

Sgurramblers Meet March/April 2022

At Dumfries I take the A76 and soon leave it to gain height on VERY narrow and lonely lanes to arrive (eventually) at Mitchellslack farm at 1.00 pm. As I put on boots the wind blasts out of the NE and hail sweeps down! I go to the farm, through a field of rams and take a track beside the Capel Burn before turning to climb up into the wind to gain the top of my objective of Queensberry. It is a spacious, lonely place and the hills on all sides carry snow above 2,000 feet. Showers of snow can be seen as individual agents. I send texts to Judith as well as David Douglas and Roger Reeves before descending which is a lot easier with the wind to my back. I reach the car at 4.30 and set the Sat Nav for Newton Stewart which guides me on a direct route along 45 miles of roads very beautiful and heavily wooded BUT very slow and twisty so that it takes me 1 ¾ hours to complete the drive. A real danger comes from the setting sun. It is 18.30 when I reach the Barrhill and David opens gates and shows me the accommodation which is high standard and very warm. We await David and Val before eating together then chat until bed at 22.30.

Meanwhile the rarely despondent David arrives by bus to Newton Stewart and the robust Roger is piloted there by the high value Val.

Thursday 31 March

Up at 07.00 to text Judith. After a hard frost there is a clear sky. I leave at 08.30 and drive on A75 to Castle Douglas, then take the A713 north beside Loch Ken to Carsphairn and Dalmellington where I use a high level route to New Cumnock. Here I enter Glen Afton & park at its south end after 78.9 miles to get there! Setting off 10.45 I walk to the dam, up beside it and then the length of the Afton Reservoir. Here I cut up through cut trees and take an angle to access Wedder Hill where I encounter a host of giant wind turbines. The sound of their huge blades moving swiftly under the power of a north wind is dominant, as I use access roads to cross Millaneoch Hill where I turn north and climb short grass to gain the top of Graham named Windy Standard at 12.50. Here I text Judith + Roger + Dave. I descend to turbine access roads and use them to reach the N. E. 'spur' of Wedder Hill before dropping down to the shores of Afton Reservoir. The clarity of the air is noteworthy and to the East tops of Ettrick Pen and the like are totally white. Now it is easy walking back to the car for 2.15 pm.

I go north along Glen Afton for about 2 miles to park on the estate road that serves Blackcraig farm. This makes for easy footing to a height of 1800 feet where is a cairn at Quintin Knowe. My way is now south over grass, moss & small rocky outcrops. There are spacious views on all sides with shower clouds visible as thick columns of cloud- anvil shaped – that stretch from sky down to the ground. I reach a notable cairn, then a triangulation point which is the true summit of Blackcraig Hill. Once again I text send a trio of texts before reversing my outward route. At Quintin Knowe snow sweeps upon me in the form of small uniform balls or not quite hail stones. It is down and down to broad track to find the car as left at 17.30. I sort out and set off 17.45, going cautiously on account of extreme tiredness. At last I reach the A75 BUT I am heading towards at sun that is so low in the sky as to be a real danger as massive lorries charge out of a blinding light! I get to the gates of Barrhill and phone Mr Griffiths to open them. As this happens a text from Roger (arriving 8.00 pm) tells me that they are just back at the car, so I cook for myself, prepare some vegetables for them and have a bath whilst they eat. It is 11.00 pm before I'm in bed.

News of a bereavement comes to Roger which causes a delayed start for him and his companions valiant Val and seldom dispirited David. Eventually they drive around the north end of Loch Doon to meet up with Mike Ridley with whom the four friends make a successful attempt on a Graham named Mullwharther.

Friday 1 April

I drive Roger, Val, David to join a past member of Sgurramblers -Mike Ridley- to repeat, for myself, the Graham Craignaw which I first climbed in 1977.

Route: We take the path which heads closer and closer to the Gairland Burn until it gets beside the approach to Loch Valley. Reaching this Loch we go between it and cross the outflow from nearby Loch Neldricken to make our way across the western slopes of Craignaw and then climb up its southern ridge. Apart from the descent of Craignaw we reverse our outward route. We are walking from 10.30 -19.30.

Weather: After a hard frost it's a day of clear sky and sunshine. There's a cold wind at height.

Views: Really splendid. Our hill together with Dungeon Hill to the north form a sort of island, so that close at hand the landscape is distinct in having big lochs of the strangest shapes. As well as those mentioned Loch Enoch is the highest and biggest. Surrounding these lochs the footing is a mix of rough, uneven ground covered by a deep mass of dead long grass out of which protrudes countless rocks, slabs, tiered blocks and mini-crags. Going up sloping plates of granite give respite to us from plunging deep into energy sapping grass. Regarding intermediate views, different geology gives hills like Merrick & Benyellary to the west and the Rhinns of Kells to the east a strikingly different shape and texture.

