
SIMON RICHARDSON

Scottish Winter 2000-2001

The 2001 Scottish winter season was long and varied. Heavy snowfalls early in the winter followed by settled periods of cold weather later in the season ensured some of the finest winter conditions since 1986. The season started with intense activity in the Cairngorms in October and ran all the way through to the end of April with superb ice conditions on Ben Nevis. Unfortunately the Foot and Mouth crisis took hold at the beginning of March and prevented access to the hills when conditions were beginning to shape up well. Fortunately areas such as Ben Nevis and the Cairngorms were only restricted for a couple of weeks so the impact was far less than it might have been. Key features of the season were a large number of teams operating at the top level, some significant additions by visiting European climbers and an ever-increasing focus on repeating the hardest climbs.

Northern Highlands

The Far North-West came into condition when Arctic air swept south across the country over the Christmas period. Roger Webb and John Lyall followed behind the snowploughs after the holiday break and were the first team on the scene. They visited **Cul Mor** and climbed *Cul Cats* (VII, 6) the triangular face to the left of the prominent cleft of *The Cul* to give the second recorded winter route in Coire Gorm.

Two days later, Guy Robertson and Jason Currie visited **Ben Mor Coigach** for an ascent of *The Fhìdhleir's Nose Direct* (VII, 8). This superb feature which rises up like a huge ship's prow for over 400m to the 703m-high summit of **Sgurr an Fhìdhleir** is one of the finest pieces of mountain architecture in the Scottish Highlands. It has become one of the most sought-after high-standard winter outings in Scotland, and has seen approximately ten winter ascents. Robertson and Currie took seven hours to climb the route, and the following day it saw another ascent by Pete Benson and Kenton Cool, before warmer westerly winds swept in that night and started to strip the mountain of snow and ice.

Whilst Benson and Cool were at work on *The Nose Direct*, Chris Cartwright and Simon Richardson fulfilled a long-term ambition by making a winter ascent of *Magic Bow* on the NE Face. This high-angle sweep of slabs was first climbed in summer by Tom Patey and Martin Boysen in June 1967 when they tackled the huge right-facing groove in the centre of the face. For nearly 20 years various teams had considered making a winter ascent of this prominent line, but the NE side of the Fhìdhleir is more sheltered than the *Nose*, and comes into condition less frequently. The face catches

the early morning sun, and the groove is a prominent drainage line which means it takes an exceptional frost for the turf to freeze. Difficult route-finding meant Cartwright and Richardson made four visits to the cliff before they were successful. The 14-pitch *Magic Bow Wall* was climbed in a 22-hour round trip from the car and given a grade of VIII, 8.

Robertson and Benson returned in February to make the first winter ascent of the *Tower Finish* on the **Fhidleir's Nose**. After a week of freezing temperatures, the forecast for the weekend was poor with gales sweeping up rapidly from the SE across the country on Friday night. Robertson reasoned that an early start on one of the most northerly mountains in the country was the best tactic. The gamble paid off. By 2pm on Saturday afternoon, Robertson and Benson were leaping with delight on top of **Sgurr an Fhidleir** after climbing the *Nose Direct* route and then continuing up the steep upper headwall taken by the summer *Tower Finish* (E1 5b). The pair had the advantage of climbing the *Nose Direct* earlier in the season, but to launch onto technical steep summer ground, six pitches up an established grade VII, was a remarkable performance. Incredibly, the *Tower Finish* was little harder than the *Direct* route at VII, 8, and could become the standard way.

The most intriguing new addition in Torridon was on the NE Face of **Beinn Dearg** which was probably the last significant unclimbed crag in the area. Roger Webb and Neil Wilson climbed the very steep corner in the centre of the 100m-high triangular face which resulted in the fine *Red Rag* (VII, 7). Webb and Wilson got there just in time, for a few days later another team visited the crag and were very surprised to spot an in-situ warthog high up on what they had presumed to be an untouched cliff.

