to bridge an awkward gap. "Meet you here, if you like?" was the swift response. I nodded my head in complete agreement, and the tryst was made.



When war broke out George joined the navy as a Surgeon-Lieutenant, serving in the Eastern Mediterranean out of Port Alexandria in Egypt (see left). While evacuating troops from Greece, his ship HMS *Wryneck* was sunk off Crete by German bombers. An eyewitness recorded that George could have known nothing of the bomb which killed him and many others. He was 28.

Alan Watt

George's brother Alan was a founder member in 1936 of the Aberdeen Grammar School Rambling and Mountaineering Club. He spent his war years in India, where an army nurse, Helen Hughes from Derbyshire, looked after him when he was hospitalised with hepatitis. Back in the UK after the war, his idea of courting Helen on her first trip to Scotland was to take her up the Black Spout of Lochnagar (see below).



Helen Hughes, soon to be Helen Watt, climbing the Black Spout on Lochnagar on Friday 20th August 1948, three days into her first visit to Scotland, which probably explains the cardigan and slacks.

The adventure proved no deterrent to romance. In 1949 they married and in 1954 both joined the Cairngorm Club.

My brother Nigel and I soon arrived and in 1962, aged 11 and 10, our parents took us on the Cairngorm Club's 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary expedition – an overnight traverse from the Cairngorm car park to Derry Lodge. An account of that stormy night, involving 25 male and 18 female walkers, was written up in the 1968 Club Journal. Our account was slightly different.

### Cairngorm Nightmare

*We left the car park at about 8 o'clock with the rain pouring down. There was no wind at this time. The area was then in the process of being made into the skiing centre which it now is and the Sheiling was only a network of girders and concrete slabs. Only the uprights of the ski-lift had been constructed and we climbed Cairngorm in stages from upright to upright. The storm was heightening all the time, and a wind was rising to harness the rain and lash it on to our anoraks and packs. The wind wailed and whistled. The rain pelted down, and we were soaked after only an hour's walking.*

*The four of us sought refuge in the corrugated iron hut which today is the head of the ski-lift. We stayed there for three hours, huddling round a gas ring we had found and trying to sleep on the hard wooden boards. We left at one o'clock in the morning, roped together lest we were separated by the wind. We struggled through the dim light down Coire Raibert which was a mass of wet scree. Slithering down, we eventually reached the path around Loch Avon. In the valley the wind had dropped but the rain had lost none of its fury. We trudged round to the Shelter Stone to find that we were six hours behind the main party.*

*We did not wait there, for we could not force ourselves to eat, but pressed on up to Loch Etchachan to meet the head wind again. We passed very slowly over the saddle to the South of Beinn Mheadhoin but made up for lost time by running down to the Etchachan Hut.*

*We had to reach Derry Lodge by noon and after a long, long trek down the glen, we reached the Lodge with twenty minutes to spare. The bus had managed, quite remarkably, to come up to Derry and very soon we were on the short journey to Braemar. The celebration luncheon was held in the Fife Arms Hotel. The President gave a long speech and there were many toasts. After a long night and a large meal, we were all fast asleep on the homeward journey. From Mor Bheinn, Aberdeen Grammar School Hillwalking Club Magazine, 1967*

## Two Presidents

Alan and his brother Harold Watt were both Presidents of the Cairngorm Club and are shown (see following page) at the Centenary Champagne Barbecue held at Muir of Inverey on 21 June 1987.



Past Presidents at Muir Cottage in June 1987, celebrating 100 years of the Cairngorm Club.

Back Row: - Eric Johnston, Sandy Black, Harold Watt, Alan Watt, Sheila Murray.

Front Row: - Robert Bain, Ralph Gerstenberg, Leslie Hay

**Alan Watt** was President from 1967-70 when he had major involvement in the Club acquiring Muir Cottage at Inverey. It was the first occasion on which the local Estate had agreed to sell one of its properties.

**Harold Watt**

Harold Watt joined the Club in 1967 and was President from 1976-79. He donated the bench outside Muir which bears a plaque in his memory.



As a Past-President he attended two significant Cairngorm Club anniversaries. On 1 August 1985, he joined three other Cairngorm Club Past-Presidents, (see left)

Peter Howgate, Sheila Murray, and Eric Johnston, standing by the Indicator on Ben Macdui, sixty years after its first unveiling On 20-23 June 1987, the Cairngorm Club Centenary Events included a mass gathering of the Club at 6:00am at the Dairymaid's Fields, below the Shelter Stone, next to Loch Avon, where the idea of the Club was first mooted by its six founders in 1887. Harold is seen in the centre of the picture holding a walking stick.



Members of the Cairngorm Club at the Dairymaid's Fields, below the Shelter Stone 100 years after the founding of the Club

In Charlotte Peacock's biography of Nan Shepherd, *Into the Mountain*, (see Book Reviews in this issue) Harold Watt, whose day job was Managing Director of Aberdeen University Press (AUP), is credited with persuading his neighbour, friend and colleague Nan Shepherd to publish the manuscript of her book *The Living Mountain*, after it had spent 30 years in a drawer. It was unusual at the time for the AUP to act as a publisher, suggesting that this was a personal initiative by Harold Watt, who was President of the Cairngorm Club at the time.

#### The 4<sup>th</sup> generation

My own memories are somewhat scattered : climbing Carn a'Mhaim, my first Munro, at age 6, my father having got the keys to the Derry Gate from Bob Scott, the gamekeeper, so we could drive up to Derry Lodge; family holidays at Muir of Inverey when it was little more than a stone cottage; swimming in the Dee at the back; playing on the rocks; long carefree summer days on the hills; biking deep into the Cairngorms, long before mountain bikes were thought of; clambering across the old footbridge to the pub at Mar Lodge on starry winter nights; seeing Bob Scott resplendent in his best deerstalker, tweed jacket and plus fours at the Braemar gathering, as purple as the heather; descending the trapdoor to Bill Marshall's underground shop in George Street, Aberdeen, to



buy climbing boots with my own money; chance encounters on hill paths with blind Syd Scroggie, tramping along with his tin leg; all-nighters with the Grammar School Hillwalking Club; climbing all the Cairngorms twice before leaving school.

Returning after 50 years, so much had changed. The Canadian bridge across the Dee to the lumberjack camp, just up from Muir, is long gone; the plantation across the road from Muir is new; a paying car park at the Linn of Dee; a toilet at Corrou Bothy; the hills much busier with lots of single walkers, and women; mountain clothing a big industry; guidebooks abound; electronic aids to navigation; better paths, some with engineered steps, stairways to heaven (something about which, as a very young climber, I could only dream); eight Cairngorm Munros had been demoted; the Angel's Peak became unfinished business.

Two thoughts remain. First, how ephemeral and forgettable are personal experiences and memories; second, what endures, unchanging, are the hills themselves. Standing on the summit cairn of Ben Macdui was probably as sensational for me as it was for my grandfather 127 years previously. The call of high places is as strong as ever. In 2022 I was very glad to re-join the Cairngorm Club – for old time's sake.



The Author Graeme Watt standing on the Summit of Ben Macdui 21/08/2022  
Unless stated otherwise, all photographs belong to the Watt family archive.

## MEMORIES IN WORDS AND PICTURES

BRYAN THURSTON

Club member Bryan Thurston, resident in Switzerland, celebrated his 90th birthday in September '23 and here sends us some memories in words and pictures of grand days spent in the Cairngorms and some tasters of the walking and climbing to be had in his second love, the Alps. We wish him and the first love of his life, his wife Cecile all the Best.

