

## **A Rough Ride from John Fleetwood**

The Scottish midge is living proof that a very small being can make a real difference to a much bigger body. In the absence of midges this is a comforting thought to those of us that feel too insignificant to make a difference, but in a still, pre-dawn, it is an irritating fact that curtails breakfast. I had driven up the previous evening to spend a few hours curled up in the back of the car, before braving the Scottish scourge to set forth upon my day's venture. At 3.45 am. the hillside above the Quoich Dam looms menacingly, and the steep black folds of the hill reveal knee deep grasses and waist deep bracken. I tell myself that the day will get better, but it is a truly brutal start – a veritable vertical jungle of rocks, bracken, thick grasses and bog. I pull myself up by the fronds of foliage and slowly, oh so slowly, move up the slope to better ground above. As night turns to day, the angle eases and the first summit appears.

I am embarked upon a long journey in the rough bounds of Knoydart and the dim light of a grey dawn gently reveals the hills before me. I pick up a track on the ridge, but am surprised by its faintness given the relative accessibility of the hills, and the stalkers' track on the descent is no more than a shallow indentation in the grass. In the height of summer, all is green, the product of the rain that makes this the wettest part of Britain. The deep tussocks make for a jolting running style which is both slow and wearing, and I take a direct line for the stream crossing. On the far bank I pick up a small path which is a delight to run on and once on the unmetalled road, I am flying by comparison. This comes to an end all too soon, and a steep ascent of deep tussock grass resumes. Up, up, up it goes for 900 metres; then down, down, down for the same 900 metres of difficult tussocky ground. At Coireshubh, I contemplate a rest but the midges and flies drive me on. The day is developing into a steamy one with hot sunshine, water everywhere underfoot and the air replete with horseflies, dragonflies, midges, daddy-longlegs and innumerable other insects which I fail to identify. I sip at my water but the atmosphere saps my energy as I make a third ascent of more than 700 metres. A very brief jog down a broken ridge and it is once more 800 metres downhill. The very steep slope down to the path leading to Barrisdale is especially trying with bracken and deep grass overlying rocks and covering big holes. Once upon the track, however, I resume a more normal running speed and enjoy the relative firmness beneath my feet until I reach the bothy by the sea.

I savour a doze in the hot sunshine, before resuming my journey with the climb of Ladhar Bheinn. The 1000 metre ascent from sea level following the previous three big climbs and descents is almost too much for me. The stalkers' track weaves in and out of chest deep bracken, before traversing out to Coire Dhorraicall and emerging on to yet another very steep grassy slope. My progress slows to a crawl, but I am committed and can only drag myself onwards. The superb cliffs of Ladhar Bheinn act as a temporary diversion, but even searching for future winter routes fails to relieve the omnipresent effort of the upward grind. This is self imposed torture with no-one to cry to, no-one to shout at, no-one to blame. Why am I doing this ?

The answer comes, eventually, on the summit of Ladhar Bheinn where the expansive view of the Western Isles and ridges to the East lift me out of my torpor. The breeze revives me and I relish the privilege of my solitary perch. I have seen no-one since the start and only meet three parties a little later in the day. The airy ridge to Stob a Chearchaill is a delight and is a welcome respite from the huge up and downs that preceded it. The path is soon lost once more, however, on the descent to Mam Barrisdale, and its continuation to Luinne Bheinn is an oozing black trail which sucks at my shoes. A rain shower darkens my mood once more and I struggle on the fourth big climb of the day. The incessant steepness is taking its toll and this is exacerbated on the descent by painful toes. Every step downwards sends a shooting pain through my foot. I forgot to take any plasters, so I dare not examine my feet. I suspect that my large toe nails are coming off, a prognosis which later proves to be correct.

