

Losing Myself – A Winter Rigby Round

The Cairngorms are Britain's most challenging winter mountains, combining remoteness, testing navigation and an arctic landscape. A lesser known classic 24 hour round links the 18 Munros of the Northern Cairngorms, commonly called the Rigby Round after the instigator, Mark Rigby. In Summer the route lends itself to an unsupported approach due to the awkward logistics of arranging support and this perhaps explains the relatively few successful completions. In full winter conditions it is a different proposition altogether, and to my knowledge no-one had even attempted a winter round, but someone has to be first! I was under no illusions that a 24 hour attempt was on for me – I was tired, would have to carry a substantial pack, feet of snow lay on the ground and the weather forecast was less certain than I would have liked. 36 hours looked a more feasible target in the circumstances, so I set a 7am departure time to make full use of daylight hours over the period.



I find the hours leading up to an unsupported solo outing to be filled with uncertainty, a degree of loneliness and self-doubt, and this was no exception. In the dark, cold hours of pre-dawn, it seemed ridiculous to be embarking on such a committing enterprise. If anyone had asked me what I was doing, I would have been somewhat reluctant to admit my true goal, as the reality was all too evident – rasping air, tingling fingers, a burdensome load and 74 miles of mountain wilderness. Yet these early doubts are soon dispelled by the rhythm of the day and the physical effort of yomping along the track. I had chosen the long way round via Rothiemurchus Lodge which adds about a mile but avoids the chaotic boulders of the Chalamain Gap. In the darkness this was undoubtedly the right decision, and as the feeble

light of dawn grows stronger with every minute, it becomes ever clearer that the day will be a good one. A jet trail split the Lairg Ghru like a fiery bolt from the heavens, declaring a new day of promise and vigour. The silence intensifies the stillness of the air, that seems to reflect my thoughts. I am alone, yet I am not since I have become part of the landscape itself. The moment is for me – unrepeatedable, impossible to replicate – a pure diamond amidst the common elements of life.



I have time to savour the moment on the long ascent of Braeriach, where hard-packed neve makes for efficient movement and a wide panorama opens further with every footstep. To the east, ice droops down Lurchers Crag, whilst broad, uncomplicated slopes stretch out to the North in serene simplicity. This serenity is sharply interrupted by the Cyclopean buttresses of Breariach, where sinuous cornices overhang precipitous towers that are bedecked in vast quantities of bulbous snow. I delight in the scene and without schedules, complex support arrangements and the like, there is no need to hurry – a diamond is to be savoured. It is a time to be, to marvel, to look on in awe. Only the ache in my back and shoulders reminds me of my journey – a dull insistent pain borne of an over-packed sack not designed for its purpose. Yet the day is too good to let back ache break the reverie, and as the sun beats down from a cloudless sky, I trot down hard neve and on over the frozen bog to the second Munro of Sgor Gaoith. I leave my sack at the col before the final ascent, which unsurprisingly speeds my progress most markedly as well as affording some relief from an increasingly troublesome back. A vast plateau leads to Mullach Chlach a Bhair and thence to its Eastern top, with nothing but snow to be seen. In the benign conditions it would be a delight were it not for my beast of burden, but dark clouds are massing ominously to the East as I leave the summit. After falling in on a previous occasion, the river crossing proves surprisingly easy and I cross

dry-shod by virtue of frozen bridges of snow. Soon the unspectacular slopes of Beinn Bhrotain are transformed by the setting of the sun which lights up the slopes in a deep, pink hue, before creating an astonishing crimson backdrop of strange, ribbed clouds.



I stumble along to Monadh Mor in the remnants of the light before the night settles for good and I am forced to use my torch. Predictably the night ushers in a keen breeze and the cold intensifies, whilst clouds obscure Ben Macdhui, foretelling of a long and testing night ahead. For some reason, Angel's Peak and cairn Toul are two of my least favourite Munros and the drag up Angel's Peak does little to change my existing impression. The transition between night and day is often stark in terms of mood and with gathering mist, a freshening wind and the prospect of many hours of darkness ahead, I can only look forward to a brief reprieve at Corrour Bothy. In fact the reprieve is a little while longer coming than I anticipate due to a navigational oversight descending Cairn Toul. Where the ridge bends to the right I carry on down a steep and hoared up crest, which although highly entertaining is not where I want to be and I reluctantly re-ascend the 50 metres to the main ridge. Before the Devil's Point I decide to deposit my sack for the out-and-back despite running the risk of not being able to find it again on my return, but I desperately need to relieve my back and am soon safely re-acquainted with the pack. The following descent of the corrie proves highly awkward, with steep, unstepped neve testing the short-points of my crampons, of which I am heartily glad.