Company: Good humour prevails throughout adversity (it is after 16.00 hours before we gain the top of Craignaw) and Val + Roger are plucky and persevering.

Extras. From the Bruce Stone above we drop, in error, deep into Glen Trool! At Glenhead we realise and have to return. Apart from Glen Trool we meet and see no-one, so solitude together with a sense of space amid wild land make this A memorable outing.

Saturday April 2

Once again the day dawns with frost and a clear sky. We are all into packing before our departure and I manage to get away at 08.15. I take the A74 to Dumfries then go NW on the A76 as far as Menzies where I use the B797 to gain lots of height as I head NE to park in Wanlockhead at 1,500m feet. My objective of Green Lowther has a road to the summit to serve numerous and prominent radar installations. This means it is very easy footing over tarmac or short grass when I shorten zigzags to Lowther Hill, then along to a second gentle top to gain the triangulation point on Green Lowther where I send the usual trio of texts.

At the triangulation point are Great views on all sides with snowy eastern hills being particularly clear. To descend I go due west down a long grass slope and climb a little to reach the private road for the last distance back to the car for 2.15 pm. Next comes the drive to Fort William using A74, M80 and then the A84 via Callander, Crianlarich, Ranoch Moor and Glencoe with glorious and familiar hills appearing in majesty. Final sightings are across to Morvern & Argour before I arrive at at Moray Place at the same time as Val and Roger and David. We are locked out of the flat No. 13 but Chris has been on to the owner and we soon gain access. To get our gear and food into the flat means climbing 30 steps from car park to the bottom door, then up many more to the 3rd floor. Anyway we get stuff in, unpack, and eat a vegetarian quiche together.

Resplendent Roger, valiant Val & never daunted David also drive to Fort William. On the way they climb a Marilyn Meall Mor – one of over 60 hills in the Highlands with that name ! This particular specimen is 492 metres in height, not far from Loch Tulla. It sits due east of the of Stob Gabhar and (on a clear day) gives particularly good views of that Munro and its contemporaries.

Sunday April 3

Rain is forecast so I leave at 08.00 and go 4 miles up Glen Roy to leave the car as a solitary vehicle in the valley. It is fine with snowy tops clear. I drop to the river Roy to find it flows through a gorge (!) so go upstream to find a place to wade through. I break fallen branches to make two sticks, take off trousers and put on crocks to make the crossing which is mid thigh at its deepest & very cold. I scramble up into a little wood & climb a deer fence before going up steep grass on the NW side of the Leana Mhor on the east side of the glen. More high snow covered tops come into sight. I stop at 1.200 fet, then 1, 850 feet and the angle of ascent eases as I reach a cairn which is not the top. This is 1 ½ K & another 300 ft away. I arrive at a tiny cairn with the correct GR at 11.30 and send the standard set of texts before traversing down across heathery slopes to regain the place of river crossing. Cloud has now filled the sky, covering high peaks, rain falls gently as I make the return crossing using the same sticks, then put boots back on and climb to the car for 13.00 hrs. I drive out of Glen Roy, shop at Span Bridge in heavy rain and return to the flat. Our evening meal is vegetarian Masala – excellent.

Dynamic David and competent Chris also go to Glen Roy where they climb a Graham called Creag Dubh . Remarkable Roger and vigorous Val ascend Ben Nevis to well over 1,000 metres where they have to turn back. The reason is out of respect for the significant amounts of ice and snow that still prevail at at that height.

Monday 4 April

Strong winds and heavy rain all day. I drive out towards Mallaig and park close to where the Allt Feith a' Chatha thunders beneath the bridge for the road. It is 10.10 as in full waterproofs I begin to push up trackless ground – long wet grass mixed with tussocks and heather. The river beside me is a white, raging torrent. At 700 feet two major branches of the river converge and I am on the wrong side of the westerly one! Luckily I spot a big pipe to make a crossing. Once across I find an estate road (not marked on my old map) that ends as with a bridge over the eastern branch of the river which is really the Allt an Utha. Now comes nearly 2K of sodden ground, not at all steep, heading into wind & rain with the Allt Feith a' Chatha on my left. Since dozens of streams flow from both sides, as I step over them the main river gets smaller until I can stride over it at 900 feet. The steep slopes of my target of Glas charn disappear into mist above me as I set myself lots of short term objectives to climb up surrounded by rocky outcrops and pouring water. I have a stop at 1,700 feet and soon after the angle of ascent eases. Now comes ¾ K of lumps, bumps and numerous lochans until at last I reach the summit cairn at 12.55. As usual, I check it by GPS and send out texts to confirm my whereabouts. To descend I use a bearing until I drop out of the cloud. One good thing is that wind and rain are more to my right shoulder. I head back and make slow but sure progress to gain (with relief) the start of the estate road which, this time, I follow all the way down. It is easy footing which continues into the shelter of a forest planted since my map was made. Back at the car for 15.00 hours and the rain keeps sheeting down as I return to the flat for dry clothes (hurray), to send texts regarding a safe return and have a super bath. Salmon steaks for the evening meal – yum.

