

## **The Cairngorms in one go: an alternative approach**

by Mark Rigby (*copied from The Fell Runner December 1988*)

Original long-distance rounds are becoming more and more difficult to come by and harder to set up. I've long admired the individualist approach of the Martin Stones of this world and felt it was high time I did my own thing. The challenge could be made more spicy, with just me to consider, by making it unsupported, and, as an added extra, un-reconnoitred. Infact, the antithesis of the trend towards down-to-minute planning. I'd had my eyes on the Cairngorms as a suitable area, as it was completely unknown to me and respected as a testing playground in terms of terrain and weather. Also there were 17 new Munros for the culling. Not that I'm a Munro-bagger of course . . .

Others (except at Pudsey and Bramley?) had ideas for their own epics, as an ear close to the ground among the long-distance fraternity revealed. As usual, no-one talked specifically about their plans, but to my horror I did hear the word 'Cairngorms' on one occasion. A chance meeting with Nick Crane on a train south of Inverness, when I blurted out my plans as we sped past Aviemore, finally stirred me into action before it was too late, but even so, from then on I was half-expecting news of Nick's successful completion of the round on a pogo-stick.

Route choice was a tricky business: Loch Morlich/ Glen More was an obvious centre, but the hills are spread rather unhelpfully. An essentially west to east traverse seemed the most plausible, joining all the summits between each pair of north-south glacial troughs to reduce the total climb but thereby leaving a rather contrived return skirting north of the whole massif unless I saved some summits for that leg also.

I considered myself fit enough after the Wasdale and helping with the two big long-distance jamborees of the season (Mark's and Jon's) but even with just my own work schedule to consider there was a relatively small 'window' to aim at among other events planned and the prevailing mediocre weather. Come the 24th July, it had to be then or never despite the unpromising forecast for the second half of my intended time out.

In deference to the mist and rain outside the carriage window, I spent the journey north marking my map with a confusion of bearings and altering the planned route and schedule yet again. 76 miles in this? I made a start on the fruit jellies, essential allies in long-distance attempts. At least it didn't rain as I cycled to the hostel. There, the warden became my first and only confidante; he thought one hour for the first five miles would be tough going until I pointed out that a little running was intended'

I don't think I slept more than two hours. It was a very still night and I

wished I was out there. Were the men at the met. One day out? Would their forecast front come earlier than Monday morning? Next morning I had the small matter of sweeping out the drying-room to attend to, and found myself wondering what the Italian World Cup team would be given in similar circumstances in October.

At 8am I jogged to the edge of the forest and happily continued thus most of the way to the Sinclair hut. It was unexpectedly dry underfoot and also ridiculously clear, with the cloud oscillating around the 3500ft level all day. Even Ben Macdui cleared occasionally, so the dreaded plateau navigation might yet not prove too difficult. Braeriach fell quickly, and I got my usual kick out of overhauling a

pair of over-clad hikers as they toiled upwards. The ridge run to Cairn Toul was a delight in the swirling mist. I had planned to leave half my food at the col before Monadh Mor to ease the passage of the next four hills. In fact this proved to be a featureless location and could later have been difficult to find again in mist. A confusion of tiny lochans, necessitating frequent back-tracking, hindered the traverse to Sgor Gaoith, but then an unexpected contour path led round Cam Ban Mor to the incongruous landrover track from Glen Feshie.

I left this to head for Beinn Bhrotain where I littered the summit cairn with the first of my notes that would help localise my dead body to a specific section if necessary.

Back at the food-dump I welcomed the opportunity for a break and a faceful of fruit jellies before heading for the Devil's point. Here I met again the two walkers, but resisted the temptation to tell them what I'd done in the meantime. At Corrou bothy I left another visiting card before tackling the rough slope of Cam A'Mhaim and the slog up Taylor's burn beyond (more jellies) to Ben Macdui, my highest point. Mist on the plateau and a heavy shower made things tricky to Derry Cairngorm, but just as quickly the weather changed again, and ascending Bheinn Mheadhoin I was treated to a superb spectacle as the summit stacks shone a brilliant bronze in the evening light. The highest of these provided my first opportunity for a scramble, and from the top I temporarily forgot the schedule and surveyed this, the finest view of the round, with Macdui, Cairngorm and Bhuird all crystal clear. However, the effect of the shower on my timekeeping proved more than temporary, as my watch ceased to function, leaving me with a flashing array of nonsensical symbols.

From the Lairigh an Laiogh, I detoured south to Bheinn Bhreac, the only summit below 1000m, before ascending Bheinn a'Bhuird to the accompaniment of a fine herd of hinds and the last rays of the glorious sunset, but in front the skies looked ominous and the path was soon in thick mist that had me searching for the summit cairn: Just my luck at this the flattest of the seventeen. A strong wind had also got up which bore me down to the exciting col at the head of Slochd Mor and up onto Ben Avon. The combination of deepening gloom, high winds and a fumbling scramble on the summit tor was interesting to say the least and I was glad to head down into the glen.

However, the wind continued to increase on the way to Faindouran bothy, where I popped in to put on more layers, surprising the sole occupant (who hadn't a functional watch either!). It was now pitch dark, and as I stumbled further along the non-existent path it began to rain heavily, so that I was glad of more shelter at the Fords of Avon refuge. Here I considered my position: It must be 2.30am or so, with 14 miles and 4000ft still to do, in a now raging storm and pitch dark. And running low on fruit jellies. I decided to gamble by sitting it out for an hour or so until first light, thus ridding at least one adversary but allowing only 4 hours to get back comfortably within 24, as obviously I no longer knew when that deadline would elapse.

Now or never. I opened the iron door and was immediately bowled sideways. At least it blew vaguely from the right quarter, so that Bynack More went comfortably if not quickly. But turning at the summit, my planned height-saving route down the south ridge was immediately cancelled as I could barely move directly into the driving rain, so I set a contrived bearing west over and down into Strath Nethy. The map showed masses of crags on the opposite flank of Cairngorm, but I managed to sneak up between them, on over the first snowfield and up to the weather station, which unfortunately was out of action so I'll never know how strong the wind really was. My relief at the summit cairn was tempered only by a nagging doubt as to the time I had left. Two hours? One hour? The leg from Bynack had been painfully slow.

The neat line of outsized cairns and well made hand-railed path seemed out of place after the earlier wildernesses, but I was glad to be led safely to the chairlift station.

Unfortunately, this hadn't opened for the day yet, so I had to follow its line on foot. Infact, embarrassingly, I followed the wrong set of wires off towards Coire Cas, having to traverse back through a maze of piste fences to regain the path down to the road. My only concern was the time. I panicked at the sight of campers stirring at the Loch site, but they had merely been forced to rise early, the puddled pitches and limp canvasses telling of the awful night they had even down here. Only when I found the hostel still firmly locked did I know I'd done it within 23 hours, and I could check the actual time on the dashboard clock of one of today's better off 'young people of limited means'.

So that was it. Happy as I was, stopping after the battle of the last few hours seemed a bit of an anticlimax, and all too soon I was heading south back to the routine. It was great to have achieved my target despite the conditions, never mind the time taken: For my ethic, going back simply to improve the time seems too much like hard work, but that challenge is clearly there for someone, weather permitting. Purists might even add the 'tops'. No prior reces allowed, though! I'd be glad to supply details to anyone interested. Most satisfying was to hear later of another epic acted out on the same foul night, as three of my Ambleside Clubmates staggered round to a Bob Graham success. One is never truly alone in one's madness.

