

Spring Ski Touring in the Cairngorms

To ski tour in Scotland you must be an optimist, an opportunist, and often be prepared to carry your skis quite a long way to the snow-line. Over the years, I have skied in Scotland in every month from October through to June - although not all in the same season. 2011-12 was poor until the end of April. Then, amazingly, after everyone had given up, a huge dump of snow arrived in the Cairngorms, and I had an excellent week of touring.

Pat and I have a time share in Aviemore which we go to at the end of April each year. Occasionally, we have managed get on to skis, but usually we enjoy the great on and off-road cycling and walking that is available. This year was different! After spending Saturday climbing at Dunkeld, I headed off to Aviemore. The view from Aviemore was extraordinary, clear skies and the snow level at about 900 metres. I was looking forward to the next day.



Telemarking above the Lairig Gru

Keen to get a tour in before the snow melted, I left the upper Cairngorm car park at about 7, and took the path below the corries towards the west side of Coire an Lochan. Then boots, skis and skins on, and off towards Ben Macdui. There was good cover all the way, and being a sunny Sunday, many people about on skis. From the summit I enjoyed great views towards Braeriach and Cairn Toul. Nowadays I find leaving the summit of Ben Macdui on nordic skis a little unnerving. Its quite a gentle slope, but there are usually lots of people about to observe my lack of skill. This time my conservative stem turns went fine, and soon I relaxed into the long easy traverse to the slopes above Lurchers Meadow. A few long traverses and stem turns got me down to the top of Lurchers Gully. A few more big turns down the gully, and then a long traverse into Coire an Lochan. From the coire, straightforward kick and glide skiing took

me to the outflow from Coire an t-Sneachda. By linking patches, I got almost all the way to the path before I had to give up skiing and walk. A superb day.



Coire ant-Sneachda

Monday was rather dreich with the cloud low on the high hills, so Pat and I explored some woodland walking around Carbridge. Tuesday dawned fine so we set of to enjoy possibly the best easy mountain tour in the Cairngorms. Quite a lot of snow had disappeared since Sunday, but we didn't have to walk far from the car park before putting on skis. Pleasant kick and glide skiing took us into Coire an t-Sneachda with an interesting cloud formation visible above the cliffs. We then traversed across Fiacail Coire an t-Sneachda into Coire an Lochan and up to its two lochans below the. After enjoying the views, we returned by our outward route to the car park. Yet another great day.



Pat in Coire an Lochan

On Wednesday I was joined by a friend from Edinburgh JMCS, Davey More. We skinned and walked up the wind scoured ridge of Fiacail a Coire Cas. Then from the cairn we skied easily across the plateau to the site of the demolished St Valery Hut above Stag Rocks. The weather was again good and we had fine views south towards Derry Cairngorm. After lunch we skied uphill to Cairn Lochan. Here we were entertained by two snow-kiters (skiing or boarding with a small parachute). From there Davey and I took different routes into Coire an Lochan. I skied down to Lurchers Meadow and followed my route from Sunday. Meanwhile, Davey, on alpine skis took a more direct route down the west wall of the coire. We then skied out of the coire to the path back to the car park.

One of my favourite ski touring areas is the high plateau of the Great Moss above Glen Feshie. I had skied Monadh Mor at the same time of year two years previously, so it seemed a suitable objective. It is a technically easy, but long, tour with a great feeling of remoteness. So, early on Thursday I set off on the walk up from Achlean in Glen Feshie - longish, but on a good path. Just before the edge of the plateau, I put on skis and skins and headed towards the little bealach to the south of Carn Ban Mor. From there I could see across to Monadh Mor and the cover looked complete. However, a lot of ground was hidden from me and as I descended I found that a lot of that ground was snow free and boggy. Two years previously I had almost uninterrupted skiing and the rivers had been bridged with snow. That had been at the end of one of the best winters of recent years, when the ground had been frozen, and covered by snow for several months. This day, the snow that I was skiing over had fallen on comparatively warm sodden ground and had been melting for over a week. Nevertheless I persevered and I was rewarded with a summit ridge was that better covered than it had been the previous time. From the summit I skied due north and got a good run down towards the Allt Luinneag. Crossing it was interesting (as it had been on the way up Monadh Mor). I then linked patches along the edge of Glen Einich towards the path down to Achlean. A long day, with more walking than I wanted, but worthwhile. The melting snow also provided some interesting photo opportunities.



Good snow cover all the way to Monabh Mor

Friday was not a day for the tops, but we had a great cycle through Rothiemurchus Forest. Saturday was much better, and despite diminishing snow, I had another tour of Ben Macdui with my son Stuart and another JMCS friend, Brian Donaldson. There had been an overnight frost making the snow icy so under-ski conditions were not as good as on the other days. This time we walked up Fiacail a Coire Cas, and skied fairly directly across the plateau to Ben Macdui. Our return route was essentially the same as mine had been the previous Saturday, except we skied as far as we could down Lurchers Gully. This gave Stuart and Brian plenty of opportunity to show off their Telemark turns. A good end to a poor season. Actually, good conditions for ski touring on the Cairngorm plateau continued well into May (see SAIS Northern Cairngorms blog), but I didn't take further advantage.

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