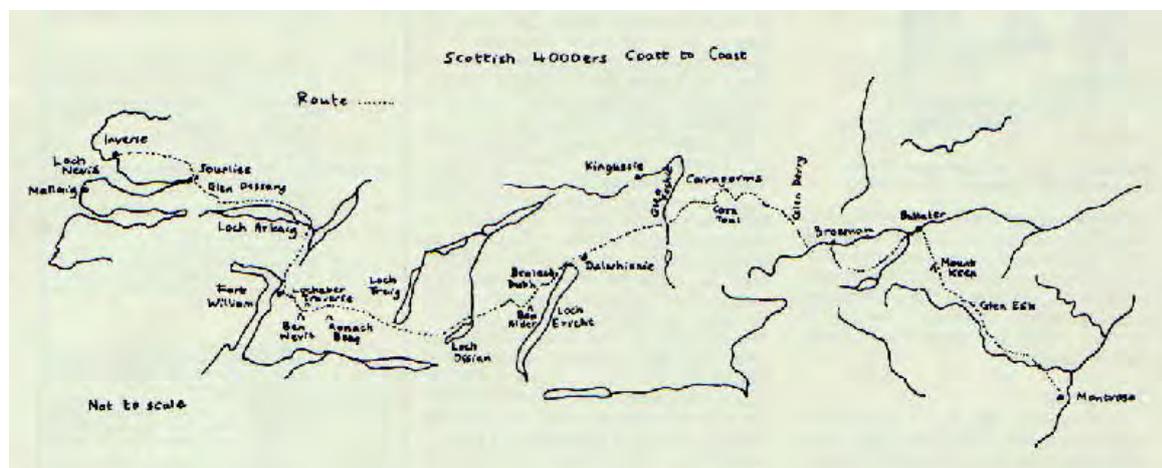


# The Scottish 4,000'ers coast to coast

Ian Leighton



If you spend much of your spare time walking or running over hills there must come moments when you ask yourself "Why am I doing this?" That moment came for me at about 2 o'clock in the morning of the second night out. Somewhere above us, shrouded in mist and darkness lay Aonach Beag. I was shivering with the cold; I was wet all over, but my feet were the wettest of all and the coldest of all, and it was over another hour till dawn. Neither of us complained: there was no point in complaining. After all, we had no one else to blame for this mad scheme but ourselves.

## Misty start

To reach the slopes of Aonach Beag Robin Price and I had put 50 miles behind us. We had left Inverie late on the Saturday afternoon and crossed the Mam Meadail in thick mist thus depriving ourselves of that impressive view of Sgurr na Ciche rising sheer from the valley floor. As we crossed the flat ground between the Carnoch and Loch Nevis the clouds seemed to glower over the water holding out promise of nothing but rain. A sympathetic climber in Sourlies bothy made us a brew to cheer us up: he had to since we weren't carrying a stove or tea bags. That done we set off into the evening and the 10 mile run over Glen Dessary to the tarred road at the head of Loch Arkaig. As far as our legs were concerned Dessary was the least of our problems. Although it has been the dampener of many hopes it is a fine glen at any time and tracks are easier to run on than road. So by the time we reached Kinlocharkaig in the wee small hours we agreed it was one of the longest 18 miles we had ever done. What didn't help was that we were very tired and the midges were pursuing us relentlessly. From time to time we would lie down by the road side for a cat nap and within a couple of minutes they had found us. At least they kept us on the move but that meant we would be reaching the Fort too early. Then, 5 miles out, along the banks of the Caledonian Canal, we found a workman's hut with a wasps nest hanging from the roof. Five minutes sleep was bliss.

Our plan to cross the Ben and the Aonachs at night was more romantic than practical. There is, after all, something romantic about being in the hills at night with the stars flickering in a clear sky and the moon throwing ghostly shadows. Our reality was rather different and to be sure of finding the arete we came off the Ben on a bearing. Once on the arete the wind was strong but the mist cleared once briefly to give us a glimpse of the north face of the Ben. The arete itself is a good scramble but it feels at times as if the summit of Carn Mor Dearg is never going to come. But come it must and we were glad to swing almost due east out

of the wind to pick up the ridge that would lead us to the col. It was gone 11p.m. by this time, the light was fading fast and in the bad visibility we were having second thoughts about taking on Aonach Beag in the dark: there is a line of crags rising 1100 feet from the col connecting the hill with Sgurr Choinnich Beag which require care in descent. That was why we took the decision to drop out of the wind and sit out the hours of darkness.

