

On the way to Stob Choire Claurigh



A Scottish Haute Route

Photo: Finlay Wild



Finlay leaving the Hutchison Hut

This trip by Roger and Finlay Wild, on 10–16 March 2010, was inspired by the journey in 1978 which is described in the article by David Grieve in the *Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal* 1978, Vol. XXXI, 227–36

All photos by Roger Wild unless credited

The Route

The route is a subjective choice. Our logic was to follow a direct line along the most significant high ground. We used two tests:
 a) would missing out a particular hill detract from the high-level concept of the route?
 b) would including a particular hill turn the trip into a peak bagging exercise rather than a traverse?

We drew the following conclusions. The Grey Corries were included. The line deviates a little but the ridge forms a continuous chain of peaks heading more or less in the right direction. The alternative deviation south to Glen Nevis is slightly off the direct line anyway. Aonach Mòr was a twenty-

minute indulgence. Ben Alder is the highest and biggest peak in its immediate area and has to be included. The inclusion of any neighbouring peaks involves losing height to an extent that seems artificial. Meall Chuaich is the highest peak in its area and is on the direct line. Beinn a' Chaorainn is off the direct line but only just and so we included it.

The final selection was: Ben Nevis, Càrn Mòr Dearg, Aonach Mòr, Aonach Beag, Sgùrr Choinnich Mòr, Stob Coire an Laoigh, Stob Choire Claurigh, Stob Bàn, Beinn na Lap, Ben Alder, The Fara, Meall Chuaich, Càrn Dearg Mòr, Cairn Toul, Ben Macdui, Beinn a' Chaorainn, Beinn a' Bhuid, Ben Avon.

The route is equally worthy

in either direction. We chose west to east because of the likely wind direction at the time. This proved to be a fortunate decision as we experienced very strong winds during days five and six. Battling against these winds would have been a major factor if we had been travelling in the opposite direction.

Distances given are by the shortest reasonable route. In reality distances were slightly longer. The total distance from road to road is 155 kilometres with 10,000 metres of ascent.

Gear

We used Nordic metal-edged mountain skis with three-pin bindings and leather boots. Finlay's boots are high cut above the ankle which gives some support on downhill sections.

My boots are lower cut but my three-pin bindings have a cable which can be attached for steeper descents. We both had damp and sometimes wet feet for most of the time but interestingly neither of us had any blisters at the end of seven days' touring. We both used 'waterproof' socks which didn't keep our feet dry but probably helped to keep them warm.

Choice of skis will always be a personal decision. We opted for Nordic skis reasoning that the extra difficulty on steep descents would be more than compensated for by the ease of travel on gentle downhill, flat and uphill terrain. This is because of the lighter weight but also the Nordic camber which provides much better 'kick and glide' than alpine camber.

The lighter equipment was an advantage on the mountaineering sections where skis were carried and also where we were obliged to walk due to lack of snow. We both had three-quarter width skins which provided sufficient grip on the uphill sections while enabling many downhill sections to be negotiated with skins still fitted. This saved time removing and refitting skins and made some downhill sections faster.

We carried sleeping bags, mats and Gore-Tex bivy bags. We both took Jetboil stoves. We each had maps (replenished at Dalwhinnie), compasses and GPS receivers. We took a simple

'hands-free' system for compass or GPS so that both ski poles could be used whilst following a bearing.

Food, accommodation and transport

We set off with two days' food and cooking gas. Our sacs weighed 14 kgs initially. Prior to setting off we had left food caches at Lairig Leacach bothy, Dalwhinnie, Ruigh-aiteachain bothy and the Hutchison Hut. We had hoped to leave food and a tent at the east end of Loch Ossian by using the train to Corroul but the line was blocked by an avalanche at Tyndrum. The food carried was mainly pasta and oatcakes. The food at the caches was tinned.

We are grateful to the Mountain Bothies Association and landowners for the continued provision of the superb shelters we used. We later returned to remove rubbish and tidy up.

On Tuesday 9 March we parked Finlay's van at Braenaloin. The snow was piled up by the ploughs at the side of the road and we took some time to park the van without getting it stuck. We drove my van to Dalwhinnie and parked it with provisions for an overnight stay. A friend took us to Fort William. We packed our rucksacks, had an evening

meal and at 8pm another friend dropped us off at Achintee in Glen Nevis.

Approach

We carried skis to Lochan Meall an t-Suidhe where the snow began. From here we were treated to an unusual ascent of Ben Nevis. A huge avalanche had swept down the Red Burn a few days previously and the old familiar track was completely covered. A narrow path crossed the Red Burn and the slopes above were hard packed snow. We arrived on the summit under a beautiful starry night sky and slept soundly in our bags until 6am.

Day One

Ben Nevis, Càrn Mòr Dearg, Aonach Mòr, Aonach Beag, Sgùrr Choinnich Mòr, Stob Coire an Laoigh, Stob Choire Claurigh, Stob Bàn, Lairig Leacach bothy
18 kilometres, 1900 metres of ascent, 10¼ hours

It was a stunning day with the snow brilliant white under the sun and views in all directions. The descent to the Càrn Mòr Dearg arête proved easier than we had expected. There was full cover with all the boulders covered and the snow was relatively soft. The arête was plastered and an excellent path

had been trodden making it easier than in summer.

