

## MAGRATHEA, CREAG AN DUBH LOCH By Julian Lines



*Creag an Dubh Loch. Photo: Julian Lines.*

BY CONTRAST WITH THE idyll of perfect mountain granite, typically golden spires protruding through virgin white glaciers, British mountain crags are damp, light-starved and somewhat flawed, but we have become immune to the imperfections and in doing so we harbour so much empathy for our remote crags and their climbs. The Dubh Loch is one such mountain crag: a huge whaleback lurking in the backwaters of the Cairngorms, muted by waterfall, secluded on a royal estate all encased in a sub-tundra climate. Coexisting in amongst its craggy matrix of rock, drooling mosses and weeps is a selection of granite climbs with a certain character not found anywhere else in the world. The added attraction of climbing here is the pure freedom to exist in a natural environment where any sort of trespass law has no jurisdiction. It is, in the eyes of some, a utopian wilderness and that is why the Cairngorms, or more rightfully, Scotland, is the most beautiful country on earth in which to go and climb.

My inauguration to the cliff was with Wilson Moir, the lauded king of the crag, having climbed almost every route there. Adders warmed on the approach path, the sky was a deep hypnotic blue, the rock shimmered in the heat, and the lack of wind turned the lochs into mysterious natural mirrors. We camped by the shore and swam then climbed *Voyage of the Beagle*, one of the best E4 mountain routes in the country. From that day on it left me inspired, which made for endless further visits. The Dubh Loch is like a mecca to Aberdonian climbers, and the general feeling with them is that if you have never climbed there then you haven't really existed.

The crag is crudely divided into four distinct cliffs: Broad Terrace Wall, Central Slabs, Central Gully Wall and False Gully wall: all with different aspects, styles, and dimensions. For a cliff more than a kilometre long there are surprisingly few climbs, about eighty maybe, but the majority of them have character and quality.

