# An Expedition to Mounts Kulal and Poi in Northern Kenya, 1977

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(*Plates* 75, 76)

It is interesting to note, on reading the 1984 and 1985 *Mountain Club of Kenya Bulletins*, that the traverse of the remote Mount Kulal at the side of Lake Turkana (previously Lake Rudolf) has now been well documented. Furthermore, in 1983, the previously unclimbed E face of Poi, in the Ndoto Mountains nearby, was finally climbed (650m, VI+) by A Wielochowski and R Corkhill.[1]

Ed had been working for three years with the UN at the mission station in this remote part of Kenya. He infrequently visited the MCK club house at Wilson Airport in Nairobi, bringing with him fascinating tales of this remote area.

For myself, Robin and Bob, the prospects of a safari climbing trip to the Northern Region of Kenya was very attractive, as we had climbed almost everywhere else in Kenya that was popular at the time, and we knew of several unclimbed peaks to be 'bagged'.

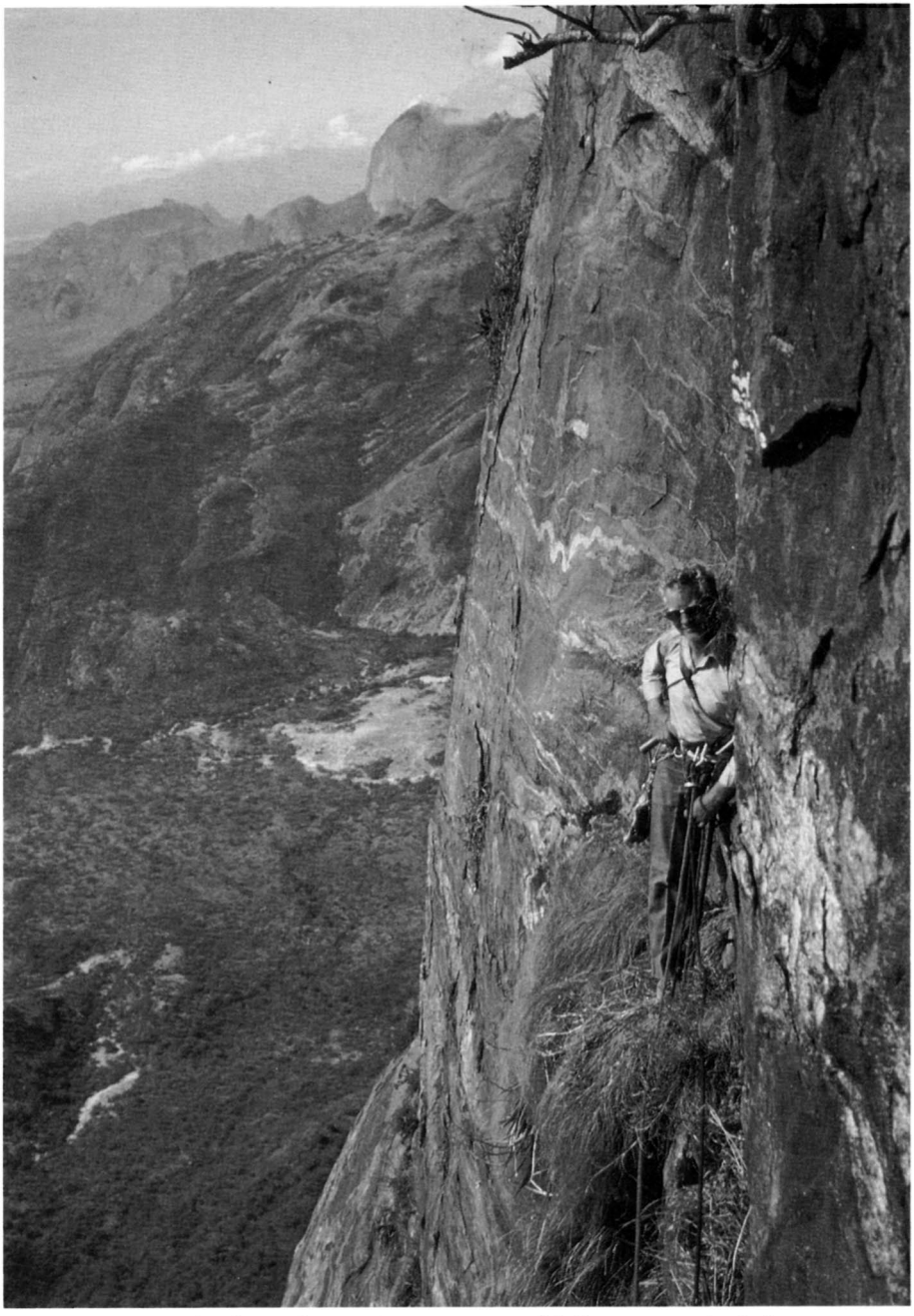
A Cessna Navajo was hired from my benevolent employers, Kenya Breweries, and we made our plans to leave. The lads were most disgusted when we found that two crates of Tusker Lager had to be jettisoned because of the heavy climbing gear and provisions which filled our tiny seven-seater aircraft.

