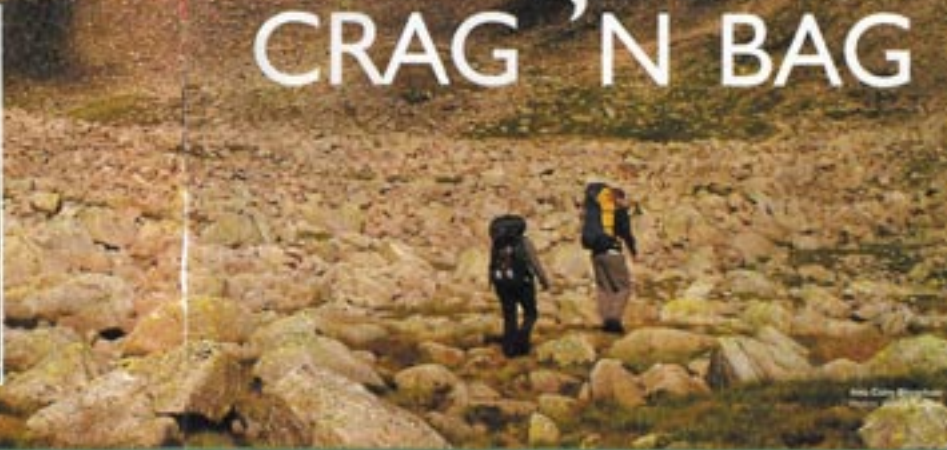


Ronald Turnbull attempts some Alpine-style ascents, without his hobnails and tweeds

A CAIRNGORMS CRAG 'N BAG



Pygmy Ridge gets easier as it goes on: the final tower leading to the Cairn Gorm Plateau

Into Coire Bhrochain: Photos Ronald Turnbull

The old and bearded concept of hillwalking was to include rock wherever rock was offered. The old and bearded idea of rockclimbing was that it should be a sort-of-sensible route onto some summit. Such hobnailed notions floated through my mind on meeting up with my half-sister and her boyfriend in the Cairngorms. These young people, who only took to the crags two years ago, have somehow absorbed this antique attitude that climbing takes place on or near mountaintops, up pathetically easy places (they've invented seven new grades of difficulty since I used to do it) and is followed by some high-level hillwalking.

