

CAMPING IN THE CAIRNGORMS

HELEN HARTLEY

Barely a week before the 1957 Easter holidays I attended an M.A.M. lecture without having made any plans at all for an holiday, other than having in mind a general desire to visit the Cairngorms. As it happened, Doreen Langfield's holiday plans had reached the same stage, so the following Thursday saw us both on the night train to Perth, complete with a borrowed mountain tent, a B.S.A. Bantam, rucksacks, axes, a certain amount of good advice and food for the night. The next morning at Perth we breakfasted and then loaded ourselves on to the little machine to ride to Braemar over the Devil's Elbow. Our two-stroke objected to the last mile of gradient, which had to be covered twice—once with kit and once with the pillion passenger, much to the entertainment of a party of skiers leaving their car for the snow slopes on Cairnwell summit.

After we had got down to Braemar, we advanced on Derry Lodge, which we reached shortly after 6.00 p.m. after two spills on the stony track, and thereafter walked through the pine woods up Glen Derry. There were some stags browsing amongst the trees as we picked our way through the mossy turf and bog, which made a pretty evening picture in the traditional manner, and later after leaving the woods and walking along the path up the open valley towards the Lairig an Laoigh a group of hinds watched us from the river bank before their leader led them away. Dusk fell before we reached our camp site by Loch Etchachan, so we chose a grassy sandbank by the river and there passed the night.

Next morning we climbed the steep path up Coire Etchachan, stopping for a while at the bothy halfway up. This we found to be a rectangular stone hut, unequipped, but always kept open for climbers' use by the Cairngorm Club. As we reached the basin of the coire we were dismayed to see a small white ridge tent, as we had hoped to have had the place to ourselves, but closer investigation revealed that it only housed a pair of skis, and was quite unsuitable for a high camp. We crossed the outfall from Loch Etchachan and pitched camp by a large erratic boulder on the left bank of the stream.

It was a grand afternoon, so we walked back to the Keeper's house at Luibeg by way of Derry Cairngorm, a top plentifully strewn with large stones. From there we were able to see the snow slopes on Ben Macdhuì which were the skiing ground of the skiers from Derry Lodge. We collected the Bantam from the Keeper's house and rode down to Braemar, taking our empty rucksacks with us and returning with food and fuel for a whole week. With two bottles of petrol in the panniers we negotiated the pitfalls of the previous evening on foot. At this time of the year, the temperature at our 3,000 feet camp made

it possible to lay in a store of fresh meat, sausages, and so on, which we stored in a larder formed with dry stone walls at the foot of our boulder. We just reached the tent as darkness and rain fell. The rain continued throughout Easter Day, which was spent reading Cairngorm Guides and Plutarch's "Lives," according to taste.

Monday was brilliant. Everywhere was white with a covering of frosted snow, and after a hasty breakfast we crossed the causeway and kicked steps up a firm snow slope on to the shoulder of Macdhuì. From here we peered over the cliffs of Stob Coire Sputan Dearg down to the remote Lochan Uaine (one of three "green" lochans in the Cairngorms) which was fringed with miniature icebergs. There followed a steady plod over six-inch deep snow past some ruined stone walls to the massive summit indicator. Visibility was not extensive, but the view across the Lairig Ghru into the Garbh Coire was particularly fine, flanked by the impressive line of the Devil's Point, Cairn Toul, Angel's Peak and Braeriach.

The wide plateau which extends north from Ben Macdhuì provides pleasant walking, and we chose Lochan Buidhe, the source of the River Avon, as a suitable luncheon spot. Actually it is more like a frozen bog than a lochan, and in winter many only discover its presence by walking into it. Some use this method in mid-summer also. From there it is only a short distance to the top of Cairn Lochan, where we met a solitary walker from Glenmore Lodge and watched two climbers two hundred feet below in a chimney in the magnificent granite cliffs. We carried on to Cairngorm, where the springy moss and short heather made a pleasant mattress that we were sorry to leave. Once down to Loch Avon we found it impossible to cross the river dryshod, and at the outflow of the loch, where the water flowed at knee height over sheets of granite as smooth as paving stones, we waded the twenty feet across. Loch Avon is generally reckoned to be the most impressive sheet of water in the Cairngorms, the upper end being dominated by the cliffs of Cairn Etchachan. To end the day we boulder-hopped along the south shore until we reached the path that climbed homeward to Loch Etchachan.

The next day we set off for the Corrou Bothy, intending to stay there one night and do the round of the Garbh Coire. However, by the time we had contoured below the crags of Coire Sputan Dearg, past Lochan Uaine and round Sron Riach to the col above the Tailors' Burn by way of a trackless wilderness of large boulders, it was clear that we had neither the time nor the energy for a walk of that length. We therefore dropped down to the Dee, catching *en route* a glimpse of a hare in its white winter coat, and crossed the stepping stones to the bothy. The afternoon was spent climbing Cairn Toul by its rocky south-east ridge and by descending by the north-east side

of the tiny corrie just under the summit. We spent a reasonably comfortable night in the bothy, having the place to ourselves although it was Easter Tuesday.

The weather remained perfect, so the next day we climbed on to the plateau by the Devil's Point and circuited the Garbh Coire. After following the edge of the coire over Cairn Toul and Angel's Peak, we crossed the massive plateau of Braeriach to look westward down into Glen Einich and regretted we had not the time to inspect its precipitous cliffs more closely. The Wells of Dee were hidden under frozen snow but we could trace the river as it emerged occasionally from the snow blanket. When we reached the waterfall on the lip of the Garbh Coire we lunched with a good view of the Coire Brochain cliffs in front of us, which from this point seem more impressive than those of Cairn Lochan. We finished our meal with our favourite, apricot snow.

Our plan next was to walk through the Lairig Ghru, so we dropped down over Sron na Lairig. As we walked back up the rough track we wondered whether it was worth the effort, but the sight of several ptarmigan walking around in their winter plumage just below the Pools of Dee encouraged us in our efforts. This time we crossed the river to the bothy by the wire hawsers, which we had spotted when descending from Cairn Toul, in preference to the slippery stepping stones. As it was now 6.30 p.m. it was really too late to carry on back to our camp, so after a night of semi-starvation we finished our stay at the bothy by breakfasting on a one-egg cheese omelette which exhausted our supplies.

We returned to camp by an easier roundabout route following the Luibeg Burn, and spent the afternoon eating and sunbathing. This was a day of atmospheric clarity when every detail of the rocky cliffs above Loch Etchachan stood out, and it seemed a pity not to go up Macdhui again to see the extensive panorama. The solitude and distances are such that it did not seem advisable to part company as the more determined member of the party suggested.

The last day was brilliantly fine, and after a similar argument we ascended Beinn Mheadoin which rises behind our camp site and some short distance off. We were able to get some amusement out of scrambling up the granite tors which adorn the mountain, rather like the "warts" of Ben Avon or the "barns" of Bynack. From Beinn Mheadoin we had a longish moorland walk north across the River Avon, following the Lairig an Laoigh, one of the ancient cattle droving "roads." We hoped to press on to Ryvoan Bothy but time was getting short and we turned back up Strath Nethy to Loch Avon and followed the northern shore along to the Shelter Stone before returning to our tent—a more preferable shelter.

So finished a week which was for me a perfect introduction to camping in the Cairngorms.

