



Matt Helliker tracing the crux M6 pitch of *Chancer* on the north-west face of the Tour Ronde. (Jon Bracey)

huge red overhangs (with some dubious rock) with no use of a drill (trad gear and pegs for belays and protection throughout). Tom Ballard climbed more than 60 routes in the Dolomites during the summer, with several first solo ascents. Perhaps the most notable from this talented alpinist and son of the late Alison Hargreaves was the *Toni Egger Memorial Route* on the Rotwand, a 400m VIII+ climbed all free and solo.

Scotland's Dave MacLeod put up an important variation on the north face of the Cime Ovest when he climbed 130m of new ground, which starts up the 1968 *Bauer-Rudolph* aid climb, then continues direct to reach the 8c crux of Alex Huber's *Pan Aroma*, up which it finishes. The new ground features a long endurance pitch of 8a+. MacLeod climbed this with Alan Cassidy, who shortly before had climbed *Bellavista* (8c) on the same face with Rob Sutton.

SIMON RICHARDSON

Scottish Winter 2014-15

The 2015 winter was a remarkable one, and full of contrasts. Although the season was short, starting in December and finishing for many in March, it was an action-packed four months. The weather was often stormy, but the wet autumn meant that as the mountains cooled down in January, the mid-level gullies and smears began to weep copious amounts of ice providing many opportunities for those poised to take advantage. Despite the presence of the ice, the technical highlights were mixed routes: Guy Robertson and Greg Boswell's three new Grade Xs and Boswell's new Grade XII in the Northern Corries. Two of these Grade Xs were climbed on sight and are the start of a new chapter in the history of Scottish winter climbing.

Despite these outstanding successes, opinions are sharply divided as to whether or not it was a good winter. Ice conditions may have been excellent, but with few periods of settled weather, there were limited opportunities to climb. To the frustration of many climbers, many of the best days occurred mid-week. The statistics bear this out with almost 70% of new routes climbed Monday to Friday – a surprising statistic considering that most climbers operate at weekends. As always, flexibility was key and Andy Nisbet, the grand master of Scottish winter climbing, showed the way by being perfectly in tune with weather patterns and making first ascents of many mid-level ice routes.

Grade X Hat Trick

Greg Boswell and Guy Robertson started their remarkable run of cutting-edge routes on 19 January when they made the first ascent of *The Greatest Show on Earth* (X,10) on the north face of Cul Mor in Coigach. This awe-inspiring route takes the blank wall on the right side of Coire Gorm. It is defended by a large overhang and is plum vertical above, and was considered by the last generation to be a problem for the next generation. And so it was – Robertson led the first pitch, a steep icefall leading to a small terrace below the overhang, before handing over to Boswell who then made one of his finest leads by pulling through the roof and climbing the poorly protected wall above. This was the first time a new Grade X had been climbed on sight, although Nick Bullock's lead of the crux pitch of *Nevermore* on Lochnagar last season hinted that this breakthrough was not far away.

Four days later, Robertson and Boswell turned their attention to the 100m-high Broad Terrace Wall on Creag an Dubh Loch. The angle tips



Guy Robertson leading the first pitch of *The Greatest Show on Earth* (X,10) on Cul Mor during the first ascent. The route continues up the wall above starting from the small ice smear up and left of Guy's head. The ascent enters Scottish winter climbing history as the first on-sight of a new Grade X. (Greg Boswell)

considerably the wrong side of vertical between the lines of *Sword of Damocles* and *Culloden*, and in summer this section is breached by two mythical climbs – *Flodden* (E6) and *Range War* (E4). *Range War* is the steeper line, but the first pitch is very vegetated and the route has only been climbed a handful of times since its first ascent by Kenny Spence and Duncan McCallum in July 1983.

Boswell had walked into Dubh Loch seven times to attempt the route, and finally on 22 January the stars aligned; Boswell and Robertson found the cliff white with hoar frost and dripping with icicles and frozen turf. They climbed an alternative first pitch left of the original summer line to the Grass Balcony, a welcome ledge in a sea of overhanging rock. Boswell then led the daunting 35m-long overhanging crux pitch (graded British 6a in summer), pulling on huge reserves of physical and mental strength, leaving Robertson the top pitch of thick bulging ice. The pair gave *Range War (Winter Variation)* the same grade as *The Greatest Show in Earth* at X,10.