Full of vitality, Val and redoubtable Roger in the morning climb a Marilyn named Druim na -h Earba. They return to the flat for lunch, then go to Glen Nevis where they take the path to Steall and encounter at different degrees of intimacy the wire bridge over the Water of Nevis which (of course) is in spate. Decisive David and considerate Chris walk from the Brave Heart car park in Glen Nevis and use a section of the West Highland Way to access the iron age fort on a hill named Dun Deardail.

Tuesday 5 April.

Today is a 47th wedding anniversary for Judith and me so I send an early text.

Once again it is strong winds and heavy rain so I leave at 08.00 and go to Spean Bridge, then Gairlochy and along the north side of Loch Arkaig. This is a twisting and narrow road leading to a dead end. It is not much used which is just as well as frequent hills lead to moments at the top when only the sky is visible before the bonnet of car begins to point downwards. Maximum safe speed for the next few miles is 15 mph as I try to find the estate road leading to Loch Blair mentioned in Andrew Dempster's guide book. Rain sheets down as I climb a deer fence into a plantation, ascend a steep estate track to where it ends at another deer fence and climb that one. I now push up slopes that typify the Western Highlands and after a while stop to check my height. I am at 1550 feet BUT am on the side of Mam ah Doire Dhuinn instead of being close to Loch Blair. I have driven too far and come up a different estate road, so head west, losing 500 feet as I do so, to gain the place where Loch Blair begins to flow down into Loch Arkaig. I am at 1,000 feet as I cross the estate track that I should have used and I now set a bearing to the NE. The way is up and up through the mist to a series of false tops and eventually a wide depression which precedes the triangulation point at the top of Meall Blair. Arrival time here is 13.00 hours. After the 'standard best practice' of texting my location, I reverse the bearing and squelch down into rain that seems even heavier, to regain Loch Blair and walk down to reach the road alongside Loch Arkaig at Caonich. I have parked beyond Arcabh instead of here, so walk back to the car about a mile away. During the return drive a motor home stops beside me and the occupants (from Belgium) ask if they are going to Loch Ness, so I put them right. I shop at Spean Bridge and am very glad to be back in the flat by 16.30. We all enjoy pasta sauce with many various vegetables.

Having climbed a Marilyn of 528 metres named Bidean bad h – iolaird (west side Glen Nevis) victorious Val, non – recalcitrant Roger and definitely David do serious lurking in the afternoon. Capable Chris climbs Cow Hill (298 metres) which blocks the view of Ben Nevis itself from the town below, it is actually pretty close to Bidean bad h – iolaird

Wednesday 6 April.

Frequent heavy showers today. I leave at 08.00 and drive 5 miles south on a narrow road that gains then loses lots of height several times to park where it ends at Lundavra. I set off up the steep eastern slopes of a broad ridge between hills named as Meall nan Claireach & my Graham target of Beinn na Gucaig. As I gain height I look down on Lochan Lunn Oa Bhra below me. I head south across heather on a rising traverse, then ascend the steeper NE slopes of Beinn na Gucaig to arrive at the summit triangulation point in mist at 10.40. As I sit there, the cloud lifts off the top and the view to the south is of the colossal widening waters of Loch Linnhe. To return I decide on a different route, so angle down across slopes of heather & grass to reach Lundavra by noon, so am back at the flat by 12.25. Fish and chips makes up or food intake this day.

Non confused Chris climbs the Graham at the east end of Loch Arkaig named Glas Bheinn. Regal Roger, non- despotic David and valuable Val visit Glen Roy and then savour the sybaritic delights of coffee in nearby Spean Bridge.

Chris continues on the hill as the rest of us go home.

Thursday 7 April.

Sgiath Chuil from Glen Lochay – some bright spells and fierce snow squalls. Some views from the south summit but not from the Munro itself

Friday 8 April

Beinn Challum on a lovely day if rather windy – plenty of sun and snow.