Thus it is that I reach Corrour Bothy after 13 hours on the go – 8 Munros down, 10 to go, but with the long, long night in prospect. No welcoming light issues forth from this most popular of bothies and I find it cold, empty and devoid of cheer. I strip off, encase myself in spare

clothing and lie prostrate whilst the stove roars away. Cake follows soup and sandwiches as I lie in the darkness listening to the insistent knocking of the wind on the door. The gnawing cold means that I don't linger overly long, although I am surprised to see that it is 9:45pm by the time I depart. The mist hangs over the ridge above, testament to the change in mood from the elation of the day to the somewhat grim character of the night. I reasoned that I would be better taking a more circuitous but safe line up Carn a Mhaim, but as I cross the more direct gully, I abruptly change my mind and head upwards. Once established in the gully, I know that I will be committed and experience of a summer descent told me it was steep. Sure enough, it is steep, but nothing untoward, and I soon establish a good rhythm of step-kicking and lunging with the axe to the sound of my deep breaths resonating within my hood. The shelter of the gully forms an enclosed world removed from the hostile surrounding, circumscribed by the walls of the gully and defined by the confines of my hood and the small area lit up by the torchlight's beam. Emerging on the ridge, I dump my sack once more for the short stretch to the summit, then for the first time, I face in to the Northerly wind that now drives lustily across the ridge. The mist descends for good and a depressing drizzle sets in, blown in to every conceivable crevice by the omnipresent wind. I stop to add a down jacket and cagoule to my layers – it is clearly going to be a testing night. I hadn't reckoned on rain and this is no ordinary rain – it is super-cooled and freezes on impact. Before long I am encased in ice. Nothing escapes – my axe carries a thick sheath, whilst a 3cm icicle droops from my torch, an ever-present reminder of the icy world that I now inhabit. Not that I can see much beyond the folds of my balaclava half-way over my eyes and I can do no more than trust to my compass in the impenetrable darkness.



By the summit of Britain's second highest mountain I am both wet and icy, and the night is but half-way through. With grim determination I trace the needle, visualising slope aspects in my mind and correlating these to what I can see and feel. In a strange sort of way, I lose sense of the context of the journey and my wider surroundings, instead focussing on the micro landscape, eliminating all other thoughts. It's just me, the patch of snow lit up by my torch beam and an image in my mind. Only the odd gust of wind or an inspection of the map lifts me out of this bubble. My gloves have become water-collecting sopping masses requiring Herculean efforts of clumsy yanks and teeth pulling to get them back on each time I remove them in order to recouple my chest strap to inspect the map that is safely held next to my chest. My waterproof trousers are also proving to be a perpetual irritation, being forced down by the weight of the ice and my rucksack. I find no solution and for the remainder of the journey waddle along with my trousers half-down. These travails are a frustrating but accepted part of the journey, so I remain fiercely focussed on the slow miles to and from Derry Cairngorm and from there to Beinn a Mheadhoin. If anything, the visibility gets worse, to the extent that I literally bump in to the summit tors of Beinn a Mheadhoin before I see them. They are encrusted in plates of hoar frost and ice, a veritable Megalithic hide that accentuates their primeval form. This is life at its most basic, raw and utterly unforgiving, but there is a vibrancy too and a simplicity about the journey: I can not stay - this is a hostile place - so I move on. There is no option.

