
SIMON RICHARDSON

Scottish Winter 2012-13

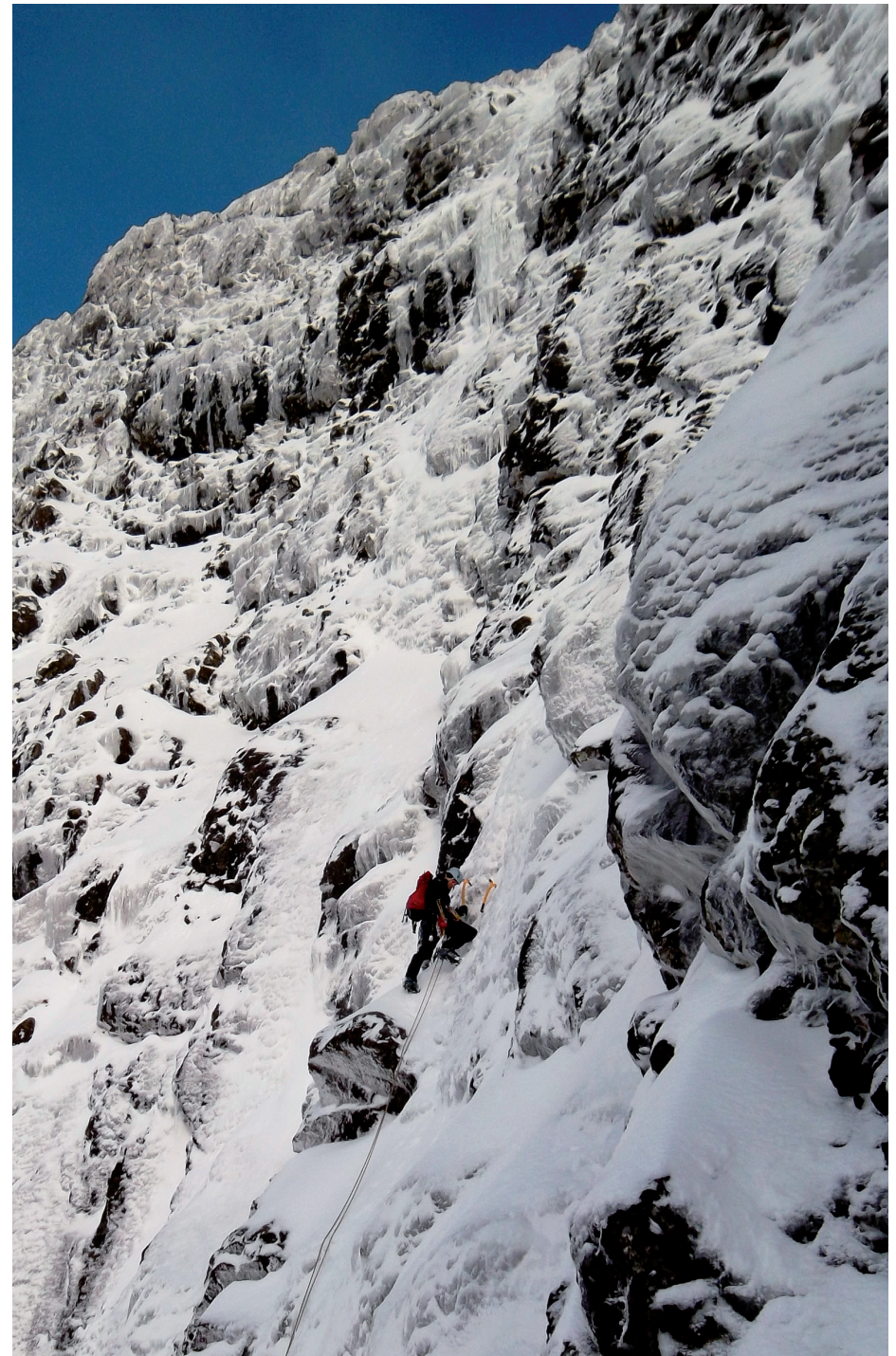
After the warmest November on record, winter started in early December as a series of blizzards swept across the Highlands. After the long and frustrating wait for winter conditions to arrive, activity levels were high for several weeks until it began to warm up in late February. After an unusually mild March, temperatures were consistently cold through late April and most of May. To the delight of ski-mountaineers, there was more snow on the Cairngorm plateau in May than during the rest of the season, and there were dozens of mountaineering routes ripe for the taking in the high corries on Ben Macdui and Braeriach.