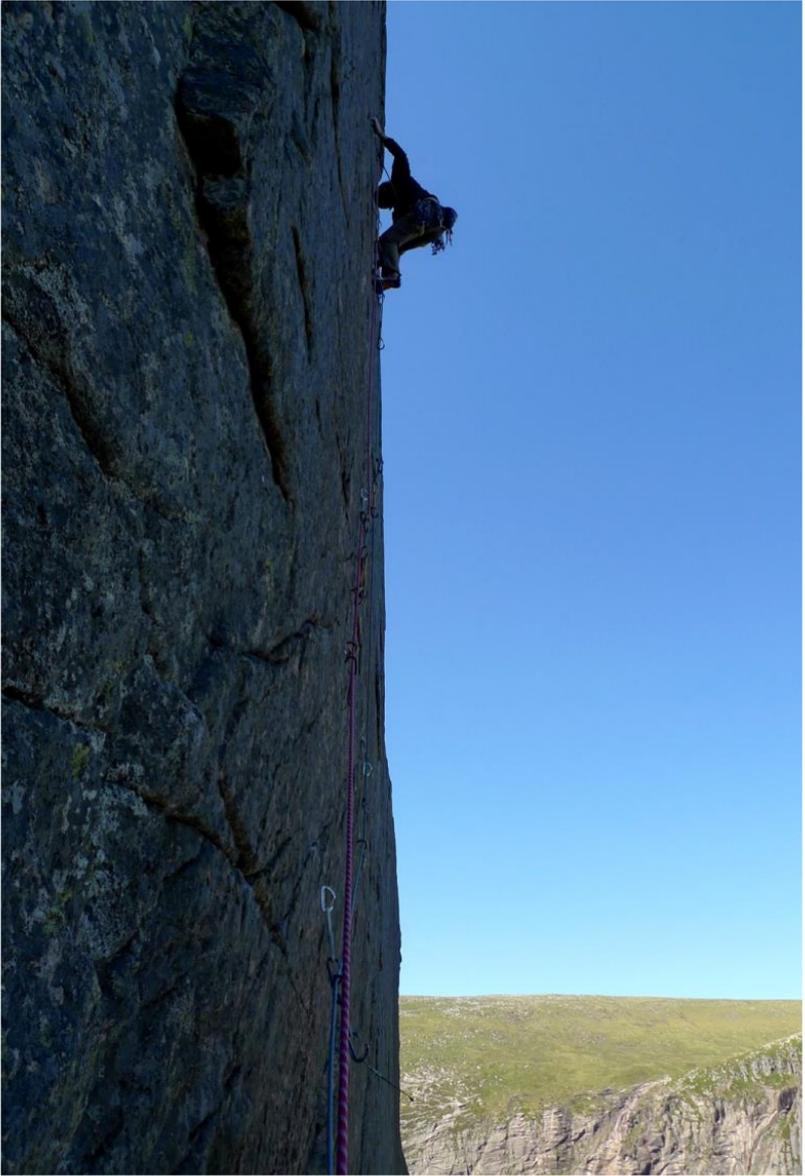


*Andy Inglis on Voyage of the Beagle. Photo: Dave Cowan.*

Central Gully Wall is the nucleus of the crag: a 700ft sweep that merges into giant overlapping tiles. Any path through them looks impossible from a distance, however, up close, devious sequences can sometimes materialise. The finest extreme route here, by consensus, evolved fifteen years after the main wave of exploration in 1982 by Pete Whillance and Murray Hamilton. *Origin of Species* is the product of Paul 'the Stork' Thorburn, which required seven wire brushes to clean it. This precariously gothic and photogenic blunt rib cuts direct through the quintessentially bold *Naked Ape*, and will supposedly consume every RP you have on your rack. The first ascent served up a mini epic.

After an arduous cleaning session, Stork is leading out up a curving groove 30ft above the belay on the main pitch. He pulls off a block and falls...the block hits his belayer, Gary Latter on the head. Gary is knocked unconscious and in doing so drops the falling Stork over 70ft into the gully. Incredibly Stork escapes serious injury. Somewhat shaken he shouts up to Gary and after hearing no reply and seeing a blood spattered face, he solos back up the first pitch and performs a rescue.

They were back within the week to secure the first ascent: such is the magnetic appeal of doing a rare new route on Central Gully Wall. Tim Rankin and I made the second ascent four years later. The main pitch is long,



*Tim Rankin on Improbability Drive, the first E6 on the Dubh Loch. Photo: Piotr Wisthal.*  
atmospheric and absorbingly bold mountain climbing; the main difficulty is maintaining calm whilst running it out fragily above assortments of tiny wires. Rick 'the Stick' Campbell, on the third ascent, having climbed the crux

was trying to place some poor RPs, no placements were forthcoming so, tiring out, he had to place and sit on a skyhook. The other option is to ignore false security and climb on in bold oblivion to gain RPs on the *Naked Ape* 20ft higher. It certainly is a long pitch and I've heard that it has heartbreakingly ejected on-sight suitors moments from the belay. The final pitch joins the *Naked Ape*, which deals out an incredible amount of exposure before one can retreat in one big abseil down into the gully.

False Gully Wall is an entirely different beast, sitting high under the rim of the plateau at the far end of the crag. It doesn't run the full height of the crag, but starts at an altitude of 800m above False Gully: a grassy ramp that cuts across the heart of the face. The routes are about 70m long with the first pitches being on an uncharacteristically smooth plane of granite. Not surprisingly this is where many of the Cairngorms' cutting edge climbs were performed over the years. Murray Hamilton's *Sans Fer* (1979) became the first 6b; his audacious *Slartibartfast* (1982) was the first E5 with its thin crux protected by a stubborn-to-place and distant RP3; and Graeme Livingston's *Improbability Drive* (1984) was the first route to be given E6.

In 1999, while climbing *Slartibartfast* with Tim, the lustrous blank wall above the RP piqued my attention when I saw a tiny, vertical cam slot at exactly half height. Walls and slabs with minimal holds, big run outs and safe fall out zones in beautiful settings appealed to me, so I stored the line away as a potential project for a later date. It was over a decade later when I made my first attempt at abseiling down the wall in a November gale. It was a frightening affair because I couldn't locate the two 100m ropes I had stashed under some boulders seven years previously. They were destined to be binned after an oil rig job, instead I hauled them in with good intentions for cleaning purposes. So I had to resort to abseiling on my 9mm sport rope, which whipped devilishly in the wind and rubbed precariously over the granite as I tried to locate the line.

An ascent became a long drawn out saga over the years. The cam slot seemed too shallow and poor, and the additional wire placements seemed rather pathetic for the falls they might have to sustain. A couple of miniscule, but crucial, footholds broke, halting progress as I searched for new sequences. The weather constantly changed; sometimes the wind funnelled up the wall making it impossible to keep shape on the moves. Direct sunlight made it too greasy to hang on the edges; no sunlight made it too cold for muscle efficiency, and sometimes the fog would creep in and drape thick moisture around the crag; additionally I sometimes had inflamed fingers, lack of skin and most importantly lack of a belayer when the moment was right.