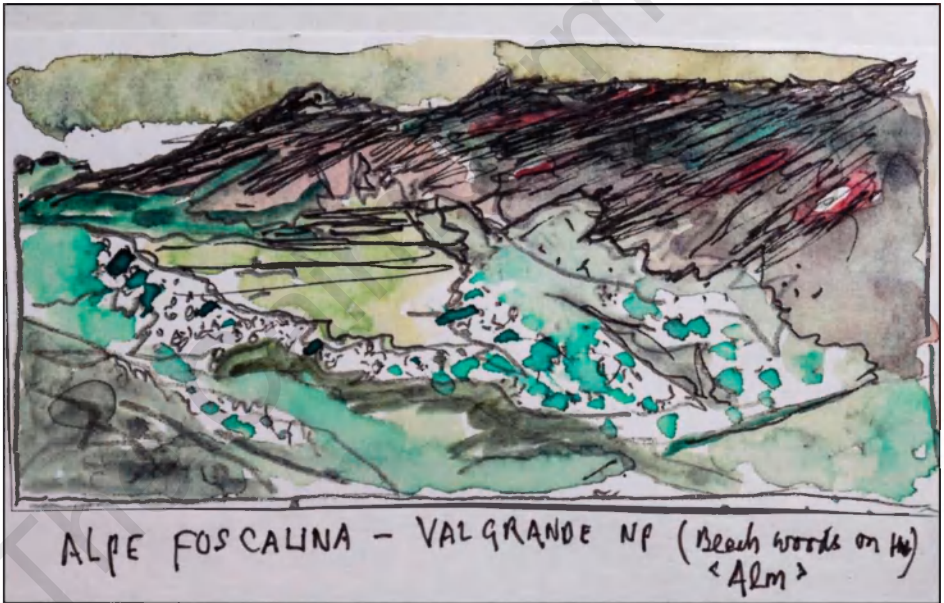


Forefinger Pinnacle, Sgoran Dubh.....Bryan Thurston

(Untitled)

“Precipitously rise from  
 sparkling grey-silver lapping  
 Loch Einich waters-  
 Sgoran Dubh, its high-  
 firmament domed ridgeline.  
 rapturously still of wild black rooks: black delight with blaeberry.  
 Days of snowstorm: bitter wind lingered still.  
 Listen to deep- solitude and the total night blackness.

30/10/2022



Val Grande watercolour

Bryan Thurston

“A remote mountain region in Northern Italy named the *par: national*, Val Grande, known as the last Alpine Wilderness, lies between north Val Vigezzo and Dommodossia and in the south Pallanza on Lago Maggiore. On one of the Val Grande slopes a cheese maker has installed a container for his cheesery.

Cima di Pedum, 2111m., (the tooth) arises in the central area of the National Parc and is found by many to be more beautiful than the Matterhorn.”



Val Grande The Tooth

Bryan Thurston

## PAST PRESIDENTS' PARTY

THE EDITOR

The Sanskrit chant Om Sahana Vavatu is sometimes used before yoga practice to give thanks to teachers, predecessors and tradition. Whilst not suggesting that we begin all Club outings by intoning Gill, Judy, Richard, Ken, Ian, Eilidh, Anne, Adrian, James, Marjory, Garry and Om, Om, Om, Shanti, it is a cause of celebration that at the time of writing (February 2024) with Helen Russell as our New President, (see page 355) we have in our midst 11 Past Presidents (PP). To celebrate these keepers of sometimes forgotten and unrecorded Club history and culture and to probe for hidden gems, I suggested a "Past Presidents' Party" outing to Kerloch, south of Bridge of Feugh.



From L to R, Richard, Gill, Marj, Ken, Judy, Eilidh and Anne

Photo credit J Robinson

Despite a frankly grim and grey day, 7 PPs duly turned up on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022, more or less on time and at the correct place. Due to location and circumstance Ian Bryce, James Friend and Adrian Scott sent apologies and at that time Garry remained active President. Busy social calendars and illness curtailed the walk for some resulting in the trio of Ken, Richard and Marj forging on to the summit. Afterwards we retired to the Feugh Falls Restaurant for coffee and cake. This occasion allowed for much "President's Parley", the

term coined by Richard for a gathering of PPs, some of which topics of conversation are gathered here.



Summit Cairn Kerloch

Photo credit J Robinson

Who knew for instance that as well as forging many a marriage, a Club outing in August 1992 was the scene of a wedding at Invermark Church with tea and cake at the Laurencekirk Hotel? Or that Muir hosted a BBQ for 300 following the 100<sup>th</sup> Club overnighter to Macdui, the Shelter Stone and Dairymaid's field. Did you know that in recognition of the work Jack Connell put into amalgamating local routes, that the MWWs have on occasion been dubbed "the Connells" or that the Club has run week long meets to Skye and Ireland? The President's Party ( designated for weekend Day Meets) it turns out is a fairly recent Club feature prompted by the 1971 Feith Buidhe disaster and given impetus by a Lochnagar meet where the anticipated party of 8 swelled to 26 some of whom were underprepared and under geared for potentially challenging conditions. Here is a quote from records of 1973 noting the tension between keeping outing participants safe whilst creating a friendly and welcoming environment for newcomers.

*The Secretary had circulated a set of outline proposals concerning safety on Club excursions. The background was that on more than one recent meet there had been present persons who were neither members nor guests of any member present, who were not entirely adequately equipped and whom no-one recognised as needing supervision and companionship; also, that even Associate members would on occasion be found without map or compass or to need supervision which was not readily forthcoming. The main feature of the*

*proposals was a suggestion that the Club should more clearly assume responsibility for training less experienced members by providing an instruction party on each excursion.*

*There ensued a general discussion, when the need for some steps along the lines proposed was generally, but not unanimously, accepted. It was agreed, though again not unanimously, that the Club should continue to allow prospective members to attend as quasi-guests if they did not know any member as whose guest they might attend, and that the Club should particularly ensure that such persons were not left unaccompanied by members. It was agreed that a book should be provided in which members might note their intended objectives and routes. Volunteers were found to lead parties such as had been proposed on the first two meets in 1973.*

Some, if not most of these Club anecdotes can be gleaned from our online archive but not everyone has the time or inclination to plough through the these and it is enlightening hearing the accounts from those who were there.

There follows some Past President "Paragraphs".

Gillian Shirreffs, President No 35, 1991 – 1994.

It is such a long time ago and yet my time as President of The Cairngorm Club remains a very clear and positive experience.

I was amazed and honoured to be asked by Eddie Martin, then President, if I would be willing to succeed him as President. I would be the third lady President in the Club History and the youngest at that time, however Richard and I had already been very active members for 20 years.

It was a time of a number of challenges and changes. Perhaps the most notable were the discussions concerning the formation of a new National Park in the Cairngorms. I was already familiar with what was happening both through the committee discussions and through Richard my husband being Club secretary and actively liaising with other clubs and organisations.

February of my first year saw us invited to a meeting in Braemar Village Hall with Magnus Magnusson in the Chair. This was to hear the proposals, to give evidence and to ask questions. It was a daunting prospect but Eddie and Richard both came with me and between us we were able to make submissions on behalf of the Club. The whole meeting was recorded I remember but Magnus Magnusson was an impressive and knowledgeable Chairman. When we adjourned for lunch at the Fife Arms, I realised I was the only woman there, and that came as a bit of a shock! Now we have the National Park.

Memories of internal Club affairs that I was pleased to be involved with include the decision to encourage more young members. This arose partly out of the fact that a few of us in the Club had family who were all friends with each other, shared a love of the hills and were in their mid to late teens. Some were keen on climbing so the committee agreed we should resurrect a Climbing group.

The committee also agreed to fund some young members to attend Glenmore Lodge for Winter Skills Training as well as more significant funding for those wanting to go further and obtain Mountain Leadership Training. More generally we also started Mountain First Aid courses for members, based at Muir.

It was a busy time especially my first year with a number of things coming up, but I really enjoyed it, and the bonus was having Maggie Gruer's very comfortable Chair to sit in!

Judy Middleton, President No 36, 1994-1997.

Little did I think on my first outing with the Club in 1965 with senior Club members Lesley Hay, Ralph Gerstenberg and Eddie Bothwell, that one day I would be asked to be President of the Club. The lesson learned that day was to learn to navigate for myself but that's another story! One of my main objectives as President, like Gill Shirreffs before me, was to ensure that new members were made to feel welcome and included and another aim was to encourage members to undergo training in climbing and mountaineering.

In the past, members had been encouraged to attend Winter Skills courses with MCofS (now MS). I knew however that some were unsure and may have preferred courses closer to home and so we brought in skilled MIC's like Di Gilbert to train folk locally at Muir Cottage, subsidised by the Club. First Aid and other courses were to follow. 1995, my first year in post, was hectic as I had some personal milestones to achieve. I completed my ML(S) Assessment in July and also had to complete my Munros (Ben lme). Luckily, I achieved both.

