

Munro Memories. Ray Thompson

I don't think I would have started out on this Munro journey if my wife, Dot, had not told me there was a group of people she worked with (Gerald Davis, Dave Piggot and Dave Richardson) who were going walking in Scotland, April 1991, and asked if I could join them. I went with them for a couple of years and this whet my appetite for climbing the big hills.

April 1993, I set off with my cousin Paul, driving to Kyle of Lochalsh and over to Skye via the ferry before the Skye Bridge was built. Arriving at the base of the Inaccessible Pinnacle, after climbing a steep snow field, it was obvious we would not get to the summit of the formidable pillar of rock projecting above the ridge, due to all the snow and ice about.

We had another desperate climb up to the Cullin Ridge and on to an extremely sharp arete between two Munros. Traversing this was totally scary, although in beautiful sunlight, we could not see any footholds because of the snow. A group of four, coming the opposite way, were able to pass us with some difficulty. They were being ably led by a guide, were roped up and kitted out with ice axes and crampons. That night, back at Glen Brittle YH, the same group were admiring our skills on the ridge using minimum kit, we only had ice axes. We basked in the glory, not letting on about our vulnerability and worried state.



Climbing up to the Cullin Ridge

In the first week, after leaving Skye, we drove to Fort William and into Glen Nevis. We climbed Ben Nevis and into a snow blizzard on the top. The snow level was such that we walked straight into the emergency shelter. On reflection, back at the YH, we realised we must have walked over cornices on the summit gullies. The site of many fatalities!

After climbing An Gearanach we abandoned the rest of the ridge because of another blizzard and the treacherous icy conditions.

Travelling to Torridon we climbed the towering Liathach, with its two Munros, each at the end of a long ridge which is quite narrow in places. It was quite spectacular. Still lots of snow about.

In the first week we climbed 7 Munros with a height gain of 22200ft.

Our experiences so far had been a quite alarming.

It's a wonder we carried on with the quest. It became apparent that the practicalities were going to be more difficult than it appeared on paper. Better planning was going to be needed. We decided not to go so early in the year, to avoid the worst of the weather and to get less attention from midges and the nasty clegs. We found May, June and September the best times.

On the second trip the planning kicked in. We caught a bus up Glen Shiel from Rattegan YH, getting off just passed the Cluanie Inn to run the seven Munros on the South Cluanie Ridge, plus two more at the end – Sgurr na Sgine and The Saddle. It was on The Saddle that we rescued a lady who had been crag-fast for 3-hours, stuck in a rocky gulley near its summit. She was very grateful but insisted on going her way which was opposite to ours. We were out running for over 12-hours and ran straight into the pub at 9.30pm. Then back to the YH to clean up (no showers) and to eat.



Running on the South Cluanie Ridge

Crossing a coll, between two Munros north of Loch Cluanie, we had to crawl on hands and knees to shelter from violent cross winds. We were running and descending a snow field off the last Munro, with me in front of Paul. I made the mistake of taking a line across a vee in the terrain to the valley floor and fell through a snow hole. With my arms spread and feet dangling, I was suspended above a fast-flowing stream. I don't know to this day how he got me out, but I'm sure Paul saved my life.

Another 12-hour day completing the 'Five Sisters' on the north side of Glen Shiel. This time walking, starting with a big climb up to the ridge.

On to Killin YH where we ran, climbing Ben Lawers and three other Munros.



Trig point on the summit of Ben Lawers

This second week we climbed 23 Munros with 26800ft ascent.

We ran Schiehallion in May 1995, staying at Pitlochry YH. It is prominent for miles around and, because of its isolation and uniform shape, was used in the 18th century to estimate the mass of the Earth.

Moving on to Ullapool we climbed several Munros in the Fannaichs, including An Teallach, one of the finest of Scottish mountains. This was a great running area on the tops. Back at the car we ran straight into a nearby stream to cool our feet off.



Cooling off our feet

Back down to Glen Nevis we completed the Ben Nevis circuit, crossing the sharp arete between Carn Mor Dearg and the Ben. Much better weather this time on the Ben.

Further up the Glen we entered the Mamores, a fine area of curved linking ridges. On the way round we encountered a scary scree. Seeing what looked like an easy descent we jumped on and at once were totally out of control, only just managing to stay upright. It was like being on a bed of ball bearings. Running back to the car, after the long day and having earlier finished all our food, we had run out of steam. Digging to the bottom of my rucksack I found a 5-year out of date Mars bar. It was completely white, but it got us back to the car.

