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SIMON RICHARDSON

## Scottish Winter 2019-20



Roger Webb making the first winter ascent of *Nethy Crack* (V,6) on Cnap Coire na Spreidhe on Cairn Gorm. (Simon Richardson)

The Scottish International Winter Meet has long been recognised as a key event on the world mountaineering calendar. It had been held on a two-year basis by the BMC since 1997, but had not run since 2016. Partnerships formed on previous meets have resulted in dozens of new routes across the globe such as *Light Traveller* on Denali, and the first winter conditions ascent of the north face of North Twin in the Canadian Rockies. The most recent example is the first ascent of the north face of Latok I in the Karakoram climbed by Tom Livingstone, Aleš Česen and Luka Stražar (Slovenia) who met on the meet two years earlier.

After an AC lecture in Keswick, John Porter and I sat down over a few whiskies and talked late into the night. If the Alpine Club contributed some funding and the Scottish Mountaineering Club provided accommodation perhaps we could resurrect the winter meet? The idea quickly gained traction: the BMC filled the shortfall in funding, Salewa kitted out the hosts, and Mountaineering Scotland took on the crucial event host role. Previous events were based at Glenmore Lodge but this time, climbers would rotate between Mill Cottage, Raeburn, Lagangarbh and the CIC huts. The meet was held at the end of February and was the undoubted highlight of the season with ascents of over 150 different climbs and seven new routes. The timing was something of a miracle, squeezed in between poor mid-season conditions and the onset of Covid-19 international travel restrictions.

Overall, the 2020 season will be remembered as a challenging and frustrating one. It started reasonably enough, with good early season climbing on the high cliffs, but a devastating Christmas thaw stripped the mountains bare and it was not until the end of January that significant snow cover returned. February was a story of gales and never-ending storms, although this did have a significant upside of plastering north-west-facing cliffs with snow-ice.

Finally, in the third week of March, a long-awaited high-pressure system arrived and winter climbing conditions were outstanding. Unfortunately this coincided with the rapidly escalating pandemic and eventual lockdown on 23 March. Scottish winter climbers were left frustrated, staring at long-distance webcam shots of the Ben in perfect condition wondering what might have been.

### Early Season

Winter arrived in late October when a cold north-westerly deposited a layer of snow over the high tops. The best climbing was found in the colder and less snowy Cairngorms with routes climbed in the Northern Corries, Creagan Cha-no and Braeriach. Jamie Skelton and Dave Almond had two excellent days climbing in the middle of November that resulted in an early repeat of *The Snowpimp* (VIII,9) in Coire and Lochain and *Berserker* (VI,8), an excellent new addition to Lurcher's Crag. The Almond-Skelton team maintained an excellent run of routes early in December with the second ascent of *Dark Angel* (VII,8) in Glen Coe, and an early repeat of *Brass Monkey* (VII,8) on Ben Nevis.



Rene Lisac from Croatia climbing *Gully of the Gods* (VI,6) on Beinn Bhan during the International Winter Meet. Lisac said afterwards that this was the finest route (of any description) that he had ever done. (Scott Grosdanoff)

The big early season event took place in mid November when Greg Boswell and Guy Robertson climbed *Local Hero* (VIII,9) on An Teallach. This spectacular route lies on the *Hayfork Gully* wall and was named in memory of Martin Moran. Roger Webb, Neil Wilson and I took advantage of the same cold weather window to climb *Dundonnell Face* (IV,4) on Benn Alligin. This is the first route to tackle the 200m triangular face between *Backfire Ridge* and *Diamond Fire*.

### Mid Season

January and the first half of February were characterised by deep thaws and generally thin conditions. Roger Webb, Gary Kinsey and I took advantage



All go on the South Wall of Garbh Bheinn. The final day of the International Winter Meet reached a climax with first winter ascents of *Gralloch* (IX,10) and *Scimitar* (VII,8) doubling the previous number of winter routes on the wall. (Neil Adams)

of an early January snowfall to make the first winter ascent of *Nethy Crack* (V,6) on Cnap Coire na Spreidhe on Cairn Gorm. Conditions were lean in the west and a well timed early repeat of *Archangel* (VII,7) on Ben Nevis by Malcolm Bass and Nick Clement was possibly the finest technical winter climb in January.