July 2013 was the first opportunity. A posse of us were camped by the beach at the head of the loch for a few days with an incredible forecast. Tony Stone, Cubby Cuthbertson and I rose early to try the wall. Cubby wanted the early morning light for photos, but it was 25°C by 8 a.m. so any real attempt was aborted. Back in the camp, the heat instilled lethargy. Iain Small and Tim Rankin mulled

around before heading off to do *Flodden*. The main entertainment was a naked man camping at the far end of the beach. We watched him stroll up to the base of my *Buddha* and he proceeded to rub his bum on it like a wild animal needing a scratch. He then ambled across and chatted to two bewildered climbers at the base of *Black Mamba*.

It was too hot to climb so I decided to fulfil one of my long term ambitions by swimming the near-kilometre long loch. It felt as good as succeeding on any climb as the ethos of the Dubh Loch to me was the full experience of nature that the Cairngorms provide. My last chance of the year was a gamble because it was getting cold in late autumn. I had Daniel Laing come in to support me as he did on many occasions. However a rogue shower passed and soaked the wall. We hung out for a while on the narrow precarious ledge at the base, which Danny named 'the pleasure ledge'. In frustration I made an attempt and took quite a big fall. At least the gear held!

The following year I was up again with Cubby and Iain Small; the warm sun-radiating rock didn't help as I took three further falls way out above my RP's. Injuries, weather and work commitments hampered me until the spring of 2016. That's when Steve Perry came over to visit and saw Cubby's picture of me hanging on my wall<sup>1</sup>. He was so awed by it that he offered to belay me when required. I was ready in May, or so I thought.

There I was staring at the break near the top of the wall, taut to the max, not able to take a hand off because I knew I would lose symmetry from the minuscule holds keeping me there if I did. In the depths of my subconscious was a flash-vision of the very narrow ledge 30ft below me, which incidentally, missed shattering my kneecap on the previous fall by the thickness of my trousers. I was totally committed. My fingers stabbed at the narrow slot, but there wasn't enough fresh muscle fibre to curtail the forces. I started to take the ride down the whole length of the wall trying to angle outwards as I did so, passing the confidence-sapping wires, which were about to determine whether I lived or died, then the ledge, my hip bone skimming it, shaving skin, still further and then the rope tightened as I came to a stop five feet off the deck...

On my next visit with Steve, I was relaxed; neither overly confident nor nervous. The day was a little lacklustre as gently greying clouds billowed out over the smooth forms of the hills with the odd gasp of sunlight leaking through the occasional blue to give some moral energy. I went for a swim in the loch to help gel the mind and muscles into harmony. On the belay Steve knew the schedule, even though he was strangely quiet this time; he was tired as he had just come back from a hard two weeks work on a barge in Denmark. I was very grateful he was there at all. Once the warm-ups were done it was time to go. The only way I can commit to and succeed on a hard, sustained route is mentally to treat it like a deep water solo and reduce all the hazards to zero in my mind.

<sup>1</sup> See 'The Belay, Magrathea' by Steve Perry SMCI, 2017 p1. (Hon.Ed.)

Steady movement up the hairline seam with one deep-seated RP that sends me on my way to the mid-height shake out and the cluster of wires. All that remains is a ninety-second sequence of dangerous-choreography that needs to be performed in a cerebral vacuum. I pull into it, tiny fingers, tiny feet, familiar left cheek kissing smooth granite skin and then all goes blank. I de-hinge and sweep my foot in a blind arc behind me and revolve 180. Immediately, the waterfall, the cascading river, the purple-clothed glen and the loch all swoop up and consume me. I shut out the exposure and pain as my fingers curl into painful granite blades. I move into a crucifix at my fibral limit with my right toe pressing-hard onto nothing, it feels impossible, but my muscle memory knows better. I make a controlled leap into the crux sequence, slapping away, waiting to plummet, but I'm still on and tenuously cross through to a good set of crimps. There is time to take one breath, trying not to focus on the tiny wires well below me. I pedal my feet up the wall, the only toe-hold here offsets my body's axis so I have to fight hard to fulfil the balance. I lock into position for the final pounce and freeze, just staring at the narrow slot with that simple predatory feeling. One second, hold... I hear Steve's encouragement from far, far away, two seconds, hold... And then, with fight or flight instinct my fingers fire into the slot, this time I hold it and I unwind through the final moves onto the shelf. I'm overwhelmed with disbelief. Two beautiful pitches follow and my five year romance with this particular stone is over.