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Scotland Winter 2009-10

According to the weather forecasters, 2010 was the coldest winter in Scotland for nearly 50 years. The snow arrived in earnest at the end of November, the mountains turned increasingly wintry and by late December the landscape was coated in a uniform blanket of white, to the delight of climbers and skiers alike. The sustained cold weather lasted into the middle of March and as a result more than 40 new Grade VII and VIIIs were climbed, nearly double any previous year, and there were dozens of significant repeats. Highlights included the development of Coire Scamadal on Skye, the astonishing first winter ascent of *Anubis* (XII) on Ben Nevis by Dave MacLeod and big additions on the Minus Face and Creag an Dubh Loch.

The Finest Ice Climbing Venue in Scotland

The vertical basalt crags of Coire Scamadal on the north side of The Storr are dripping wet most of the year but have the potential to be a natural ice trap. Facing north-east, and easily visible from the main road north of Portree, they have attracted the attention of ice climbers over the years, but most have been thwarted by their relatively low altitude and proximity to the sea. They were finally breached by Mike Lates who climbed an icy gully cutting through their left side in two instalments in the late 1990s. *Scamtastic* (V,5) saw a second ascent by Mick Fowler and Dave Turnbull last season.

Well aware of the potential of the corrie, Lates was determined to return as soon as conditions became good. The cliff started to ice through December, and finally after New Year the ice was thick enough to climb. On 4 January, Lates enlisted Andy Huntington for the first ascent of *Top Scam* (V,6), the central ice line topped by an ice umbrella. Lates returned four days later with Martin Welch to add *Scamadaladingdong* (IV,6), the prominent icy recess to the right of *Scamtastic*.

Other teams had been alerted to the potential, and on Saturday 9 January, Robin Clothier and Doug Hawthorn picked *The Fine Line* (VI,6), the plum route on the crag, up the vertical ice sheet on the imposing right side of the cliff. The following day, Alasdair Fulton, James Sutton and Ben Weir joined the fray and added another major line – *The War Path* (VI,6), whilst Clothier and Hawthorn climbed *The Shard* (VI,6), the huge hanging cigar to the right of *Scamadaladingdong*. After a brief thaw, Martin Welch and Stewart Anderson climbed *Vertigo Gully* (VI,7), the prominent incised corner on the right of the cliff whilst Hawthorn and Weir added the equally impressive *Slilverpine* (VI,7) up the hanging chimney to the right of *The Fine Line*. This concluded a remarkable 10 days of development and the establishment of one of Scotland's steepest ice climbing areas. No doubt



166. Dave MacLeod approaching his highpoint on his second attempt on *Anubis* (XII) in January 2010. MacLeod succeeded on his next visit a few weeks later. (*Andy Turner*)

these superb routes will attract considerable attention next time there is a major freeze.

Anubis – A Pointer to The Future

Late in February, Dave MacLeod stunned the winter climbing world with the first winter ascent of *Anubis* (XII), a summer E8 6c, high up in Coire na Ciste on Ben Nevis. MacLeod made the first summer ascent of the route, which follows an intermittent crack-line running up to a huge roofed prow on the front face of *The Comb*, in July 2005. He had dreamed of climbing it in winter ever since, and after completing his long-term project to free the nearby aided winter route *Don't Die of Ignorance* (XI,11) in March 2008, he turned his attention to *Anubis*. Unlike *Don't Die of Ignorance*, which took six attempts, Dave succeeded on *Anubis* on his third visit. After climbing the long crux section, which overhangs 12m over its 35m length, he tied his 70 metre ropes together and continued up icy grooves, with the rope just clipped to the belay as a runner, until he was on Grade IV ground. He then untied and soloed to the top.

Anubis opens a door to a new future for the world of winter climbing. MacLeod has taken M-climbing tools and techniques and combined them with Scottish ethics to produce a climb that is quite unique across the world. *Anubis* is equivalent in difficulty to the hardest pre-protected M-climbs and represents a quantum leap in the development of the sport. M-climbing will never be the same again and MacLeod can justifiably claim to have climbed the most difficult traditional mixed route in the world.