Once on the track to the next Munro, Meall Bhuidhe, my misery is lifted and I enjoy the saunter over the rocky ground. The benefit of a decent path is obvious, as is the ardour of successive large ascents and descents. Unfortunately the latter resumes with the steep and broken descent to sea level at Carnoch. I fail to take the best line which results in a very steep sideways hobble amongst tussocky grass, boulders and bog. My relish at reaching the path from Mam Meadail is tempered by its frustrating zig zags on a gentle downhill incline. I am forced to follow the path in its sinuous entirety, as the intervening ground is the bracken/bog/tussock grass mix, with which I do not wish to re-acquaint myself.

I have no idea of the time at Carnoch as I have been relying on my Garmin Forerunner which has an integrated clock. Having borrowed a friend's Forerunner to complement my own (the batteries only last for 15 hours), my friend's has now run out of battery power and I have switched my own on. To my horror, whilst finding the satellite, my Garmin has frozen and refuses to function at all, meaning that not only can I not track my distance, but I have no watch ! I have no schedule but fear that I may be falling behind a 24 hour completion time if the rough ground continues and I fail to recover.

The next ascent is another 'killer': an 1100 metre ascent from sea level to Sgurr na Ciche. This begins by a trog over the bog and a thrash through vertical vegetation up to the ridge. I decide to accomplish the initial ascent before resting,

and as a result manage to reach the summit of this fine cone of a mountain without undue toil. The summit scrambling is enjoyable and I have sufficient reserves to appreciate the incredible interplay of slabs, gushing streams and steep grass that makes this one of the roughest parts of Britain. I am keen to traverse Garbh Cioch Mor before nightfall, so press on along the rocky but well trodden track. The commitment and roughness of the ridge is a real antidote to the interminable slogs of earlier in the day and I escape the mist before it descends over Sgurr na Ciche. Eventually I lose my race with the darkness and stop to don extra clothing before the climb up Coireachan. The weather is less certain now, with a stiff breeze and a few spots of rain, but it remains clear until I reach Sgurr Beag, at which point the cloud envelops me to set the pattern for the night. I can hear, but not see, the stags which roar eerily in the darkness. There is a good path, but the descents are very slow as I am forced to peer at the path in the mist and dark and I am prevented from running. Nevertheless, I enjoy the simplicity and commitment of the night-time traverse: my course is set, I have no options and I simply have to follow the ups and downs of the long ridge back to the Quoich dam.

Did I say simply? In the comfort of an armchair at home perhaps, but it is at this juncture that my map confounds me, since a previous battering by rain has left it a bit worn and difficult to read in places. I meant to pick up a new map before embarking on this expedition but have not had time to do so. This results in my poor line off Meall Buidhe and now causes me to select the East ridge of Sgurr an Fhuarain, rather than the North East ridge. This is trackless and requires intricate route finding to locate the correct spur in the dark and mist. A cliff looms out of the darkness on the left but the ground straight ahead is also steep and indeterminate. It is therefore only on my third attempt that I find the correct route down and it is steep and broken ground, leading to the bog and thick tussock grass beneath. Running is a distant memory and I manage no more than a slow trot through the bog until I hit the stalkers' path. It is a delight to be off the ankle-jerking grass but the gentle inclines of the stalkers' path seem to weave depressingly slowly upwards. The night is once more turning to day as I emerge on to the shoulder of Gairich Beag but it does little to enliven me. I stop for a wonderful interlude to close my eyes, feel the grass on my back and rest my aching shoulder blades. For a brief moment I am lost to the struggle, cosy in my mountain reverie, but it is all too brief and a nagging voice tells me to get up, have another caffeine pill and plod on up the hill. I respond and am surprised by the effect of a brief pause. My legs are re-ignited and my pace increases accordingly, reaching the summit of Gairich as the sun rises to the East. The glowing orb draws me to it as I descend the bogs of this most uninteresting of hills. I am now in sight of the end and even the pain in my toes fails to stop me as I squelch my way back. I can not run, but I can walk and the thought of an end to my solitary vigil lifts me over the black bog that stands between the dam and me. I manage a hobble across the dam and suddenly I'm there. But what of the time: is it mid morning, breakfast or ??? My watch reveals that it is just before 7.25 am and I have taken 27 hours and 40 minutes. The rough bounds of Knoydart have proven to be rough indeed.