

in safe hands



Emily Rodway meets Heather Morning, the new Mountain Safety Adviser at the Mountaineering Council of Scotland

IT'S June 2009 and Scotland is enjoying a brief but glorious heatwave. I'm in the Cairngorms National Park, meeting the Mountaineering Council of Scotland's new Mountain Safety Adviser, Heather Morning. Later on we will take Milly, Heather's search and rescue dog, out for a brief leg-stretch and Heather will give me a tour of the Cairngorm Mountain Rescue Team's base. But for now, it's down to business. Heather is talking me through her plans for the new job.

On the wall of her office, based at Glenmore Lodge – Scotland's national outdoor training centre – is Heather's somewhat lengthy 'to do' list. When we meet, she's only four weeks into the role, but the newly appointed Mountain Safety Adviser is brimming with ideas to encourage walkers and climbers to enjoy the Scottish mountain environment safely. After two decades working outdoors in the UK and abroad as an instructor, ranger and guide, and 10 years as a mountain rescue volunteer, she has plenty of experience to draw on. "I've been involved a lot at the sharp end on mountain rescues where things had gone wrong and it's always very interesting to analyse that and see why they've gone wrong. Being in a position now where I can do something about initiating change is going to be great," she says.

Heather is a true outdoor enthusiast – and her first introduction to hillwalking came before she could even walk. Back in the 1960s, she was taken around the hills in a home-made baby carrier by her mountain-loving mum and dad. Munro-bagging before she had started secondary school, she developed a passion for mountain environments and outdoor adventure that was to stay with her for life. It has taken her from her childhood home in North Yorkshire to Scotland and Wales, Nepal and Antarctica – "anything outdoorsy and involving some physical exercise, I just love it!" she enthuses.

After an initial brief foray

into secretarial work, Heather launched her outdoor career with a BA degree in recreation and leisure, followed by a postgrad in outdoor education at Bangor. She later worked at Local Education Authority outdoor centres and at Plas y Brenin, with spells of travelling in between. Moving to Scotland, she first worked in Ballachulish at the Joint Services Mountain Training Centre then spent eight months running a bunkhouse before returning to outdoor instruction in the Cairngorms, interspersed with seasons abroad, in Antarctica and Alaska. Immediately before joining the MCofS she was working full-time as a ranger on Cairn Gorm.

It's when Heather mentions this most recent job that I have to make a confession. Before she was appointed to the MCofS, the name "Heather Morning" meant just one thing to me... poo. More specifically, the high profile Cairn Gorm Poo Project, which Heather initiated, whereby snowholers were encouraged to pick up biodegradable bags and carrying pots to dispose of human waste on their way off the Cairngorm plateau. "People do know me for that; it's amazing how much publicity it got," she admits. "It made a lot of difference up there, and I'm certainly hoping that it continues in my absence. I actually had the Nevis rangers over, because they've got a huge problem on Ben Nevis. But in the Cairngorms I was preaching to the converted really – mountaineers who have often used similar projects elsewhere in the world. Selling it to tourists as a one-off experience of the Ben is going to be a very different."

As Scotland's Mountain Safety Adviser, Heather will face a similar challenge. Some of her work will involve providing safety advice to paid-up members of the MCofS who, one would imagine, largely know roughly what they're doing. But she'll be reaching out to inexperienced hill-goers too. "It never ceases to amaze me, you pull

people off the hill dead and you find out they're a lawyer or something – so they're obviously intelligent people – but they're out there wearing a pair of cotton jeans and trainers and not carrying any waterproofs. Perhaps they see going for a walk on the hill as something non-serious, which of course it can be. Occasionally people are really unlucky but quite often they're poorly equipped; I guess the big challenge in this job is how do you get the message out to people like that? Not the people who would read the literature, go on a course or turn up for a talk; how do you hit that target who just take it upon themselves to head out into the Cairngorms in winter not knowing anything about what they're doing?"

The last person to tackle that task was Heather's predecessor in the role of Mountain Safety Adviser, Roger Wild – now the MCofS Scottish Students' Mountain Safety Officer – who, during seven years as MSA, established a range of safety-focused courses and lectures for Scottish hillwalkers and climbers. Heather explains that she plans to take his work further, not by "reinventing the wheel" as she puts it, but by expanding the repertoire, communicating the safety message to more people and acknowledging the role that technology like GPS plays in the 21st century.

