

The Best Of Three

Ticking off a triple helping of spectacular Highland Munros

by FIONA RUSSELL

REACHING the second mountain summit of the day in the spectacular Highlands area of Glen Carron, a quiet confidence seeps in.

A glance at my watch reveals it has taken three and a half hours to summit two Munros – Sgùrr Chòinnich and now Sgùrr a'Chaorachain.

My husband Gordon and I have covered 11km (seven miles) and climbed almost 1220m (4000ft) – and it is not yet lunchtime.

"Not bad," I thought, especially after so many months away from the mountains due to Covid-19 restrictions.

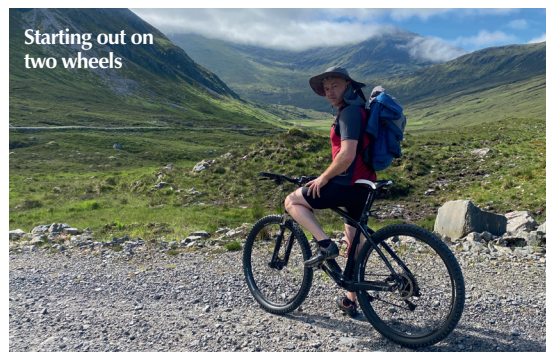
"Just one more Munro to do. It's not so difficult is it?"

My husband's face reveals more doubt than I was hoping for. "I'm not sure we are even halfway," he says.

He is right. Without properly considering the facts, I've falsely congratulated our progress. Looking ahead at the route on paper, I realise we are barely a third of the way.

The day had started with an almost continuous uphill bike ride from a forest car park at Achnashellach, just off the A890 at just 60m (200ft) above sea level. We had pushed hard, climbing almost 250m (800ft) in the first leg.

It was a challenging way to launch a big mountain



Starting out on two wheels



Cairn at the summit of Sgùrr Chòinnich



High-rise views of mountains

Kit List

- ▲ Mountain bike and puncture repair kit
- ▲ Bike helmet
- ▲ Walking boots or trail shoes
- ▲ Walking clothes
- ▲ Waterproof jacket
- ▲ Gloves and hat
- ▲ Spare layers, including an insulated jacket
- ▲ Rucksack
- ▲ Food and water
- ▲ Map and compass



"Ascent has many false rises and summits"

We stop to refill our already near-empty water bottles and enjoy the high-rise views of mountains all around. The sun shines and clouds float away.

Heading towards a low rise between the western flanks of Sgùrr Chòinnich and another mountain, Sgùrr na Feartaig, the ascent once again steepens.

Turning east, our route winds round and between the rocky crags of our first Munro summit. A few short, scrambling sections call for hands and feet, but it's easily manageable.

Finally we reach a high point of 998m (3277ft) and a small cairn. The views are breathtaking, with mountains near and far including Torridon and the Fisherfield Forest.

Leaving our vantage point, we continue east to the far end of the summit ridge and descend on rocky terrain.

The path comes and goes but it's mostly easily visible.

top tip

We refilled our water bottles in the rushing waters of Allt Leathad an Tobair.

Suddenly, we are treated to a stunning vista over Loch Monar far below before we start another climb.

Although steep, the path zigzags upwards and before too long we've reached the second summit, Sgùrr a'Chaorachain at 1052m (3454ft) above sea level. At the large shelter cairn, two other walkers are resting and we stop to exchange Munro-bagging stories.

More fantastic panoramic views include easily-recognisable Torridon summits to the north and the Munro, Lurg Mhor, to the south.

It's here that my previous confidence is dented with the realisation of how far we still have to walk.

Yet I'm upbeat because I've bagged two of my last few Munros. My tally of 276 Munros has taken me a decade and only in recent years has it seemed possible I might one day complete it. »

A stunning vista
over Loch Monar



As we descend, at first on a faint path and then by tramping over a rough terrain of grass, moss and rocks, then peat hags and bog, we dare to look upwards to the next summit.

The huge hulk of Maoile Lunndaigh looms ahead and to the distant east. I question our sanity and then notice another solo walker making far quicker progress behind us.

Normally, Gordon and I are quite swift Munro baggers but it feels like we are hiking through treacle.

With heavy, tired legs we are committed to the three Munros, though we're both lacking our usual enthusiasm.

We spot a faint path, which we had not expected, rising up the first western flanks of the mountain and make a beeline for it. Fortunately, the weather is still fine and the views continue to provide superb rewards as we climb laboriously uphill.

The ascent of Maoile Lunndaigh proves to be one of many false rises and summits. We climb upwards, finding short sections of paths in between thick and pathless vegetation again.

Carn nan Fiaclan at 995m (3267ft) – almost as high as the first Munro – gives false hope, before a small cairn – also not the summit – rises ahead on the wide final ridge hike of Maoile Lunndaigh.

And so it goes on, until we start to wonder whether we have missed the summit. Finally, there it is, a large cairn marking the high point of 995m (3297ft). Taking care not to say anything to Gordon,

I quietly consult the map to assess how far we still have to go to reclaim our mountain bikes.

My heart drops – especially as I realise I've finished all my food except for a couple of pieces of extremely sugary Scottish tablet.

It takes in excess of another hour to make our northerly descent on the open slopes of rocks, heather and grass before reaching a small lodge and a wooden shelter at Gленаig and then on to a wide track at the base of the glen.

The tablet offers a brief energy boost as we walk in tired silence for another hour back west towards Pollan Buidhe and the relief of swapping feet for wheels.

The ride back to Achnashellach is exquisite. It is a huge relief to be suddenly pedalling easily downhill and eating up the final miles, while also relishing a cooling breeze in early evening temperatures tipping 27C.

The full distance turns out to be 32km (20 miles) with a total ascent of almost 1800m (5900ft). 📍

Wooden shelter
at Gленаig



Three alternative routes:

- ▲ Walk Sgùrr Chòinnich and Sgùrr a'Chaorachain in one outing
- ▲ Walk Maoile Lunndaigh in another outing
- ▲ Walk Sgùrr Chòinnich and Sgùrr a'Chaorachain and add in the Corbett Sgùrr na Feartaig