

A wild round: Knoydart's 7 peaks.

It is one of the great pleasures to explore the wild and remote landscapes within Britain. Northern Scotland offers good scope for this, and the area of Knoydart in particular is considered by many to be one of the remotest. Within, there is the mainland of village of Inverie which is inaccessible by car. It is best accessed by a ferry from Mallaig, but otherwise it's a very long walk over mountainous terrain. Inverie offers much in accommodation, and there are various pubs/cafes, including the famous Old Forge. However, essential supplies are best obtained from Mallaig.

My first introduction to Knoydart was in summer 2002 on a wild camping trip with two friends. We took a three day adventure from Inverie to Shiel Bridge, going via Ladhar Bheinn, the wild Corbett Sgur nan Euggallt, and then onwards to The Saddle, descending via the Forcan ridge with large rucksacks. I was persuaded to go back the year later, and we took a longer time exploring the nearby peaks accessible from Inverie. The view from Meall Buidhe to the pointy top of Sgur na Ciche always remained in my mind. I wanted to climb this latter peak but it seemed too far away for a day walk!

Another opportunity to visit Knoydart presented itself in summer 2014, and with a group of friends we stayed in a large house within the center of Inverie. We had a whole week to explore the area, provided it didn't rain every day. A month or so beforehand I got the maps out to investigate feasible long distance routes. The main objective being to climb Sgur na Ciche as a day walk/run. However, mountains look small on maps, and so I started to think about other little peaks to add in along the way. Little peaks turned into bigger peaks, and so perhaps I add in Meall Buidhe and Luinne Bheinn too. Nor should I miss out Ladhar Bheinn as it's one of the finest in the area, and it would make a good finish to the day. Further research on long distance routes within the area brought me to routes involving Knoydart's 7 peaks. The Old Forge pub in fact displays the route description for the linear (one-way) traverse. As recorded in Fellrunner, a linear "round" was completed in 2009. So, could I have a day out that included these peaks in too? The answer was hopefully going to be yes given good luck with the weather, and crucially whether I could persuade myself to get up at 4am.

The start to our week was not good weather wise, with low cloud, wind and rain. However, you then go up peaks you never normally would climb on a fine day, and the little ridge of Druim na Cluin-airidhe made for good explorations, with a test of navigation in very low cloud. If I was to get lost on this little peak then I don't think there was much hope for me getting around the rest of wild Knoydart alone. A good break in the weather was to be for later in the week, and for my friends' big day they had set their sights on climbing Ladher Bheinn. Hence, a plan for me was to catch them on that summit after first going over 6 other Munro peaks beforehand. I knew the pub stopped serving around 9pm, and so that gave another incentive for keeping to my (vague) schedule.

On the day itself (mid-August), I naturally awoke at 3:30am, and left the house around 5am just as it was getting light. The Old Forge was departed at 5:15am with an initial jog along the road and then onto the track signed for Strathan, together with the "there-be dragons" signs that warn you of entering dangerous and remote territory. Although I had a plan to meet friends en route, I was otherwise travelling solo and unsupported. I tent to go solo as it's not so easy to encourage others to go running along with you over such routes. Unsupported as it's easy logistically and you choose the time/conditions that suit you. Certainly this route is good for testing self-resilience and navigation aspects, while exploring unusual/rough ground. The previous year, while staying with the same friends I covered Tranter's Round in similar style, and I would say that this round is of comparable difficulty.

The forecast indicated the weather improving as the day went on, but initially there was a lot of low cloud, in fact down to 300m to begin with. Good progress was made initially, and the initial path towards the pass Mam Meadhil was not so boggy. I broke off left to aim for spot height 769m on ridge to Meall Bhuide. I hit cloud around 600m, and then a steady climb to Meall Bhuide. This summit was reached in 2 hours, and dead on

schedule. There was now a bit of concentration to get the best route off into the valley and then to cross the Carnach River. From the summit, the cloud base was still low, but now not so thick. I kept looking right to find a best break off point of Meall Bhuide along the north-east ridge. The best decent seemed to be just before the climb to the 839m peak. On the descent, I threaded through outcrops, streams and bogs all the way down to the River Carnach. There was a lot of thick bracken about and you need to be vigilant about warding off the ticks. Crossing this river was crucial to the initial part of the round, and due to previous rainfall there was potentially going to be a torrent. However, worries about making significant diversions subsided as indeed crossing the river proved straightforward. This crossing was made via small island near Allt Archadh a' Ghlinne. It was now a big climb to Sgurr na Ciche, (1000m direct). I arrived to the summit at 9:45am, 30 minutes up my schedule. The cloud base now about 800-900m.

