

SIMON RICHARDSON

Scottish Winter 2015-16



Adrian Crofton about to be 'bamboozled' on the first ascent of *Bamboozle Buttress* (V,6) in Corrie Bonhard. The route eventually went up and left. (Simon Richardson)

The 2016 winter started late and finished early, and is unlikely to go down as one of the great Scottish seasons. Snow came late to the mountains, and even through December, winter climbing was a start-stop affair with frequent thaws. The mountains were then hit by an almost unprecedented series of storms over the Christmas-New Year period, which made climbing almost impossible; the trend continued through January and February with ferocious winds. As the weather cooled down in February, the gales transported and redistributed the snow causing dangerous avalanche conditions and making mountain travel difficult. Despite the challenges, there was a high level of activity, mainly centred on calmer periods in the middle of January and February and a glorious weekend at the end of February. A major thaw in early March brought most climbing activity to an abrupt halt, although cool weather later in April brought the classic ice routes on Ben Nevis back into condition.

The most significant event was the first repeat of *Anubis* on Ben Nevis by Swiss climber Dani Arnold. The first winter ascent of this overhanging summer E8 on The Comb was made by Dave MacLeod in February 2010. It is widely regarded as the most difficult winter route on Ben Nevis, and along with *Banana Wall* in the Northern Corries, it is the only route in Scotland that merits a Grade XII rating. Arnold is perhaps best known for setting speed records on the north faces of the Eiger and the Matterhorn, but he also made an early repeat of *The Hurting* in the Northern Corries in 2012 so is no stranger to top end Scottish mixed. He succeeded on *Anubis* on his second visit: conditions were too warm in January, but the cliff was well frozen and well rimed up in March. Continental climbers have visited Ben Nevis in winter for many years, however most have focused on the classic snow and ice routes. Dani Arnold's repeat of *Anubis* is undoubtedly the most difficult Scottish ascent ever achieved by an overseas visitor.

Gates of Paradise

The finest new route of the season took place in February when Iain Small and Murdoch Jamieson climbed *Gates of Paradise* (VIII,8) on Church Door Buttress in Glen Coe. This spectacular route starts further right than the existing summer routes and climbs overhanging mixed ground to gain a hanging icicle. Small had noticed the icicle start to form when he made the second ascent of *Crusade* (VII,8) with Uisdean Hawthorn earlier in the season. 'The line had formed up into some ice-coated lower walls and slabs from the dripping icicle fringe, then a steep mixed section to roofs and through them to gain the icicles,' Iain explained. 'The main pitch started up a rather run-out icy arête leading to a strenuous roof with a knee-bar rest on an icy tufa-like feature. A hard pull then gained the ice and some short screws after which it was all over. With it being short, but intense, we thought VIII, 8 might cover it.' The grade should be treated with respect, as Small is reluctant to give relatively short routes a grade IX rating.

Earlier in the season in Glen Coe, Small and Uisdean Hawthorn made the first winter ascent of *Shadhava* (VIII,9) a summer E3 on the right wall



Iain Small just reaching the hanging icicle on the crux pitch of *Gates of Paradise* (VIII,8) during the first ascent. This very steep route lies high up on the right side of Church Door Buttress in Glen Coe. (Murdoch Jamieson)

of *Unicorn* in Stob Coire nan Lochan, and Mark Chadwick and Simon Tietjen added *Moonshine* (V,7) to Lost Valley Buttress. Further south, Dave MacLeod had a good day with Helen Rennard making the first winter ascent of *Southern Freeze* (IX,9), an E2 on The Cobbler's South Peak.

The Cairngorms

The wild weather and difficult snow conditions limited exploratory activity in the Cairngorms, although Andy Nisbet used the west-facing aspect of Lurcher's Crag to his advantage and added nine new routes. The finest additions of *Have an Ice Day* (V,5), *The Force Awakens* (VI,6) and *Snowbird* (VI,7) were climbed with Steve Perry and took advantage of early season ice. Glen Clova proved to be a sheltered venue away from the westerly gales and saw activity from Henning Wackerhage, Adrian Crofton, Sophie Grace Chappell and Simon Richardson. The finest routes were *The Age of Enlightenment* (VI,7) in Corrie Farchal, *Bamboozle Buttress* (V,6) in Corrie Bonhard and *King Herod* (VI,7), an unusual pinnacle-like feature on Cairn Broadlands.

Early in the season, the Northern Corries saw third ascents of *Pfugga-lule* (VIII,9) by Andy Inglis and Neil Adams, *Swallowtail Pillar* (VII,8) by Dave Almond and Ian Parnell, and *Babes in the Wood* (VIII,8) by Almond and Helen Rennard. Uisdean Hawthorn and Tom Livingstone also made the second ascent of *The Vapouriser* (VIII,8) on Creag an Dubh Loch. Big news in the Cairngorms however, was two ascents of *The Needle* (VIII,8) on the Shelter Stone the same weekend by Inglis and Adams, and Parnell and



Nick Bullock leading the thin ice smear on *Capricorn* (VIII,7) on Ben Nevis. This outstanding two-pitch addition climbs the thin snaking ice line directly above the twin grooves of *Gemini* on the north face of Carn Dearg. (Tim Neill)

Kenton Cool. Although *The Needle* was first climbed in winter as long ago as February 1985 by Andy Nisbet and Colin MacLean, it is still regarded as one of Scotland's big grade VIIIs, so ascents on consecutive days was something of a landmark event.

