

Scotland Meet - Crianlarich.

February 15th -22nd

Another decent turn-out braved the foul weather forecast and reports of masses of deep snow falling since December in South-westerly gales. Unfortunately both turned out to be correct for once, along with the avalanche forecasts which predicted sorrow for anybody rash enough to ascend a north-facing gully, corrie or indeed anything at all

Terrified by all the doom and gloom I hedged my bets by going to the football on the Saturday (beat Torquay 3-1, thank you for asking) so I pitched up on Sunday evening to a hot and crowded kitchen, serving also as a lounge, to get the picture on the ground, as it were, before trusting my precious carcass to the horrors above. First problem was the usual one of Gaelic pronunciation - the early arrivals had ascended something called Ben Chab-hair, but close questioning revealed it was actually Ben Chavar (the ch being very soft) where Dave had only been slightly avalanched on the way down and had almost stopped shaking by the evening. The others seemed to be taking it very calmly, but they would wouldn't they?



So, Monday. Warm, wet, low cloud - un-inviting. The A-team, John, Dean and sundry Daves went off early to do Curved Ridge on the Buachaille (not Buckle) but found masses of unstable, un-trodden, wet snow so retreated round the corner and climbed Stob na Broige, because they could pronounce it. The snow in the North-west corrie kindly refrained from burying them, so that was nice. Mike, Austin and I went round to Glen Lochy where Mike alleged that the low, dripping clouds concealed a Munro he needed to tick off. Unfortunately it was on the other side of a fairly major river from which the stepping stones had vanished, and a plod downstream for a mile led to a

bridge containing awful warnings about trespassing on the railway line just beyond. We stood in the heavy drizzle contemplating the slush leading up into the clouds, and decided to be responsible citizens - so we rescued Austin from the woods and went to visit the local ruined castle at Kilchurn.

Tuesday, much the same. I was promised a trip to the Tarmachans with Chris, Gill and Mike if I got up early, so just the three of them went, and, wouldn't you know, the foul weather relented for a couple of hours in the afternoon and they had a magnificent traverse of the ridge in deep snow, blue sky and drifting mist, whilst I had a run in the dripping woods under weeping clouds. This whole thing has sure been a lesson to me. The others ascended Beinn Dorain and Beinn an Dothaidh (Ben an Dawhee - yes, really) from Bridge of Orchy and also got the afternoon clearance of cloud. James arrived whilst I was lazing about the hut and shot straight off up Ben More (the Big Hill - the Gaels being a poetic nation, in Derbyshire it would be t' big 'ill).



Wednesday same again, but I managed to get up early enough to join Mike, Chris, Gill and Dave in an ascent of Beinn Vorlich from Ardlui. This was fun, as the party paid due respect to my long years and short legs by not insisting I break the trail through the deep snow, and with Chris keeping us on line with his GPS all I had to do was try not to fall over. After several years of ploughing through thick cloud, wet snow and heavy drizzle we arrived at an iced over lump, so I stood on it, waved my ice-axe and we all shot off down over even wetter snow and rapidly rising burns. John, Dean, t'other Dave and James did Ben Cruachan, which is a magnificent high ridge in winter

conditions, but all they saw was wet snow and cloud and weren't too impressed. But you get two Munros and a couple of Tops, so all is well.

Thursday, surprisingly, was just the same but wetter. The Serious Mountaineers went to Oban distillery, Chris and Gill went shopping in Stirling, and John and I watched the glen slowly flooding outside the window, and stranding a flock of six sheep on a patch of bog which gradually disappeared under the water. The locals, informed of this, took a very laid-back view and in fact it's hard to see what could have been done - sheep don't embark in rowing boats, though nothing would please them better than to turn one over and drown themselves and their rescuers. The water rose to the top of their legs before the rain stopped and they gradually emerged.

Friday, 'nuff said. Car troubles and the 'flu that had been passing round since we got there reduced the party to four, none of which was me, but I understand Chris and Gill got to 3000ft on t'big 'ill before being forced to retreat in a white-out and gale, while Mike and John, importers of the flu in the first place, got as far as the South summit of Beinn Challum (Malcolm's Hill - good eh?) with the gale behind them, turned to retreat, and found a cornice with the same idea. No lasting harm done and the party broke upon Saturday sadder but wiser - or sadder anyway.

Jamie arrived at some point in the week and spent a couple of nights with us on parole from family duties in Stirling - to boldly go and climb obscure Munros from where no man has climbed them before. "It's bagging, Jim, but not as we know it." One of them was Beinn Fhionnlaidh (pronounced Yoon-lie, but means Finlay's Hill - I love it).

So, a good time was had by all socially in a fine, warm and spacious hut. Shame we had to go out now and again, but the lucky ones got at least a couple of hours of splendour. Thanks, as ever, to Mike for the organisation, though when I looked round on Ben Vorlich and saw his face, white as a sheet and covered with sweat, I wondered if we were going to be looking for a new Secretary. But he managed to pass the bug on, so that's OK.

P.S. It's nice to have a bit of fun with the wilder flights of Gaelic spelling, but I found early on that learning a few pronunciations and meanings pays dividends. A people that can call a great, hollowed out mountain range The Forge (An Teallach) or a huge crag, guarding the entrance to Etive, the Great Herdsman (Buachaille Etive Mor) surely demands to be taken seriously in the matter of language. English mouths just can't get near the actual sounds of Gaelic but I try to get the pronunciation somewhere near, and to find out the meanings.

Though never forget that though the Highlands have numerous Ben Mores, only England possesses a Great Cockup.

Mick Biggin