We all know that not all Overnighters are amazing but 1995s was a memorable one. Leaving the bus in Glen Cluanie, we climbed up Sgurr nan Ceathramhnan to bivvy and woke to a stunningly beautiful cloud inversion. Coincidentally, the Quincentenary of the University of Aberdeen was celebrated that day by helping to have someone on top of every Munro. It was very hot traversing the Glen Affric Munros and a relief to eventually find water again. On arrival home, it was a quick turn round and off to assist with "The Three Blind Mice" "stravaiging" the hilltop boundaries of Grampian



Region before its demise. These three worthies from Gramian Society for the Blind (GSB) now North East Sensory Services (NESS) were all very visually impaired but were so impressive with their enthusiastic walking and camping skills and it was a privilege walk with them from Glenshee to Glen Feshie.

A highlight of 1996 was a Club holiday meet at Puerto Pollensa in Majorca and especially seeing (former) member Ian Lowit (then 80) atop Massanella, the highest climbable mountain on the island.

Club Dinners during my three-year Presidency, saw Irvine Butterfield, Seaton Baxter & Allen Fyffe giving excellent presentations. Luckily the days of long after dinner speeches are in the past, as is the formal dress code and one also needed thermals for the Elphinstone Hall in late November. I found it humbling and a great privilege to be your Club President, now nearly thirty years ago.

Richard Shirreffs, President No 37, 1997- 2000.

In 1972, when I had been a member for less than two years, and was still not an Ordinary Member, the President of the day, Sheila Murray, caught me in a weak moment (half asleep on the bus coming home from an overnight meet) and invited me “as an up-and-coming young member with office facilities” to consider taking on the Secretaryship. I accepted and was still Secretary 25 years later when the President of the day, Judy Middleton, told me that the committee wanted to have me as next President to see the Club into the new millennium. I might have had some choice on the first occasion, but I had no real choice on the second.

For my first year as President there was little out of the ordinary but come October 1998 Scottish Natural Heritage had issued a booklet on proposals for National Parks, with responses called for by the end of November – typical of the way so little time is allowed for consultation on important issues. We did have the Environmental Issues Sub-Committee discuss this and submit a response on behalf of the Club, but in April 1999 the committee minutes record “Nothing further was expected on the National Parks until the Scottish Parliament was up and running.”

Also, in October 1998 we began to think ahead to the millennium, wondering if we should have a special event such as a lavish meet, or might sponsor a new activity or a project, perhaps another environmental one. Robbie Middleton as Huts Custodian was forward thinking enough to reserve Muir for use only by members for the week when we would enter the new millennium.

By February 1999 our millennium plans were taking definite shape – an event at the Stag Ballroom at Mar Lodge at the end of March, a meet to Mount Keen in May with a photographer, and a £2000 contribution to the Clachnaben Trust for footpath work. The planning that went into these and the way that they panned out successfully is described in an article of mine “Marking the Millennium” in Issue 106 of the Journal.

One of my abiding memories from the event at the Stag Ballroom is looking in past a week before the event and finding “the floors awash with lengths of wood panelling, and WCs and wash hand basins arranged as an obstacle course over the dance floor”. But I was assured that it would be all right on the night, and so it proved to be.

Another fond memory relates to my speech at the 2000 Annual Dinner. Although I had just stood down as President at the AGM, I still had to propose the toast to the Club. IT at this time still had to make much of a mark on everyday life but it was clear that we were to expect great things to come. I suggested, half in jest, that very soon in the new millennium we might have goggles displaying the direction we were facing or even a map. And now? Well maybe not goggles with built-in displays, but car windscreens that show speed limits and other traffic information.

My three years as President certainly involved a lot of work, but I enjoyed them and am glad to have had the opportunity to contribute to the evolution of the Club.

Ken Thomson, President No 38, 2000- 2003.

Looking back at the “Proceedings of the Club” section of the 2004 *Journal*, my time as President seems to have coincided with various significant changes of Office-Bearers - primarily the retirement of Graham Ewen as Bus Meets Secretary after 36 years, a record unlikely to be broken any time soon, although the current incumbent, Garry Wardrope, is making a good start! Nevertheless, due to falling numbers, a self-drive minibus, instead of a coach, was used for the first time in February 2003. A Constitutional change in 2003 was needed to recognise, in a new post, the importance of Club communications, both the longstanding Newsletter and the then-new-fangled Yahoo! email and website. In 2002, the Mountaineering Council of Scotland (now Mountaineering Scotland) started to send out their magazine *Scottish Mountaineer*. Anne Cassidy took over from Les Batt as Club Secretary, both occupying this post for a few years before a more permanent replacement could be found - me!

An unusual task for me in 2002 was to work through about 8 boxes of glass slides dating from the early 1900s; these were eventually digitised. My last year as President was blighted by the avalanching of John Elgie in the Left-Hand Branch of the Black Spout of Lochnagar; I had to visit John in the ARI shortly before his death, and deal with enquiries from the membership and the media. On the hill, I remember a couple of snow-limited bus trips to, but not up, Glen Esk (on the return, the bus got stuck at Marykirk!), and in 2001 the then-regular Easter Meet at the (now demolished) Glen Affric Hotel at Cannich had to be curtailed due to foot-and-mouth disease, which also sabotaged (until 2003) a week-long Club meet to Wales.

Memorable meets during my Presidency included:

- Summer 2002: Joint with Westhill Walkers to Sierra Nevada in Spain, under the auspices of Brian Davey, with an ascent of Mulhacén, Spain's highest peak at 3,479m (11,414ft)
- Easter 2003: Aultguish Inn on the Ullapool road, mainly for Fred Belcher's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday party, with wild boar for supper and a hired band afterwards, but also for several multi-Munro trips by other members, in marvellous weather!
- Summer 2003: after a week in the Ticino Alps with Lydia, to the Zermatt meet, held in memory of John Elgie; see above). I can't remember much (weather was poor, and the Matterhorn was falling down), but I did manage another "horn" or perhaps even two!

Eilidh Scobbie, President No 40, 2006-2009.

In thinking about the Cairngorm Club, I will echo the words of Sheila Murray, the Club's first Lady President, "joining the Cairngorm Club was the best thing I ever did." For me, it gave me the confidence and skills to do the things I enjoyed doing in the hills, it enabled many wee adventures both in Scotland and abroad, and over the years, it has provided me with many good friends. Hopefully, I will have put into the Club as much as I have taken out.

One particularly magic and never forgettable experience was my first outing with the Club - the overnighter on the Fannichs, perfect weather, with distant views even to the lighthouses of the Hebrides as the daylight failed, a full moon rising out of the mist over Loch Fannich, the hills a velvety black. I slept deeply that night and woke early when the sun started over heating my orange survival bag.

Anne Pinches, President No 41 2009-2012.

I was immensely proud to be elected President of the Cairngorm Club in 2009 and as the President's "Badge" was hung around my neck I felt as if I'd won Olympic Gold! I had been Vice-President previously and had thought that was a great honour but did not imagine that I could be President and here I was wearing the beautiful badge of office presented to the Club in 1976 by the First Lady President, Sheila Murray.

The job has its "duties" such as chairing meetings but outwith that the incumbent has freedom to make the job their own. Three years is a good length of time as I found it took the first year to grasp all that was involved and then I felt I could attempt to make my mark over the following two years. Quite a lot happened in the three years I was President. The Club was the subject of a television programme for Japanese TV which involved some filming at a weekend meet and also at the dinner in 2009. In 2012 we celebrated the 125th Anniversary of the founding of the Club with a well-attended BBQ at Muir Cottage.