We carried skis along the arête to Càrn Mòr Dearg, down to the col below the Aonachs and up to the easy ground near the Aonach Mòr / Beag col. We had decided from the start that we would adopt whatever mode of transport was the most efficient at the time i.e. skis, skis with skins or skis carried. Skis were a tool for travelling rather than an end in themselves.

With skis back on we soon reached the summit of Aonach Mòr and a brief downhill run took us to the foot of Aonach Beag followed by a short climb to the summit. We could see the Grey Corries stretching out from us with the Cairngorms in the far distance. It was game on.

We met a group of three walking in the opposite direction and having a great day. These were the only people we saw on the hill during the whole seven day trip. The descent from Stob Choire Claurigh had been in the back of our minds wondering what the snow would be like. It was a doddle with soft snow on a firm base. The final climb to Stob Bàn was an effort but spirits were high as we descended to Lairig Leacach bothy and an evening of eating and drinking followed by unbroken sleep.



Ascending Sgùrr Choinnich Mòr with Aonach Beag in the background



Descending Beinn na Lap to Loch Ossian



Bivouac near Loch Ossian

Day Two

*Lairig Leacach bothy, Beinn na Lap, Loch Ossian (east end)
17 kilometres, 800 metres of ascent, 7¼ hours*

We skied down to 480 metres altitude where the snow stopped. From here we carried skis for five kilometres to the south-east end of Loch Treig where there was sufficient snow to continue on ski. Apart from the start and finish, this was the only significant section where skis were carried due to lack of snow.

Beinn na Lap was a gradual climb up consolidated snow followed by a fairly quick descent to the north shore of Loch Ossian where we followed snow at the edge of the track to Corroul Lodge. We had planned to leave a tent here by using the train but the line was blocked by an avalanche and so we had no plan in place for a roof over our heads. We could perhaps have contacted

the estate in the days before the trip to try and make arrangements but time ran out.

We spoke to a lovely lady in the estate office and asked if there was anywhere we might use. She tried her best to help but was hindered by the story she told of a burglar who had sued the estate because of an injury sustained during a break in. We could see in her eyes the pain of the conflict between the requirements of Highland hospitality and the Health & Safety Executive.

Sadly the HSE won and we ended up bivouacing in the woods. This gave Finlay the opportunity to indulge his pyromaniac tendencies although when I complimented him on being able to get a fire going in the damp conditions he remarked that Jimmy, his old Scout master, would have been disappointed because he had used two matches rather than one. The weather was unsettled and we were unsure

of what the night would bring.

Day Three

*Loch Ossian, Ben Alder, Culra bothy
14 kilometres, 800 metres of ascent, 7½ hours*

The weather held and we left the bivouac early, keen to get moving. The snow was hard packed and fast going so we soon reached the slopes of Ben Alder. The ascent on hard névé was tiring. On the mist shrouded summit we considered descending on foot by the Long Leachas as it was a direct and quick route to Culra bothy.

With poor visibility and wind we decided to keep skis on and retrace the last part of the ascent and then traverse to just below the Bealach Dubh. The descent from the bealach was great fun, providing easy height loss and distance gained.

We passed below the

north facing cliffs of Ben Alder which were iced up and looking in good condition for climbing. The last few kilometres to Culra bothy involved linking up hard packed wreaths of snow which provided a fun challenge to see who could find the best combination.

The bothy was bathed in sunshine and we hung out sleeping bags and boots to dry outside. It was fairly green around the bothy and we anticipated some walking next day. During the evening the wind got up again eliciting a positive comment from Finlay,

“The stronger the wind the faster we’ll be blown to Dalwhinnie and we’ll take fewer photographs – and that’ll be fast too”.

This theory was to be severely challenged a couple of days later when we were fighting our way over Cairn Toul and Ben Macdui in very strong winds.



Map taken from the Munro and Corbett Chart by Harvey Maps

Roger and Finlay's Scottish Haute Route indicating the peaks ascended

Day Four

Culra bothy, The Fara, Dalwhinnie

17 kilometres, 700 metres of ascent, 6½ hours

We set off on foot but quickly realised that the Allt a' Chaoil-reidhe was frozen well enough to hold our weight. This was a real bonus as we could skate and glide slightly downhill all the way to Loch Pattack which was also frozen. This provided easy access to the snow at the foot of the ridge leading to The Fara.

Looking back from the ridge to Culra bothy we could see the ice covered river snaking its way in sharp contrast to its grassy banks. It was our Yellow Brick Road. The snow was firm along the ridge and we soon reached the summit of The Fara and descended south-east to the firebreak and the track alongside Loch Erich.

There was no snow on the track but to our delight the shore was snow covered and we skied along the water's edge, crossed the stream by a jammed log near the dam and cut across to Dalwhinnie and my van. We enjoyed an excellent feast, listened to the indifferent weather forecast and turned in for another early night.