On **Sgurr na Fearstaig** John Mackenzie, with Richard Biggar, settled a long-standing score by making the first ascent of *The Sorcerer* (IV, 5). This superb mixed route takes a direct line up the prominent corner in the centre of the face and is undoubtedly the line of the crag. On a previous attempt with Richard Weld, Mackenzie had reached a point just five metres below the end of the difficulties, before poor conditions dictated retreat. This time the initial icefall was well formed, the turf well frozen and a convenient through-route provided a way past the final overhang. The result was one of the finest winter routes in the area with an easier than expected grade of IV, 5.

The finest late-season addition to the Northern Highlands took place on the Eastern Ramparts of **Beinn Eighe**, where Blair Fyffe and Es Tresidder made the first winter ascent of *Fairytales Groove* (VII, 8). They followed the summer HVS to where the main groove moves left and continued up cracks in the right wall.

Southern Highlands

Big news on **The Cobbler** was the second ascents of *Direct Direct* and *Viva Glasvegas* by Dave MacLeod and Andrew McIntyre. These routes are

arguably the most difficult winter undertakings on the mountain. *Direct Direct* (VII, 9) on the North Peak was first climbed in winter by Robin McAllister and Dave McGimpsey in January 1995. The route packs a lot of climbing into its 30-metre length with a strenuous start leading to a bold turf groove and a tenuous offwidth crack to finish. *Viva Glasvegas* (VIII, 7) takes the poorly-protected wall to the left of *Gibber Crack* on the N Face of South Peak. It was first climbed by Mark Garthwaite in the winter of 1996 and the run-out nature of the climbing reinforced his reputation as a bold and forceful winter climber. MacLeod found the crux section, that involves a difficult rockover and hooking thin quartz edges up a steep wall, very committing. MacLeod added a Cobbler route of his own when he climbed *Cerebration* (VI, 7) with Richard McGhee. This major addition starts up the tiny left-facing corner left of *Gibber Crack* and gains the long series of thin cracks on the right wall of *North Wall Groove*.

The Cairngorms

The big event of the International Winter Climbing Meet at Glenmore Lodge in February was the first ascent of the impending corner-line to the right of *The Demon* on No.3 Buttress in Coire an Lochain in the **Northern Corries** by Florian Schranz, Heinz Zak and Egon Netzer from Austria. This fierce problem had been tried by at least two Scottish teams in the past and the in-situ retreat gear indicated it was a clear winter target. Schranz placed three pegs on the lead but unfortunately had to take a rest just one metre below the top of the pitch. By the time Zak and Netzer had followed the pitch it was getting late, so they left the pegs in place and returned two days later. Schranz re-led the first pitch without any falls or rests, and Zak made a clean on-sight lead of the second pitch (as for *The Demon* and 5a in summer) to reach the top. The route was named *Happy Tyroleans* and graded VII, 9, although Northern Corries regulars believe the difficulty may have been underestimated and an M8 or M9 grade might be more appropriate. Even though the route was climbed in red-point style, this was a very impressive ascent resulting in one of the most difficult technical routes in the country. Scottish pride was restored a few days later when Alan Mullin succeeded on his long-standing project to climb the neighbouring crack-line of *Demon Direct* (IX, 9) with Steve Paget.

On **Lochnagar**, Guy Robertson and Jason Currie solved a long-standing problem with their ascent of *Shady Grove Road* (VII, 6) on Shadow Buttress B. This conspicuous V-groove high up *Douglas-Gibson Gully* just right of *Penumbra* had been admired by many winter climbers from the comforts of their armchairs when studying Bert Jenkins' superb Lochnagar crag photos in *Cold Climbs*. The line is rarely in condition and on this occasion some serious and precarious mixed climbing was required to reach the thinly-iced groove.