My tenure coincided with continuing as Social Activities Secretary. One of the jobs of the Social Secretary is to organise the annual dinner. Acting on an idea suggested by Eilidh Scobbie in 2008 it was agreed that the Club should invite those who had been members for at least 60 years to the dinner. I hasten to add that the following year and since then, you only need to have been paying your sub for 50 years to enjoy a free dinner! As Social secretary I had the pleasure of inviting quite a number of longer standing members to the dinner. The members, some of whom had been members for almost 70 years, were invited by letter and I received some lovely letters in return, especially from those who were unable to travel to the dinner. For some, living elsewhere than Aberdeen, the distance to Aberdeen was the challenge, while others had mobility issues. All commented on how much the Club meant to them and many included meaningful memories. Some said that they very much enjoyed reading the newsletters and Journals and through that were able to share in others' adventures. Reading these letters made me realise that to be an active member of the Club didn't necessarily mean being able to get out and join in with a walk. Just to be taking a keen interest in the Club activities was enough for me.

During the 2009 dinner I was delighted as the President to present the certificates of long-standing membership. The certificate was conceived and designed by Derek Pinches, at that time the Treasurer and Membership secretary. That first year we were joined at the dinner by six members. Most

of those who couldn't come to the dinner were sent their certificate by post and Derek and I also delivered the certificate to some members who lived closer to Aberdeen. One gentleman, very pleased to receive his certificate, told us that he couldn't remember what he'd had for lunch that day, but he still had nightmares about Crowberry Ridge.

Throughout my time as President, I was ably assisted by my two Vice-Presidents, Derek Beverley and Marj Ewan who were by my side for my three-year stint and ready to support when necessary. I also had wonderful support from my husband Derek and my Mum who took a keen interest in what I was doing. I was delighted that one year she could join us for the Annual Dinner.



One of the privileges of being President was having custody of Maggie Gruer's chair, I very much enjoyed spending quiet moments sitting in it next to our Rayburn oil fired stove in the kitchen imagining her next to her peat fired Raeburn at Thistle Cottage Inverey

On reflection it was a wonderful fulfilling three years, and I still can't believe I was privileged enough to hold that position .

Maggie Gruer's seat with cushion embroidered by Pam Howgate Photo credit Helen Russell

James Friend President No 43, 2014 – 2017.

Although I became a President of the Cairngorm Club in 2018, I first joined the Club in 1984, though I had spent many years before this hillwalking with school and university friends from about 1952 onwards, and even did my first Munro (Lochnagar!) in 1947 when I was 9 years old. But my first outing with the Cairngorm Club was the annual January outing to Lochnagar, where I joined the then President's Party. However, such were the conditions that the road

up Glen Muick was blocked, and we went to Easter Crathie instead, to tackle Lochnagar from the north! But, as you will know, the O.S. map covering Lochnagar does not extend over the glens from the north, and it just happened that I had with me an old O.S. Tourist map of the Cairngorms, which did cover all that area! The leader of the Party jokingly said that I could mark my first outing with the Club by leading the President's Party as I was the only one with a suitable map! Of course, the route was simple enough and I cannot claim to have led the party, but it was memorable and good day, and I enjoyed the company and the experience! I remember at that time it was considered gentlemanly for male attenders to change out of their outdoor clothing behind the back of the bus, while the ladies had the privacy of changing inside the bus itself!

#### **Marj Ewan, President No 44, 2017 – 2020.**

Having completed an 'Introduction to Rock Climbing' at Aberdeen College in the late 1990's I joined the Cairngorm Club to find someone to climb with, and it has become so much more than that over the years. I remember my first winter climb in Raeburn's Gully on Lochnagar which was also my first bus meet day with the club. We arrived 3 hours late back for the bus (which had gone!) and we got into quite a bit of trouble, but it was worth it. Don't recommend being late to others though. I completed my Munros and had climbed most of them during weekend meets, and being President was certainly an experience. I've made lifelong friends, had many adventures (and occasional epics) and especially enjoyed the climbing and trips abroad which were so much fun. Hopefully there is still much more to come.

Since Marj was President, we have had Garry Wardrope as President No 45, 2020 -2023 and now Helen Russell, our 46<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> female President. Indeed, one of the very positive aspects of our Club's organisation has been the ratio of female to male Presidents.

Although all of our PPs would argue that the vitality and evolution of the Club resides with members, Committee members and organisers it is clear from the above that behind the scenes a great deal of energy, passion, hard work and grind goes into the usually smooth running of the Club's organisation.



Back row, Anne Pinches, Eilidh Scobie, Judy Middleton, Gill Shirreffs  
Front Row, Sheila Murray, Anne Cordiner

So, the next time you are walking with a PP, keep an ear out for these nuggets of history and change and reflect on the effort of those who have step cut before us.

THE NEW PRESIDENT  
HELEN RUSSELL

“I was born and grew up in Ayrshire and went to school in Ayr. My interest in hills and mountains didn't manifest itself until I was in my early thirties when I came back to live in Scotland after living in Italy and America for work. While living abroad many people told me how lucky I was to come from such a beautiful country; however, I was ashamed to admit that I had not visited most of Scotland's beauty spots. This sparked an interest and a desire to get to know my own country more and when I returned, I joined some walking clubs. One of my most memorable first experiences was an overnight walk with the Cairngorm Club where we watched the most spectacular sunset and sunrise over Ben Nevis, despite not being able to feel my hands and feet while we bivouacked for a few hours on a Mamore summit.

I probably then climbed around thirty to forty Munros over the next few years, but it was restricted as a result of starting a family and working full time, so my desire to get into the mountains had to take a back seat while I focused on family life and building a career. When my daughters reached their teens and I started to have more free time this allowed me to do more walking and enabled me to start my Munro-bagging journey

Retirement in 2022, and the purchase of a campervan, has significantly increased the number of visits to the hills, along with being appointed the Club's Weekend Meets Secretary - a role which I have thoroughly enjoyed. I now have two Munros left to do in 2024 and it will be a privilege to complete whilst I am President. I have also started on the journey to complete the Corbetts and hope to enjoy it as much as I have enjoyed walking the Munros.

I was elected as President in November this year and would like to thank Garry Wardrope (our previous President) for his efforts and contributions during his tenure. Membership numbers in the Club have recently increased and I hope that this trend will continue. I also hope that my time as President will ensure that the Club stays current and in line with what the members want. To this end we are working on a survey which will help inform the committee. I am looking forward to being more involved with managing the Club and I hope that I will be able to contribute to maintaining it in good health and facilitating its growth to future-proof it for many years to come.”





Stob Gabhar

Photo credit Jamie Vince



## CLUB INSIGNIA: BADGES, PENDANTS AND PINS

KEN THOMSON

Over the years, the Club has commissioned several physical indications of membership, officialdom or possession; Chapter 10 of the Centenary Book (Sheila Murray, 1987) is entitled "Emblems, Arms and Gifts". This note attempts to expand that account somewhat, and to bring it up to date.

**Pre-War**

From 1925 onwards, the Club appears to have set up arrangements with one or more local outfitters (e.g. Alexander Booth at 49/51 St. Nicholas Street; and Dugan & Mitchell at 448 Union Street) to sell various items in Club colours (i.e. "gold and dark brown"), such as "silk ties, hummel doddies, woollen scarves, sweaters"; these were advertised in the Club Journal between no. 65 (June 1927) and no. 81 (1940). Ties at least were "well in evidence" at the New Year Meet at Braemar, as recorded in *CCJ* no. 64 (July 1926).



"Bronze" badges or buttons were first designed in 1926 by Club member A. G. Nicol Smith, one with "CC" and a thistle, and a second with the Lochnagar corrie, though with sunrays coming from a very odd direction – unless the *aurora borealis*?

The cover of the Club Journal has always borne two crossed ice-axes, entwined with the letters CC, and surrounded by a rope, a candle lantern, and "1889" - the year of the first official meeting although the Club was actually founded

by Loch Avon in 1887.

