

SCOTTISH 4000' RECORD ON FOOT - STEPHEN PYKE

Steve superb record-breaking journey took place on 14th/15th July. He reduced Martin Stone's 1986 record for the traverse of the nine Scottish 4000 ft Munros by 76 minutes. Steve writes "I had been thinking of running the nine 4000 ft Munros ever since an unsatisfactory completion of the route in the run-bike-run duathlon organised by Martin Stone in 2003. On that occasion I had been undone by my weakness on the 60 mile bike leg linking the Nevis peaks to the Cairngorms, followed by a navigational cock-up heading to Cairn Toul and finally a dead leg as I took a tumble descending Braeriach into the Lairig Ghru.

This time I decided I would attempt the whole route on foot. The route starts at Glen Nevis Youth Hostel and takes in Ben Nevis, Carn Mor Dearg, Monarch Mor and Aonach Beag before heading east to the Cairngorm peaks Cairn Toul, Sgor an Lochain Uaine, Braeriach, Ben Macdui and Cairngorm. The finish is at the Norwegian Stone by Glenmore Youth Hostel after some 83 miles and 17,000 feet of ascent.

The route was first achieved as a multi-day trip in the 1950s by the Rucksack Club and the 24-hour barrier was broken by Chris Dodd in 1980. The record for this route is held by Martin Stone who completed it as a solo unsupported run in 21 hours 39 minutes back in 1986 beating the record of another of the great luminaries of long distance running Stan Bradshaw by 54 minutes.

In a very wet summer, the forecast suggested yet another rainy weekend as I set off from my home in Staffordshire on the Friday evening. Accompanied by the small group of supporters who had volunteered to accompany me - Dale Colclough, Stephen Watts, Phil Janaway and Jack Leech - we headed up the M6 in increasingly heavy rain with the wipers on Jack's pickup worn to shreds by the time we arrived at the Pottery Bunkhouse in Laggan at 2 am.

Next morning the rain had cleared although heavy grey cloud still hung overhead. I set off at 4 pm on Saturday accompanied by Jack. Heading up the tourist track we made good progress as we passed regular hordes of walkers setting off on the first leg of their three peaks challenges. We reached the summit of the Ben at 5:27 almost exactly on schedule. Some time was lost as we descended the greasy blocks coming off the Ben and climbed the Carn Mor Dearg arête in claggy drizzle.

From Aonach Beag we descended south east into Glen Nevis for the long haul across to the Cairngorms. At first this was slow going across the waterlogged tussocks at the head of Glen Nevis before the going gave way to a good path running alongside the Abhainn Rath down to Loch Treig. By now I was about half an hour down on the 20 hour schedule I'd set and beginning to realise just how tough this was going to be. At this point I left Jack who was also feeling the effects of this tough section. The next few miles were on the well-graded track that initially climbs south following the West Highland railway before swinging east to follow the north shore of Loch Ossian.

Phil was there to meet me at the east end of Loch Ossian having cycled the 10 miles in from Loch Laggan to the North. After a brief refreshment stop with the midges instantly homing in on me as soon as I stopped moving, we left the bike leaning against the fence for Jack to pick up and cycle back out to the A86 - one of our pre-arranged contingencies - with me just hoping that he'd be OK as he'd looked pretty tired when I left him.

After some moments confusion about which path to follow as we passed the Corroul Shooting Lodge - although I'd only reccied this section three weeks earlier - we set off up the Glen towards Ben Alder. I had planned to get the first part of this done in the daylight but it was now quite dark as we pulled on head torches and squelched through the heather and peat bogs trying to follow the muddy trod that passes for a

path on the OS map. We were relieved to finally reach Bealach Dubh below Ben Alder and join the well-made path that runs down the other side. By now we were some 40-45 minutes down on schedule and started to pick the pace up once more. The sky had also cleared now and head torches were almost unnecessary as we ran past Culra Bothy and followed the track as it swung past the head of Loch Pattack and down towards Loch Ericht. As we headed towards the distant lights on the A91 watched the minutes ticking past our scheduled change over in Dalwhinnie and anxiously wondered whether Jack had been able to get back in time to hand over to Dale and Stephen who were waiting at the Bunkhouse. I needn't have worried, Dale was waiting for us by Dalwhinnie station.

After a five minute break to eat freshly prepared tortilla wraps with avocado and cream cheese followed by a pot of rice pudding downed in one gulp, Dale took us on an interesting line to cross the A9 at Cuaich. More good vehicle tracks took us past Loch Cuaich. We then headed north east leaving behind the tracks to wade through peat bogs and then a muddy trod to take us down to Glen Tromie. Some wild campers must have been very surprised to be woken by us fording the Tromie and come crashing up its banks directly past their tents at 4 am. The route swung southeast now following the Allt Bhran. This was the first time I really started to feel tired as I followed Dale picking his way through the heather. Before long however, we were back onto another landrover track and descending into the head of Glen Feshie for the next change over with Stephen Watts.

It's a gruelling 600 m climb directly out of Glen Feshie up onto the Moine Mhor, a desolate moorland plateau, but it now looked beautiful in the clear blue morning sky with the sun rising ahead of us. We made good progress across the moorland with Cairn Toul and Sgor an Lochain Uaine clearly outlined ahead of us. We climbed strongly to reach the top of Cairn Toul and within an hour we had skirted the huge corries to our right and were on top of Braeriach.

There was now a steep 600 m descent into the Lairig Ghru. We took the direct line (probably not the best option as Martin Stone told me later) and struggled, initially over loose scree and then boulders treacherously hidden in the heather. At this point Stephen passed some dry comment about my schedule for this leg being a bit optimistic. However, the climb up to Ben MacDui went well (my LAMM partner Tim Laney had tipped me off about a path that goes up the right side of the burn - he was right!) and we completed the 600 m climb to the top of Ben MacDui in just over 40 minutes.

The final peak Cairngorm was now clearly visible across the high plateau and I pushed on with whatever strength was left in my legs. Dale was there to greet us at Cairngorm and lead us on the steep descent following the funicular railway and the other ugly ski paraphernalia but by this stage I didn't care, my legs were in agony. At the ski car park I was joined by Phil and Jack for the final run down to Glenmore Youth Hostel. I eventually reached the Norwegian Stone at 12:23 on Sunday 20 hours 23 minutes after setting out from Glen Nevis Youth Hostel.

I was very lucky with the weather and for the quality of my support team who deserve a huge thank you. If the organisation didn't quite run like clockwork then the hard work and humour of all involved ensured the support was always there on time and helped make it a memorable weekend. A special mention must go to Jack Leech who not only drove the crew both up and back in horrendous weather but also told me that Ben Nevis was his first Munro."