On again to Glen Coe, staying at the YH. We walked the two Munros on the spectacular Aonach Eagach Ridge with plenty of exposure, which quicken the heartrate. On the other side of the Glen, Bidean nam Bian had a good scramble to reach its summit.

From Aviemore we climbed the northern Munros of the Cairngorms. The climb up to the Cairngorm itself was messy, going by all the ski paraphernalia. But once on the plateau and over to Ben Macdui it was lovely and isolated.

To the west, over the deep valley of the Lairg Ghru, there are four Munros along a long southerly ridge, with great views over to the Cairngorm Plateau. The most southerly of these Munros, The Devil's Point, was the descent for the long walk back via the Lairg Ghru and Chalamain Gap. A long day, we just made the chippy by 9pm.

We had a great day running in the hills southwest of Tyndrum, although stopping to read the map I had one of my fainting spells, falling backwards and splitting my water bottle. These spells had happened over the years, while stopping early in a run, usually to read the map. This would later be cured by having a pacemaker fitted. Once recovered, we carried on to Ben Lui and Ben Oss. From the last of the Munros, Beinn Dubhchraig, we had one of those marvellous descents where the running seemed effortless and you never want it to stop.

Back in Torridon, as well as Liathach, there are two Munros on the north side of Glen Torridon. Beinn Alligin and Beinn Eighe. Together they are a formidable group with deep corries and white quartzite screes.

Slioch dominates the southern end of Loch Maree. From its summit there are great views over the surrounding mountains, some of them over to the wildest part of Scotland.

Staying at the Cachaig Inn, Glen Coe, we completed the hills on the south of the Glen and those up to Ballachulish. This is a spectacular area with challenging climbs, particularly with snow around.



Boots off, crossing one of the many mountain streams

Another trip was to Breamar, staying at the YH, where we climbed the southern and eastern Cairngorms, plus the Lochnagar Hills. Ben Avon was a long route in and we biked about ten miles along a rough track to get to its base. Again, we biked the approach to Derry Cairngorm. While on top there was a strong smell of paraffin. In the pub at night, we were talking to a couple of local mountain rescue team members who told us that a pair of USAAF F-15's had flown into the mountain two months previously and they were part of the attending team – there were no survivors. They told us there was a big US security presence afterwards to recover sensitive information from the wreckage.

We did a lot of biking along Land Rover tracks in this area. One being to Mount Keen which is the most easterly Munro.

From Glen Doll YH we climbed the two Monros of Driesh and Mayar, in the Eastern Grampians. While having our lunch on the summit we were approached by two young ladies. They asked if they could accompany down as two men had been stalking them on their way up. Out of earshot, Paul jokingly said, 'It's just not their lucky day' We did get them down safely and had to refuse when they tried to pay us!

From Roybridge, north of Fort William, we caught the train to Corroul Halt to complete three Munros in this remote area. On finishing and back at the station, there was not a convenient train to Roybridge. There was one, however, carrying on over Rannoch Moor to the Bridge of Orchy, where there was a convenient pub. After a good meal and a few pints, we caught a train back to Roybridge.

Another remote Munro, Ben Alder, was reached by biking along a private road, then onto an undefined track and walking from the Culra bothy. This turned out to be one of the worst weather days we'd had – heavy rain all day, 5 deg C on top with very cold wind. The next day, on the north side of the valley, there were three Munros and the weather change was dramatic – sunny, light wind and 29 deg C on the tops. The weather can be so changeable and not often predictable.



One of the obstacles biking to Ben Alder

Back on Skye, staying at the Sligachan hotel, we hired a guide for two days to climb five of the more challenging Munros. Roped up and climbing the back of the Inn Pin from the Sgurr Dearg ridge we abseiled off its summit. I was about to start the abseil when I alarmingly noticed that the rope did not reach the bottom. Graham, our guide, said he was not going to carry more rope than was needed, it would stretch! It was an exhilarating experience. We traversed the ridge, crossing narrow ledges, for a short scramble to Sgurr Alasdair, the highest point on the Cullin Ridge. From the summit col I could see no obvious way down. Graham pointed down the Great Snow Shoot and jumped on. I said to Paul, we had better follow him. It was the most exhilarating experience, descending 1500ft in a matter of minutes.

