

Thursday 2 June - Recce

After a wake me up coffee at Glen Brittle Camp Site, I left at the relaxed hour of 8:40 am for a decent recce of the ridge. I decided to start with Casteil a Garbh Coire and see how far I got, armed with the Mike Lates description and the Andy Hyslop booklet. At 10:47 I dropped a box of food and a 0.5 litre bottle of juice beneath the tower and carried on with a fairly chunky sack full of goodies and fluid. The sun spurred me onwards and apart from an awful route choice descending Thearlaich (where I ended up downclimbing the nose), I made good progress to the Inn Pinn where I was envisaging a queue of people at this peak bagging hour. In the event I managed to solo up and down past two roped parties without being a nuisance. The weather was sunny but not too hot, with a fairly stiff wind that later strengthened to a strong wind from the North – very good for a ridge traverse, so I carried smoothly to Mhadaidh until I slipped on small stones lying on a slab. I slid down a couple of metres and ripped open my leg on the gabbro. Without any form of first aid, the wound wouldn't stop bleeding, but after a little while congealed. The open gash looked really nasty, but I didn't have any option but to continue. That evening I was able to bandage it up thanks to Guy who was rather better provisioned than me.

I was able to continue without further mishap and the feared descent from Bidein proved to be quite straightforward to down-climb. I left my other box of food and 1 litre of drink for my Cuillin Round attempt, allowing me to proceed more quickly with a lighter sack. Unfortunately the cloud now obscured the summits and the wind picked up to make it much less pleasant. By Bruach na Frithe it was a bit miserable and an awkward wall on Sgurr a Fionn Coire was tricky with cold hands and wet rock. The chimney on Gilleann was similarly wet and I just wanted to finish now, reaching the summit of Gilleann at 6:10pm in light drizzle. In the murk, I'd have to leave section over Knights peak and Sgurr na Uamha to the day itself. It was 18 years since I'd done the ridge and I was pleased to have been able to repeat the experience.

Friday 3 June

After a very poor night I felt lousy and just enjoyed the sunshine at the beach. Everything ached, my leg hurt and all I wanted to do was doze. I spent the day lounging around in the sunshine and mentally attuning myself for the morrow. There was no way I was going to feel like starting at midnight, so opted for a 7am start and a bivvy near Sgurr Sgumain. Guy and Adrian would bring my bivvy gear up and cook some couscous. That evening I stuck my ear plugs in, put on an eye mask and hoped for an overnight recovery.

Saturday 4 June

Encouragingly I felt a bit more chipper in the morning and didn't need any encouragement to make a swift departure in the midge fest of early morning. Guy dropped me off at Sligachan and I set off in a stiff breeze that kept the midges at bay. This soon relented and from there on it was just warm. I'd purposely chosen to do the Red Cuillin first as there was no way I wanted the anti-climax of slogging up scree lumps after the exhilaration of the Main Ridge. As a starter, I figured that it would make a good prelude to the main course and so it proved. With fresh legs, Glamaig wasn't too bad, but it was soon evident that my

shoes were a poor choice. Although their grip on rock is superb, scree presents something of a challenge, akin to skating on ball-bearings. Like Rob Woodall, I stopped to empty my shoes of the small hill of scree that had accumulated whilst descending the Glamaig screes. I felt good, the weather was fine and all seemed well with the world. The Red Cuillin are shapely, hills with their very own distinctive character and do indeed make a good hors d'oeuvre. I'd debated whether to include Belig, the Black Cuillin outlier as its a bit of a transgression from the natural line, but in the end, I decided that I should follow in the footsteps of Rob and Yiannis and include it as Black Cuillin hill. Rob and Yiannis talked about a sketchy traverse under Garbh Bheinn. The question in my mind, was "which traverse". Looking at the map I could traverse under a crag after the top of Druim Eadar Da Choire or I could go up a bit and then traverse over. This seemed to lose less height so I opted for the latter, despite spotting a bit of trod lower down. Bad decision! After a decent way through the initial crag there was no semblance of a track and the scree was horrendous, losing me time and lots of energy with full view of the nice little trod lower down. To cap it all there was no water and my bottles needed refilling. I had a single 0.5 litre bottle of water to last for the next 3 hours or so, which was far from ideal under a beating sun. I kept to the rock as much as possible up Belig and from there, its black ball-bearings to the summit of Garbh Bheinn. Near the top, I met the first person of the day dressed in heavy leather boots and the obligatory red woolly socks. Amusingly, he asked if I'd done it before and said that "it would go". I accepted his advice and didn't add that I was proceeding on to Clach Glas and the Main Ridge.

The little West Peak of Sgurr nan Each is a wonderful prelude to the Clach Glas - Blaven traverse, with a splendid view of the "mini Matterhorn" that is Clach Glas. Remarkably the actual traverse was completely free of people at 1pm on a sunny Saturday afternoon in June. I'd have liked to spend longer on the ridge, but conscious of the journey ahead, moved on. I chose the Diff chimney up Blaven rather than the exposed ledge that I'd used previously. The ledge seemed a far better route than the damp chimney, but it wasn't long before I joined the throngs on Blaven, just over 7 hours since leaving Sligachan. So far, so good.

