



AAC Publications

Recent Winter Climbing Highlights

Scotland, The Highlands

The hat trick of new grade Xs climbed ground-up and onsight by Greg Boswell and Guy Robertson during the 2016 season was a landmark for Scottish winter climbing (see AAJ 2016). These two continued to set the pace the following four seasons with challenging new routes in Glen Coe and the Northwest Highlands. These included The Holy Grail (IX,11), the steep crack on the right side of Slime Wall on Buachaille Etive Mor, and The Forge (X,10), the discontinuous crack line bisecting the vertical wall above Hayfork Gully on An Teallach.

Iain Small also made waves with a series of impressive onsight grade IXs on Ben Nevis and in Glen Coe. His finest addition was in 2017 with the stupendous line of The Ninety-Five Theses (IX,9) on Church Door Buttress, which takes the impending groove line and stepped roofs to the right of Gates of Paradise. Few Scottish winter routes overhang from the first move to the very last, especially when much of the progress depends on very thin ice, and there is little doubt this climb set a new level for Scottish icy mixed.

The 2019 season was overshadowed by a terrible accident on Ben Hope on February 5 that took the lives of Andy Nisbet and Steve Perry. The exact details will never be known, but it seems likely they fell from the upper section of a new route they were attempting on the west face. This event took the wind out of everyone's sails. Andy Nisbet, in particular, had such a positive impact on Scottish winter climbing—continuously innovating and taking a great interest in everyone else's activities—that it seemed the game would never feel the same. His winter record is without comparison: By the mid-1990s, he had made first ascents of over a quarter of the 600 or so Scottish routes graded V or higher (likely more than 1,000 new winter routes in all). One has to look to the records of Fred Beckey in North America or Patrick Gabarrou in the Alps to find climbers whose influence has been as long-lasting and profound.

The winter of 2021 saw the emergence of a new guard, and reports were full of new routes by Callum Johnson, Tim Miller, Will Rowland, and Jamie Skelton. Miller and Skelton opened their account with the first winter ascent of Metamorphosis (IX,10), a difficult summer 5.10 on Ben Nevis. But their finest hour was on March 12, when they climbed the three classic Glen Coe VIIs—Neanderthal, Un Poco Loco, and Central Grooves—in a day. Enchainments had been done before in Scotland, but this was the first time such difficult mixed routes had been linked.

The Scottish mountains were battered by almost continuous storms for much of the 2022 season, but despite the challenging weather there were some exceptional performances. Inevitably it was the Boswell-Robertson team that capitalized on the conditions. Their standout additions were The Fear Factory (VII,7, with Hamish Frost), the prominent hanging icicle on the Little Brenva Face and one of the most prized objectives on Ben Nevis, and The Reckoning (X,9) on Hayfork Wall on An Teallach.

This past winter, 2022–23, after some years of consolidation, the pace of new routes at the highest levels stepped up significantly. In December, Boswell and Robertson made headlines with the first winter ascent of Nihilist (IX,9)—an oft-tried problem on Lochnagar—followed by Vortex (X,10), a bold and technical route breaching the main wall on Cul Mor. Miller and Skelton really turned heads with the first winter ascent of Stone Bastion (X,10) on the Shelter Stone in early January. This seven-pitch

route up a sustained summer 5.11 deep in the Cairngorms is one of the longest grade Xs climbed to date and caught everyone's imagination, though a little gloss was taken off when they explained they had pre-inspected the crux pitch from above.

A week later, Boswell revisited Lochnagar with Skelton and Frost. The weather was poor with spontaneous avalanches cascading down the gullies, but Shadow Buttress A was free from danger. Boswell set his sights on the three-meter horizontal roof guarding the blank-looking wall on the right side of the buttress, and after two false starts on the roof, he rounded the lip for an onsight battle with the technical headwall above. The resulting Bring da Ruckus (XII,13) is the highest-graded route in Scotland to date. The two existing XIs (Anubis on Ben Nevis and Banana Wall on Cairn Gorm) had taken numerous separate attempts, but Bring da Ruckus was climbed on the first visit and sits fully within the ground-up ethic. Scottish winter climbing has taken another significant step forward.

— **Simon Richardson, Scotland**

Images



Greg Boswell about to turn the three-meter roof of Bring da Ruckus (XII,13), with the bold technical headwall waiting above. The new route, climbed in January 2023, set a new mark for difficulty in Scottish winter climbing.



Greg Boswell climbing onsight on the headwall of Bring da Ruckus during the first ascent.

Article Details

Author	Simon Richardson
Publication	AAJ
Volume	65
Issue	97
Page	254
Copyright Date	2023
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions