

Glen Shiel Round, 25 February 2005

I started from Cluanie at 6.06 am in overcast dreary conditions. On leaving the road to take the direct route up Creag a Mhaim, the going immediately became tortuous, with a foot of fresh snow overlying the heather, but it improved higher up where it was windblown. I donned crampons near the top and kept them on until the descent from the Saddle, as the windblown slopes were covered in rock hard neve. Unfortunately, it was largely mist covered along the South Glen Shiel ridge with no tracks for most of it. However, at Creag nan Damh the cloud broke up and a beautiful afternoon followed. I front pointed up a gully on Sgurr na Sgine and likewise on a direct line for the summit of the Saddle. The view from there was truly stunning: snowy peaks as far as you could see - it really doesn't get better than that.

I made a meal at the road and loaded up my sack with two days worth of food, fuel and plenty of winter woolies, so it was pretty heavy. You can imagine that the ensuing ascent of Sgurr Fhuaran was very tough. I went down to the bridge, up by a stream and then up the ridge of Sgurr nan Carnach until I could traverse round the side to the col with Fhuaran. This was pretty tricky in the dark, with slopes of neve, knee deep crusty snow and slabby ground all mixed up. The final slope to Fhuaran was desperate: crusty, one foot deep crusty snow which just about broke on treading on it and no trail. Indeed apart from a few places there was no trail all day. People had been up and down one mountain but hadn't continued along the ridges, presumably because the snow was so trying.

Anyway, I eventually reached the top of Fhuaran and gazed at a quite stupendous view. The full moon lit up the snowy peaks all around, from Torridon to Skye, from Knoydart to the Ben, and East to A Chralaig. I reluctantly descended and at this point I noted that the strap on my crampons was digging in to my leg, presumably from over tightening it. However, I had tied the straps up to prevent them from flapping around and these had frozen in to an impenetrable mass. I just couldn't prise them apart, so I had to press on regardless and this meant that I couldn't walk downhill properly, since I was forced to place my right foot parallel to the slope and use a pole to relieve the weight on my foot. Naturally, this didn't make for fast progress!

Apart from this, the traverse over the remaining five sisters was magical in the moonlight, although without a trail, the more level sections were exceptionally time consuming, with a need to pull each foot out of the snow and then plunge the next one in. It then clouded over and even began to snow on the Brothers ridge. The snow became even more trying, as the brief trail which I had followed from Sgurr nan Ciste Dubh to Saileag stopped at the summit of the latter top and was unremittingly deep. I was forced to seek any rock going to keep out of the worst of the snow and although the downhill was easier, it was far more painful with the crampon strap acting like a saw against my leg. The subsidiary top of the last of the Brothers was desperately exhausting and I realised that I probably wouldn't get to the bothy at Cam Ban before 5 am. which was 2-3 hours longer than I had anticipated. With my leg, the prospect of even deeper snow on Carn Eige and little prospect of a trail, I couldn't see how I was going to complete the round, so I decided to retreat to my car at Cluanie.

It was a good decision because I was moving at a snail's pace, partly because of my leg and partly down to sheer tiredness. If the snow had been less crusty and deep things might well have been different, as I reckon that I could then have made it to the bothy at a more reasonable time, grabbed some sleep and then continued in reasonable shape. However, in those conditions it was just too much for me and I'm content with what was a magnificent round of Glen Shiel.