"I'm trying to look at the rescues that I've been involved in – and also the wider rescue scene – and find out why things go wrong, then initiate projects to try and alleviate that. Folk will dial 999 and want rescuing when they've got a GPS and can give you a 10-figure grid reference of where they are, but can't use the unit to actually get themselves off the hill. So I've just set up some GPS training courses which initially are going to be based here at Glenmore Lodge. I'm hoping that it's going to be really popular and that we'll run it down in the Central Belt as well, because I think there are an increasing number of folk

in the hills now who like the gadgets but who don't know how to use them, and a lot of folk who are going out with a GPS but without a compass. I'm not saying a GPS takes over the role of a map and compass, because it certainly doesn't – but at least if they've got it and they know how to use it, then they're less likely to have problems."

She is also planning to extend the winter lectures that Roger set up at Glencoe's Clachaig Inn to a similar series at Aviemore's Mountain Cafe and another in Lochaber (once she's found the right venue), with the opportunity for those who turn up to eat a good meal and listen to lively speakers – to "get the mountain safety message across but also make it a bit more attractive for people and more informal". On top of that, she's doubling the number of first aid courses on offer and is also looking to double the number of people attending avalanche courses. But training won't just be available to those who turn up to a course or lecture – Heather is also planning to take the message out into the hills, specifically to mountain huts. "I run the SMC Raeburn hut down in Laggan. Every weekend it's booked 18 months in advance in the winter time – it's just chocka with clubs coming up from the south. There's always been the mentality that we provide a course and people come to us, but I thought, well actually, why don't we go to them? So one of my initiatives this winter is to link up with various local huts in Strathspey, and offer to go to the hut on a Saturday night and deliver a mountain safety talk for 45 minutes, like an after-dinner speaker. I'd be using anecdotes and stories from my mountain rescue experience, because every rescue that you go on, there's a catalogue of events that have caused the incident."

Heather has been involved in the Cairngorms MRT for about a decade now, but her very first encounter with mountain rescue came much, much earlier – back when she was a young child, and a minor event left a major impression. "My dad was a super-keen



Photo: Noel Williams

hillwalker and as a kid I was dragged up the Munros, not really knowing what they were. When I was eight we went up to Torridon to do Beinn Eighe. In his national service my dad had been in the RAF and had spent some time in the Torridon area. They had been tasked with clearing up the site where a Lancaster bomber had crashed on Beinn Eighe, after the bodies had been removed. So there I was on Beinn Eighe with my dad, eight years old, and he was telling me a story about how he had found a boot up there in the 1950s. It had been severed off so the foot was still inside. That story stuck with me from being a little girl, of my dad in the hills finding a foot in a boot. And I guess that's my first memory of anything to do with mountain rescue." I ask Heather whether the image stuck in her mind in a squeamish way but she says no, it was more that her curiosity was piqued.

Nowadays, Heather is a well-established presence in the Cairngorms team, one of just two women members



Photo: Carl Haberl

(the other is her best friend, Fran Potheary, access officer for the Cairngorms National Park). "Because of the sort of character I am, I just tend to be one of the lads," says Heather. "I've always been in a profession where it's very male dominated – in the instructional world, down in Antarctica and in the ranger service. I know my strengths and I know my weaknesses and limitations. Ironically enough, Fran and I are technically two of the stronger people on the rescue team. You need a broad range

of skills – people who are technically very competent, organisationally competent, but also people who are happy to be told what to do and carry the weight up the hill. I'm never going to be able to carry a huge load up the hill as fast as some bloke. But there isn't any male chauvinism at all in the Cairngorms team, and they've got a lot of respect for me and Fran – although I guess you have to earn it with some of them."

Nearly three years ago, Heather introduced a third female to the team, in the

form of Milly, who was then a young pup about to start her search and rescue training. As a SARDA dog handler, Heather can be called out on any rescues in the Highlands, not just those involving the Cairngorms team: "They call out the nearest dog to the area and you might need half a dozen dogs for a big incident, so you can get pulled 100 miles away," she explains, adding: "The MCofS is supportive. If I'm not in a meeting or doing a lecture or something, then they're happy for me to just go, which is great." And taking part in mountain rescues is something that gives Heather a lot of satisfaction. She initially joined the team with the desire to "give something back" (she had been rescued herself, following a climbing accident in the States) but soon found that being an MRT member was surprisingly enjoyable. "It's exciting – if you go out on a big rescue in gnarly conditions and you're flown in, you get a real adrenaline kick. I enjoy the whole social side of it and I enjoy being out there on the hill. There can be a lot of hanging around and frustration but also at times it can be very exciting and I think that's probably why a lot of people do it."