We had to abandon one Munro on the ridge due to heavy rain and very strong side winds. This meant having to come back on another occasion.



Abseiling off the Inn Pin



With our guide looking over to the Great Stone Shoot



One of the tricky manoeuvres on the Cullin Ridge

Over on Mull we stayed at the Tobermory YH to climb Mull's only Munro – Ben More. It was a warm day but unfortunately the cloud base was low at 2000ft. From the summit, in the clag, I took a compass reading for the way down. When we dropped below the cloud base, I could see we were on the wrong side of the hill. We had to climb back up again. I had not realised that the local rock was Gabbro which is magnetic (as on Skye) and interferes with the compass. With difficulty we managed to find the correct route off. GPS was in its infancy, we had to rely on map and compass for our travels in Scotland.

To gain access to the remote area of Knoydart we drove from Derby to Scotland, along the narrow road through Glen Garry to Kinloch Hourn. We walked the last six miles over swollen streams with camping gear to our wild campsite. Because of a tight schedule we set off for Ladhar Bheinn at 3pm, not getting back until 1.30am after getting lost in the dark. There were two Munros the next day and we were troubled by Clegs, which are mainly found in these remote areas. We were fortunate to see the unusual sight of a completely circular rainbow, centred on a pillar of rock. Unfortunately, no camera to record it as we were running with lightweight gear. Eleven Munros were completed in this area, finally getting a much needed clean up by bathing in a mountain stream.



Camping in knoydart



Drying off on the summit of Meall Buidhe, Knoydart

Glen Affric and Glen Strathfarrar are two areas having challenging access for Munroing. We used bikes to get to the remote Glen Affric YH. We had some luck with Strathfarrar. In the pub at night, we were talking to a local of our plans for traversing the four Munros on the northern side of the Glen and of the five mile walk out at the end of a tough day. He told us of a friend who had a boat and he may be prepared to take us along the loch. This was arranged and we got back to our digs at a reasonable time.

Fisherfield is a wild uninhabited area with no road access. There are six Munros which, as a group, are the remotest in Scotland. We walked in over rough ground carrying camping gear, but when we got to the Shenavall Bothy there were that many midges about we decided to use the bothy. We had an uncomfortable night; we could hear rats moving around in the walls. We set off early next day to tackle all six Munros. We were slowed down having to take our boots off in several times to ford streams. The views were magnificent and we saw wild goats near the summits. It was a long day out - 14-hours with 7500ft ascent. After a meal we were too tired to worry about the rats. In the morning Paul found he had a cut on his lip and was convinced one had bit him. After walking back out to the car we drove to the Cairngorm Hotel, Aviemore, for a touch of luxury.



On our way round Fisherfield

On one of our arranged flying weekend visits to Scotland, from EMA, we were late at the gate by one minute and were not allowed to board the flight. In total frustration we collected the car and drove up to Glenfinnan. While completing three Munros in this area we were again treated to the attention of Clegs with their nasty bites.

We travelled to the Inchnacamp Hotel, North of Ullapool, and had an interesting day on Ben More Assynt and Conival. As we climbed up, we went through thick cloud and came out of it at 2500ft into bright sunshine. The rest of the day was spectacular walking above the cloud inversion.

We then travelled on to Grave to complete our penultimate Munro – Ben Wyvis. This being the most easterly of the northern hills. We had left our final Munro, Ben Lomond, for an occasion when we could climb it with our families. Ben Lomond is the most southerly Munro and has easy access from Glasgow. Seventeen of us flew from EMA in October 2004 and stayed at the Oaktree Inn, Balmaha.

We had carried cake and champagne for summit celebrations. A good meal had been arranged at the Oaktree Inn in the evening. It was a great occasion with beer and wine flowing, plus reflections on our spectacular journey.

We started out on the journey a bit hesitantly; it would have been more sensible not to have tackled some of the extreme Munros in our first week. Confidence grew, however, as we became more aware of the challenges ahead. We were stretched at times with big climbs and long days. It was a magnificent experience with great scenery, wildlife and many lasting memories.

Some stats:- It took 11-years to complete

284 Munros (the number at the time of completion)

1650 miles (walking, running, biking + 5 in a boat!)

531250 ft ascent

220 views from summits (we were extremely lucky to get this high number)

The approximate cost (travel and accommodation) worked out at £30/Munro!



