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Scottish Winter 1993-94

Scottish winter climbers will remember the 1993/94 winter as one of the best in recent years. It was a record season with over 140 new routes reported, reflecting a sustained level of intense activity by an ever-increasing number of winter enthusiasts. In contrast to previous lean winters which focused attention on mixed climbs, this season saw the best ice conditions since 1986. Unfortunately, there were few periods of stable weather, an essential ingredient for success on long and difficult winter climbs, so there were only 50 new routes graded V and over, compared with nearly 70 during the more settled winter of 1986. Full details of the winter's routes can be found in the 1994 *Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal*, but a selection of the season's important repeats and significant first ascents are described below.

Northern Highlands

On **Beinn Bhan** there was considerable activity in Coire nam Fhamhair, with the exciting 400m long expedition of *Die Riesenwand* (VI, 5) receiving several ascents. The most important event was the first free ascent of Mick Fowler and Phil Butler's *Great Overhanging Gully* (VI, 7) by Dave Hesleden and Chris Cartwright which had successfully intimidated several strong teams in recent years intent on a repeat. On the nearby **Meall Gorm**, Graeme Ertle and John Lyall found *Blue in the Face* (VI, 7) an unlikely mixed line up the wall to the left of Lobster Gully. Further inland on **Fuar Tholl**, Hesleden and Simon Richardson found the SE cliff in immaculate condition and added *Il Duce* (VII, 7), the much-fancied thin ice line to the left of *Tholl Gate*.

Further north in Torrion, Coire Dubh Mor on **Liathach** was the scene for the boldest new route of the winter when Hesleden and Cartwright climbed the prominent icefall between *Poacher's Fall* and *Test Department*. After a mixed entry pitch, Hesleden tensioned onto the icefall and made a precarious 25m lead up 80° ice only 1 to 2cm thick. Four more pitches up steep (but thicker!) ice then led to the top. *Foobarbundee* is graded VIII,7 and ranks alongside Fowler's *West Central Gully* on Beinn Eighe as the hardest ice climb in the country.

The secluded Coire Ghranda on **Beinn Dearg** came of age with six new IIIs and IVs by Andy Nisbet and Brian Davison. Eager to capitalise on the excellent conditions, Nisbet later indulged in a soloing spree resulting in five new grade IVs and over 600m of new climbing. Further north in **Coigach**, the *Fhidhleir's Nose Direct* (VII, 8) saw its third and fourth winter

ascents over the cold and snowy New Year period. This compelling 300m-high feature is surrounded by sea on three sides and is rarely in condition. On **Quinag**, Roger Webb and Simon Steer made a winter ascent of *Raeburn's Route* on Barrel Buttress (V, 6), and in the far north on **Foinaven**, Neil Wilson took advantage of good ice on **Creag Dubh**, with four new routes in the vicinity of his 1992 route *Overseer*. The best addition was *Columbian Couloir* (V,5) climbed with José Luis Bermúdez.

The Cairngorms

After the intense development of recent years, activity in the Northern Corries was fairly quiet, although three technical snowed-up rock routes were added to Coire an Lochain by Nisbet, Ettle, Bruce Goodlad and Jonathan Preston. The remote Garbh Choire Mor on **Braeriach** was the scene for the hardest addition in the Cairngorms when Nisbet succeeded on *Hot Lips* (VI, 7) on his third visit with Preston and Davison. Also of note was *Virago* (V, 6), the line of grooves and roofs between *She Devil's Buttress* and *Vulcan*, by Roger Everett and Richardson.

Creag Meagaidh

The heavy January snowfall resulted in excellent ice build-up on The Pinnacle, and *The Fly Direct* (VII, 6) saw well over a dozen ascents and is now firmly established as one of Scotland's greatest ice climbs. Further right, Andy Perkins and Nick Woods added *White Knuckle Ride* (VI, 6), a steep thin ice pencil to the left of *Pinnacle Buttress Direct*.

Ben Nevis

Excellent conditions drew the crowds, with routes such as *Astronomy* (VI, 5), *The Shield Direct* (VII, 7), *Gemini* (VI, 6) and *Waterfall Gully True Finish* (VI, 6), which have rarely been in condition over the past few winters, all seeing ascents. There were several new mixed routes with *Slanting Slit* (VI, 6) on Fives Wall by Mal Duff and Steve Greenhaugh, and *The Edge of Beyond* (V, 5) on the East Flank of Tower Ridge by Colin Stead and Doug Lang, being of particular note.