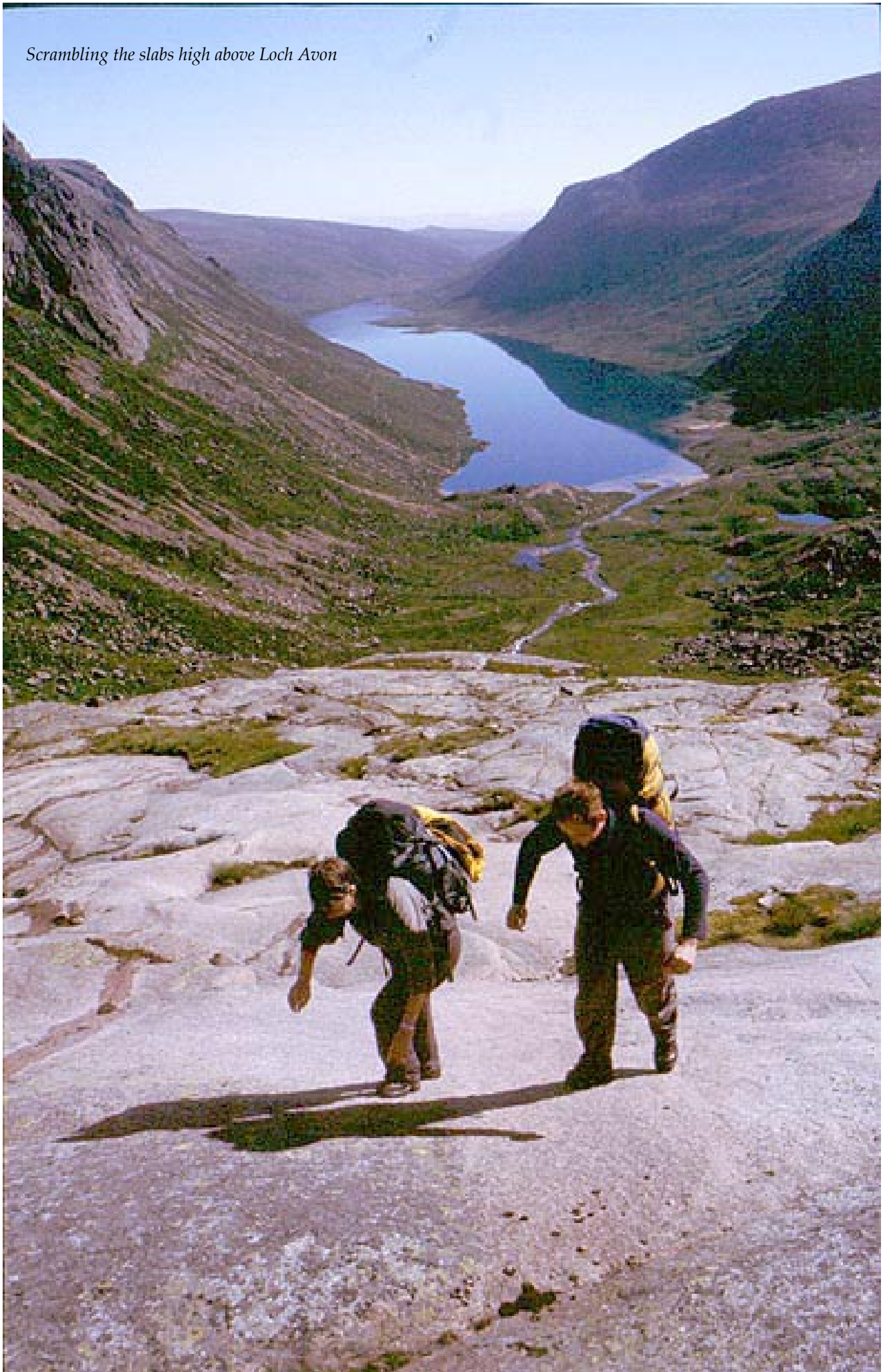
Climbing alpine-style in the Himalaya means no fixed ropes, no big rucksacks, quick and risky. Climbing alpine-style in the Cairngorms requires the same jump of the imagination and the same lightweight overnights: in this case, the Shelter Stone and the Garbh Choire shelter. It means going up all four of the fourthousanders, on easy rock, wearing walking boots and rucksacks, over a long weekend.

Thus it was that I found myself climbing Cairngorm by a surprising route. The first surprise was Coire an t-Sneachda. Cairngorm's northern corries expose themselves recklessly to travellers on the road alongside Loch Morlich. They're not afraid to show you everything they've got, even though all they've got is a gentle hollow and a slim fringe of scrappy crag around the rim. Except that when you get there, Sneachda has a splendidly unfriendly floor of bare boulders, and small grey pools of water, and a stretcher box to remind us of our mortality. Sunlit forests are a flat and far-below world glimpsed over the rim. On the other three sides, the boulders slope up to the bottoms of rockfaces that, now we're up and under them, suddenly look serious. It's still not quite a proper Scottish corrie,



Fluid intake is crucial though a Cairngorm beer should be reserved for a post-scramble treat

Scrambling the slabs high above Loch Avon



as it lacks a proper lochan; actually its boulders and impending pinnacles remind me of the Tatras. But wherever it belongs geographically, it's one of the great places. And, almost certainly, it would be even more spectacular – if we could actually see it.

Or maybe not. Boulders, crags and the imagination: Corrie an t-Sneachda is just as grimly grand with the cloud down. To make it even more mysterious, it's pronounced 'Corrie n' Treyach'. Amidst the concealing clouds we fumbled around on small half-seen patches of gully, scree and gentle rocks, until grassy pockets on a craggy slope led to the bottom of a lovely Moderate called Pygmy Ridge.

Hobnailed but not bearded (though he did have a more-than-adequate moustache), Harold Raeburn first climbed this on April Fools' Day exactly a century ago. Pygmy Ridge starts off rather steep on very big holds. It then obligingly gets easier, with each pitch being slightly less daunting than the one before. The cloud swirled, allowing glimpses of rocky towers above and on either side. The rock eased back and, and then became actually horizontal. And on this miniature arete the cloud slumped away to leave us in a burst of sunshine. Dazed by the glare, we stepped down off the ridge's final tower onto the Cairngorm plateau.