**Post-War**

*CCJ* no. 85, 1946-47, p.84, contains:

*"Regarding Insignia: The device on the Club button is a representation of Lochnagar; the Library stamp is an ice-axe, entwined with climbing rope; the decoration on the Journal cover brings the total of Club emblems to three, where, it has been suggested, one token would suffice. The Committee is considering a proposal that the cover design be adopted as the single badge,*

*bookplate, and voucher, but would welcome other suggestions, with designs, if necessary. No prize is offered! The stock of Club buttons is now exhausted."*

The outcome of this post-war "proposal" is not known, but in 1965 the Lord Lyon King of Arms granted the Cairngorm Club "Ensigns Armorial", or Coat of Arms, in the following terms, as recorded in CCJ no. 93 (1968), p.226:

*"Per chevron Azure and Gules, a chevron Argent between in chief a cross-crosslet fitchèe in dexter and an antique crown in sinister both Or, and in base two ice-axes, head upwards also Or, and in an Escrol this Motto clac-dian"*



The same CCJ issue goes on (p. 227) to record that "receipt of this honour by the Club was due entirely to the initiative of the late Dr G. A. Taylor". The design suggests the foundation of the Club at the Shelter Stone or *Clac Dian*, its main activity by the crossed ice-axes, and the locality by features of the arms of local families, i.e. the cross-crosslet for the Earl of Mar, and the five-pointed

crown for Grant of Grant, on Speyside. The chevron suggests a mountain peak, while the lower red (*gules*) field recalls *Monadh Ruadh*, the old name of the Cairngorm range, the upper blue (*azure*) the sky, and the silver (*argent*) chevronel a covering of snow – the latter two features not always characteristic of the Cairngorms these days!



Crests etc.

The first Club design that I have been able to trace is a crest at the foot of the menu for the Club's First Annual Dinner, held on 19<sup>th</sup> February 1890. Against a sketch of an ascent route from "*Potage – Hare Braeriach*", through "*Entrée – Oyster Patties*", "*Relevés* [another form of entrée] – *Sirloin of Beef ...*" and three more courses, to "*Dessert*" (unspecified), and between two bearded gentlemen lounging at their ease, the Lion Rampant of Scotland appears below two crossed walking sticks and above the slogan "*O'er Moss and Fell*" It is not known if the glee was actually sung! The Annual Dinner was not repeated until 1920, when

Mr. George R. Gowans "*designed an artistic menu card*", and spoke in response to the sentiment, "Art and Artists". Later menus, as archived by the Club, i.e. for Annual Dinners in 1931, 1933, 1934, 1938, 1947-1950, and 1952-1955, and 1957-1960, carry no logo or crest on the cover, but rather a photograph, usually taken in the Cairngorms but occasionally the Alps. An exception was the 1955 menu, which carried a crest much like the Library stamp, e.g. crossed ice-axes, entwined by the letters "CC" within a circle of rope between the digits "18" and "89", and a lantern hanging below. The number of courses on the menu was still 7 in 1938 but had shrunk to 3 in 1947. From 1968 (possibly 1967) onwards, the Dinner menus carried the Club's crest, as awarded in 1965, with the motto "*Clac Dian*" in a scroll below. This has been repeated each year since, with the notable exception of the Centenary Dinner in 1987, when the crest

carried the dates “1887-1987”, and appeared above a sketch of the Shelter Stone, by N. E. Shepherd.

### **Clubwear, Glassware etc**

Following a 1987 Centennial precedent, in 1997 the Club arranged a supply of 110 specially labelled bottles of whisky. Further appearances of the Club’s insignia took place in the 1990s, when a range of “clubwear” such as fleeces and T-shirts was produced for sale to members, each garment emblazoned with the Club’s badge: a few examples are still worn by elderly members on special occasions! In total, this raised around £1000 by the mid-2000s.

And from the 2000s onwards, Club-engraved glassware and quiches have been occasionally commissioned to commemorate achievements by various Club members, mainly “completion” of all the Munros or Corbetts.

There is also a book stamp (date and origins unknown) for Library items, showing an ice-axe entwined with climbing rope. And a number of coloured tie pins and brooches, and cloth badges, remain from previous stocks.

### **Current Insignia**

The President is presented with a lapel badge and a neck pendant: as well as the Club coat of arms, the latter carries a cairngorm stone, and was first presented in 1976 by Sheila Murray, the Club’s first female President (1970-73), to Sandy Black (President 1973-76), who shortly afterwards passed it on to Harold Watt, the succeeding President. Lapel badges also exist for the Hon. President, both Vice-Presidents, Hon. Secretary, Hon. Treasurer, and up to 15 Past-Presidents.



## BOOK REVIEWS

## Scotland's Mountain Landscapes. A Geomorphological Perspective

By Colin K Ballantyne – 2019. Published by Dunedin Academic Press Ltd. ISBN 9781780460796 (Hardback), 9781780466118 (Kindle).

Geology is the science of the earth and its history, reconstructed from the record of the rocks: their types, structures, ages and origins. Geomorphology is the study of landforms and landscapes and the processes responsible for their formation. Essentially (but not exclusively), Geomorphology focuses on the processes operating at the surface and near surface of the Earth to produce landforms ranging in scale from millimetres to hundreds of kilometres.

Most books and articles devoted to the evolution of the Scottish landforms and landscape are targeted at the professional research community of geologists and geomorphologists. At the other extreme are popular accounts, typically shorn of jargon and replete with imaginative, colour reconstructions of past landscapes but limited scientific content. This book attempts to steer a middle course. What further helps the reading of this book is that, at 158 pages, it is not too long. Even then, about a third of the pages are taken up by beautiful pictures and diagrams. Also helpful is an index of locations in Scotland and an index of Scottish mountains and hills. So, if you are visiting a certain location, mountain or hill you can locate what information about them is to be found within the book.

The following are some of the things that I've learned from reading this book:

- for a small country, Scotland contains a staggering range of rock types of widely different ages, the result of a complex and sometimes violent geological history. To understand this geological diversity, it is useful to first identify the major pieces of the jigsaw puzzle of Scotland's geology. These are termed *terranes*, zones of the Earth's crust which preserve a geological history that differs from adjacent areas. Scotland comprises five *terranes* (formed ~490 million to ~390 million years ago) that are separated by major northeast-southwest trending faults that represent vertical and horizontal movement of one *terrane* relative to its neighbour.
- the geological Union of Scotland and England occurred at ~425 million years ago and runs from the Solway Firth to just south of the Cheviot

Hills, roughly parallel to the present political boundary between the two countries.

- which mountains are regarded as being the oldest and youngest Munros, their composition and approximate age.
- how the Inaccessible Pinnacle was formed.
- when and why Ice Ages and global cooling occur.
- the last Scottish Ice Sheet expanded and contracted during the period of ~31 thousand - ~11.7 thousand years ago. Thus, most landforms in the Scottish Mountains are of comparatively recent origin, particularly the period after ~17 thousand years ago when Scottish mountains began to emerge from the thinning and retreating of the last ice sheet.
- did the last ice sheet cover the Scottish mountains?
- how dead midges have been used to indicate temperatures during late glacial periods.
- how far and how high erratics have been transported.
- how to recognise glacial meltwater runoff channels.
- how available col outlets created the “parallel roads” of Glen Roy.
- why rubble covers many Scottish mountain ridges and plateau, but not on others.
- how tors are formed.

As said above, this book attempts to steer a middle course in terms of technicality, but it does still require a bit of effort to read. However, I think that the examples of what I have learned shows that such efforts are rewarded. Reading this book will open your eyes further to what you see when you're out hillwalking and enhance your appreciation of this beautiful country of ours.

BRIAN PURVES

### **Mountain Friendships: the First 100 Years of the MAM**

*By Dave Roberts, Midland Association of Mountaineers, 256pp. ISBN 978-1-3999-4819-7.*

This centennial volume is a portrait of a kindred mountaineering club based in Birmingham, with over 500 members and no fewer than three huts: in Wales, the Lake District and the Pennines. The book is organised roughly by four periods, from the club's foundation in 1922 to the present day and interspersed by profiles of notable members (e.g. Showell Styles, Rick Allen) and many sections dealing with various topics such as its London Section, hill-bagging, and of course those huts. An usual feature is the close link with the Birmingham University Mountaineering Club known as the Stoats: this has

given the MAM a valuable recruitment source, often of climbers of a high standard.

Like the Cairngorm Club, the MAM has admitted both male and female members from the start and runs a journal much like the CCJ. Its meets range from days at relatively local venues (e.g. South Wales), through weekends at its own huts (73 in 2022!) and elsewhere, to “Alpine” meets in Norway and Corsica as well as Austria etc. Most meets have a label, e.g. Family, “Mega Meal”, “New Year”, etc., and the “Walk, Run, Bike, Swim” section indicates some recent developments. Proper attention is paid to Scotland, with many tales and photographs of Munro-bagging, the Ben, Skye ridges, Fort William Easter Meets (1934 – 2003), etc., and favourable mention of the Cairngorm Club’s Muir Cottage as an oft-visited Scottish hut. Developments of its own huts range from the purchase of a semi-ruined cottage in 1945 to a similar event in 2016, with every conceivable property-owner’s nightmare in between – floods, asbestos, parking, and the rest of it.