Ten days later, Robertson and Boswell teamed up with Uisdean Hawthorn and succeeded on the long sought-after first winter ascent of *The Messiah* on Beinn Bhan. The route was possibly first climbed by Creag Dhu climbers George Shields and Bob Jarvie in summer 1972, but their ascent was not recorded, and the route passed into climbing folklore. The eight-pitch winter route was graded X,10 and completed a remarkable hat trick of three new Grade Xs. 'We didn't intend to go out and climb three new Grade Xs in succession,' Greg explained. 'We've been waiting for these

Greg Boswell just after his spectacular 10 metre fall from *Banana Wall* (XII,12) in Coire an Lochain in the Northern Corries. After lowering down for a rest, Boswell then led the route on his second attempt that day. (Masa Sakano)

routes for the past few seasons, and with the stormy weather this winter, they all came into perfect condition... all the training and route planning paid off... and to have them be three hard routes is the perfect scenario. Scottish winter at its best!

Banana Wall

Greg Boswell's final ground-breaking ascent of the season took place on 25 February when he succeeded on the awe-



inspiring *Banana Wall* (XII,12) in Coire an Lochain on Cairn Gorm, with Masa Sakano. This continuously sustained route, which takes the overhanging wall between *Fallout Corner* and *Bavarinthia*, is only the second route in Scotland ever to be given a Grade XII rating.

Boswell first tried the route in 2011, but after two failed attempts, he abseiled the line to see if it could be protected. The wall is so undercut that he hung too far out to gain any useful information. With four more years of winter experience under his belt and fresh from his superb trio of new Grade Xs, Boswell felt ready for a return visit. On his first attempt he took a 10m fall when a placement ripped. After a break he tried again and successfully led the pitch. Sakano followed and they completed the route in the dark whilst battling a rising storm. 'The route is crazy steep but the protection is there if you can hang on long enough to place it,' Boswell explained. 'It is by far the most sustained thing I've done in Scotland.' Boswell considers *Banana Wall* to be M11, which makes it one of the most difficult technical mixed routes ever climbed by placing the gear on the lead.

Early Season

After a very warm November, the winter season finally got underway in the first week of December, as westerly winds brought snow to the higher tops. As usual, The Northern Corries were the most popular venue and there were ascents of *The Message*, *Pot of Gold*, *Hidden Chimney* and *Invernookie*



Roger Webb nearing the top of the crux pitch of *Tenterhooks* (VII,8) on Ben Nevis during the first ascent.
(Simon Richardson)

in Coire an t-Sneachda, and over in Coire an Lochain, *Savage Slit* and *Ewen Buttress* were also climbed.

The first new route of the season fell to Ally and Gav Swinton on Creagan Cha-no on Cairn Gorm, where they made the first ascent of *Punching Numbers* (VI,7), the steep crack-line right of *Mac's Crack*. A couple of days later on Ben Nevis, Will Sim and Andy Inglis set the pace with the second ascent of *Tomahawk Crack* (VIII,9). This excellent route to the right of Sioux Wall on Number Three Gully Buttress was first climbed by Greg Boswell and Adam Russell in November 2012.

Ferocious storms the following week relented in mid-December providing a welcome weather window. Martin Moran and Robin Thomas visited Beinn Eighe and made the first winter ascent of *Boggle* (VIII,8) on the Eastern Ramparts. 'It was worth the wait and a special thrill to climb a Robin Smith route in winter,' Moran said afterwards. The same day, Guy Robertson and Greg Boswell pulled off the second ascent of *Culloden* (IX,9) on Creag an Dubh Loch's formidable Broad Terrace Wall. This exceptionally steep summer E2 was first climbed in winter by Iain Small, Gordon Lennox and Tony Stone in December 2010. *Culloden* was an inspired route choice as Creag an Dubh Loch is not normally considered an early season venue.

The weather on the run-up to Christmas continued stormy and unsettled but as ever, Andy Nisbet was on hand to visit the right place at the right time. On Stob Ban he made the first ascent of *Flying Saucer* (VI,7) with Steve Perry and on Aonach Mor he added *Gonzo* (IV,4) to the Ribbed Walls with Jonathan Preston.

The weather finally settled down between Christmas and New Year and Uisdean Hawthorn and Murdoch Jamieson nipped in for the second ascent

of *Boggle* on Beinn Eighe – an unusually quick repeat of a major route. Three days later, Hawthorn teamed up with Callum Johnson on Ben Nevis to climb *Super G* (VI,6) on the Little Brenva Face. This ephemeral ice route had probably not had a second ascent since it was first climbed by Hannah Burrows-Smith and Dave McGimpsey in March 2002. Also on the Ben, Iain Small and Tony Stone had a productive couple of days making third ascents of *The Brass Monkey* (VII,8) and *The Great Corner* (VIII,8).