THE BATTLEMENTS & FOREFINGER PINNACLE

According to a recent guidebook by Paul Dearden called 'Classic Rock', "it is now possible to become a 'good climber' without ever going to the mountains, or even to the gritstone edges of Derbyshire". His book of classics contains nothing under E3 (seven grades harder than Pygmy Ridge), nothing from longer ago than 1980, and nothing in Scotland. And when you've looked at the book's pictures of Ride the Wild Surf (one pitch, 150ft, E4 6a in Dinorwig slate quarries, bolted and with some artificial holds) you realise why climbers can't be bothered with the five-hour walk to Carn Etchachan above the Shelter Stone.



Scrambling not alongside but inside the Garbh Uisge



Garbh Choire shelter: few comforts, but lots of Location, Location, Location



Domed ridge: the exposed wall, as seen from the summit of Braeriach, lacks privacy



On Carn Etchachan we were trailing our rope up another Moderate, a Tom Patey creation called The Battlements. A famous hard-man who died in an abseil accident on a Scottish sea-stack, Patey was bearded occasionally, and wore hobnails in his early days. But he was also an Aberdonian. Aberdonian is the opposite of glamour, and The Battlements is actually a supposedly-useful descent route from proper climbs alongside (such as Boa, Severe, so-called for its 30m constricting crack, and Python, Very Severe, so called for being even nastier than Boa). Even the approach to the Battlements, along the inappropriately named 'Terrace', is on steep moss two thirds of the way up Carn Etchachan Buttress. The climb itself is described with Aberdonian nonchalance, so as not to spoil our exploratory pleasure. I followed my leaders by their footprints on the mossy holds, and we ended up in a greasy corner below a short but slightly overhanging wall with the handholds not quite right. Not being from Aberdeen, our nonchalance here was put under severe strain. As was the climbing rope. Fortunately there was plenty of protection: a rusty nut had been well jammed in by the previous visitor some time last century (presumably by a process of falling off on it). And Matt coped, Barbara coped on a tight rope, I coped on a tight rope too.

When an Aberdonian called a route Mod, did he actually mean Diff or V Diff? I recalled Cioch Nose Direct in Applecross, described by Patey and Bonington as "the Diff to end all Diffs" – and perhaps to end all Diff climbers as well. In today's guidebook it's a Severe. And today's climbers, rucksackless, unbearded, in their sticky slippers: do they still even visit Carn Etchachan?

We came down again by way of the Forefinger Pinnacle, and Matt obligingly posed on the very fingertip. "Very nice son," says his mother on receiving his email, "and whatever happened to your helmet?"

"Helmet – " says Tom Patey from Aberdeen – "a safety device for climbers falling head first..." The drop behind the Pinnacle is about 100m. It's easier than the Nape's Needle on Great Gable, but every bit as iconic. Or it would be if it wasn't hidden in a gully on the edge of Ben Macdui six hours walk from the car park.

Even in Scotland, in August, if you keep climbing long enough the day does eventually end. At about 10pm we scrambled down Pinnacle Gully, over stones and wildflowers and a little bit of bare rock,

with the light fading and Loch Avon below us going silvery-grey.

The Shelter Stone: it's half-full of ancient tea bags and orange plastic, and stuffed to the doorway with history – the first recorded sleep-over was by some bandits in the late Seventeenth Century. Midges lurked in great numbers in the doorway but for some reason didn't come inside to bite us: perhaps it's the orange plastic that puts them off, or maybe they're afraid of us bandits.

In terms of routes up Ben Macdui, the Avon Slabs way is the one with the hobnails and the big beard. You start at the Shelter Stone, which as already mentioned is neither convenient nor a car park. The Garbh Uisge and the Feith Buidhe splash into the head of Loch Avon; between the two streams is the way the glacier slid down off the Macdui plateau. There's 300m height-gain here on nice clean granite, all graded between not-very-difficult and a-lot-easier-than-that. Views are the full length of Loch Avon.

To avoid steeper slabs at the bottom, we scrambled up alongside the left-hand stream, the Garbh Uisge. This meant that the Garbh Uisge had to be crossed above its first waterfall – well it didn't *have* to be, technically speaking, but large flat footholds led right through a splashy cataract with plenty to hold on to but a couple of waterfalls below if we should be so silly as to get swept away. I hoped the camera would stay dry – it'd be a shame to lose the Forefinger Pinnacle pictures. "Zip up your waterproofs," I suggested; but they just laughed. They did stop laughing, though, when the waterfall came out of the bottoms of their trousers.

We rambled happily up all the bare rock, and the rest of the way was on boulder, and a grassy valley with a little stream that rather resembled Yorkshire except for being at 1200m. And under blue sunny skies, at the big cairn on Ben Macdui, my soaking-wet companions attracted some odd looks from the assembled rather hot hillwalkers.

NORTH-EAST RIDGE OF SGORR AN LOCHAIN UAINE & DOMED RIDGE

Cairn Toul is not a climbers' mountain. However, its outlier Sgor an Lochain Uaine has a ridge that's Alpine in atmosphere even if only Munro-bagger in difficulty. It's a place where, on an August afternoon, the peak's English nickname of Angel's Peak is altogether apt. Leave the big sack in the shelter: and waft your way up to Heaven.

The route starts up a small, steep path that leads up between a splashy stream and a bit of broken rock. At the top you arrive suddenly at Lochan Uaine, the green lochan, one of four so named in the Cairngorms. From there it's clambering over boulders, and a gently-angled slab with big holds and the merest whiff of exposure, and little ledges with grass and great views right across the Lairig Ghru to Ben Macdui, and right across the Garbh Choire to the rocks of Braeriach.

At the top, it was 9pm. The sun had collapsed tiredly into a cloudbank away over the Great Moss, and the midges had come out to dance in the dusk. Given that the summit of Angel's Peak is above 1200m, presumably the little grey midge wings were at that moment beating over every square metre of Scotland. Fortunately, some lover of humanity had left midge-coils at the Garbh Choire refuge.

Coire Bhrochain of Braeriach means 'gruel', as this is what happened to some cattle that once fell over the edge. Up in Coire Bhrochain is a climb called Domed Ridge, that I sent Barbara and Matt up while taking long-focus photos from



Domed ridge: the top of the first pitch



various directions. 600ft, Mod, it said in the old book. From the summit of Braeriach I watched with mixed emotions as Matt led what was certainly a V Diff move, superbly exposed above the huge view of the Lairig Ghru. The hand that goes pat pat pat seeking the handhold that isn't actually there – this is usually a private moment, but not on the final pitch of Domed Ridge, in full view across 40 metres of empty air from Braeriach's summit cairn.

For the third time, it was evening on the Cairngorm plateau. But late is not so great when your planned evening meal is eight miles away in Aviemore. We arrived in Aviemore just in time to be sure of a bunk in the youth hostel, or a meal at the Indian restaurant – but not both. We went for the meal. And so I ended up in my bivvy bag in Rothiemurchus Forest; where I was obliged to sleep facing the dark trees, rather than the open sky, so as not to be kept awake by the awful sight of several thousand midges an inch away outside the midge net. For the first time ever, I could actually hear midges: a gentle hum of 10,000 wings, somewhere near Middle C on the keyboard.

Information & contacts

The routes

Pygmy Ridge (Moderate, 100m) to Cairn Gorm

The Battlements (undergraded – Moderate, 100m)

Forefinger Pinnacle (Moderate, 20m)

Avon Slabs (scramble Grade 2, 500m) to Ben Macdui

Sgor an Lochain Uaine's NE ridge (scramble Grade 1, 100m) to Cairn Toul

Domed Ridge (Difficult, 200m) to Braeriach

Guidebooks

Scrambles: Walking in the Cairngorms, by Ronald Turnbull (Cicerone)

Climbs: Climbing Guide – The Cairngorms Vol 1, by Allen Fyffe and Andrew Nisbet, SMT (1995)

Start/finish: Sugar Bowl, Glen More (GR: NH986074)

Accommodation: Shelter Stone (GR: NJ 002015);

Garbh Choire shelter (GR: NN 958986)

Over the years, the categories of action shift like the boulders of Coire Bhrochain. The old guidebook's rock-climbs get downgraded to scrambles; but now the scrambling guidebooks have started suggesting ropes, which by my reckoning makes them back into climbs, just without the sticky shoes on. In the Alps they simply call it mountaineering. Three days and two nights; four fourthousanders; and an awful lot of granite; a pair of stout walking boots on the feet – and a set of hundred-year-old hobnailers in the head. When it comes to ideas for going up hills, bearded is best.

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The long weekend described was investigating scrambling routes for 'Walking the Cairngorms' (Cicerone 2005). It generated half a dozen routes for that book, and many of the photos were also used there: the slabs above Loch Avon, seen here, became that book's cover picture.

The text of the article, somewhat expanded, became a chapter in 'The Life and Times of the Black Pig' (pb Millrace 2007). It's reused with their permission as well.

So even before the OWPG Award, this was a pretty productive weekend!