The writing and production standard is high, with over 100 photographs and a pleasing format, though an index would have helped.

The book has been placed at Muir, where it can be consulted by anyone staying there.

KEN THOMSON

*The Hidden Fires. A Cairngorms Journey with Nan Shepherd*  
by Merryn Glover. Polygon Books, Birlinn Ltd, 2023. ISBN 978 1 84697 575 2.  
ebook isbn 978 1 78885 517 4. 232 pp. Hardback £14.99

There are many reasons for climbing the Scottish hills. Displacement and release from everyday concerns. The exhilaration of height and space. The satisfaction of steady toil. Marvelling at the beauty of the country. Calming nerves, reducing anxiety and lifting depression. Enjoying freedom of movement. Company and conversation – attractions for some, a distraction for others. The sense of achievement.

For over 7000 people and 20 dogs the achievement has been monumental. According to the SMC Guide the 282 Munros can be climbed in 155 days, walking 3057 km and climbing 172,580 m, spending 963 hours and 10 minutes in the process, not counting stops. Goodness knows the associated car mileage and carbon footprint.

First published in 1977, Nan Shepherd’s *The Living Mountain* described a different approach, sometimes called “mountain wandering”, alerting the body’s senses to every facet of the mountain environment. Her talent and



achievement as a writer, for herself and then for others, was to set down the nature and effects of that interaction.

As Merryn Glover comments “By now it has sold hundreds of thousands of copies, been translated into at least sixteen languages and spawned countless works in response from dance, music, art, photography, a literary prize and further writing”. After 30 years in a drawer and nearly 50 years in print it is a book which keeps on giving.

Although the Cairngorm Club bus passed her home in Cults on the North Deeside Road many times, Nan Shepherd (who was not at all like her image on the RBS £5 banknote) wasn’t a member of the Club and does not seem to have taken part in Club activities. However, she did go out with the Deeside Field Club, so wasn’t “unclubbable”. Nor was the Club closed or oppressive to women. From its very first outing up Mount Keen in 1889, women were often and usually part of the company. Possibly the fixed nature of Club outings (back at the bus by a certain time) didn’t give her the freedom and flexibility her roaming involved.

However, the Cairngorm Club does have a place in her story. As Charlotte Peacock mentions in her biography *Into the Mountain. A Life of Nan Shepherd*, she was finally “pestered” into print by Harold Watt, the Managing Director of Aberdeen University Press, who was not only a neighbour in Cults but was also her publisher during the years she edited the *Aberdeen University Review*. At that time, before Robert Maxwell bought and subsequently ruined the business, Aberdeen University Press was a high end printer rather than a publisher, so taking on *The Living Mountain* was a special deal. Harold Watt was President of the Cairngorm Club at the time (1976-79).

Merryn Glover is an Australian author, brought up in the Himalayas, the daughter of missionary parents, who for 30 years has lived on the western edge of the Cairngorms, married to a local general practitioner. In 2019, as a professional writer, broadcast playwright and published novelist she was appointed writer-in-residence at the Cairngorm National Park, re-read *The Living Mountain* and was sparked into a flurry of reading, research and personal exploration. Numerous quotes from *The Living Mountain* provided footsteps to follow.

Much has changed and continues to change in the Cairngorm area since Nan Shepherd wrote her book but the massif itself and its elemental natures are largely unchanged. In twelve chapters, whose titles mirror Shepherd’s, the common thread is a series of walks through Glens Derry, Einich and Feshie and up Creag Dubh, Cairngorm, Ben Macdui, Angel’s Peak and Braeriach,

sometimes camping overnight. Special destinations were Loch Avon, Loch Etchachan, Lochain Uaine below Angel's Peak and Loch Coire an Lochan on Braeriach, each celebrated with a dip, sometimes with and other times without a swimming costume. One is reminded of TE Lawrence's description of "*that peculiarly Australian air of reckless willingness and capacity to do something very soon*".

Each account involves personal narrative, keen observation, reflective commentary and frequent digressions to: *The Living Mountain*; Nan Shepherd's earlier writing and life; previous writers on the Cairngorms including Seton Gordon and Syd Scroggie; history, geography and geology; local people, politics and controversies; the absence of midges in *The Living Mountain*; winter training and mountain rescue, to list a few. The mixture is both familiar and new. Readers may be inspired to follow Merryn Glover's steps up the usually neglected and pathless Coire Garbhlach in Glen Feshie. And who knew about the 2000 Indian soldiers posted to the Cairngorms in World War II, and their cemetery in Kingussie?

The final chapter is a close reading of what Nan Shepherd wrote about her mountain experiences, "*at first ... seeking only sensuous gratification*" but "*going on to discover the mountain in itself*" and learning to prepare herself for the revelations that walking in the mountains could provide. Like the Shelter Stone Crag, this may not be for everyone, but as Merryn Glover herself writes, "*There is something about a long walk in the mountains that opens us.*" WH Murray, the pioneer Scottish mountaineer and author, wrote similarly, his mountain climbing a means to an end rather than an end in itself.

Having grown up in the Himalayas, where mountains have a more explicit spiritual significance, mountain pilgrimages being common to many religions, Glover is well placed to compare, contrast and reflect. Shepherd was interested in Eastern religions and philosophies, especially Buddhism, but was not a Buddhist herself. She did not believe in an afterlife and was more interested in what life itself could offer, especially "*what it is to be*", devoid of mundane distractions.

Merryn Glover is surefooted in clarifying, commenting and adding to what *The Living Mountain* is about, and in making her points accessible through descriptions of her own experience. *The Hidden Fires* is well imagined, well written and fully realised. Following *The Living Mountain* was ambitious, but this book does it modestly, carefully and rather brilliantly well.

GRAHAM WATT

*One Man's Legacy. Tom Patey*

By Mike Dixon, Scottish Mountaineering Press. 2022

ISBN 978-1-907233-46-3, 464 pp, Hardback £30

Many readers will know that the title of this book is a play on the book *One Man's Mountains*, a collection of Tom's writings published in 1972.

Mike Dixon spent several years researching the book and this attention to detail is one of its strengths. He has managed to write a book that sits easily alongside Tom's own output.

The author's style makes this book easy to read or to put it another way, hard to put down. I had no trouble reading it again for the review. Yet, throughout the book there is a sense that Mike Dixon has gone to great lengths to ensure the veracity of the story. This was made more difficult by Tom's casual approach to the dates of some events.

This book will appeal not only to the climber but to anybody with a love of the Cairngorms and its history. This is very much a human story written with great sensitivity. There are a large number of photographs, mainly black and white but a few coloured ones with many coming from the Patey family. These images are dispersed throughout the book and play a significant part in the narrative. Just like the climbing, some of these photographs were taken in extreme conditions.

Altogether there are 22 Chapters, which chronologically follow Tom's various careers. I liked the titles given to the Chapters, many having a play on words. For myself the reason for the title often only became obvious after reading it. 'After you Mike' refers to being invited on Mike Bank's Rakaposhi expedition where after six weeks he summited with Mike. The Admiral in the 'Admiral and a Christian' refers to Tom's naval heritage.

In each chapter there are a few numbered footnotes, their explanations are easily accessible at the end of each chapter. The clarity of the explanation is impressive, far better than in most books of this nature. There is no chronological list of Tom's first ascents and in my opinion, it is not needed in this book. As the story unfolds there are plenty of references to climbs completed, many readers will know these climbs and will have done them. The lack of any lists is compensated by the excellent eight pages of Appendices, where you can look up and see if your 'Patey' route gets a mention. Also of interest, particularly to a collector of this genre, is the comprehensive seven page bibliography.

The 1950-51 Cairngorm Club Journal contains Tom's first published accounts of two of his new routes. This is my only disagreement with Mike

Dixon who claims that Tom's first published account of a climb was in the SMC Journal of the following year.