Our first look at Poi, after two hours' flying-time, was from the air. It was daunting to consider climbing such a remote, large, steep face that pointed tantalizingly skyward at our small Cessna.

We landed at Lolengalani for our last taste of civilization and a cool swim in the crystal-clear pool of the hotel, based at an oasis amidst the volcanic debris of this barren region. A day's visit down to Lake Turkana amongst the Turkana people was well spent, and we feasted on the day's catch of Nile perch and tilapia. Evening fell and the odd Rendile tribesman was seen driving camels back to the kraal as we set off for the hills in our long wheel-based Land-Rover. We passed on and upward through the barren land until we reached the grassy foothills of Kulal with their herds of kudu. We arrived at our rest camp among the lush trees of the mission station at Gatab late in the evening for a welcome shower.

Gatab is situated in the foothills of the Mount Kulal range which runs north and south adjacent to Lake Turkana in this desert region.

We had it on good advice from the mission that no successful traverse of the Mount Kulal ridge had been recorded, and as we had recently learnt of the 'silent lions' which were terrorizing the local Rendile tribesmen in the Ndoto mountains, the Kulal Range seemed a very attractive alternative to start with.



75. *Ascent of E face of Mount Poi: Ron Corkhill at tree niche belay.* (p 167)

A local tribesman was hired to assist us in finding our way through the rain-forest to the Kulal ridge proper. We then set off alone on our memorable traverse.

The complete traverse of the Kulal ridge must be treated as a very serious undertaking. Technically it is not difficult. Rock climbing on it rarely exceeds Very Difficult standard, and the pitches are all quite short. There are also several abseils, which need not be long.

Very little technical equipment is needed, as the rock is generally not suited for chocks and pitons; trees and shrubs are usually the best belays and runners. The seriousness arises from several sections where long traverses have to be made on steep slopes of very loose soil with extremely steep drops below. The worst section in this respect was the drop down into the Cow Path Col. The dense bush sections were very tedious and unpleasant. Water must be carried, as there is none on or near the ridge.

Situations on the ridge are incredibly beautiful, especially the views towards Lake Turkana and down the great gash of the El Kajarta Gorge. The scenery compensates for the more unpleasant sections of the ridge. There are some sections where the walking is very good; these are either in the beautiful shady forested parts or on the more open northerly end of the ridge.

Access to the ridge is best from Gatab, where there is a well-run mission. The road to Gatab is spectacular; a saloon car with good clearance should get up it. The walk from Gatab to the southern summit takes about four hours and is mainly through very beautiful, shady rain forests. The southern summit provides excellent views over the ridge.

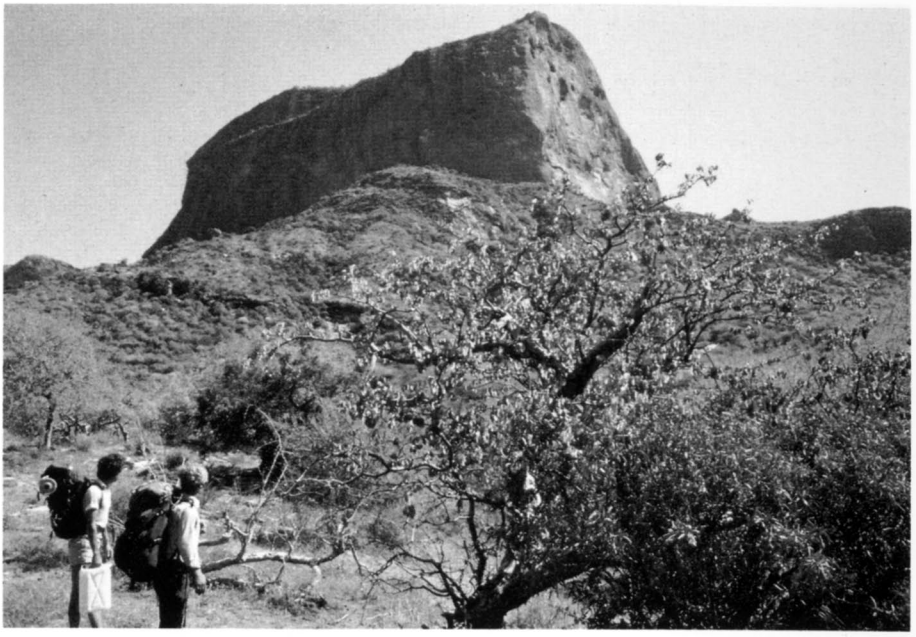
The most memorable incident, on our return after three days, was the sight of four grown men fighting over a single tin of sardines and one packet of biscuits as they tried to negotiate their lost tracks through the forest during late evening. Fortunately, we eventually discovered the marks we had made by our panga on the bark of nearby trees, and these helped us to get home safely.