### **Complan and Glucose**

We started to ascend Aonach Mor before dawn and by the time we had traversed Aonach Beag and negotiated the crags the mist had cleared and the day was starting to warm up although a strong north wind was to stay with us all the way through to Loch Ericht. We had some food and a sleep and we had put Sgurr Choinnich Mor behind us by the time our children back home were on their way to school. We stopped on Stob Coire an Easain to pick out the hills of Knoydart, Cluanie and Affric and to think up possibilities for other long hill runs. It was on then over the grey corries to Stob Choire Claurigh and Stob Ban with fine views over the Mamores and beyond to the hills of Perthshire. We jogged some of it and took our time, but time has a way of vanishing in the hills so it was late morning before we dropped down to the bothy in the Lairig Leacach, where we had a wash, a sleep, a meal of complan and glucose and took stock. Two nights out and our plan of travelling at night and sleeping during the day wasn't working very well. So we decided to press on for Dalwhinnie. This meant a 30 mile run over mountain tracks and we could use Culra bothy as a stop gap if we had to. As it happened we covered the 30 miles in 7 hours, leaving behind us some of the finest mountain scenery in Scotland. Our route took us up the Lairig Leacach, around the side of Loch Treig into Loch Ossian. We stopped at the bridge over the Uisge Labhair to stoke up with more complan and glucose for the long climb up to the Bealach Dubh and over the shoulder of Ben Alder into Loch Ericht side. Ben Alder is a magnificent mountain with its soaring cliffs and lonely corries. With 400 acres over 3,500 feet it contains the largest area of tundra outside the Cairngorms. We had hoped to cross Ben Alder but we could see signs of the next front coming in and prudence dictated we should head for Dalwhinnie.

The morning was wet and windy with promise of more rain to come. Our planned route would have taken us into the Gaick and over an Sgarsoch and Carn Fhidleir to reach Carn Toul by way of the Geldie burn; but that is a huge trackless wilderness and can give real navigation and escape problems in bad weather. So we settled instead for the 'tourist' route to the Feshie, hoping for a night crossing of the Cairngorms and a doss at the Sinclair hut. Fed and watered we set off for the run to Glen Tromie by way of the Cuaich and a bog trot down the Allt na Feinnich. As we dropped into the Feshie the rain came on properly so we called it a day at the bothy at Ruigh — aiteachain. We spent the evening by a pleasant log fire drying out our clothes and woke at 3 to a waning moon shining in the bothy window.

### **Downhill Gallop**

The weather still looked far from promising but by 5a.m. we were taking a bearing from Meall Dubhaig in swirling mist for Carn ban Mor on our way to the head of Gleann Einich and Carn Toul. The Cairngorms are fine for hill running and we made good time to be rewarded with our only view of the day from the summit. Garbh Coire is a wild place but all you have to do to find the summit of Braeriach is to follow the rim of the corrie or your nose if there is any doubt. From there it is a long gallop down hill to the Sinclair hut and more complan and glucose to set us up for the run to Ben Macdui. We were glad to leave the Sinclair hut and the complaints of a well dressed climber about the amount of gear we were carrying. But his words echoed in my ears when the hail and sleet hit us on the track to Macdui. The wind was storm force and it was very cold. We had to run as hard as we could to keep warm on the track to Carn Gorm and I was glad to be taking the bearing that would allow us to drop to the saddle above Loch Avon. We stopped at the refuge a

mile further on for more 'fuel' and decisions. In an ideal world Braemar was the last place in the world we wanted to go to and Beinn a Bhuid and Ben Avon were much more tempting. But we were wet and tired and a 25 mile run would give us a bed for the night in case there was more rain to come. As it happened we made good time down Glen Derry, the rain stopped and our clothes dried on us.

### Fish and chips

It is 40 miles to Montrose by way of Glen Doll. By early afternoon we were standing on top of Carn t Sagairt Mor making more decisions. If we carried on we would get to Montrose by about 3a.m. and what was the point in that? I knew there was a fine chippie in Ballater and the easiest way to get there was by way of Lochnagar and Glen Muick. There is a lot to be said for a 12 mile run for a fish supper (or two) and a jar, and our reward was the girls whistling after us as we ran up the main street.

It is 40 miles to Montrose by way of Mount Keen and we left on the last lap as the pub closed. It proved to be slower going than we thought: up and down in the dark through bog and heather and only my faith in Robin's map reading ability gave me any reassurance that we would get there. Thick mist on top denied us a sunrise and it was 5 a.m. before we reached the head of Glen Esk and the tarred road. We still had 25 miles to go, the hills were behind us and we were tired. But we had to see it through. By mid morning we had reached our first shop in Edzel, a neat little village which didn't seem accustomed to wild men coming down from the hills. However, they took our money and let us eat and sleep in their war memorial gardens. It was turning into a very hot day and the last 12 miles into Montrose were ideal if you enjoy inflicting pain on your self. But as far as we knew we had done the first coast to coast run over the 4,000'ers.

### Travelling Light

We covered about 230 miles and around 35,000 feet of climbing. We had hoped to take in 20 munros on the crossing but the hills allowed us to settle for 18 and 15 tops which is a fair compromise. The decision to travel light and unsupported was not easily taken but we took a gamble with the weather and we felt we knew the country well enough to get off with it. Scotland has tremendous potential for long hill runs of this type for anyone with the fitness and experience. We found that at midsummer 3 layers of clothes and waterproofs was enough to keep us warm. 4 ozs. complan and 2 ozs. glucose kept us going for 5 hours. Next year? A north/south run would mean more time spent on the hills and less on the roads. But remember, distances in Scotland are much greater than in the Lakes.

