

Scottish Winter 1984–85

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The Scottish winter season of 84/85 was one of the driest for decades with very little snow. Despite this several hard and classic rock climbs received winter ascents under mainly powder snow conditions. In the Northern Highlands some use was made of a build-up of ice, with routes such as Diamond Five (V) on one of the Horns of Beinn Alligin, by S Chadwick, G Livingston, and G Strange on 10 February. In January, C Maclean and A Nisbet paid a visit to the Fannichs, climbing the excellent Cuileag Corner (IV/V) on the right side of No 3 Buttress of Sgurr nan Clach Geala, and The Ramp Tramp (IV) in the Garbh Choire Mor of An Coileachan.

The Cairngorms gave a higher yield with several Grade VI routes. Tough Guy (VI) on Lochnagar was climbed over two weekends by A Nisbet. On 18 December, Nisbet and Maclean climbed the first three pitches before taking to an escape ramp. Returning on 26 December Nisbet and B Davison succeeded by way of an alternative start and the true finish. This is a fine sustained route with difficult route finding. The crux was a thin crack slanting leftward up an otherwise blank slab.

In the Northern Corries, Ventricle (VI) on Coire an Lochain by Maclean and Nisbet, climbed on 27 December, is perhaps the 'state of the art' for technical difficulty. Maclean led the first two pitches with several overhanging sections requiring much strength. But perhaps the most outstanding ascent in the Cairngorms was the ascent of The Needle on the Shelter Stone Crag later in the season by Maclean and Nisbet. Their ascent took 16 hours for 11 pitches, eight of which were 'very hard'. The most natural winter line was followed, the summer line on the Crack for Thin Fingers being impossible, the approach being very rounded with much ice. Similarly, Nisbet had to quit the Needle Crack at half-height because of verglas. The climbing was mainly by way of torqued axes in cracks, the Shelter Stone being most suitable for this mode of progress. Maclean led the crux.

Ben Nevis had a lean winter. Early in the season D Cuthbertson soloed Centurion in powder snow conditions. M Duff and J Tinker made a steep ascent on No 3 Gully Buttress on 16 March with Direct Route (V/VI), though the exact line is uncertain, the route starting up an icefall somewhere between Green Gully and No 3 Gully Buttress. Earlier in the winter, on 19 January, the same pair climbed Sod's Law (V/VI), taking the buttress left of the chimney of Route I.

Stob Coire nan Lochan in Glencoe saw a desperate ascent on 24 January with Maclean and Nisbet on Unicorn (VI). The corner was followed directly to below the last pitch. Here, darkness forced a left traverse to finish up a back-and-knee chimney. The cliff was under powder snow condition. Leftward on Summit Buttress, an alternative start was made to Spectre (IV) on 1 February

by M Duff, M Garrett, and R Nowak. On the Buachaille Etive Mor, A Paul and D Hawthorn made an ascent of June Crack.

One point which follows on from recent developments in winter climbing is the possibility of rock damage due to the use of axes on routes climbed in summer. Picks are increasingly being used in cracks for progress, and it will be interesting to see whether summer ascenders will have reason to complain. Crampon scratches on rocks are of little event, but cracks may be splintered by picks. Some axes are not designed to take this sort of punishment in any case, and it may be that there will be 'a self-limiting effect'.