I retrace my steps for half a mile then drop off toward a stream line that falls steeply to the Lairg an Laoigh. The stream seems to plunge in to an abyss so I drift off to the side and meander downwards on increasingly undependable snow which fails to support my weight. All of a sudden my crampon comes off and on inspection it's clear that a vital metal component has snapped. In its iced-up state there is no way that I can repair it, so I just thrust it in to my sack and proceed with one crampon. Sitting in the heather inspecting the damage, my eye is drawn to the ice crystals that stand like a miniature Giant's Causeway in the grass, each column extending to more than several centimetres in length. I am struck by how nature replicates patterns in the micro and macro.

On resuming my journey, I sense that I'm not quite where I want to be and am astonished to observe how long the descent has taken.. I'm in an undulating area of heather, bog and stream, but I'm confused. The stream is running the wrong way. My mind is in a bit of a fuzz, dulled by the long hours of night and the onset of fatigue. I clumsily slosh through the stream to a path beyond. A quick check – and yes – this is the track to the Hutchison memorial Hut. I am off route but at least I know where I am, although how I got here in the first place I can't quite work out. Never mind, the way ahead is clear – recross the stream and ascend to the Lairg an Laoigh in the first light of day. I've spent a good two hours extra on my meanderings and the weather looks no more promising, but no matter – I figure that if I can get to Faindouran Bothy by nightfall, I can crack it, especially with the advantage of a new day ahead. Or so I justified it to myself. The reality is that 18 wild miles lie ahead in to one of the most remote quarters of the British Isles, and if anything, the driving drizzle intensifies in a rising wind. Daybreak signals no more than a lifting of the darkness as snow whips across the broad-backed ridge of Beinn a Chaorainn.

Over the course of the day, the blanket of mist lifts only momentarily, at times reducing visibility to absolute zero, with the wind sometimes gusting to almost galeforce. I am wet, cold and fatigued, but I am also set on my goal with retreat being scarcely less arduous than continuing. I battle the gale across the lonely miles to Beinn Bhreac and the equally empty quarters to Beinn a Bhuird. The day is an extension of the night wandering glued to the

compass, with nothing but white above, below and all around. Only at the Sneck do the mists part before swiftly closing over once again, this time for good. The discomfort is continual as the wind slices through my sopping layers, rustling the waterproof trousers as they hang loosely around my thighs and freezing my replacement Dachstein mitts that only serve to soak up the wet. Nothing is dry, nothing is warm, nothing is comforting. I count down the miles to Faindouran, peeking through the gap in my hood at the small horizon before my eyes. I scrabble up the summit top of Ben Avon, trousers flapping around my knees, the wind gusting awkwardly as I totter up the ice-encrusted rocks. At 2pm I begin my descent and start to look forward to a reprieve from the hostilities of the plateau. I search out the beginnings of the ridge, but can see nothing. I mean nothing – nothing at all. Up is down and down is up, mist is snow and snow is mist. Each step is one of faith in to the unknown, and to compound the situation the freezing rain has deposited a sheet of glass on what appears to be a worryingly steepening slope. Suddenly I sense danger as the points of my one crampon struggle to bite and my uncramponed fellshoe skitters uselessly off the surface. I resort to step-cutting, but it is both painfully slow and insecure, whilst I can't see what is up or down, let alone anything ahead. I am forced to retrace my steps, then head for rocks on the left, but they are sheathed in thick ice and equally hazardous. I head for a steepening gully, kicking with my cramponed foot and hacking small steps for my other foot. It is painfully slow and heart-breaking to realise that the goal that had seemed so close was now several hours away. Instead of a gentle descent to the relative sanctuary below, I am skittering down glazed ice, in the words of Whympers, looking well to each step. The situation has become more serious – I must descend quicker, I must try something different. I decide to lie on my front and gently push off, breaking with my ice-axe as I go. It is a tactic of some desperation: on this glassy surface I am conscious that I must control the slide very slowly or I won't stop. I make staccato and undoubtedly quicker progress, but the bumping on unforgiving ice adds to my poor body's woes, as every slide is a voluntary subjugation to rib battering and worse. I am thus relieved when I am able to intermittently kick through the ice that enables me to downclimb. This is infinitely preferable but still slow, with every step requiring three hefty blows that batter my long-suffering feet in the woefully inadequate protection of my fellshoes. As I descend further, the process becomes easier and with it quicker. I am relieved to arrive safely at the valley floor, but instead of a relatively firm passage down the ridge crest, I am faced with the wet variability of the snow, heather and streams of the valley. I stumble uncertainly along the valley, sloshing through the near-freezing waters and falling in innumerable holes. It is with some relief that I arrive bedraggled but unbroken at the landrover track to Faindouran. It is dark again, so I don my torch before feasting on two jam donuts and trudging toward the bothy. To my dismay, even such a track as this is untravelled so my frustration grows as I make disappointingly slow progress, even losing the track for a while (yes it is possible in soft unmarked snow in the dark). I eke out the seven kilometres to the bothy, bend by bend, kilometre by kilometre, until finally my degenerate body makes it through the snow drift that blocks the door to my long-anticipated goal.

Like Corroul, Faindouran is cold and uninviting, but it provides shelter from the elements. At last I can remove my wet clothing, but this time I have nothing with which to replace it, so in consequence I shiver uncontrollably. Only the stove can restore vital warmth, so I make four brews whilst I take stock. I am horrified to see how soggy the down jacket has become, both on account of the dramatic diminution in warmth and how I was going to explain its demise to its owner – my dear wife. I try to effect a system of keeping my waterproof trousers in place but conclude that it is hopeless and move on to a more satisfying (and highly effective) repair of my crampon with a spare lace. Unfortunately, there is little that I can do about my damp shirt and microfleece, meaning that I can do no more than put on every layer of wet clothing

in my possession. First though, I have to de-ice my wet jacket which has frozen on the inside. Dinner comprises a hot chocolate sachet, a cold cheese sandwich and a donut, which although not quite a sumptuous feast, makes a change on the occasional chocolate bar. After completing an entry in the hut book, I put everything on and set forth at 9:15 pm.



Aided by poles, I make relatively reasonable progress up the hillside above the bothy, before dropping down to the stream beyond. Bynack More lies somewhere above in the mist and I set course for what I estimate will be the summit, continuing until I hit the ridge. My reasoning is that I need simply follow the ridge to the summit, so no great accuracy would be required. How wrong could I be. On breasting the ridge, it takes on a plateau like form and I replace poles with compass and map in an attempt to re-establish my bearings. Alas it is too late. Up, down, across and back, and back again, but its no good – I just seem to become more confused with every step. I cross and re-cross my steps several times, desperately trying to figure out the lie of the land, but there are no obvious landmarks. The tors I was expecting seem to have disappeared and none of the slope aspects tally with any location that I can imagine. For the first time ever I am utterly, completely and very seriously lost.

What do you do when you are lost in the middle of the night on a Cairngorm plateau in the depths of winter? My answer is to keep walking – walk until I can work out where I am – so I do so. I descend to the West, follow a stream through a gorge in wet snow with the consistency of porridge, then retrace my steps as the direction of the stream seems all wrong. By now I am almost immune to the cold, wet and dark and just keep plodding calmly because that is what I have programmed myself to do. However, I know that I have to do something different or I will continue to walk round and round. I therefore head downwards and up the

next hill to the South. Small rock escarpments appear and I make a summit then another. I'm still confused but believe that I may be on A Choinneach after having ascended Bynack More and head to the South West towards the Saddle. A wall of mountain looms above the saddle which I take to be Cairngorm. I gratefully climb the initially steep wall, then follow ribs to the windblown final summit. Only I couldn't see any evidence of the weather station or the large summit cairn. Never mind – maybe the cairn had been snowed over. I follow the North ridge down, glad to be descending toward the long-awaited comforts of the ski area. During the ten hours of wandering since Faindouran, an inner voice has kept me on track, instructing me what to do, keeping me focussed. I am not one person but two – me and my guide, my companion, my guardian angel. He tells me to keep my waterproof trousers on to avoid freezing; he talks incessantly, he's always there.