Things began to pick up mid February with more snow and cooler temperatures. On Skye, Mike Lates and Lucy Spark made the first ascent of *Christmas Comes but Once a Year* (IV,4) on Sgurr nan Gillean, a beautiful icy groove on the left side of High Crag. The same day Cal-

lum Johnson and Andy MacKinnon made the first repeat of *Crack of Dawn* (VII,8) on Sgurr Mhic Choinnich. The following week, Tim Miller and Jamie Skelton made the first ascent of the serious *Sapiens* (VIII,9) on Lost Valley Buttress in Glen Coe, which climbs the upper *Neanderthal* corner with a new start. Two days later, the same team made the first winter ascent of *Butterknife* (VI,6) on the South Wall of Garbh Bheinn.

### Winter Meet

On the evening of Saturday 22 February, 28 guest climbers from 22 countries and 28 British hosts met up in Aviemore, and the following morning dispersed to the huts before hitting the cliffs. In Coire an t-Sneachda ascents were made of *Fingers Ridge*, *Fluted Ridge Direct*, *Doctor's Choice*, *The Lamp*, *Vortex*, *Original Summer Route*, *Yukon Jack*, *The Slant Direct* and *Aladdin's Mirror Direct*. Jamie Skelton and Damian Granowski from Poland had an impressive day with *No Blue Skies*, *The Message* and *Pot of Gold*.

A couple of pairs ventured north to Torridon and found excellent conditions on Beinn Eighe. On the Far East Wall, Neil Adams and Peter Hoang (Canada) made an ascent of the modern classic *Sundance* (VIII,8), and on the Eastern Ramparts, Callum Johnson and Lukas Klingora (Czech Republic) came away with the fourth ascent of *Boggle* (VIII,8). In Glen Coe, Paul Ramsden and Wadim Jablonski (Poland) climbed the superlative *Central Grooves* (VII,7) in Stob Coire nan Lochan.



Greg Boswell powering up the first pitch of *The Israelite* (VIII,8) during the first winter ascent. This highly prized objective on the awe inspiring Central Gully Wall on Creag an Dubh Loch was climbed on the fourth attempt. (Guy Robertson)

On Ben Nevis, ascents were made of *Waterfall Gully*, *The Curtain*, 1931 *Route*, *Italian Climb*, *Route II/Route I Combination* and *Orion Direct*. Dave Almond and Trym Saeland (Norway) climbed *Darth Vader* (VII,7) and Rich Bentley and Seokju Woo (South Korea) made an ascent of *Tower Face of The Comb* (VI,6).

The weather forecast predicted Scotland would be in the eye of a storm on day two providing a break in the wind, but the exact timing of the anticipated heavy snowfall varied from forecast to forecast. Unfortunately, after a calm start it soon started to snow and blizzards persisted all day.

In Glen Coe, four teams made the long haul up to Church Door Buttress. Willis Morris and Steve Towne (USA) were particularly impressive making a possible second ascent of Greg Boswell and Uisdean Hawthorn's 2016 route *Hoargasm* (VII,8), followed by *Crypt Route* (IV,6). Paul Ramsden and Wadim Jablonski chose a lower level option and made a rare ascent of *Antichrist* (VI,7) on Creag an Socach above Bridge of Orchy.

Big news from Ben Nevis was a new route on Minus Two Buttress by Maarten Van Haeren (Canada) and Andy Inglis. *Calculus* (VIII,8) takes a line directly through the overhangs that girdle the buttress at one-third height. Inglis led the grade VI entry pitch up icy grooves and Van Haeren pulled out the stops with a superb lead up a stepped corner through the overhang on tenuous hooks.