Glen Coe

The harder classics in **Stob Coire nan Lochan** proved popular and there were ascents of *Chimney Route* (VI, 6), *Tilt* (VI, 7), *Central Grooves* (VII, 7) and *Crest Route* (V, 6) and an early repeat of *Inclination* (VII, 7) by Graeme Ertle and Dave Hollinger. On Summit Buttress, Neil Gresham added a 30-metre sport pitch on the wall below the exit gully of Scabbard Chimney. *The Tempest* was pre-equipped on abseil with pegs and wires in the autumn, redpointed on Gresham's third visit this season, and given a North American M9 grade. It was repeated the following week by Innes Deans. Mark Garthwaite made a fine addition to the cliff with a new *Direct Start* (VII, 8) to *Central Buttress*. This sustained pitch was climbed with Rab Anderson and Willie McLure.

Ben Nevis

Ben Nevis is at its best in April. Heavy snowfalls early in the season followed by a series of freeze-thaws meant the mountain was shaping up for a classic season in February, but the onset of the Foot and Mouth crisis in early March threatened everything. Prompt action by the Lochaber Mountain Access Group spearheaded by Alan Kimber saved the day, and two weeks later the mountain was accessible again via a disinfectant point at the North Face Car Park above Torlundy.

Chris Cartwright and Simon Richardson were quick to capitalise on the good conditions with the first ascent of *Atlantis* (VI, 6), a direct line on Observatory Buttress. The pace quickened over the following week with many parties enjoying the harder classics such as *Rubicon Wall* (V, 5), *Match Point* (VI, 6), *Left Edge Route* (V, 5) and *Galactic Hitchhiker* (VI, 5). Dave Hollinger found a variation finish to *Italian Right-Hand*, Godefroy Perroux made an ascent of the serious and much-prized *Pointless* (VII, 6), and Cartwright and Richardson returned to Observatory Buttress and climbed *Appointment with Fear* (VII, 6), the thinly iced groove left of *Match Point*.

By early April the focus shifted to the Orion Face with ascents of *Orion Direct* (V, 5), *Slav Route* (VI, 5) and *Astral Highway* (VI, 5). Robin Clothier and Harvey Mullen made the third ascent of the very run-out *Journey into Space* (VII, 5), which was swiftly followed by another repeat from Blair Fyffe and Es Tresidder. Robin returned the following weekend with Andy Forsyth and added *Spacewalk* (VII, 6), the left-trending line of thinly-iced corners between *Journey into Space* and *Long Climb Finish*. Further left, Andy Nisbet and Jonathan Preston made it a landmark day on the Orion Face, by making the first ascent of *Space Invaders* (VI, 6), the narrow groove system to the right of *Astral Highway*. The route has good belays and a runner on each pitch which should ensure a repeat next time it gets icy. The significance of two major new routes on Britain's premier snow-ice face cannot be over-emphasised, and in Clothier's case was the result of multiple ascents of *Orion Direct* and a campaign spanning over ten years to repeat *Journey into Space*.

Over in Coire na Ciste, Andy Nisbet and Chris Dale scored a major coup when they climbed the attractive hanging groove to the right of the great corner of *Don't Die of Ignorance* on the front face of the buttress. Climbers have stared longingly at these grooves for decades, but they are defended by an impregnable-looking overhanging wall. In 1987 Simon Yates and Andy Cave tackled the problem by aiding rightwards across the diagonal break from the foot of *Tower Face of the Comb* to reach the great corner which provided superb mixed climbing in an outstanding position. Dale and Nisbet repeated their approach confirming the A2 grade. In all 18 points of aid were used and the exposure was compared to the Dolomites. The excitement continued on the next pitch, because although the groove was attractively filled with blobs of ice, a short thaw the day before had left them partially detached from the rock. Inevitably one of the blobs fell off taking Nisbet with it, but fortunately he was unhurt and was able to mixed climb a little to the left and continue up the appropriately named *Flying Groove* (VI,6) to join the final crest of the buttress.

Further right, Cartwright and Richardson settled a long-standing score on Number Three Gully Buttress with *Babylon* (VII,8) which starts up the right edge of the buttress overlooking *Winter Chimney*, and continues up the cracks of *Gargoyle Wall* before breaking right across an exposed wall to reach a prominent hanging chimney.