As always it is difficult to single out the most significant events, but Greg Boswell's 20-day blitz in December stands out as something special, with pride of place going to the first ascent of *Siberian Tiger* (IX,10) in Coire an Lochain and the outstanding second ascent of *Stone Temple Pilots* (X,9) on the Shelter Stone with Will Sim. It is unusual for the highlights of a Scottish winter season to be repeats, but there were several second ascents of legendary routes such as *Don't Die of Ignorance* (XI,11) on Ben Nevis and *Guerdon Grooves* in Glen Coe. Arguably the finest new route took place on Lochnagar in February, when Guy Robertson and Nick Bullock climbed *Black Spout Wall* (IX,9) – an outstanding line climbed in superlative style.

Another feature of the season was the number of visits from accomplished overseas climbers. In the middle of January, Charly Fritzer and Matthias Wurzer added the steep *Pfugga-Lule* (VIII,9) on the Happy Tyroleans wall in Coire an Lochain in the Northern Corries. The Austrians first climbed the route on almost dry, snowless rock, but when they heard feedback that these conditions were not acceptable they returned and re-climbed the route in bona fide winter conditions after it had snowed a few days later. Swiss climber Dani Arnold, of recent Eiger record fame, eclipsed everyone however, with the fourth ascent of *The Hurting* (XI,11) in Coire an Lochain during his first ever winter climbing trip to Scotland.

The Boswell Blitz

The month of December was dominated by one man – Greg Boswell. The 20-year-old started his campaign on Ben Nevis on 2 December when he made the second ascent of *The Minge* (VII,8) on South Trident Buttress. Conditions were appalling that day with blowing spindrift and half-frozen turf but, even so, Boswell and Fiona Murray climbed the route in rapid time. The weather was even worse next morning, so wary of avalanche danger, Boswell climbed the prominent direct line up the centre of the low-lying Moonlight Gully Buttress. *The Big Cheese* (VIII,8) was climbed with



Mark Francis on the first ascent of the 280m-long *White Lies* (IV,5) on the south face of Sgurr nan Gilleann, Isle of Skye. (Ginger Cain)



Iain Small pulling through the crux roof of *Fly Me To The Moon* (VII,8) on Creag Meagaidh. This steep overhanging wall lies on the right side of Crescent Gully in the Inner Corrie. (Simon Richardson)

Jim Higgins and Harry Holmes and sported a very bold first pitch up a narrow hanging streak of newly formed ice.

Two days later, Boswell teamed up with regular partner Will Sim and visited Creag an Socach in the Southern Highlands for the second ascent of *Defenders of The Faith* (IX,9). This route was first climbed by Dave MacLeod and Fiona Murray in 2006 and was Scotland's first on-sight Grade IX. The pair then moved up to the CIC Hut on Ben Nevis with James Dunn. After climbing *The Great Chimney*, they were confined to the hut next day as the Great December Storm ripped off the roof covering of the sleeping quarters. The wind calmed down overnight and, undeterred, the trio made the second ascent of *The Knuckleduster* (VIII,9) on Number Three Gully Buttress. This was first climbed in winter by Steve Ashworth and Blair Fyffe in February 2007 with a finish up *Sioux Wall*, but Boswell, Sim and Dunn stayed independent and climbed the steep final summer pitch.

Three days later, Boswell was in Coire an Lochain in the Northern Corries with Guy Robertson and Pete Macpherson attempting a winter ascent of *Siberia*, a spectacular summer E3 that takes the arête between *The Demon* and *The Vicar*. Unfortunately, Macpherson took a long fall from the crux, narrowly missing his belayer's head, so he pulled the ropes through and Boswell took the lead. Boswell powered through the crux sequence onto a bold and very tenuous section before reaching easier ground.

Robertson compared *Siberian Tiger* (IX,10) to *Crazy Sorrow* on Lochnagar, and it ranks as one of Scotland's most technical winter routes.

Full of confidence Boswell teamed up with Will Sim three days later for *Stone Temple Pilots*. They started the route at 6.30am, and 14 hours later they were on the summit of the Shelter Stone with one of Scotland's most prized second ascents in the bag. *Stone Temple Pilots* is an eight-pitch super directissima, which links the summer lines of *Steeple*, *Haystack* and *Spire* directly up the front face of the crag. It was first climbed the previous winter by Guy Robertson and Pete Macpherson, and at a grade of X,9, it is generally considered to be the most technically sustained Scottish winter route climbed to date. Finally, to cap an exceptional period of climbing, Boswell made the first winter ascent of *Jumping Jupiter* (VIII,8), a summer E2 on Carn Etchachan, in the company of Ian Parnell.