On day three, excellent ice conditions focused the climbing on Ben Nevis. *Minus One Gully* (VI,6) had three ascents, and Callum Johnson and Lukas Klingora climbed the route so quickly that they also had time for *Minus Two Gully* (V,5). Fresh from his success on *Minus Two Buttress* the day before, Van Haeren soloed *Orion Direct* in a two-hour round trip from the hut. Other ice routes climbed include *Left-Hand Route*, *Waterfall Gully*, *Vanishing Gully*, *Thompson's Route* and *Tower Ridge*, which was plated in ice from bottom to top.

The mixed routes in Coire na Ciste were very icy and in challenging condition. Dave Almond and Trym Saeland (Norway) made an ascent of *Sioux Wall* (VIII,8), and Rich Bentley and Seokju Woo climbed a very bold and icy *Gargoyle Wall* (VI,6), finding only seven pieces of protection in five pitches. Mixed conditions were more amenable lower down the mountain and Neil Adams and Peter Hoang made an ascent of the rarely climbed Kellett's *North Wall Route* (VII,7).

The wind finally dropped on day four, and all eyes turned to Ben Nevis with close to 40 climbers from the meet active on the mountain. The stand-out performance came from Peter Hoang and Neil Adams who made an ascent of *The Shroud* (VI,6) followed by *Mega Route X* (VI,6). *The Shroud* had not touched down and was climbed as a hanging ice fang. Hoang used his extensive Canadian icefall experience to judge that this potentially very risky ascent was in safe condition. Even so, he rated the climb at WI6/WI6+ on the Canadian scale and commented that he had never climbed an icicle that did not hang vertically before: it had been blown sideways by the wind.



Mike Lates on the first ascent of *Christmas Comes but Once a Year* (IV,4) on Sgurr nan Gillean on Skye. This superb-looking route was climbed in mid February immediately following Storm Ciara. (*Lucy Spark*)

*Mega Route X* was also climbed by Murray Cutforth and Tom Phillips, and *Gemini* (VI,6), another highly sought after Ben Nevis classic, was climbed by Alex Mathie and Franz Friebe (Switzerland). Other routes climbed on the Ben included *Boomer's Requiem*, *Minus Two Gully*, *Minus Three Gully*, *The Curtain*, *Orion Direct*, *Platforms Rib* and *Route II/Route I* combination. CIC hut host Robin Clothier made a rare ascent of *Right-Hand Route* (VI,6) on Minus Two Buttress with Nicholas Wylie. This route also saw an ascent from Masa Sakano and Frano Udovic (Croatia).

Further north, Scott Grosdanoff and Rene Lisac (Croatia) climbed *Gully of the Gods* (VI,6) on Beinn Bhan and Dave Almond and Trym Saeland (Norway) made the third ascent of *Feast of the East* (VIII,9) on the Eastern Ramparts of Beinn Eighe. Saeland, who is best known for the first ascent of *The Corkscrew Route* on Cerro Torre, was absolutely buzzing after the ascent. In Glen Coe, meet volunteer John Higham took a break from resupplying the huts with food to make the first ascent of the 350m *Ephemeron Buttress* (IV,4) to the right of *Ephemeron Gully*, with John Hutchinson.

Heavy snowfall overnight on strong westerly winds resulted in dangerous wind-slab conditions on the fifth day of the meet. On Ben Nevis this confined teams to wind-scoured cliffs such as the Minus Face, where the three Minus gullies saw multiple ascents. I took time out of my meet coordinator role to team up with volunteers Stuart MacFarlane and Ian Dempster to make the first ascent of *Superwoman* (V,6), a line of icy grooves up the lower east flank of Tower Ridge. The route was named after Carole Hawthorn who kept everyone superbly fed and watered in the CIC hut throughout the meet.