An example of the author's regard for Tom's family is his inclusion of a little detail regarding Betty Patey neé Davidson. At the end of the book, I realised that the true hero of this book is Betty. Her loyalty to Tom, her hospitality to his friends and her success as a mother are testament to a remarkable woman. The book deals with Tom's foibles with great sensitivity but the reader is left to make their own judgement. It is over fifty years since his tragic death. His demise was the end of a mercurial man whose range of talents made him almost superhuman.

We should always remember that his first Club was the Cairngorm, and he was one of our own. For me this is the best Mountaineering book to be published in the last few years. I know my friend Bill, an Etchachan climber, ordered his copy in advance and was not disappointed.

MARK PEEL

### First on the Rope

*by Roger Frison-Roche, first published in France in 1942 as Premier de Cordée by Arthaud, Paris, and in English in 1949 by Methuen. Translated by Janet Adam Smith. Re-issued in paperback (250pp) by Vertebrate Publishing, Sheffield, 2019, ISBN 9781911342458.*

Amongst mountaineers, Janet Adam Smith who translated this book, is a name to conjure with, especially for *Mountain Holidays* (1946), her account of pre-war walks and climbs in the Cairngorms and the Alps. But she was a literary figure (and more) on a much wider scale, including translations with Nea Morin of Maurice Herzog's *Annapurna* (1952), and *Gervasutti's Climbs* in the Dolomites, Alps and Andes.

The book considered here is a semi-autographical novel written by an eminent French guide, the first non-local to join the "hermetic" Compagnie des guides de Chamonix. With the help of family and friends, young Pierre, an aspirant guide, overcomes a tragedy on Mont Blanc to re-build his passion for climbing. If pre-war simplicity and romance appeal to you, have a read of this!

KEN THOMSON

Fiva: an Adventure That Went Wrong.

*By Gordon Stainforth. Golden Arrow Books, 2012. 210pp. ISBN 978-0-9570543-0-1.(cont)*

Written some 40 years after the “adventure” – actually a “near-death experience” – this book describes the 1969 ascent of the Fiva (pron. “fever”) route up the 5500-foot (1788m) Troll Wall in Norway’s Romsdal. The two Hertfordshire twins had minimal training (“a couple of quite big mountains in the Alps with guides”, and a week’s winter course in Glencoe), equipment (hemp waistlines, an ice-hammer and ice-axe with shortened shaft, and seven pegs), and food (three cheese sandwiches and two Cadbury Fruit & Nuts). The “breathless teenage voice never wavers”, as they absorb the enormity of their surroundings, the endless route-finding (and route-losing) problems on rock and snow-ice, the vanishing of time, and even their fall, miraculously survived at the cost of a single bruised knee. They make it to the top after two days, only to be faced by a horrendous descent, starving and sleepless, taking another 24 hours. A wonderful story, masterfully told, and with a happy ending!

KEN THOMSON

## IN MEMORIAM

**Guy Scott**

Guy Scott joined the Cairngorm Club in 1969 and remained a member until his death in January 2023.

He evidently made a mark as soon as he joined the Club, as he was elected to the committee in 1970 and served two three-year stints. He was one of Peter Howgate's squad of members who erected bunks and did other fitting out works at Muir in 1972, and was a regular attender of bus meets, often with his friend and work colleague Norman Shepherd. In the days before weekend meets Norman and Guy were part of a group who regularly went to the hills for weekends away, whether camping or staying at Muir or other club huts. On one occasion Guy and Norman joined the Club members heading for Beinn a' Bhuid by emerging from an igloo not far below the South Top.

Guy was also a keen climber, well enough known in climbing circles to serve for a time on the committee of the infant Mountaineering Council of Scotland. He did much of his early climbing in Torrion and on Skye, where he helped a group of us to reach the top of the "In Pin". He also climbed further afield, including a successful ascent of the Matterhorn, with a guide, on a day when a storm led to misfortunes for others.

Guy became less active in the Club when his eyesight began to fail, but he still enjoyed keeping in touch with Club members and hearing how things in the Club were faring.

**Peter Ward**

Peter joined the Club in 1973, along with his wife Ruth, and both were active members for many years, often staying at Muir with fellow-members. A radiologist at Foresterhill by career, he served on the Committee between 1977 and 1980, and as Librarian between 1986 and 1993.

**Duncan Macrae**

Duncan's newspaper obituary recorded his time at Robert Gordon's Technical College studying naval architecture whilst working in the drawing office at Hall Russell Shipyards. It was during this time that he became involved in hillwalking and climbing, joining the Club in 1954 and remaining an Ordinary Life Member until his death in 2023.

It is cited that he and friend Gus Faulkner made first ascents of Lucifer Route, Slugain Buttress and Forefinger Pinnacle Direct.

In the last few years Duncan contributed articles to the Journal on Alexander Kellas, issue 113 and The Secret Howffs of Beinn a' Bhuid in issue 114.

The Club has also received notifications of the deaths of the following:

**Neville Critchley** : Ordinary, Life Member, 1967 – 2022, Committee Member, 1969-1970

**John Hetherington** : Ordinary Member, 1969 – 2022

**Greg McMeekin** : Ordinary Member, 1969 – 2022

**Winton McNab** : Ordinary Member, 1965 – 2022

**Douglas Riach** : Associate Member 1990 – 2022

**Helen Turner** : Associate Member 2022 – 2023

**Jim Petrie** : Local contact for Muir Cottage until his death in 2022

**Heather Salzen** : Although never a Club Member, the death of Heather Salzen was noted. She undertook the first botanical survey of Piper's Wood.

## CLUB PROCEEDINGS

This review covers the period since early 2022, i.e. two years of Club activities carried out largely in the post-Covid-19 era.

### GENERAL MEETINGS

Both the 2022 and 2023 AGMs were held in hybrid form, i.e. both in-person and by Zoom. In 2022, 30 members attended, and the following were elected or re-elected as Office-Bearers: Robbie Middleton (Hon. President), Garry Wardrope (President and Day Meets Secretary), Izy Kirkaldy and Ivan Hiscox (Vice-Presidents), Ken Thomson (Secretary), Donald Thomas (Treasurer), Kees Witte (Hut Custodian), Helen Russell (Weekend Meets Secretary), Stuart Message (Climbing Activities), Eilidh Scobbie (Social Activities Secretary), Colin Brown (Communications Secretary); and the following as “ordinary” Committee members: Kolbjorn Akselvoll, Mike Culley, Stuart Dick, Mike Duguid, Susan Jensen, Craig Thomson, (all re-elected), and Esperanza Martin Gil, Vay Mutch and Brian Purves. During the year, Club membership rose slightly, from 338 to 340.

The 2023 AGM saw 41 members attending, and most Office-Bearers re-elected, with the following replacements: Helen Russell (President), Mike Duguid (Vice-President) and Craig Thomson (Day Meets). Stuart Dick (continued as Climbing Secretary) Mike Duguid and Susan Jensen all stood down as “ordinary” Committee members, while Will Ellwood was elected as a new one. It was reported that Club membership had again risen to 359.

### MEETS

#### DAY MEETS

In both years, the traditional excursions were made to Lochnagar in January and across the Cairngorms in September as well as the midsummer overnights, to the Mamores in 2022 and Glen Shiel in 2023. The Schiehallion meet in 2022 was preceded by a talk by a John Muir Trust ranger. In December 2022, a traverse of Bennachie had to be cut short due to deep snow, and a meet to Glas Tulaichean in February 2023 was met by very high winds. In both years, multi-day camping meets were held, and snowholing on the White Mounth in March became a regular occurrence. The planned October 2023 meet to the Convals near Dufftown had to be cancelled due to Storm Babet.

