

Munro's 24hr record attempt July 2017

Simple things appeal to me, perhaps that is why I like fell running so much - run to the top of that there hill and back to where you started - it doesn't get much simpler.

The Scottish hill runners site explains the Munros 24hr record as follows: "The rules of this game are simply to climb as many Munros as possible, and return to your start point, within 24 hours." Sounds like my sort of game!

The record has stood for a long time with Jon Broxap running 29 Munros in the Shiel area way back in June 1988 (just a few months before I started secondary school - sorry Jon ;)). I first came into contact with the Round when I supported Spyke on an attempt at the record in 2011. I tried my best to support a leg but got dropped and it became one of those – "I wish I could do that" rounds.

A lot has changed since then and finally this year I felt ready to try and see if it was in my grasp. I was planning on extending Jon's route so dropped him a message. We met up and pored over the maps and I tried to extract any special tips or secrets from him. I left feeling determined but very apprehensive and with a few options for the 30th Munro that I would need to climb to break the record.

Then a few weeks later I received a letter with a hand written address which is very unusual. When I opened it there was simply a schedule and a post it note: "An alternative! See you at the Long Mynd - JB". The schedule had no times, just names of hills and heights and distances between summits and was titled "The Phil Clark Round". I looked up Phil Clark and was a bit embarrassed that I didn't know who he was. Phil won the KIMM (now the OMM) in 1990 and did one of the first repeats of the Rigby round amongst a stack of other achievements. The route though was in the Cairngorms!? Really? I had looked at Lochaber and Shiel but never the Cairngorms. The Round statistics looked good. It was a long way, a very long way but less height gain than Jon had done. If the ground wasn't too bad it might just work but scheduling something like this is tough, people have not done it before like a Bob Graham and there is no online tool to make a schedule.

I needed to get up there running asap but I already had a busy summer and really wanted to do an on sight Rigby round before getting to know the Cairngorms. I bought the maps, read the guidebooks, looked at all the pictures I could find etc but still needed to get on the ground. As is so often the case on these rounds I wouldn't be climbing the obvious route up most of the hills so there would be no tracks and some of the ground looked pretty rough and that is leg sapping and time consuming.

I reversed the route from the original anticlockwise direction as there were more options for missing or adding summits in the north and swapped a few peaks around but fundamentally the route I wanted to take was based on Phil's plan.

Finally after a busy early summer I found a weekend free for a Rigby round. I mentioned it to Shane Ohly and he was keen to join me so we headed up on the weekend of the 17th/18th June. However, the weather was not great... Knowing we were not likely to do the full round in the forecast conditions I did my full week's training and had put some 80 miles in my legs before the weekend. When we set out it was 2pm on the Saturday afternoon and the weather station on Cairngorm was recording 80mph gusts – we took enough gear and food to do the round but both secretly knew that we would have an adventure and be back in the pub for last orders. It just needed one of us to say we'd had enough then we could come back down.

As it turned out neither of us was ever going admit that and so 21 and a bit hours later we were back at the car, Rigby complete and with one of the toughest runs I have ever done behind me, but more importantly all of the northern Cairngorm hills recied - at least of sorts. Over the next 2 weekends I went up in more miserable weather and ran the rest of the 24hr route and decided that it should be okay. Potential pacers were contacted and there were enough people up for it although unsurprisingly no one really knew those hills very well. I could go on either the weekend of the 8th or the 15th of July depending on the weather. A small weather window developed on the first of the 2 weekends and I asked everyone to be on standby. As the week continued the weather stabilised and it looked like it would be near perfect for me. High cloud, cool temperatures (max 16 degrees), no rain and the wind although blustery wasn't too bad. We were on.

A midnight start meant we could get most of the night running out the way early on. Andrew Berry joined me for this and we had great fun. There were a couple of bits where we changed from the route I had run on the recce to try and avoid some bad ground and we got lucky both times allowing us to come in 25 mins up on what I thought was a pretty aggressive schedule for the first 11 Munros. It really was a very uneventful leg, a good thing, which I know Andrew prides himself on.

Steve Birkinshaw and Jo Zakrzewski were waiting for me at the Glenshee Ski centre with coffee and treats and Jon Gay who would be joining me later on came to see us. We went straight through, eating and drinking on the climb. It was again a fun leg as the day started to warm up just a little and we rapidly ticked off the summits keeping to the best lines and getting further ahead of schedule. Steve pointed out as we came off the final summit that I had summited 19 Munros peak to peak in under 9 hours - not too shabby. We had certainly set a good foundation but the bigger hills are in the north so there was some work still to do and a few bad scheduling surprises to come.

