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## Scottish Winter 1997-98

Tactics are everything in Scottish winter climbing. The sport requires a wide spectrum of climbing skills, but in general the balance is more towards mountaineering than making desperate technical moves. The overriding factor, however, is being in the right place at the right time. Getting this right is one of the enduring fascinations of the game, but is easier said than done. There are two different approaches to this intriguing problem. The simplest solution is to keep an ear close to the grapevine and go where others say it's good. The alternative strategy is to keep careful track of temperatures, precipitation and wind direction and make a measured judgement on where best to go based on the weather forecast.

In practice most climbers consider all these factors, but the 1998 season tested even the most experienced practitioners in choosing the right places to go. Record high temperatures, sudden snowfalls and prolonged thaws made predicting where good conditions might occur very difficult. What made matters more awkward than usual were the varying amounts of snowfall between east and west, and marked temperature differences between north and south. In view of this, some of the most impressive ascents of the season were by those who ventured away from the frequented areas and relied upon mountaineering skill (and an element of luck) to select an appropriate venue and route.

Despite this a number of important new routes were climbed, mainly in the Cairngorms and on Lochnagar. In all there were 35 first ascents graded V or harder, which demonstrates the ever-increasing popularity of the sport and hints at what could be achieved in a good year. A selection of some of the season's important ascents are described below. Full details can be found in the 1998 *Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal*.

### Cairngorms

In the popular Northern Corries of Cairngorm, Graeme Ettle added a number of routes including *The Millennium Line* (VII,7) in **Coire an Lochain** with Mark Garthwaite. This spectacular route takes the hanging groove on the left side of the impending wall which cuts through *Sidewinder* on No. 4 Buttress. Following the Scottish ethic of making on sight ground-up leads, it took several attempts spread over a number of weeks to place the crucial protection pegs under the crux roof prior to the successful ascent. Ettle also made a winter ascent of *Ali Baba* (VII,7) in the nearby **Coire an t-Sneachda**. This smooth corner-line was protected with skyhooks and weighted slings.

Ettle concluded his run of new routes with *Stage Fright* (VI,7) climbed with Rob Milne. This takes the wall to the L of *Grumbling Grooves* above Y Gully, and gave two spectacular pitches on good but hidden holds. Lying in a high

and sheltered position, the climb is often in condition, and is destined to become popular. Deeper in the Cairngorms on the remote **Beinn a'Bhuird**, Guy Robertson and Jason Currie made a winter ascent of *Hot Toddy* (VI,7). This poorly protected summer VS had seen off a number of previous winter attempts, but on this occasion a dribble of ice at the back of the overhanging crux crack proved to be the key.

The technical highlight of an unusually busy **Lochnagar** season was the first winter ascent of *Mantichore* (VII,7) by Wilson Moir and Niall Ritchie. The summer line (E1 5b) provided a sustained mixed climb with sections of very thin ice interspersed with long reaches for marginal turf placements in a near-vertical series of grooves. Another important first winter ascent was *Fool's Rib* (VII,7) by Andy and Pete Benson, which was the only summer line (HVS 5a) on the frontal slabs of the Pinnacle not to have been climbed in winter, and had received a number of attempts by experienced teams in recent years. The same day, Simon Richardson and Chris Cartwright succeeded on *The Link Direct* (VIII,7). This takes a direct line up the vertical Black Spout Wall of the Pinnacle, and was very sustained with six of its nine pitches rating a technical grade of 7. *The Link Direct* was a well-known problem, but to qualify as a winter ascent it had to be climbed on a short early season day before the sun stripped off the hoar frost from the crux headwall.

### Central Highlands

**Ben Nevis** came into good condition in late March with ascents of *Harrison's Climb Direct* (IV,4), *Point Five Gully* (V,5), *Route II Direct* (VI,6) and *Gemini* (VI,6). On the new route front, Colwyn Jones and Chris Ravey made a winter ascent of *Moonlight Arête* (IV,5). Also of note was *Big Bad Ben* (VII,7) by Robin Clothier and Simon Richardson, which breaches the impending headwall right of *Roaring Forties* on Comb Gully Buttress.

Nearby, **Coire an Lochain** on **Aonach Mor** saw some good late season activity with 6 new routes by various teams. The hardest addition was *Stirling Moss* (VI,7) by Mike Pescod, Peter Winterbottom and Dave Sykes which climbs the R side of the front face of the buttress to the R of *The Prow* via an obvious triangular niche. Perhaps the most attractive new route however, was *Foosyerneeps* (IV,5) by Andy Clarke and Jason Davis, which climbs the front face of the clean pillar situated at the far R end of the coire via a series of well protected cracks.

### Northern Highlands

One of the finest achievements of the season took place in mid January when Roger Webb and Neil Wilson made a winter ascent of *Fishmonger* (VI,6) on **Foinaven**. This long and natural winter line takes the obvious chimney just right of the nose on **Lord Reay's Seat** finishing at the summit cairn. This was Webb and Wilson's third visit to attempt the line and the sustained 9-pitch route took 9 hours. What was particularly impressive about this ascent was the realisation that the Far North was experiencing considerably colder weather

than the rest of the country, and was possibly the only area of the Highlands in winter condition at the time.

Another fine ascent took place a little to the SE on **Seana Bhraigh** when Malcom Bass and Simon Yearsley found *A Girl's Best Friend* (IV,5). This interesting route, which takes mixed ground on the right flank of Diamond Buttress in **Luchd Coire**, was the first new addition to the coire for 20 years. Bass and Yearsley returned with Julian Clamp later in the season to add a companion route *Saxifrage* (IV,5), which takes the narrow icy corner just left of *Pomegranate Gully*.

Further north on **Beinn Eighe**, Andy Nisbet and Robin McAllister had a good find with *Gashtrognome* (VI,7). This starts up The Gash and continues up the line of least resistance above via a concave scoop to a spectacular exit onto the crest of E Buttress. In the Far North on **Quinag's** Bucket Buttress, Finlay Bennet and Martin Cooper climbed *Fell for Lorna* (V,6), the groove line immediately left of *Bounty Hunter*.

Two of the most stylish ascents of the winter took place during the SMC Easter meet based at the Loch Maree Hotel. Direct boat access to Letterewe allowed two teams to take advantage of the unseasonably cold weather and climb on the very remote N Face of **Ben Lair**. Peter Macdonald and Malcolm Slessor notched up the first winter ascent of *Y Gully, Left Fork* (III) and Rick Allen and Bob Richardson climbed *Ordinary Route* via the *Wrangham Variation* (IV,5).

The Northern Highlands climb of the season, however, went to Andy Nisbet and Chris Dale who made a winter ascent of *Snoopy* (VII,7) – a sensational line which cuts through the overhangs on the impressive NW Face of Mainrechan Buttress on **Fuar Tholl**. Nisbet had waited ten years for this route, and his patience was rewarded with a crucial ice smear over the crux bulge following a freak March storm – proof that being in the right place at the right time counts for as much as pure technical skill in the fickle Scottish winter-climbing game!