	<u>2022</u>	<u>2023</u>
January	Lochnagar	Lochnagar
February	Mayar & Dreish	Glas Tulaichean



March	Snowholing - White Mounth	Snowholing - White Mounth
April	Ben Lawers Traverse	Beinn Bhreac
May	Broad Cairn - Cairn Bannoch	Ben Wyvis
June	Overnighter - Mamores	Glen Shiel (overnighter)
July	An Sgarsoch/Carn an Fhìdhleir*	Monadhliaths
August	Middle Cairngorms*	Glen Feshie; Atholl – Deeside*
September	Cairngorm Traverse (S to N)	Cairngorm Traverse (N to S)
October	Schiehallion	Cancelled
November	Ben Rinnes	Pollagach Ridge
December	Bennachie	Buck of Cabrach

\* Multi-day trips

### WEEKEND MEETS

These meets proved very popular in both years when many of the usual locations were revisited. An “extra” meet at Muir was held in November 2023, and proved successful.

	<u>2022</u>	<u>2023</u>
January	Muir (Burns Night)	Muir (Burns Night)
February	Kinlochleven (with FRCC)	Rothiemurchus Lodge
March	Inbhirfhaolain, Glen Etive	Inverardran, Crianlarich
April	Strawberry Cottage, Glen Affric	Glen Brittle, Skye
May	Coruisk Hut, Skye	Hogarbost, Harris (camping)
June	CIC Hut, Ben Nevis	Rum; Durness (camping)
July	Naismith Hut, Elphin	Forest Way, Lael
August	Shielaig (camping)	Corran Bunkhouse
September	Rum Hostel	Knoydart
October	Riasg, Roybridge	Morvich, Kintail
November	Inverardran, Crianlarich	Muir Cottage
December	Corran Bunkhouse	Blackrock Cottage, Glencoe

### CLIMBING

In both years, climbing meets, both formal and informal, resumed much as in pre-Covid days, i.e. indoors at Transition Extreme (and sometimes at the Alford Community Campus) during the winter, and outdoors on the coast or inland.

Two self-rescue training sessions were held in 2022. In spring 2023, Stuart Dick took over Climbing Secretaryship duties from Stuart Message.

### **MID-WEEK WALKS**

Coordinated by Joyce Ritchie, these Walks resumed as pre-Covid normal, with several well-known locations revisited. A highlight was the A-to-B Walk in August 2022, from Glen Dye to Clatterin' Brig, during which we heard a talk at Charr Bothy about the tree-planting and access plans of the new purchasers of Glen Dye Moor (which includes the Clachnaben summit), and tea and scones were enjoyed at the Brig café before the coach arrived. In 2023, traverses of the Coyles of Muick in April, and the Hill of Fare in August, were perhaps outstanding. See Joyce's article elsewhere in this issue.

	<u>2022</u>	<u>2023</u>
January	The Blue Hill	Kemnay – Fetternear
February	Glen Girnock	Kincorth & The Gramps
March	Portlethen – Newtonhill	Glen Gairn
April	Carn Mor, Corgarff	Coyles of Muick
May	Carn Fiaclach Beag	Ballochbuie – Callater
June	Sgor Buidhe, Ballater	Carnferg
July	Correen Hills	Craig Leek
August	Glen Dye – Clatterin' Brig	Hill of Fare Traverse
September	Baudy Meg	Upper Glen Dye
October	Seven Bridges	Clova Hill, Lumsden
November	Sands of Forvie	Finzean
December	Drumoak Circular	Banchory Circular

### **SOCIAL ACTIVITIES**

Eilidh Scobbie organized both the 2022 and 2023 Dinners at the Royal Northern & University Club, with talks by Mick Fowler, "No Easy Way", and by Simon Richardson, "Looking Around New Corners in the Alps and Canada", respectively. The RNUC also hosted the Club's summer BBQs, and the indoor meets in 2022/23, but in autumn 2023 the latter were switched to the Church Centre at Queen's Cross.

### **COMMUNICATIONS**

Colin Brown continued to maintain the Club's website [www.cairngormclub.org.uk](http://www.cairngormclub.org.uk), and to edit the thrice-yearly Newsletters. The

Google Group email system was well-used, supplemented by WhatsApp. By the start of 2024, the Members' Forum had 169 members, 1450 topics and over 7600 posts. Facebook was well used by the climbers, and a general Club Facebook page was populated with meet reports mostly by Mike Duguid, with 633 followers in November 2023.

## **MUIR COTTAGE**

Kees Witte continued as Custodian, supervising Work Weekends in both years, and in spring 2022 Forbes Macpherson took over bookings from Jamie Vince. After Covid, Muir was fully re-opened at the start of 2022, and the number of bed-nights recovered to 1200 in 2021-22 (2020-21: 500) and 2158 in 2022-23, i.e. back to normal if not above. In 2022, the bedrooms were rewired, with bunk light/USB sockets and smoke sensors installed, and in 2023 automatic closers and intumescent seals were fitted as fire protection to the common-room doors. Most of the trees planted a few years ago continued to thrive, despite the attention of the local deer.

## **FINANCE**

Receipts returned more or less to normal in 2022 and 2023, with membership subscription revenue around £8000, and Muir letting receipts of around £20,000. On the expenditure side, the usual range of Club donations, subscriptions and training grants to members were made, but with higher affiliation fees becoming payable to Mountaineering Scotland. Printing and digital archiving of Club Journal no. 114 in 2022 cost around £1750, and electricity costs at Muir – for new fittings, rewiring and per-unit charges – rose substantially. In pursuit of the Club's charitable objectives, about £15,000 was spent on various Club projects (see next subsection), whilst continuing and increasing the Club's donations to Mountain Rescue. Despite this, the Club's 30 September bank balances remained high, at £ 108,015 in 2021, £110,940 in 2022 and £ 105,252 in 2023.

## **PROJECTS and TRAINING**

As life returned to normal after Covid-19, attention turned to using the Club's reserves, over and above the sums needed for prudent management and for future maintenance of Muir. After a preliminary airing at the 2021 AGM, a number of possible projects were considered by the Committee, and a more detailed and costed list was presented at the 2022 AGM. In the event, the

following projects were pursued during 2023, with varying degrees of success and consequent expenditure:

- 50% funding of footbridge repair by Dalhousie Estates over the Water of Unich (£3748)
- Steps, path and bridge repairs to the Gordon Way just east of the B992 (£5400)
- Contribution to pathwork costs by Balmoral Estate at Loch Muick (£5000)
- First of three annual payments of £1000 to Mountain Training Scotland, for bursaries to assist individuals “for groups with limited or no familiarity with the Scottish hills, e.g. refugee or ethnic communities.”
- Replacement or repair of the Club-erected indicators on the summits of Lochnagar and Ben Macdhui: no progress due to difficulties in locating a competent firm
- Footpath repair on Clachnaben: further work delayed due to land purchase by investor interested in improving access
- Glen Ey Woods: Richard Shirreffs arranged a species survey by experts at both Piper’s Wood and Altanour: see report elsewhere in this issue.
- Contribution to the “It’s Up To Us” campaign by Mountaineering Scotland and Outdoor Access Trust for Scotland for path repair outside the National Parks, initially on An Teallach (£5000).
- In addition to his duties as President and Day Meets Secretary, Garry Wardrope organized a number of training activities, including a two-day course in first aid in 2022, and a one-day one in 2023, along with winter skills courses at the February Weekend Meets each year, and a self-organised Night Navigation course on the Hill of Fare in 2023. Finally, the Club made 50% contributions to the costs of certification courses for several members.

KEN THOMSON, CLUB SECRETARY

## POST SCRIPT

As a closing word in my final Issue as Editor, I will mention finishing my round of the Corbetts on tiny but lovely Cnoc Coinnich on October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

The day was very inclement with high winds and torrential rain, so Millie dog remained in the van. Taking Millie's place on Cnoc Coinnich was Alfie Dog summitting his very first Corbett.



Izy, Alfie, Jean and Mark on the summit of Cnoc Coinnich

Photo credit Phil Gorton

It was only as I was descending and looking across at the Cobbler that I recalled that over 40 years ago whilst working as a junior doctor in Yorkhill, Sick Childrens Hospital in Glasgow, the Cobbler was my first proper hillwalk. So, my final Corbett felt like a turn of the wheel.

Then as now, walking in our wonderful Scottish landscape was a great tonic and so, whether its multiday epics, a saunter up Bennachie or walking the dog, enjoy the freedom and pleasures of putting one foot in front of the other. Travel Well.

Jean Robinson



Descending Cnoc Coinnich 29/10/23

Photo credit Izy Kirkaldy