I had a brief look down the gully taken by Yiannis but rejected it as it looked pretty hideous. Instead I took the sensible but more circuitous route down the South Ridge, that is until I spotted a gully about one third of the way down. I peered into the depths. It looked okay at the top and following my explorer's instinct, elected to take the road less travelled. It was soon evident why it was a road less travelled. Very quickly the gully degenerated into loose rubble and steeply angled slabs leading into a chasm. I really didn't want to retrace my steps so kept on shuffling downwards on my backside, occasionally turning round to down-climb the more precipitous sections until I got to an impasse. No doubt about it – this was the end of the road. The cliff dropped pretty vertically down a step with no good holds. I'd have to reverse the horrible terrain for maybe 130m or else look for a way round to the side. I chose the latter. It was nasty steep ground, with down-climbing of up to Diff punctuating loose, insecure rubble. I bitterly regretted my impulsive decision to descend the gully, but there was no point crying over spilt milk and little by little, it got easier. The rocks gave way to deep heather and then grass. After a worrying hour I reached the sandy shore of Loch na Creitich and joy of joys, water.

Parched and barely able to stomach anything, I drank deeply from the river, luxuriating in the soothing waters. It would have been idyllic were it not for the midges and the imposing grassy lump ahead. The deep grass of Sgurr Hain sapped my energy levels further. Within ten minutes I was reduced to a limp lettuce wilting under the sun at its zenith. All the small streams had dried up and there was no way of cooling down. I forced down a dry cheese sandwich, masticating one little bit at a time as the sweat oozed out of every pore. I went into survival mode and plodded slowly up the hill, reflecting that the Cuillin Round was quickly becoming the Cuillin Sauna. Not a hint of a breeze disturbed the summits, offering no relief from the omnipresent rays of the sun. Yet even in my debilitated state, the sudden sight of the cone of Sgurr nan Gillian, was spectacular. By now, all thought of running had melted away and with jelly legs I wobbled over to Sgurr na Stri. What a peak this is, standing proud over the ocean that twinkled turquoise in the afternoon sunshine. It is a complex hill of slabs but I picked a decent line to the North West that took me down to a point several hundred metres or so to the North East of the Stepping Stones. I didn't envy the two campers who would inevitably be fighting the midges later on. The heat was intense in the bowl that is Coruisk, relentless in its sapping power to draw energy. I reached the hut at Coruisk at 5:30 pm but didn't stop due to the midges and anyway, I had no support and no reason to prolong the 900 metre ascent of Gars Bheinn.

Instead I meandered along the rough track that weaves in and out along the shore to the Mad Burn. On a day such as this, it was anything but mad – more of a chuckling brook. Anyway, it was WATER and that's all that mattered. Higher up I stopped in the first shade of the day, leaving it until the last opportunity to keep my water bottles full. The scree gully leading to Gars Bheinn looked horrible so I chose the East Ridge. 18 years previously I'd found this awkward and so it proved on this occasion. I subsequently discovered that I chose the wrong route heading up the steep final section which was more difficult than anything on the main ridge. It had taken two whole hours to get up Gars Bheinn (compared to Yiannis' time of 1:05), but by now time didn't mean anything and getting to the end was the goal.

It was still hot on the top with midges so I didn't hang around for long. I was greeted by two local climbers who said that it was as dry as they'd ever known it. Having explained what I was doing, they enquired as to whether I was famous (ha ha)! I picked up a bit on the ridge over to Sgurr nan Eag, but failed to find my first box of goodies and 500ml of fluid at the foot of Casteil a Garbh Coire. I backtracked and found them undisturbed, but seriously doubted the wisdom of my food selection. Jelly babies and something moist would have been better than the sandwiches and dry bars on offer. I did manage to get a bakewell tart down before clambering up the periditite column of Casteil a Garbh Coire. In my tired state I missed the way down and had to backtrack a little, but I was soon through the gap and on the traverse out to Sgurr Dubh Mor. The local pointed me in the right direction and at 9:20 pm I arrived at the bivvy site at the bealach before the TD Gap.

The lack of any breeze whatsoever meant that the midges were making their presence felt, even at this height. This confirmed my thoughts to continue. I relaxed on a mat, drew heavily on a Platypus of water and enjoyed a bowl of couscous and sauce. Guy and Adrian had planned to bivvy here, but I reasoned that the evening was so warm that I could take a down jacket and continue until it got too dark to find the way. I could then lie down for a

few hours and proceed the next morning. So I left after fifteen minutes or so, seeing the red ball of the setting sun from Sgumain. I was greeted by a young lady who asked if she could take a picture of me. I might be shuffling along, but I was famous!

