



Scottish Grade X Onsights

Scotland

Scottish winter climbing continues to go from strength to strength and remains a fascinating blend of the traditional and modern. Bolts are not allowed and protection needs to be placed on the lead. Several years ago this was thought to be a limitation, but leashless tools and dry-tool training have increased skill and fitness levels, and recent seasons have seen an explosion in activity and standards. Not long ago, a new grade VIII was headline news, but nowadays several grade IXs are put up each season, and grade XII has been climbed. [Scottish winter climbs receive an overall difficulty grade using a Roman numeral, and a second grade, using an Arabic numeral, for the technical difficulty of the hardest moves.] The vision is to climb ever more challenging lines in perfect style.

In 2013 the chilling prospect of an onsight grade X became very close to reality with a winter ascent of Nevermore on the Tough-Brown Face of Lochnagar. This rarely repeated summer E2 (hard 5.10) was first climbed by Dougie Dinwoodie and Bob Smith in August 1981 and takes a direct line up the face between Post Mortem and Mort. Guy Robertson had made four attempts on the route, spread over three seasons, when he teamed up with Nick Bullock in April 2013. Bullock led the challenging second pitch (thought to be IX,10 in its own right), leaving Robertson the crucial fifth pitch. After some hesitation, Robertson pulled over the roof but then fell.

With the onsight lost, Robertson handed over the ropes to Bullock, who soon passed the high point and pushed into the unknown. The climbing difficulties above the second overlap increased, and there was no more gear until the angle eased. "I took a long time, as the technicalities were brain ache-inducing, stomach-churning," Bullock wrote later. "Terror was the tang of battery terminals licked." Bullock kept his cool, and a winter ascent of Nevermore was finally a reality.

A dozen or so grade IX first ascents had previously been climbed onsight—Nevermore was graded X,10. Of course, given the prior attempts, Nevermore was not a perfect first ascent, but it had been climbed in better style than the handful of grade XI and XII winter routes in Scotland, which typically benefitted from pre-inspection, multiple attempts, or prior knowledge from summer ascents.

The 2014 winter was poor for mixed climbing, and the 2015 season was stormy and started late. However, a wet autumn meant that as the mountains cooled down in January, the mid-level gullies and smears began to weep copious amounts of ice. Activity levels were high, but the clear highlight was three new grade X's by Robertson and Greg Boswell.

They started their remarkable run on January 19, 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, which is defended by a large overhang. The line had been considered a problem for the next generation. Robertson led the first pitch, a steep icefall leading to a small terrace below the overhang. Boswell then made one of his finest ever leads, pulling through the roof and climbing the poorly protected wall above. A new grade X had been climbed onsight at last!

Four days later, Robertson and Boswell turned their attention to the 100m-high Broad Terrace Wall on Creag an Dubh Loch in the Southern Cairngorms. The angle tips 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). The first pitch of Range War is

very vegetated, and the route has only been climbed a handful of times (in summer) since its first ascent in July 1983.

Boswell had visited the remote Dubh Loch seven times to attempt the route, and finally, on January 22, the stars aligned. Boswell and Robertson climbed an alternative first pitch left of the original line, and Boswell then led the daunting 35m crux pitch (graded 6a in summer), pulling on huge reserves of physical and mental strength, and leaving Robertson the top pitch of thick bulging ice. The pair gave Range War (winter variation) X,10.

Ten days later, Robertson and Boswell teamed up with Uisdean Hawthorn and succeeded on the long-sought first winter ascent of the Messiah on the forbidding vertical walls of Beinn Bhan in the Northern Highlands. This route was first done by George Shields and Bob Jarvie in the summer of 1972, but their ascent was not recorded, and the route had passed into climbing folklore. At the beginning of February, the trio climbed the eight-pitch winter route onsight, grading it X,10, and thus completed a remarkable hat trick of hard new routes—a significant step forward in the development of Scottish winter climbing.

Simon Richardson, U.K.

Images



Pete Benson climbing the challenging second pitch of Nevermore (X,10) on Lochnagar during the fourth attempt in March 2013. Extreme cold and dwindling daylight forced retreat two pitches above. The first ascent finally fell to Nick Bullock and Guy Robertson several weeks later.



Greg Boswell onsighting pitch three of the Messiah, an eight-pitch climb on Beinn Bhan in the Northern Highlands.

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