BMC International Winter Meet

The BMC Winter Meet was held in Glenmore Lodge during the last week of January. Forty overseas guests from 26 different countries teamed up with a similar number of British hosts and climbed for six days all over Scotland. Routes were climbed at all standards, from straightforward hill walks up to Grade IXs, with the majority of the visitors enjoying a rich sample of Scottish winter climbing. There were smiles all round at dinner every night and in total eight new routes were climbed. The most technically difficult was Nick Bullock and Bayard Russell's ascent of *The Mindless Finish* (IX,10) to *Pic 'n' Mix* in Coire an Lochain, with Bullock later describing this run-out pitch as 'an emotional experience'.

On Ben Nevis, Simon Frost and Takaaki Nagato from Japan made the first ascent of *Sake* (VIII,9) which lies to the right of *Babylon* on Number Three Gully Buttress. Nagato and his colleague Ryo Mastumoto were the technical stars of the meet, and impressed everyone with their quiet and efficient climbing style that resulted in a string of impressive ascents such as *The Vicar* and *Daddy Longlegs* in Coire an Lochain, *Where Eagles Dare* on Lochnagar and *Unicorn* in Glen Coe. Other new routes included *Red Dwarf* (VII,7) on Stacan Dubha by Markus Griesshammer from Germany, and *Horus*, a new six-pitch VII,7 on the West Buttress of Lochnagar by Swedish climber Magnus Stromhall.

At the end of the week, Guy Robertson, Nick Bullock and Bayard Russell made headlines with the second ascent of *Guerdon Grooves* (IX,8) on Buachaille Etive Mor's imposing Slime Wall. *Guerdon Grooves* was first climbed in winter by Arthur Paul and Dave Cuthbertson in January 1984. It was originally graded VI, and was the earliest route to be given Grade VIII when the grading system was extended in the early 1990s. Following a number of attempts over the years, its reputation had built considerably and it is graded IX,8 in the current guidebook. The second ascent went relatively smoothly in nine hours, but as Bullock explained afterwards, with the burden of 28 years of history, 'the crux of the route was actually starting it'.



Guy Robertson on the first pitch of *Steep Frowning Glories* during the first winter ascent of *Black Spout Wall* (IX,9) on Lochnagar. This outstanding route takes the stupendous line heading up and left towards the skyline and onto the headwall above. It links together pitches from *Steep Frowning Glories* (E6), *Black Spout Wall* (E3) and *The Link* (VS). (Nick Bullock)

Black Spout Wall

Big news in February was the first winter ascent of *Black Spout Wall* on Lochnagar by Guy Robertson and Nick Bullock. The 170m-high *Black Spout Wall* towers above the prominent gully of *The Black Spout* and is the steepest feature on the mountain. It was first climbed in summer by Dougie Dinwoodie and Bob Smith in 1976 at E3 5c and is one of the most sought after rock climbs in the Cairngorms. Such a prominent route was a clear winter target and it had been probed by a number of teams, but all had failed on the steep wide rounded crack of the first pitch.

Nick Bullock made an ascent of the nearby *Link Direct* (which takes a less direct line up the wall) with Tim Neill and Keith Ball on 2 February and was intrigued by the route's winter potential. He prompted Guy Robertson into action, who being well aware of the nature of the summer first pitch, hit upon the inspired idea of starting up the first two 5c pitches of *Steep Frowning Glories*, a neighbouring E6, to access the line. Four days later the pair returned to Lochnagar and put their plan into action with Robertson

leading the crucial entry pitches and Bullock leading the difficult second pitch of the summer *Black Spout Wall* and the 'Inhospitable Crack', a desperate finish up the impending headwall. The result was an outstanding IX,9 and one of the most brilliant on-sight first winter ascents ever made in Scotland.

Castle in The Sky

Dave MacLeod's six-metre wide roof, *Castle in The Sky* on Druim Shionnach in Glen Shiel, was another significant climbing achievement, and typical of so many Dave MacLeod routes, it pushed the boundaries. The pre-protected nature of the route means that it is more in the realms of a continental M-climb rather than a traditional Scottish winter route, but this does not mean that it was a safe undertaking. An upside down Pecker and a blade peg as the key protection must have offered little reassurance, and the

route is so unlike any other that it is virtually unclassifiable. A key point perhaps is that MacLeod has demonstrated that roofs of this size are physically possible on Scottish winter rock.

All Go in The Cuillin

Some of the most remarkable discoveries of the winter took place on Skye in the hands of Cuillin mountain guide and guidebook author Mike Lates. Together with Ben Wear and Mark Francis in late December, he made the first ascent of *White Lies* (IV,5), a seven-pitch ice line on the south face of Gillean and, three days later, he was back with Matthew Holmes to climb *Southern Comfort* (IV,5), a 240m-long ice route in Coire Laggan. Lates also organised a very successful winter climbing meet on Skye, which resulted in several new routes including *Wildcat Flap* (V,6), a new route on the Upper Rake of Sgurr a' Mhadaidh by Paul Cunningham and Brendan Croft, and *High Visibility* (VI,6) on the buttress right of Gully E on Sgurr Thearlaich by Lates and Susan Jensen.