I'd been an hour up but had badly miscalculated the time to get to the northern hills and by the time I was on Beinn Bhrotain we had lost all the advantage. That was the first of two sections that I hadn't run and having dropped a full hour, there was a danger that the other section which I hadn't run – and which was the final descent - would be the same. If I went over the 24 hours and wasn't back at my starting point I would be timed out. It doesn't matter how many hills you have visited, if you go 1 minute over the 24 hours it all counts for nothing. I didn't want that so started to think about playing safe.

Jon Gay and Dave Harrison joined me for leg 3 and again we ran through without a stop. I was eating well on legs 1 & 2 but leg 3 turned into a really nice picnic with spicy pepperoni pizza, smoked salmon and avocado wraps and plenty of sweet treats too. We were back holding the schedule now which I had more confidence in but I was pretty sure the time for the final descent was too short on the schedule and instead of going for the 32 that were on the schedule I decided that as soon as I got the 30, that would break the record, I would bank it and head down. I wasn't prepared to risk the record when I was this close. We finished the leg in great shape and again rolled straight into leg 4 without a stop.

Duncan Archer and Carol Morgan were supporting this leg and Jo and Jon both joined us for the first part. Simon Franklin came up to see us on Beinn Macdui which was really nice of him. However, he ended up on a bad route and the first we saw of him was a distant figure shouting support from crags on the opposite side of a rather large gully from the good path we were on! He was fine, but it made us laugh and lifted our spirits – thanks Simon hope you are down OK now??

I was getting really concerned about the final split and had started to push the pace now. We were taking chunks out of the schedule but I was still worried and still adamant that we take the 30 and get back.

The section from Beinn Mheadhoin to Beinn a' Chaorainn and on to Beinn Bhreac is really rough but we were moving well and having Duncan there was fantastic. We have run a lot of Mountain Marathons together so it all felt very normal and comfortable.

At the top of Beinn Bhreac Duncan got his camera out and caught me grinning like a lunatic. He checked that I was certain about heading down from here and not going on for a possible additional hill or two. "No regrets?" I was very clear in my mind: "No regrets, lets get out of here!".

There is no descent path so we ploughed through some really rough stuff, but at this stage we had around 4hrs 20mins to cover about 12 km so were pretty safe. We relaxed and just set to grinding out the final miles. It felt interminable but when we got close Dave and Jo were there to meet us which was a huge lift. The final run up the bridge with nearly the entire support crew there to greet me was magical. I've been fortunate to spend many really special days in the hills with friends but this one is right up there with the best. The final time of 22 hours and 5 minutes meant we could be in the pub before last orders – a result all round.

It's with Phil's kind permission that we are going to call this route the "The Phil Clark Round". The round of 30 hills and at least 1 pint must be completed within a 24 hour period.

Thanks go to all the pacers and hill support that made this possible (in order of appearance): Andrew Berry, Steve Birkinshaw, Jo Zakrzewski, Dave Harrison, Jon Gay, Carol Morgan, Duncan Archer and Simon Franklin.

Phil Clark for the idea, Jon Broxap for being so supportive and passing the idea on, Margarita Grigoriadi, who has worked wonders on my fitness, John McDonald at Gateshead Harriers for the track and speed sessions and Shane Ohly for helping me reccie the Northern hills.

Perhaps we should go back for the 2 we forgot sometime?

The Munros (also in order of appearance) were:

1. Cac Carn Beag (Lochnagar)

- 2.Carn a' Choire Bhoidheach
- 3.Carn an t-Sagairt Mòr
- 4.Cairn Bannoch
- 5.Broad Cairn
- 6.Tolmount
- 7.Tom Buidhe
- 8.Carn an Tuirc
- 9.Cairn of Claise
- 10.Glas Maol
- 11.Creag Leacach
- 12.Carn Aosda
- 13.The Cairnwell
- 14.Carn a' Gheòidh
- 15.An Socach
- 16.Glas Tulaichean
- 17.Carn an Rìgh
- 18.Beinn Iutharn Mhòr
- 19.Carn Bhac
- 20.Beinn Bhrotain
- 21.Monadh Mòr
- 22.Sgor an Lochain Uaine
- 23.Cairn Toul
- 24.Bod an Deamhain (aka The Devil's Point)
- 25.Carn a' Mhaim
- 26.Ben Macdui
- 27.Derry Cairngorm
- 28.Beinn Mheadhoin
- 29.Beinn a' Chaorainn
- 30.Beinn Bhreac