Day eventually dawns as I descend toward the chairlift station. I'm surprised to see a village of chalets around the station, but think little of it. The mist has lifted and the ridges look to different to my recollection, but the chairlift station is plain enough and there's a steep but easy gully directly toward it. I lunge through the deep, soft snow, until the chairlift station is very close, but hold on – its not there! Nor are the chalets – there's nothing but heather and rocks. The illusion is all too clear and a perusal of the map makes the extent of my befuddled mind equally evident. I am in Strath Nethy having descended A Choinneach, not Cairngorm. I have a choice of a 14 mile walk down soggy untrodden snow in Strath Nethy, or else I must climb back over Cairngorm.

I choose the latter, but it means climbing a decidedly steep gully through the crags opposite. A party has obviously passed this way, but equally clearly, it contains a couple of steep, icy steps and the glassy surface ice is much in evidence. I take every care in climbing what proves to be a lengthy (300metre) and atmospheric runnel of grade II standard that leads to the ridge. The climb is a welcome diversion from the drudgery of my night-time wanderings and the shelter it affords is just as welcome. I feel an instinctiveness about every action that is moderated by an awareness of my depleted abilities.

It is only on attaining the ridge that I realise that I can still achieve my goal. I'm only a mile and a half away from the summit of Cairngorm and I have time to bag the final top before contemplating the drive home. The surface has been turned to bullet proof neve by the scouring of the wind, and I am glad of my successful crampon repair, even on such easy angled slopes. The plateau is truly Arctic, which perhaps explains the continuing lack of people. The summit cairn is unmistakable, despite a remarkably thick coating of hoar and ice, but it is not a place to linger or record the occasion. The bone-hard neve makes for a surprisingly treacherous descent on what would normally be a most straightforward slope. Certainly, there is no evidence of skiers or mountaineers – just a white wasteland that meets civilisation in the form of the top ski lift. Here at last I meet my first fellow humans in over fifty hours of travel. They don't look much more comfortable than me, especially a young boy who is being introduced to the delights of spindrift, a buffeting wind, concrete-like snow and near white-out conditions. I am glad to be descending, though the rest is an uneventful shuffle down the piste to the café. I feel like an alien in the café which is inhabited by jolly skiers and boarders. As I strip off, I am aware that, in contrast, I am smelly, battered, bedraggled and sore (don't ask where). I am also still wearing my crampons as I can't remove them without a trip to the toilet to run hot water over the straps to melt the ice. Yet as I revel in the fug of the café, devouring my chips and beans, I am content – the journey over the hills and in to myself is almost done. There is no ceremony as I shuffle sorely down the

road - no reception, no physical mark of success - but the reward is already mine. A great journey has come to an end.

Rigby Round, 73.5 miles, 6800m ascent, 13-15 December 2010, 54 hours. (+ 4 miles, 600m ascent!)

Postscript

I never did manage to fathom just where I'd wandered over Bynack More, but I am reasonably confident that I somehow managed to drift over to Bynack Beag and from memory of the summit rocks I'm fairly sure that I did climb Bynack More and thereby completed the round. From there, I must have descended to the South West before climbing back up A Choinneach from South of the col. After two nights without sleep, the mind plays tricks, especially in the dark days of midwinter, and time and distance become confused. Nevertheless, I still struggle to understand how I could have spent nine hours from the river to the summit of A Choinneach. It will remain one of life's little mysteries.

Subsequent to the round, I sustained several minor discomforts – a strained wrist from pulling my glove on and off, mild frostnip in my fingers and toes, the usual black toenails and most notably, swine flu, although I think I must have caught that before leaving for Scotland.

Equipment Carried

Lowe Alpine 35l Event Contour sack
Mudclaw 330 fellshoes
Camp 250g ice axe
Kahtoola steel crampons
2 pairs waterproof socks
Leki poles
Olympus E510 SLR camera
Dachstein mitts
Lined over mitts
Pocket rocket stove
1l aluminium pot
250g gas
Aiguille gaiters
Tikka torch plus Black Diamond torch
RAB down jacket with hood
Microfleece
2 x Dryflow tops
Mountain hardware lined jacket
Berghaus Paclite shell

Food Carried

1 litre liquid (+0.5l at start)
1 soup packet
1 hot chocolate sachet
1 tea bag
5 jam donuts
6 rounds wholemeal cheese sandwiches
2 pieces Christmas cake

20 bars
Figs
Dextrosol
Nuun tablets
Flapjack