Across in Glen Coe, Andy Nelson, Kenny Grant and Keith Ball added an excellent mixed route to Stob Coire nan Lochan. The sustained three-pitch *Tried and Tested* (VII,7) climbs the chimney-corner formed by the spur of Central Buttress and the wall of *Satyr* and was described as being 'at the sporty end of its grade.' Roger Webb and Simon Richardson took advantage of a short sudden freeze after the New Year thaw to make the first ascent of *Tenterhooks* (VII,8) on Ben Nevis. This steep, icy mixed climb on Creag Coire na Ciste between *Central Rib* and *Tinkerbelle* brought the first part of the season to a close as more storms rushed in from the Atlantic.

Cold and Snowy

The stormy weather finally settled down in mid-January and a cold and snowy spell set in. The snow line was low, which made route choice difficult, but winter climbers are becoming increasingly adept at hunting out the most appropriate venues for the prevailing conditions, and soon a host of excellent routes were being climbed.

Many of the most notable ascents were early repeats, and Erik Baillot and Rob Bryniarski set the ball rolling with the second ascent of *The Sea, The Sea* on Slioch. This legendary Grade VII was first climbed by Roger Webb and Neil Wilson 20 years ago and is the second winter route on Slioch's huge Atlantic Wall to see a repeat. Clearly on a roll, Baillot made the third winter ascent of *Enigma* (VII,7) on Mainreachan Buttress the following weekend, and nearby, Andy Inglis and Will Sim made the second winter ascent of the technical *Pale Rider* (VIII,9) on Beinn Eighe. Further north, Helen Rennard and Simon Yearsley made the third winter ascent of *Castro* (VII,7) on Sgurr an Fhithleir and two days later Rennard joined the small group of climbers who have climbed this magnificent feature more than once in winter, by making an ascent of the *Nose Direct* (VII,7) with Simon Davidson and Neil Silver.

The relatively low-lying Giant's Wall on Beinn Bhan saw the most activity however, with an early repeat of *The Godfather* (VIII,8) by Neil Adams and Graham McGrath and the second ascent of *Godzilla* (IX,9) by Iain Small, Murdoch Jamieson and Andy Inglis. Small and Jamieson returned a few days later to make the second ascent of *The God Delusion* (IX,9). This Robertson-Benson creation from 2008 is considered one of the most demanding winter routes in the Northern Highlands and was described by Small as 'a masterpiece in route finding.'

Elsewhere in the north-west, Andy Nisbet, Jonathan Preston and Dave McGimpsey added *Jinky* (V,5) to the Western Cliffs of Quinag which



Murdoch Jamieson leading pitch 6 of *The God Delusion* (IX,9) on The Giant's Wall on Beinn Bhan. (Iain Small)

are always a good choice when snow levels are low, and James Edwards and Neil Wilson found *Sideshow* (IV,6), a good looking chimney-line in Coire Gorm on Cul Mor. Over on Mainreachan Buttress, Iain Small and Murdoch Jamieson climbed a spectacular series of bulging ice pitches approximating to the summer route *Private Eye* (VIII,8), and further east, Andy Nisbet and Jonathan Preston added *Twerk* (V,5) to the rarely visited Coire nan Eun in the Fannaichs.

Classic Conditions

In early February the temperature rose, but cold clear nights transformed the snow into névé and the drainage lines filled with ice. On the west face of Aonach Beag, Andy Nisbet and Steve Perry had a great day climbing *Axiom* (III), the central gully on the lower face (a line so obvious that everyone thought it had been done before), *Santa* (V,5), the icy corner left of Prominent Chimney, and the steep *Right-Hand Branch to Bottleneck Gully* (VII,7).

But Ben Nevis was where the finest conditions were to be found, especially on the mid-height ice routes. The snow was frozen hard and the bright sunny weather made it feel more like spring than early February. For the first time in many years *Gemini* and *The Shield Direct* on Carn Dearg Buttress came into excellent condition and both routes saw dozens of ascents. Nearby, *The Bewildabeast* (VI,6), a Mark Garthwaite–Adam Wainwright route from 1995 saw its first ever repeats with all the parties raving about the quality of the climbing and the sensational positions.

On the new route front, Malcolm Bass, Simon Yearsley and Neil Silver succeeded on a long-standing objective with the first ascent of *Cousinade* (VII,8). This route climbs the front face of Cousin's Buttress using a steep groove spotted by Bass on the second of his previous attempts with Yearsley in 2013. Pride of place went to Andy Inglis and Iain Small for their first winter ascent of *Teufel Grooves* (IX,9) on Raeburn's Buttress. This steep route takes the hanging corner on the right flank, but rather than start up the summer HVS which uses the first section *The Crack*, Small found an independent direct entry. Inglis then made a superb lead of the crux pitch. 'It looked very intimidating from below,' Small explained. 'It was an overhanging corner-crack that had no hooks, just torques, and at the belay Andy's ropes were hanging free in space. Yeah, it was steep!'