Cairngorms – Super Route for Dubh Loch

Creag an Dubh Loch's 200m-high Central Gully Wall is one of the great Scottish cliffs. This maze of steep slabs and overlaps rarely builds up with snow and catches the morning sun, so not surprisingly it is rarely in winter condition. Until this season it had only been climbed in winter on three occasions. The first was in January 1980 when the strong Edinburgh team of Hamilton, Taylor and Spence made a winter ascent of the VS *Mousetrap* at VII,8. Their ascent benefited from unusually icy conditions, but even so it was an astonishing feat for the era.

The route was repeated in January 1986 by Dougie Dinwoodie and Jeff Hall in similarly icy conditions, but the ascent of the day was the first ascent of *The Rattrap* by Andy Nisbet and Sandy Allan. This pair started up the 5c cracks of *Dubh Loch Monster* before veering right to gain a line of ice near the upper section of *Gulliver*. Their 19-hour ascent, climbing the upper pitches by moonlight has entered Scottish winter climbing legend as one of the greatest winter climbs of the 1980s, and was one of the first Scottish Grade VIIIs to be recorded.

In recent years, *The Rattrap* saw a couple of repeat attempts by Pete Benson, but they failed due to poor conditions at mid-height on the face. After accompanying Benson on one of these attempts, Guy Robertson resolved to climb a direct line up the face based on the line of *King Rat*. This summer E1 classic follows VS cracks for the main part, except for a wide 5c roof at the start of the second pitch. Above the roof, Robertson had noted that it was possible to climb a more direct line up the crack system, avoiding some of the devious wandering left and right taken by the summer line.

Robertson made two attempts on the line earlier in the season with Pete MacPherson. They reached a high-point five pitches up, below an overlap level with the second crux section on *King Rat*. After a brief thaw and re-freeze Robertson and MacPherson were back on 18 February. This time the grooves were lined with helpful snow-ice and after a 6am start the pair were on top of the crag before dark. 'The route was stunning,' Robertson enthused. 'Not the slow powdery verglas grind of last time but really elegant, thin and icy climbing, interspersed with very strenuous bulges (and, of course, the roof). For me it was one of the best, if not the best, of all the long hard routes I've done. You can imagine the two of us sitting watching the sunset, after all that effort, to be rewarded with conditions and such an immaculate day. We were tickled pink.'

The eight-pitch long *Super Rat* (IX,9) is one of the finest Scottish winter additions in recent years taking a strong natural line and needing a precise combination of snow, freeze and thaw to make it possible. Ross Hewitt was also rewarded that day with an ascent of *Mousetrap* with Tania Noakes. Three days later, Iain Small and Simon Richardson added *Danger Mouse*, which starts up *Mousetrap*, then follows *Kraken* and *Waterkelpie Wall* to join the upper pitches of *Super Rat*. At VII,7 it is the easiest line on the wall but as with the other three routes on the face it will only be possible when the 'easier' upper pitches have consolidated snow or ice. The front face of



167. Left: Iain Small climbing the *Subtraction* groove on the first ascent of *Integration* (VIII,8), Minus One Buttress, Ben Nevis. (*Simon Richardson*) Right: Pete MacPherson climbing steep cracks on Pitch 4 during the FA of *Super Rat* (IX,9), Creag an Dubh Loch. The route continues up the cracks and bulges to the right of the ice smear high up and left. (*Guy Robertson*)

Central Gully Wall has now been climbed six times (on four separate days) in the last 30 years and remains one of the most elusive winter objectives in Scotland.

Minus One Buttress Comes of Age

In early March, the Minus Face came into its best condition for over 20 years, and the much-prized Minus gullies saw many ascents together with two new winter routes on the legendary Minus One Buttress. The original line on this superb feature (*Minus One Buttress* – VII,7), was first climbed by Arthur Paul and Norrie Muir in April 1977 and has only been repeated a couple of times. According to climbing folklore the pair were climbing on the Ben on a horrible sleety day, but that night it froze, so they headed back up next morning to find the mountain coated in a climb-anywhere coating of polystyrene ice. Their route was repeated a day or two later by Jerry Smith and Graham Little, and then in 1988 by George Armstrong and Alan Shand but, since then, all other attempts on the route have failed.

Iain Small and Simon Richardson followed the first three pitches of *Minus One Direct* and then continued up the summer line of *North-eastern Grooves* to below the huge overhanging corner slicing through the upper part of the buttress taken by the summer E1 *Subtraction*. Small made an outstanding lead of this long and demanding crux pitch, and they eventually arrived at the top of *Integration* (VIII, 8) on the crest of North-east Buttress at 8pm with eight sustained pitches and 13 hours of climbing behind them.

Three days later, Guy Robertson, Nick Bullock and Pete Benson followed their footsteps up the lower part of *Minus One Buttress* before breaking out

right to follow a continuous crack-line leading up the buttress. This stunning line (VIII, 8) approximates to the summer *Minus One Direct* with the *Serendipity Variation* (E1). 'The route was never particularly hard,' Robertson said afterwards, 'but this is possibly the finest winter climb I've ever done. The climbing and the line were simply superb.' Unfortunately these routes were only in condition for a few days before a slow thaw set in and the ice peeled off and crashed into the lower reaches of Observatory Gully.

Second Ascent Fever

Significant second ascents included *Against All Odds* (VII,7) in Glen Coe (Robertson-Fyffe), *Hung, Drawn and Quartered* (VIII,8) on Am Basteir on Skye (MacPherson-Parnell) and *The Godfather* (VIII,8) on Beinn Bhan (Small-Stone). In the far north, Pete MacPherson and Iain Small made the second winter ascent of *Marathon Corner* (VIII,8) on Ben Loyal. This vegetated E1 climb was first climbed in winter by Guy Robertson and Pete Benson in 2004 and has the distinction of being the most northerly winter climb in the country

The most important repeats however, were two ascents of *The Tempest* in Stob Coire nan Lochan in Glen Coe by Andy Turner and Dave MacLeod. *The Tempest*, which takes the diamond-shaped wall on Summit Buttress to the left of Broad Gully, was first climbed by Neil Gresham in January 2001 after top rope practice and pre-placing gear. The route caused a furore at the time, but it was a genuine attempt to raise Scottish winter standards in line with the rest of the world. The route was graded M9, and together with *Logical Progression* in the Southern Highlands, which was climbed in similar style, it set a new technical level for Scottish winter climbing.

The Tempest was repeated shortly after Gresham's ascent by Innes Deans, but since then it has not been climbed. Scottish technical standards have risen considerably in the intervening nine years, often by climbers who have applied skills learned on M-climbing venues elsewhere in the world. As a result, the Scottish ground up ethic has emerged even stronger than ever, and it was time for a re-appraisal of *The Tempest*.

Enter Andy Turner who realised that to make a ground-up ascent, placing protection as he climbed, he would have to remove the original in-place nuts and pegs that were now in poor condition. Turner spent a couple of days climbing *Scabbard Chimney* and *Spectre*, so he could abseil down the route to remove the gear. He then succeeded on leading the route on his second visit. His first attempt failed at a bold section at three-quarters height, but on his return he managed to find a couple of wire placements to protect the committing icy top section. Turner felt that in its traditional state the route was worth hard IX,9, possibly even X,9 for the difficult-to-find gear and run out climbing.

A few days later, Dave MacLeod set off up the route, eager to make an on-sight ascent. He also stalled at a point six metres below the top, having run out of the correct sized protection. 'I didn't fancy a major peel from the final moves without gear but was desperate not to lose the on-sight either,' he explained on his blog. 'Solution? Down-climb the whole thing taking



168. Iain Small on the FA of *Danger Mouse* (VII,7), Creag an Dubh Loch, which takes the easiest way up the great front face of Central Gully Wall. (*Simon Richardson*)

the gear back out and come back after a rest.' A day later MacLeod was back on a typically foul Scottish day, and he battled up the route fighting through spindrift avalanches to record the first on-sight ascent. Both ascents were highly significant. Turner demonstrated that it was possible to climb the wall without working the moves and MacLeod climbed the route in perfect style. These two ascents alone are a clear demonstration of how far Scottish winter standards have progressed over the past decade – who can guess what the next 10 years will bring?