Northern Highlands

Activity in the Northern Highlands was limited, although Martin Moran and Pete Macpherson made a winter ascent of *The Blue Lamppost* (VIII,8), a summer HVS on Meall Gorm, and Roger Webb and Simon Richardson climbed *The Bulldog Spirit* (V,5) up the centre of the previously unclimbed summit cliff of Beinn Damh. Early January brought storm force winds, but some superb new routes were climbed later in the month. These include Martin Moran and Murdoch Jamieson's first winter ascent of *Rudolf* (VIII,9) on Beinn Eighe, and *Roseroot* (V,5), a 300m route on a previously unclimbed cliff deep in the Fannaichs by Martin Hind and James Edwards.

Cairngorms

The weather most favoured the Northern Cairngorms, and the Loch Avon Basin proved especially popular with the Shelter Stone seeing ascents of *Sticil Face* and *The Needle* (VIII,8). New route activity focused on the nearby Stacan Dubha where Andy Nisbet, Helen Rennard and Jonathan Preston and Ross Cowie added *Upper Crust* (VI,6), *Atlantis* (III) and *Mr Blobby* (V,5) in the centre of the crag as well as making the first winter ascent of *Zigzag* (IV,4). Roger Everett and Simon Richardson also nipped in for some of the action with the first ascent of *Goldilocks* (VI,6) up the crest of the pillar left of *Tangent*.

On the southern side of the Cairngorms, the first winter ascent of *The Primate* (VIII,8) on the West Wall of Mitre Ridge on Beinn a' Bhuidr in early February by Pete Davies and Donie O'Sullivan was an impressive achievement. This rarely climbed E1, which tackles the wall right of Slochd Wall, breaching a large overhang at mid-height, was another obvious Cairngorms winter target, but most had been put off by the 16km approach. Davies and O'Sullivan's matter-of-fact on-sight ascent demonstrates that remoteness is now no barrier, for even the most imposing of objectives.

Across on Lochnagar, Guy Robertson made first ascents of *The Mummy* (VIII,8) and *The Cracker* (VII,8) on The Cathedral with Pete Macpherson and Jason Currie, and later in February a cold snap allowed Iain Small and Simon Richardson to climb a counter-diagonal to *Isis* on West Buttress. The 300m-long *Osiris* (VII,8) featured a steep and bold first pitch leading to sustained Grade VI climbing above. Nearby on Earn Crag at the head of Glen Esk, Dave Almond and Duncan Tunstall made the first ascent of the five-pitch *High Grade Low Grade* (VII,8). Finally, the cold weather at the end of April allowed Robertson, Richardson and Piotr Wistal to make the first winter ascent of Sniffer Buttress (VIII,8) in Coire an Dubh Lochain.

Central Highlands

Apart from the activity on the Winter Meet, it was not a particularly eventful season on Ben Nevis. Early in December, Helen Rennard and Simon Richardson added *Cyclops* (V,5) to the upper tier of South Trident Buttress, and later in the month Nick Bullock and Dougal Tavener added a fiercely difficult route to the east flank of Tower Ridge. *The Ride of The Wild*



Greg Boswell on the crucial second pitch of *The Knuckleduster* (VIII,9) on Ben Nevis during the second ascent. (Will Sim)

Bullhorn (VIII,10) takes the groove to the right of *The Pretender* and was described by Bullock as 'George Smith territory in winter – knee bars, hand jams and pretty savage pulling'. Nearby on Aonach Mor, Adam Hughes made a bold lead of *The Prow* (VIII,8), the prominent feature left of *Stirling Bridge*. This committing climb involved precarious hooking on poor flat hooks and was protected by a bulldog halfway up a steep hanging corner.

Across on Creag Meagaidh, the mixed potential of the steep bounding wall to the right of Crescent Gully was explored. First on the scene were Iain Small and Richardson who added *Fly Me to The Moon* (VII,8), an unlikely-looking fault-line through a series of roofs, closely followed by Pete Davies and Donie O'Sullivan who climbed *Gully of The Sods* (VI,6), the overhanging ice gully to the left.

But if anything demonstrated the relentless rise in standards, it was Guy Robertson's back-to-back ascents of *Guerdon Grooves* (IX,8), *The Duel* (IX,9) and *Satyr* (IX,9) in Glen Coe. Three Grade IXs on consecutive days was an unprecedented feat, requiring outstanding technical ability, supreme fitness and the crucial Scottish winter ability of being in the exactly the right place at the right time.