Although Heather's first experience of seeing a dead body on a rescue haunted her for a couple of weeks afterwards, she says that as "a very practical, pragmatic sort of person I just totally got on with it." Nowadays, rather than feeling disturbed on seeing a fatality, she says she finds herself intrigued, trying to analyse how the incident came to happen. And it hasn't affected her own relationship with the mountain environment. "But that's not to say that I see myself as infallible because one slip in the wrong place and you're potentially over an edge aren't you? You can never, ever be blasé in the mountains."

Of course, some mountain areas are more dangerous than others. One idea that Heather is currently working on as part of her role with the MCofS is drawing attention – through the organisation's website, magazines like TGO and elsewhere – to "accident blackspots" like the Goat Track in the Northern Coires and Coire na Tulaich on

Buachaille Etive Mor, where three walkers lost their lives in an avalanche earlier this year. She's also hoping to liaise with television executives in order to combine the already existent Scottish ski reports with avalanche reports. Plus there are plans afoot to ensure that any press attention when accidents happen is handled appropriately. "We want to make sure that we have a really good immediate response in place for the press when things go wrong. Again, using Coire na Tulaich as the example, as soon as that kicked off, the press were onto it straight away – they want someone in front of the camera to give comment. Myself, Bob Kinnaird who's the boss here at Glenmore Lodge and David Gibson from the MCofS, as well as several other interested parties, are coming up with a protocol of what should happen – so that if one person isn't available, we know who is next in line, and the press aren't just getting hold of any ad hoc person who might not paint quite the right picture."

Speaking personally and with refreshing honesty, Heather says she relishes the responsibility of representing mountaineers on those occasions when a spokesperson is needed: "I feel as though I'm old enough and wise enough and have been around the block enough to actually make some very valued comments, and that I'm respected enough among senior members in the mountaineering community." Having spent a couple of hours in her company, she strikes me as the ideal person to represent that community, and indeed, the Mountaineering Council of Scotland. As well as being thoroughly experienced on the hill and full of ideas for promoting mountain safety, Heather is clearly level-headed, down-to-earth and easy to relate to. So with Scotland's representative body for mountaineers, climbers and hillwalkers looking to become more approachable and raise its profile, I reckon she's a good bet. If she can do it for the poo project, she can do it for mountain safety!

We're pretty much done with the serious stuff, so Heather and I head outdoors to take Milly for a short walk around the Lodge. It's good

to get into the fresh air on a hot day like this, even if it's only for 10 minutes. Now that she's going to be that bit more office-based, will Heather miss spending her working hours outside? "Yes is the simple answer, but I think my job will take me out from time to time. For example, tomorrow I'm taking part in a meeting on Ben Nevis to discuss the cairns that were constructed last year, because there's concern that they take folk too near the edge. No, I won't be out and about as much in this job, though being based at the Lodge it's actually really easy to cycle to work and go out at lunch – including lunchtime swims in the loch in summer!"

"But I'm 45 now and you've got to accept that you can't abuse your body every day as you did in your mid 20s. It's actually quite nice to be able to maintain the fitness but not be hammering up the hill with a big rucksack on every day – which can be physically very demanding, particularly in winter. That's why I moved from teaching full-time in the outdoors to the ranger service work, because you can start getting knackered knees and a bad back – and I want to be in the hills for the rest of my life, for my own pleasure." ■

MCofS safety courses

THE MCofS has launched its autumn training series, providing a low-cost opportunity to gain valuable hill skills.

The courses, which are run on a not-for-profit basis, include one-day basic navigation training courses in Edinburgh on the 12th and 13th of September and in Glasgow on the 19th and 20th of September; one-day GPS training courses at Glenmore Lodge on the 3rd and 4th of October; and a two-day basic first aid course in Glen Feshie on the 24th and 25th of October.

Navigation and GPS courses are open to all and cost just £25 – the price includes a free Ordnance Survey map and a day with a qualified mountain leader. The first aid course, which is only available to MCofS members, costs £85 for two days including accommodation.

www.mcofs.org.uk/courses.asp

Photo: Petr Malat