Visiting French guides Godefroy Perroux and François Damilano got the pick of the ice. Perroux and Jim Blyth climbed *Place your Bets* (VI, 6), the prominent icefall joining the slanting rake of *Wendigo*, whilst Damilano pieced together *The Roar of the Bull* (VII, 6), a tenuous line of ice smears between *The Bullroar* and *The Shadow* on Carn Dearg Buttress.

Glen Coe

The most significant ascent was on the Rannoch Wall of **Buachaille Etive Mor** where Mark Garthwaite and Andy Clarke added *Fear of a Flat Planet* (VII, 8) - a very bold hooking exercise. On **Bidean**, Andy Cave and Duff climbed the sensationally steep *Un Poco Loco* (VII, 7) which climbs through the Arch left of *Crypt Route*.

Southern Highlands

Big news here was the long-awaited second ascent of the compelling line of *Messiah* (VII, 7) on **Creag an Socach** by Hesleden and Cartwright in less than optimum conditions in early January. Heavy snow cover made the first two mixed pitches awkward, and the top icy groove was only thinly iced. The third ascent was made by Clarke and Garthwaite in February, who also made a winter ascent of *Punster's Crack* (VI, 8) on **The Cobbler**.

Orkneys: The Old Man of Hoy

In autumn 1994 the Old Man of Hoy was climbed by Mike Banks, with Richard Sykes (aged 61) and Dave Parker. Just approaching his 72nd birthday, Mike established a new age record for the climb, beating his own previous age record which he won several years ago.

A Note on the new Scottish Winter Grading System

In 1992 a two-tier system for grading Scottish winter climbs was introduced. This was a direct result of the dramatic increase in the popularity of Scottish winter climbing, and the surge in standards throughout the 1980s. The new system has gained widespread acceptance and is now used in all new Scottish guidebooks. It works in a similar way to summer E grades, with a Roman numeral encompassing the overall difficulty of the route including seriousness, protection, sustainedness and length. The second digit reflects the technical difficulty of the hardest pitch or crux sequence. It is not intended to use the system for multiple-pitch gradings.

Taken together, the two numbers can either capture the serious nature of a Ben Nevis ice climb, or the well protected technical intricacies of a Cairngorm mixed route. The new Scottish grades should not be confused with the French and Canadian two-tier systems, which grade ice climbs based on their technical difficulty, with an additional seriousness rating.

By adopting an open-ended scale, no downgrading of existing climbs has been necessary, and *Point Five Gully* on Ben Nevis is taken as the benchmark V, 5 ice climb. This great classic is relatively straightforward compared with many recent climbs, and some of the hardest Scottish winter routes, such as *The Needle* on the Shelter Stone, merit grades as high as VIII, 8.

The following table of benchmark routes and keynote grades illustrates how the system works. The benchmark routes are all well known or celebrated climbs and are representative of the main climbing areas.

SCOTTISH WINTER CLIMBS – KEYNOTE GRADES

	Snowed-up Rock	Mixed	Ice Gullies	Thin Face	Ice
	Techniques mainly include torquing and use of frozen turf. Great care must be taken not to damage the rock with peg placements, axe and crampon scratches, etc.	Mainly turf, iced cracks or sections of thin ice. Normally less well protected than snowed-up rock routes	Classic Scottish gullies – mainly ice.	Typical of many Ben Nevis routes – thin ice or névé over steep open slabs. Often very bold with limited protection.	Icefalls or ice smears. Harder routes may involve thin brittle ice or free hanging sections.
IV, 3 IV, 4 IV, 5 IV, 6	– Fingers Ridge Aladdin's Buttress Original The Message	Tough Brown Traverse Observatory Ridge Route Major (Etchachan) –	Green Gully Emerald Gully – –	Brimstone Groove Platform's Rib – –	Farenheit 451 The Screen – –
V, 4 V, 5 V, 6 V, 7	– Mitre Ridge Savage Slit Hooker's Corner	1959 Face Route Scorpion Sticil Face –	Zero Gully Point Five Gully – –	Indicator Wall Orion Direct – –	The Pumpkin Poacher's Fall – –
VI, 5 VI, 6 VI, 7 VI, 8	– Parallel Buttress Fallout Corner Savage	Die Riesenwand Tower Face of the Comb Crypt –	North Post Direct Minus One Gully – –	Slav Route Galactic Hitchhiker – –	Astral Highway Mega Route X – –
VII, 6 VII, 7 VII, 8 VII, 9	– Central Grooves Citadel Ventricle	The White Elephant The Shield Direct Trail of Tears –	The Fly Direct West Central Gully – –	Pointless The Ayatollah – –	The Shroud Tubular Bells – –