Beer was a scarce luxury and, from our location high in the Northern Region of Kenya, the nearest brewery was well over 1000km away. Nevertheless, Ed was organized and we had a promise that two teetotal friends of his, who were establishing a work station in the Ndoto mountains, had left a full crate of White Cap Lager 'in the stream' at the side of their Base Camp. This incentive was enough to send us packing the following day and to make the day-long, hot, dusty journey by Land-Rover to the promised land. The terrain between Kulal and the Ndotos is semi-desert scrub, and several snakes were disturbed as we followed the vehicle tracks of the local missionaries.

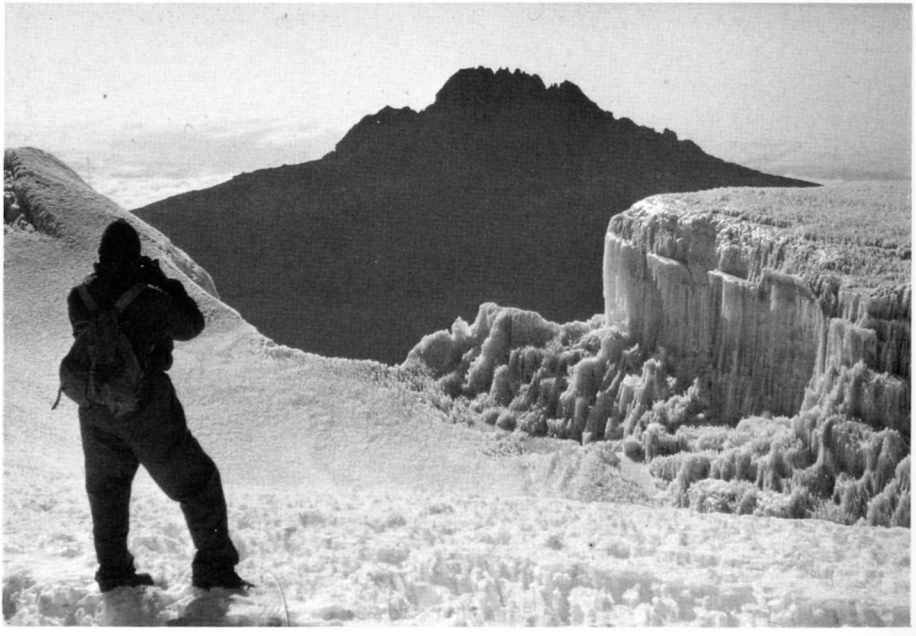
Word had got back to Nairobi of a pack of man-eating lions which made a habit of plunging through native mud-walls of the kraals to drag away and devour their unsuspecting victims. The walls of a Low and Bonnar canvas tent were not even a match for the mud and thatch dwellings of the tribe.

We arrived in late evening with much trepidation, particularly as the 'Askari' at the camp showed us the remains of a domestic cow which had been half eaten by lions the previous night.

After such a hot, thirsty day in the bush, the White Cap mirage turned into reality as it lay there among cobbles of the gurgling stream. What a luxury!



76. *Mount Poi (Kenya), S crack approach.* (p 167)



77. *Looking E: Mawenzi from rim of crater.* (p 175)

It couldn't have been planned better! We soon forgot about the marauding lions as the White Caps raised our spirits.

Having slept uneasily we set off at the crack of dawn, led by our 'warrior' tribesman. After several exhausting hours we came upon the E face of Poi as can be seen in the photograph.

The most significant feature of the face, which looked well over 650m high, was the smoothness and lack of protection for the climber. The gas holes inhabited by those rarest of birds, the lammergeyers, were very significant. We realized that several days of hard exposed and unprotected climbing would be necessary, with the prospect of several bivouacs on the way. Unfortunately, we were ill-prepared for such a climb, and as we had the added excuse that Ed had to be back in Nairobi within a few days, we retired to leave this unclimbed peak to the solitude of the lammergeyer.

## REFERENCES

1 *Mountain Club of Kenya Bulletin 80*, 26–30, 1983; *82*, 39–40, 1985. Maps of Kulal Main Ridge: *MCK Bulletin 81*, following p41, 1984.