In Glen Coe, Andy Inglis and Maarten Van Haeren made an ascent of *Central Grooves* (VII,7) in Stob Coire nan Lochan, and Luca Celano, Carl Nystedt (Sweden), Nicolas Dieu and Michael Poulsen ploughed through deep snow along the Aonach Eagach traverse. Other Glen Coe based teams headed to Creag an Socach above Bridge of Orchy in search of less snowy conditions. *Messiah* (VI,7) had ascents from at least three teams but the most notable climb was the third ascent of *Defenders of the Faith* (IX,9) by Peter Hoang and Neil Adams. This very steep mixed route was first climbed by Dave MacLeod and Fiona Murray in 2006, and was the first Scottish grade IX to receive an on-sight first ascent. Also of note was the first ascent of *A Very Naughty Boy* (VII,8/9) by Tim Miller and Damian Granowski from Poland. The route takes a left-trending line across the steep wall to the right of *False Rumour Gully* finishing up *The Enemy Within*.

Two new routes on Garbh Bheinn were the big news from the last day of the meet. The South Wall is very rarely in winter condition, but continuous storms had plastered it in snow making it a very wintry proposition. Tim Miller, Callum Johnson and Damian Granowski made the first winter ascent of *Scimitar* (VII,8) and Neil Adams, Peter Hoang and Lukas Klingora made the first winter ascent of *Gralloch* (IX,10). Damian led the crux of *Scimitar* and Peter made an outstanding lead of *Gralloch*, which is E2 in summer.

The weather deteriorated quickly through the day and the avalanche danger was very high. Teams on Ben Nevis wisely restricted themselves to the Douglas Boulder and Vanishing Gully areas. The weather was wild in the Northern Corries, but ascents were made of *Honeypot* and *Wachacha* on the Mess of Pottage, and Jamie Skelton and Trym Saeland climbed *Big Daddy* (VII,7) in Coire an Lochain. Everyone was back in good time for the final celebration event in Aviemore.

The 2020 Scottish International Winter Meet was a major success. Great routes had been climbed, ideas shared, friendships made and new partner-

ships formed. Our international guests had been given a magnificent taste of Scottish winter climbing and left with huge smiles on their faces.

### Late Season

Guy Robertson and Greg Boswell pulled off a long sought after first ascent on 4 March when they made the first winter ascent of *The Israelite* (VIII,8) on Creag an Dubh Loch. This summer E4 provides superlative rock climbing but is often wet, so it was a logical winter target. The same day, the first ascent of *Hindmost Ridge* (IV,4) on The Devil's Point, demonstrated that there are still major unclimbed features even in well-known parts of the Highlands. Iain Young, John Higham and Kenny Brookman's ascent of the 400m ridge bounding the right side of *Geusachan Gully* on the south side of the mountain was a significant coup and one of the finest exploratory ascents of the season.

Good conditions extended to the Northern Highlands. Dave Almond and Jamie Skelton visited the Eastern Ramparts on Beinn Eighe and climbed a more direct version of the summer line of *Claustrophobic Corner*. They called their route *The Irony* and after some careful pondering graded it IX,9. The following day they returned to add *Scotophobia* (VII,8), which is based on the summer E1 *Fear of the Dark* on the Eastern Ramparts. Mark Robson and I had a fine adventure on *End of Days* (VI,6) on An Ruadh-Stac. This takes an unlikely six-pitch line taking in all three tiers to the left of Patey-Bonington summer line *North Face*. Finally, just before lockdown, Tim Miller and Jamie Skelton made the first winter ascent of *The Modern Idiot* (VIII,8) on Beinn Eighe's Eastern Ramparts.

In the days leading up to the enforced close of play on 23 March, many teams enjoyed superb conditions on Ben Nevis and multiple ascents were made of the Minus gullies and Orion Direct. The most significant took place on Skye however, when Will Rowland completed the Greater Cuillin Traverse followed by the Red Cuillin. This is thought to be the first time this link-up has been achieved in winter, and Rowland follows in his father Clive's footsteps, who was first to complete the feat in the summer of 1982.