**Fife Mountaineering Club**

Scotland Coast to Coast 2017

The month of May again and the lure of the Challenge had us on the road to Dornie for our West coast starting point. It was a fine morning with, the locals assured us, a forecast temperature of 22 degrees when we left the Dornie Hotel after signing the Challenge register and splashing the boots in the salt water just across the road. A mile of quiet road had us off the tarmac and following a narrow glen where we heard our first cuckoo and after crossing the same burn several times we reached the bealach which gave us a view down into Glen Elchaig. We caught up with several other Challengers who had also started at Dornie and we all followed the path up the glen to the bridge where we stopped for a lunch break. A family of four sat next to us who came from Birmingham, Alabama and they quizzed us on the route ahead and what the following days were likely to bring as they were first time Challengers. The weather forecast was proved right as the sun beamed down but the steep zig-zag track above Iron Lodge was a bit daunting in the late afternoon heat and we camped for the night after another mile or so.

A cool, dull morning as we headed East to reach the remote west end of Loch Mullardoch where we turned South and had a long pull up the glen to a bealach between Mam Sodhail and An Socach, then a slow descent on a path down through the corrie to reach Glen Affric.

We followed the track Eastwards to the spot where we intended to camp to find a new hydro-electric scheme under construction, but we found a space for the tent in the woods nearby and were soon in for the night as the rain fell steadily. An early start had us away just as some of the workmen arrived and a walk through the woods brought us back to the tarmac for a roadwalk to the Tomich Hotel and an excellent lunch. We try to stay off the roads as much as possible so followed farm tracks and paths up to a forest where we had a rest in the warm sunshine out of the cool breeze. A brisk shower had us sheltering under the trees and a nearby bothy was a welcome haven for the night with a coal fire and a dram provided by two other Challengers. Bothy floors being hard, we were all up early and soon away heading East for Drumnadrochit which we reached after several miles of forest tracks and limited views, mainly of trees.

A local boatman provides a ferry service across Loch Ness (permitted within the rules!) and we were on the second crossing the next morning as the boat only takes 12 at a time. The old pier at Inverfarigaig was even more dilapidated than we remembered from our previous crossing, but it was in 2004! A road walk followed for the rest of the morning and after a lunch break in a sunny hollow sheltered from the strengthening breeze the waterproofs were soon on for an uphill pull into the Monadhliath. We watched a red kite hanging in the wind and only seconds later a particularly strong gust caught Irene off balance and she was blown over into the ditch landing heavily on her left leg. After removing her rucksack, it was still several minutes before she was able to think of moving. Fortunately, a bothy was only a few minutes walk away so we were soon there and had a hot drink to restore morale. We decided we had gone far enough as it was still very windy with passing showers so we had an early evening meal and found a sheltered spot for the tent below a high bank as the stone floor of the bothy didn't appeal. It was still windy the next morning, but at least the sun was shining as we crossed the high ground passing the large Dumnaglas wind farm before dropping down to a track in Glen Mazeran. Thick banks of gorse and the warm sun brought the wonderful scent of coconut from the bushes as we followed the track to the road and the River Findhorn. A short stretch of road beside the river, a bridge and another track and we were heading uphill again for a crossing of the high ground with lots of tracks and lines of grouse butts which brought us to Isharn and, familiar territory for those of us who visit Boat of Garten, a campsite by the Sluggain Bridge. A cold night followed with raindrops freezing on the tent, but the morning was again bright for the walk through the woods to the A9 and on to Boat of Garten meeting the Jacksons from Alabama again last seen on the first day. A lunch at the cafe next to the shop, a visit to the Post Office to send home maps no longer needed, then the Speyside Way to Nethybridge and a night at the quirky Lazy Duck campsite completed our first week

A road walk next morning took us out to Dorbrack Lodge then tracks over the hills to Tomintoul where we had booked into the hostel. They had overbooked us so sent us down to the Glenavon Hotel where we were comfortably accommodated paying the normal hostel overnight charge. The meals were extra but it was still a great bargain! Fortified by a full breakfast it was waterproofs on and out into the rain for our wettest day of the trip, South by the River Avon to Inchrory on to Loch Builg and along the River Gairn (a tributary of the Dee) to camp by the bridge. The rain relented in the evening, the sky cleared and another cold night followed, but it stayed dry the next day for the walk to Ballater over the Graham of Geallaig which gave us a view of Lochnagar. The Ballater campsite, now repaired after the storm damage of 18 months ago, is a gathering point for many Challengers and we met several old friends there and at the Alexandra Hotel which is a fine watering hole.

We stocked up with food for the last few days to the coast, walked along the Deeside Way (the old railway line) to Dinnet, crossed the River Dee, followed tracks over to Glentanar then the Firmounth route up out of the forest before turning East to drop down to camp near Birse Castle. The tent was up just in time as the heavens opened and thunder rumbled a couple of times later in the night. A sunny morning for the half day walk to the Feughside caravan and campsite and a lazy afternoon before a good meal at the nearby Feughside Inn. Chatting to the landlady we discovered that she came from Dornie and her mother ran a B&B there! Another sunny day as we headed East by the road before entering the Fetteresso forest

where the installation of a large windfarm and a myriad of confusing tracks ended with us fighting our way through the trees to a stretch of open moorland where we camped. The evening was hot and sunny and gave us the warmest night we had ever experienced camping on a Challenge. The next morning was equally hot so we decided to stay out of the forest and soon reached a farm road that took us down to the public road and East to Stonehaven. A cold drink then the short walk out to Dunottar Castle, down to the shore and hot feet were soon in the cold North Sea. Other Challengers were celebrating nearby and we were treated

to a glass of fizz and smoked salmon.

At the Challenge dinner in Montrose that evening Irene was presented with a plaque to mark her 10th crossing. Another crossing next year? No, but we will be helping out as volunteers.