Central Highlands

New route activity on Ben Nevis was unusually quiet although a couple of good pitches were added in January. John Crook and Pete Graham climbed the bold *Gothic Edge* (VII,7) up the arête left of the *Gargoyle Cracks* on Number Three Gully Buttress, and Ramon Marin and Douglas Russell found *Tangerine Dream* (VII,8) the prominent chimney-crack to the left of *The Rattler* on South Trident Buttress. Later in the season Nick Bullock and Tim Neill tip-toed up *Capricorn* (VIII,7), the ice smear that often forms to the left of the twin grooves of *Gemini* on Carn Dearg Buttress, and Dave MacLeod added a serious mixed route on the east face of Tower Ridge. The two-pitch *Night Fury* (IX,9) had seen a couple of prior attempts and lies just left of *The Urchin*.

On Creag Meagaidh, Simon Richardson teamed up with Henning Wackerhage, Pat Ingram and Roger Everett to explore an attractive unclimbed, mixed buttress in Coire Choille-rai. *Birthday Route* (IV,4) and *Cat Burglar* (V,5) took the obvious lines of weakness on the left side of the cliff, and the full challenge of the buttress was met with *The Day After Tomorrow* (VII,8) that climbs the front face.

Northern Highlands

The cold weather in January resulted in a number of significant repeats in the Northern Highlands. On Beinn Eighe, the spectacular *Shoot the Breeze* (IX,8) saw its second ascent courtesy of Andy Inglis, Iain Small and Murdoch Jamieson, and Jamieson also repeated *Bruised Violet* (VIII,8) with Guy Steven and *Immortal Memory* (IX,8) with Ian Parnell and Uisdean Hawthorn. Other notable second ascents include *Reach for the Sky* (VII,6) on Mainrechan Buttress by Inglis and Small, and *Fishmonger* (VI,6) on Foinaven by Erick Baillot and Dave Kerr.

The most significant addition to the Northern Highlands took place in mid February on Beinn Bhan when Malcolm Bass, Neil Silver and Simon Yearsley climbed the eight-pitch *Nam Famhairean* (VII,7) in Coire nam Fhamair. This major expedition takes a mirror image line to *Der Riesenwand* on the Giant's Wall and shares a pitch at half-height. Later in the month, Beinn Bhan proved a popular location as its proximity to the sea meant it avoided most of the heavy snowfall inland, and multiple ascents were made of *The Godfather*, *Gully of the Gods* and *Great Overhanging Gully*. Also on Beinn Bhan, Andy Nisbet, Dave McGimpsey and Steve Perry climbed an excellent, three pitch *Direct Start* (V,5) to *Wall of the Early Morning Light* resulting in one of the longest ice routes in the country. Further south in Knoydart, Roger Webb and Simon Richardson added the long and serious *Tir na h-aoise* (VI,6) to the 400m-high Spider Buttress on Ladhar Beinn.

Cul Mor in Coigach saw a couple of good thin ice additions with the first winter ascent of *Buffalo Ballet* (VII,7) on the south face by Rennard and Richardson and the first ascent of *The Wrecking Light* (VIII,7) in Coire Gorm by Nick Bullock, Andy Inglis and Guy Robertson. The latter team also made the long-awaited second ascent of Mick Fowler and Dave Wilkinson's *Ice Bomb* in Beinn Dearg's Coire Ghranda adding a spectacular *Direct Finish* in the process.

Skye

The Cuillin on Skye provided several of the season's finest exploratory routes spearheaded by local guide and guidebook author, Mike Lates. The Skye Winter Festival in mid January saw some excellent additions, notably the first winter ascent of *Crack of Dawn* (VIII,8) on Sgurr Mhic Choinnich by James and Doug Sutton. Mark Francis and Dave Bowdler climbed the excellent *North Rib* (IV,5) of Banachdaich Gully, and Lates made the first winter ascent of *Owl Chimney* (IV,5), but it was Michael Barnard who proved most prolific with several difficult new routes including *The Bogeyman* (VI,7) and *Mr Charlie* (VI,7) on the Stone Shoot face of Sgurr Thearlaich.

Spurred on by Mike Lates' informative reports, several parties made traverses of the Cuillin Ridge in February. Conditions were excellent which led to a six-hour record time by Finlay Wild and Sam Gomersall, and an eight-hour solo traverse by Uisdean Hawthorn. Attention then swung to the ice routes when Lates made the second ascent of *White Wedding* (IV,4) with Mark Francis. This route was first climbed by Mick Fowler, Victor



Uisdean Hawthorn on the third pitch of *Immortal Memory* (IX,9) during the second ascent. This demanding winter-only line on the Far East Wall of Beinn Eighe was first climbed by Guy Robertson and Jason Currie in January 2013. (Murdoch Jamieson)

Saunders and Chris Watts almost exactly 30 years ago. News of their ascent focused attention on the other great Fowler-Saunders route, *Icicle Factory* (VI,6) on Sgurr a'Mhadaidh. James Sutton, Ben Wear and John Smith just beat Uisdean Hawthorn, Adam Russell and Dougie Russell to the coveted second ascent, who instead, added *Spectacula* (VI,6), the prominent line of ice to the left, before abseiling down to make the third ascent of *Icicle Factory*. The following day Hawthorn and Lea MacLeod made the first ascent of *Spirulina* (V,5), the line of ice between these two routes.

Across on the Coruig side of the Cuillin, Andy Nisbet, Steve Perry, Dave McGimpsey and Sandy Allan had a good run of new ice routes including *The Inaccessible Icefall* (IV,4), *Griffin* (III,4) and *Skyefall* (IV,5). In a winter of difficult and testing conditions it was ironic that the most fickle venue of all, namely the Cuillin on Skye, should provide some of the finest routes of the season, but then that's Scottish winter climbing for you.