As February progressed, the focus increasingly turned to ice and Uisdean Hawthorn climbed an impressive triptych of routes. He started off with the first ascent of *Han Solo* (VIII,7) on Ben Nevis, a thin ice drool hanging above the first pitch of *Storm Trooper* on the left side of Creag Coire na Ciste. 'Uisdean's lead of the smear was impressive,' Guy Robertson commented later. 'The ice was maybe only about three inches thick at best, and a lot thinner in places. All in all it was a pretty cool cerebral experience and I'd have thought one of the harder bits of ice the Ben has to offer.' The next day Hawthorn linked up with Iain Small and Murdoch Jamieson to make an ascent of *The Fly Direct*, the highly prized thin ice gully on Creag Meagaidh's Pinnacle Buttress. Seeing that the neighbouring *Extasy* (a Grade VIII that you really shouldn't fall off) was in condition, the trio returned the following day to make the fourth ascent. 'I would have been delighted to climb just one of these routes in a season but to climb them both in two days, after doing a new route on Ben Nevis the day before, left me on a high,' Uisdean said afterwards.

Ice conditions improved further on Ben Nevis and many teams took their fill on rarely formed modern classics such as such as *The Shroud*, *Mega*



Steve Perry below the Tower during the first winter ascent of the 470m-long *Tower Ridge* (V,6) on the north-west face of Ben Hope. (Andy Nisbet)

Route X and *Boomer's Requiem*. Michael Barnard and John MacLeod took advantage of the rarely formed ice to make the first ascent of *Shear Fear* (VI,5), the direct continuation to *Vanishing Gully* and the steep *Superdirect Finish* (VI,5) to *Nordwand Direct*.

More mixed in nature was *Inception* (V,7) a line of grooves and chimneys

in the Fawly Towers area of Secondary Tower Ridge by Steve Holmes and Duncan Curry, and the technical *Red Dragon* (VIII,9) by Dave MacLeod and Helen Rennard that takes the steep crack and wall just left of *The Urchin* on the east side of Tower Ridge. Also on the Ben, seasoned regulars Dave Rudkin and Keith Ball notched up an important repeat with the second winter ascent of *The Crack* (VIII,8) on the front face of Raeburn's Buttress. Further east, Andy Nisbet, Steve Perry and Dan Bailey added the excellent-looking line of *Navigator* (VI,6) to Stob a'Choire Mheadhoin, a secluded cliff that can only be seen from the West Highland Railway.

Nisbet and Perry had an impressive run in the North West notching up *Barbie* (V,6) on Beinn Liath Mhor (with Sandy Allan), *Batman* (VI,7) on the Northern Pinnacles face of Mullach nan Rathain on Liathach and the first winter ascent of *Tower Ridge* (V,6) on Ben Hope. The last route was something of a coup being 470m long and snatched in fairytale conditions of deep rime in advance of a warm front rushing up from the south. Guy Robertson and Uisdean Hawthorn made a successful raid on An Teallach and came away with the first ascent of *Low Riders* (VII,8), a prominent line of corners on the steep lower section of Minor Rib.

In the Cairngorms, Nisbet and Perry continued their good run with first ascents of the icy *Blood Hound* (VI,6) on Lurcher's Crag (again with Sandy Allan) and the steep *Waive Wall* (V,7) in the rarely visited Coire Garbhlach. The most impressive achievement in the Cairngorms however was visiting German climber Ines Papert's ascent of *The Hurting* (XI,11) in Coire an t-Sneachda. This was the fifth overall and first female ascent, but these statistics only tell half the story. The route was climbed on the last day of her visit (after an attempt two days before) during terrible weather with winds gusting over 100mph on the tops. Papert's fall-free ascent of *The Hurting* is almost certainly the finest yet, but remarkably this 10-year-old test-piece still awaits an onsite ascent.

Late Season Blues

The weather finally settled down in the middle of March allowing Iain Small to make two excellent additions to Ben Nevis. Starting off with Blair Fyffe, he climbed the *Piece Maker* (VIII,9), a steep mixed line between *Cleftanger* and *The Angry Chair*, on the east flank of Tower Ridge. This high and sheltered part of the mountain retains mixed climbing conditions longer than other venues. Two days later Small teamed up with Uisdean Hawthorn to make the first ascent of *Call Me Ishmael* (VIII,9) on Indicator Wall, an ephemeral and challenging route to the left of *Stormy Petrel*.

Perhaps the most noteworthy late season event however was the development of An Riabhachan by Andy Nisbet who climbed a remarkable 17 new routes in three days. This remote corrie had only been visited a couple of times before by winter climbers and illustrates the remaining potential for exploratory mountaineering potential in the Scottish Highlands. And needless to say Nisbet's visits were perfectly timed, as by the end of March the spring thaw had well and truly set in.