Day Five

Dalwhinnie, Meall Chuaich, Càrn Dearg Mòr, Ruigh-aiteachain bothy
27 kilometres, 1300 metres of ascent, 10 hours

From the high ground during the previous day we had

noticed that there was more snow to the south and east of Leacainn than on the track to the north so we followed the snow and took a fairly direct line to the track on the south flank of Meall Chuaich reaching it at the foot of a stream at 500 metres altitude.

We ascended by the east bank of the stream to reach the summit in increasing wind. Visibility deteriorated and we took care with the navigation as we descended the north-east ridge before cutting across to the dam at Loch an t-Seilich. Some snow and heather hopping was needed here and the final run down to the dam was entirely on heather.

The track leading north had just enough snow for skiing and after a kilometre we turned east and, after more snow and heather hopping, reached the weir on the Allt Bhran at 440 metres altitude. From the weir the snow improved and we took a fairly direct line to the

summit of Càrn Dearg Mòr.

The weather had deteriorated now with strong winds and a rise in temperature. It was thawing. We descended north and then east to reach a swollen River Feshie with the bothy tantalisingly close on the other side.

It didn't seem worth going the extra distance to the ford beyond the ruined bridge as we would get our feet wet anyway in these spate conditions and so we crossed straight to the bothy in calf-deep water.

It had been a long day and we were glad to reach the bothy but it felt rather cold and inhospitable. To our joy there was a little coal and some firefighters and we soon had a warm fire going with our boots drying in front of it. The pre-placed food cache was recovered from the woods and we set to, cooking it all. We had no difficulty eating all the tinned ravioli, macaroni, spaghetti, corned beef, rice pudding, fruit

salad and custard, washed down with lashings of hot tea and condensed milk. Life was good!

Day Six

Ruigh-aiteachain bothy, Cairn Toul, Ben Macdui, Hutchison Hut
25 kilometres, 1950 metres of ascent, 10 hours

The weather was still unsettled as we carried skis for half an hour to reach the snow at 480 metres altitude on the track by the Allt Coire Chaoil. The visibility on the Moine Mhòr was very limited and the hands-free navigation kit was put to good use.

The snow was perfect for Nordic 'kick and glide' technique and we quickly reached the lower slopes of Cairn Toul. As we gained height the winds became stronger and the final minutes to the summit were a struggle. Keeping skins on we descended south to the col and then contoured around to head east towards Coire Odhar.

The snow in the coire was soft and a straightforward descent brought us to Corrou bothy where we stopped to brew tea. Rejuvenated by tea and oatcakes, we headed for the Tailors' Burn and made a good start on the ascent to Ben Macdui. The snow on the lower half of the ascent was relatively soft and easy for skinning. As we gained height the snowpack became very firm and the last half-hour was spent struggling with frozen rime and very strong winds.

The summit platform and trig point were almost completely covered in snow. The weather



Cooking in Ruigh-aiteachain bothy



The Hutchison memorial Hut



Inside The Hutchison

and the lure of the Hutchinson Hut provided all the momentum we needed to lose height as quickly as the navigation would permit and before long we were turning right at Loch Etchachan and dropping down to the hut.

The Hutchison Hut is small and basic but after 10 hours in the wind and clag it felt like a palace, especially once we had recovered the food cache which a friend had helped me deposit during the previous week. We sat opposite each other leaning against the walls in our bags on the narrow bench and cooked and brewed and chatted about the day and the trip so far. We'd had

perfect snow and sunshine, wind, rain, frozen rime, frozen hands, wet feet. One day to go: would the weather hold?

Day Seven

Hutchison Hut, Beinn a' Chaorainn, Beinn a' Bhuid, Ben Avon

32 kilometres, 1350 metres of ascent, 11½ hours (to the road)

A gentle rising traverse brought us to the Lairig an Laoigh. Patches of blue sky appeared intermittently as we climbed to Beinn a' Chaorainn. The wind had eased too. A great descent was followed by more 'kick and glide' across the Moine Bhealaidh to Beinn a' Bhuid.

Visibility became poor as we gained height and it took a

while to locate the summit. The skies cleared as we dropped down to the Sneck and up the final climb to Ben Avon. It was great to get to the last summit and take in the views. However we still had 19 kilometres to go and as we headed down the cloud came in again.

More navigation was required until we dropped below the cloud base and we could see the long and winding route eastwards. From Loch Builg the snow was patchy and we alternated between walking and skiing for most of the way until there was no snow at all on the last few kilometres to the road and Finlay's van.

The first chip shop we found on the way to Aberdeen was in

Aboyne. We didn't linger for fear of putting off customers with our ragged appearance. The next day we collected my van from Dalwhinnie and we went into the fuel station for a coffee. The lady behind the counter asked what we had been doing. We gave her a brief summary of the trip to which she replied,

"And did it do any good?"
I suppose she has a point but then maybe she hasn't read W.H. Murray: "Here is a field of free action in which nothing is organised, or made safe or easy or uniform by regulation; a kingdom where no laws run and no useful ends fetter the heart."

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Carn a' Mhaim and the Lairig Ghru on the ascent of Ben Macdui