On Sgurr Thearlaich, I yelled a goodbye to Guy and Adrian and set off down the roof slabs. This time I found the route down the slabs on the Coruisk side which proved to be very straightforward despite the fading light. It was a bit dim to fully appreciate Collie's Ledge (or Hart's ledge as its now known), but I took a direct exit to near the summit of Mhic Coinneach and proceeded down the easy angled ridge towards An Stac. By now it was very dim indeed but I reckoned just light enough to climb An Stac. For me, this is one of the highlights of the ridge and I can't understand why anyone would think it a loose nightmare. It's a wonderful climb up an imposing, but ultimately, easy tower. I was soon at the base of the Inn Pinn where unsurprisingly I was in a queue of one and ready for a torchlit ascent of this iconic, saw toothed monolith. This was one of those moments you treasure, when everything comes together to make a sensational experience. I reached the top just before midnight on a clear, windless and warm night, letting out a whoop on the summit that echoed around Coire Lagan. The down-climb was exhilarating, the torch beam lighting up the crest and lending an exaggerated sense of exposure that made for a truly unforgettable experience.

From there, I ground on, still sweating away in T shirt and shorts. With jelly like legs, each descent became a slow, painful wobble down the scree and rocks. I bitterly regretted not bring my collapsible poles which would have made life a whole lot easier, but then I hadn't considered poles on The Ridge. At intervals, I'd lie down in a bivvy shelter and have a snooze with my down jacket as a pillow. Why I brought a fleece, down jacket and running tights, I don't know – I was quite warm enough in shorts and T shirt. Yet. Despite my feeble physical condition, I revelled in the night. Route finding proved to be easy enough and I made best use of the cooler conditions of night as if I was travelling in a desert. The many tops of Banachdich came and went, then the short tower of Thormaid and the knife edge of Greadaidh. What a night this was – to travel along such a crest with the silhouette of jagged peaks in front and behind. The silence was palpable, with no wind, no birdsong, just a complete absence of sound. I felt profoundly privileged.

Below the first top of Mhadaidh I saw two people sleeping in a bivvy shelter. If they were awake they must have thought it a little odd to see someone going past at that hour, but they merely shuffled as I climbed up the first tower. I had timed my night vigil perfectly, arriving at Bidein as day broke. By now I was down to half a 500ml bottle of water, but my next food cache was just above. I climbed onwards to the central top without sight of the cache. By the top I knew I must have gone past it and returned a little way. I just couldn't find it and didn't want to descend too far or spend a long time in fruitless searching. I therefore took the decision to carry. The food wasn't a problem as I could hardly eat anything anyway, but the litre of juice was a different matter. I would have to get to the end with just 200ml of water and maybe some slowly melted snow if it was available.

I was finding the scrambles harder than two days previously, presumably because I was far more tired. Even so the down-climb of Bidein passed easily enough and I hauled myself up An Casteil as a soft red light lit up the ridge behind. The slog to Bruach na Frithe is one of

my least favourite bits of the ridge and it was no different on this occasion. Still, the view of the ridge is the best on the ridge itself and I did find some snow approaching Sgurr Fhionn Coire. Once more the scramble up this fine little peak proved to have a tricky little step. I could see two climbers just getting to the top of Naismith's Route on the Tooth, presumably after a night bivvying. For me, the Lota Corrie route beckoned with its big loss of height. I minimised this by cutting up the rock band a little to the shelf and thence on to the tooth and Am Bhasteir. I caught up with the other climbers on the West ridge of Sgurr nan Gillean, reaching the top just before 7:30 am. For a third time, I was asked who I was and if they could have my photo, and most kindly they offered me the remains of their water which I gratefully accepted. To stop the fame from running to my head, I still had the unknown ground to Knights Peak and Sgurr na Uamha to do, two little climbs which are not without interest or route finding difficulty.

I picked my way down the steep ground to the gap with the fifth pinnacle and quickly identified the route up Knights Peak, revelling in the exploratory nature of this addendum to the ridge. The heat of the day was starting to make itself felt, but I was now on the homeward run and the snow in my bottle was starting to melt into refreshingly ice cold water. I did not enjoy the scree after the grass ramp that leads to the SE Ridge of Gillean and could do no more than pick my way across the slope with wobbly legs. I was shot but not dead. With the end in sight, I ambled along to Sgurr Beag and then at last I was on grass. But not for long – ahead rose Sgurr na Uamha with its Moderate climb. What a fine finishing peak this, thrusting into the sky like a sentinel keeping guard over Sgurr nan Gillean. I found the route easily enough, but I could barely cope to touch the rock, so razor sharp was it. I think it must be because it is far less worn and therefore even rougher than the 'polished' rock of the gabbro on the Main Ridge.

All that was left was to potter down the grassy slopes to the river and back along the track to Sligachan. The bog was so dry that I didn't even get my feet damp. Under a familiar beating sun, I jolted along, dreaming of a soft seat and a hard earned drink. I envied the freshness of a runner coming up the glen, but just before 12 noon I was there and the dream of a sofa and a pint of beer became reality.

For more details on the round see <http://www.gofar.org.uk/cuillinround.html>