Repeats

Alan Mullin made some remarkable night-time solo excursions into the **Northern Corries** on Cairngorm. He warmed up by repeating *Despot* (V,7), last year's Ettle-Preston addition on the Mess of Pottage, in Coire an t-Sneachda. He then turned his attention to No.3 Buttress in Coire an Lochain where he added *After Dark* (VII,7) to the right of *New Age Traveller*. Mullin's finest hour came a few nights later when he made the second ascent of *Migrant Direct* (VII,7). This difficult route, which takes the challenge of the obvious corner which the original route avoids, was first climbed by Will Garrett and Ally Coull in December 1996. The ascent of one of Coire an Lochain's last great problems by two young climbers from Edinburgh University shocked the Northern Corries regulars at the time and the route was always felt to be tough for the grade. On Mullin's ascent, the icy conditions made placing protection difficult, and he took four falls before he was successful. One of these falls was over ten metres onto a copperhead, and Mullin felt that the route was a contender for the very serious VIII,7 grade.

A key ascent on **Ben Nevis** was the second ascent of *Cornucopia* (VII,9) by Dave MacLeod and visiting Swiss climber Urs Stoeker. This vertical corner-line on the right wall of *Number Three Gully* was first climbed in 1996, and was the first route on the mountain to be given a technical 9 grade. Stoeker freed the rest point low down on the route and then continued up the crux corner, but the onset of a storm and lack of time meant they

had to abseil off. They returned after a rest day to bag the second ascent in slightly better weather with Stoeker rating the climb solid M7+. After a much needed rest, they visited Coire an Lochain in the **Northern Corries** to make an early repeat of *The Vicar* (VIII, 8). The route was in excellent condition, with a good covering of rime; however the weather was poor and the team only made it back to Glasgow with five minutes to spare to get Stoeker on his plane back to Zurich. McLeod's ascent of *The Vicar* meant he had on-sighted three grade VIIIs in one season – almost certainly a record.

On **Lochnagar** Guy Robertson and Tim Rankin made a very smooth third ascent of *Diedre of Sorrows* (VIII, 8) on the Tough-Brown Face. For many years this steep mixed climb was considered the hardest mixed route in Scotland and it was only repeated the previous season. Robertson returned to Lochnagar with Benson the following weekend, but conditions were poor so they made the long drive across to Ben Nevis on Saturday night. On Sunday they climbed *Cornucopia* (VII, 9), making the third ascent a mere six days after MacLeod and Stoeker.

In Coire Mhic Fhearchair on **Beinn Eighe**, top Slovenian climber Marko Prezelj and Jules Cartwright scooped the prestigious second ascent of *West Buttress Direttissima* (VII, 8). This superb line, which climbs the full height of the rightmost of the Triple Buttresses, was first climbed by Rab Anderson and Rob Milne during the superb winter of 1986. The route climbs the lower tier via the summer HVS *Senior* and then continues up the easier Bonington-Patey line on the upper tier. On the first ascent the technical difficulty of the first two pitches was eased by the presence of some ice, but Cartwright and Prezelj climbed the route on snowed-up rock throughout.

Finally on **Aonach Mor**, Mike Pescod and Donald King made the second ascent of *Alien Abduction* (VII, 8) which takes the clean-cut inverted hanging groove on the right edge of Central Buttress overlooking the gully of *Left Twin*. This superb line was first tried by Roger Everett during the initial development of the crag in 1989, but was not climbed until December 1996 when Al Powell and Andy Benson made an ascent. The smooth rock on the second pitch made the crux roof very awkward and they used a point of aid and a rest point. Pescod had been eyeing up the line for the past couple of seasons and towards the end of November after a series of heavy snowfalls and freeze-thaws, he noticed a crucial build-up of thin ice on the slabs just right of the crux roof. This was sufficient to allow Pescod to eliminate the aid and climb the route free. It was a uniquely Scottish winter climbing scenario. The combination of optimum conditions, imaginative thinking and perfect timing resulted in the first free ascent of one of the finest lines in the area.