Since there were a lot of natural water sources, I typically I carried 1-1.5 litres. Foodwise, it's best to take what you like best. I took shortbreads, some left over fruit jellies, various sandwiches, fruit, etc. Unfortunately, I was short on Jelly Babies as the shop in Knoydart had limited supplies. I decided to improvise with chocolate covered peanuts! In terms of equipment I took a few extra layers/waterproofs than I would normally carry, especially as I was traversing ground in a very remote area. I took a GPS as back up but I did not use it. I used a map and compass when required.

After Sgurr na Ciche the clouds gradually lifted, and I followed the ridge all the way to Sgurr Mor via the intermediate Munro tops of Garbh Chioch Mhor, and Sgur nan Coireachan. I arrived 12:45, 30 minutes up on the schedule, and now felt that most of the hard work had now been done (about 3000m of completed ascent). This ridge does have a lot of undulation, but the climbs to each peak being no more than, say 250m. I was conscious also to pace carefully here, and keeping eating, etc. Being too fast or complacent here could have consequences later on. I had not met anyone so far, although I did hear distant voices coming up the ridge to Sgurr nan Coireachan.

From Sgurr Mor summit, which was now just out of cloud, I descended west via a knee trembling route though steep grass, and minor outcrops. However there was nothing difficult for the Mudclaws to get to grips with. Once into the valley I aimed for the west end of Loch Quoich via easiest route. There was a lot of rough ground here, which included crossing streams, bogs, and deep vegetation. The local undulation here could easily add on 150-200m without realising it. I crossed Allt Coire nan Gall a few 100m upstream as the outflow to loch looked deep from afar. I was now on the path as marked on the map (using the BMC 1:40000 map of Knoydart). I noticed now a distant view towards Luinne Bheinn, and so I knew I was (eventually) heading back to civilization, but still a long way to go.

Arriving at Lochan nam Breac, a grand sense of remoteness is apparent. The Lochan is situated in a valley flanked by cliffs of Ben Aden and Sgurr a Choire-bheithe. Strange over hanging trees emanate. The path to the loch appears basically untrodden, overgrown and sinks into bogs. I recall it being difficult to maintain any good running rhythm along it. At the eastern edge of the lochan the path vanished and I waded up to waist deep through the lochan in-flow. Fortunately the water was flowing very slowly, with a sandy lochan base. The path for approaching Luinne Bheinn, via height 522, was again faint, boggy and undulating. I would say that doing this section of route in the dark would not be obvious. At this point of the round I started to slow down and was making less progress than expected. From the spot height 522, the ridge to Luinne Bhein was quite pleasant, and I reached the summit 16.05, 10h50 after starting out from the Old Forge. I would say that I lost time on my schedule after departing Sgurr Mor. In fact I was hoping to still gain on the schedule but that wasn't to be. This was mainly due to the rough ground.

At Luinne Bheinn, all the summits were now out of cloud, and the sun was out. The section to Ladhar Bheinn I was familiar with, but I underestimated the climbing by an order of 300m! Again there was a lot of local

undulation. I was certainly very slow at this point, and my schedule of 2hours suddenly turned into 3hours. I managed to get down an apple, but the chocolate peanuts were a no-no. Overcoming the final greasy scrambles to Ladhar Bheinn took a few minutes more than expected, despite my climbing experience being much better now than when I last went up this peak. I reached the summit at 19:05, (13h50 in, and now down on my 15 hour overall schedule). Fortunately the view compensated for this, and I had the peak to myself. I took about 5-10min rest and tried to eat what I had left so as not to flake out in the final stages. I had not many anyone at all so far, and my friends would be almost back to Inverie by now.

A slow jog decent was made, and the path to Folach was again boggy and rough. Fortunately I started to recover speed once on the firmer forest track, and I also found some old jelly babies which I got down. I then managed to pick up to about 10K pace on the final (downhill) approach to Inverie. The last 2 miles back in went well with good views out to across sea, and a setting sun. At the Old Forge I looked at my watch and clocked in 15h32. The cottage I was staying at being not far away. It turned out my friends got back to Inverie the not long before I did, and I found them in the pub. A great day all round and hope to get back to explore more of the ground, and perhaps find a way to link together some of the other (non-Munro) peaks.

Vague statistics: A back of envelope calculation on distance/ascent seems around 15500ft-16000ft, and 35-40 miles. So perhaps appearing slightly less distance/climbing than the alternative linear route(s). A schedule of 15 hours would be reasonable for anyone trying this as a long run, and is of the scale similar to that of Tranter's Round.