

Route(s)	A'Chralaig, Mullach Fraoch-choire and Ciste Dhubh Loop
Elevation(s) (ft/m)	A'Chralaig (3,675ft/ 1120m) Mullach Fraoch-choire (3,615ft/ 1102m) Ciste Dhubh (3,212ft/ 979m)
Date(s)	May 23 2018
Partner(s)	Solo
Elevation gain/loss (ft/m)	5,356ft / 1,633m
Distance (miles)	11.1 miles / 17.86 km
Total time (hours/mins)	8h 10m
Equipment	Trekking poles, map/GPS, snacks and water
Weather Forecast	Mostly sunny
Weather Actuality	Mostly sunny – quite hot with the occasional light breeze
Flora/Fauna	N/A
Wildlife	Deer! Some where even laying on the snow. <i>Natures refrigeration!</i>
Starting Point/Trailhead	¼ east of Cluanie Inn – layby on the north side of the road
Grade/Rating	Mostly Class 2 (steep walking with some scree and rock) one short section where I briefly used my hands on rocks (maybe a couple Class 3 moves)
Accommodations	Drove out from Dunblane that morning
Tourist Attractions	N/A
Motto for the day	N/A

Day 1	
Daily 1 Distance	11.1 miles / 17.86 km
Daily 1 Elevation	5,356ft / 1,633m
Day 1 Daily Time	8h 10m
Leave Dunblane	7.30am
Leave layby	11.40am
Summit A'Chralaig	1.35pm
Summit Mullach Froach-c.	2.45pm
Summit Ciste Dhubh	5.30pm
Arrive layby	7.35pm

The Story

Ugh. There goes the alarm. I knew once I got going I'd glory in the beautiful day ahead but getting out of a comfy bed was the first battle! I'd laid out most of my gear the night before. I was planning to drive up to the Skye and Lochalsh area of Scotland and spending five days or so. I had a tentative plan but was planning to just sleep in the car and go where the wind and weather took me. Kyle helped me carry out my pack and a couple bags of food, clothes, toiletries etc. to the car and then saw me off on my way. *That sweetheart!* He was probably rubbing his hands in glee as soon as I turned the corner though!

It was a gorgeous morning. The type of morning that makes you glad to be alive. That infuses the body with energy and delight! I briefly listened to a little Gael FM and Heartland radio stations before the

radio petered out all-together. And without that distraction I was forced to talk to myself about all of the slow moving trucks on the road! I felt that I was likely adding a third of the time onto my travel just because the trucks were moving so slow! In reality that was certainly not true, and in any case, I wasn't willing to try to pass a slow moving truck on one lane curvy backroads. *I wasn't impatient enough to flirt with death!* I did make it to the Inn but it took me a minute to orientate myself to the surroundings and find the correct layby. I had to drive the road back and forth a couple of times and on one pass I saw a sign that looked to generally mark a peak or a trail so I flipped back around and tried to drive slowly. The problem was, the marked speed is 60mph and going any slower is liable to seriously frustrate people. The secondary problem was the fact that the signs had the names written twice. Once in Gaelic and once in what I can only presume is the English pronunciation but didn't look like any words I recognized. I was quickly trying to read the words, sound them out and see if they rang any bells all while doing a quick drive by. I decided that it must be the general area at least and I'd just park and take it from there.

As I pulled into the layby I noticed that there was an older gent walking up the road. He had a backpack and looked friendly enough so I flagged him down and he crossed the road to come and talk to me. I asked him a few questions about the area and then we briefly talked about where he was going. He was walking ten miles north in the valley to get to his next night's lodgings. He then proceeded to ask if I was one of those people chasing Munros. I have a non-committal answer indicating that we were fairly new to the area, but that I liked getting outdoors. *I'm trying not to commit to lists!!* He then proceeded to tell me that he sees more women out there and that they seem to go harder than the men these days. He seemed a kindly older gent with grey white hair and a beard, and genuinely impressed to see so many ladies out. He also told me that a couple had helped him out recently. Admittedly, at first, I wasn't entirely sure what to do with that information but be glad he had such a positive and happy attitude. And, I am certain, like with any situation, one could take that in several ways, but upon reflection I thought it was charming and endearing. He seemed genuinely surprised and pleased to note more women in the outdoors and given his age I suspect he may remember a time when it was a much more male dominated activity and that he was happy about the change was endearing.

With it now determined that I was in the correct spot and with the sun fully beating down from above I grabbed my pack and headed back down the road to where I saw the road sign. Fortunately, Kyle had loaded some GPS tracks before I left which seemed to indicate I was going in the correct direction. *All signs were a go!* From the road it is an immediate and direct uphill climb. Having been out enough in the UK now, I did not have high expectations for this 'trail', but in actuality I was pleasantly surprised that, even though it was faint, I could actually follow it. *Will wonders never cease?!* The pleasure of being outside still outweighing the fact that I was sucking wind on the steep ascent. As I slowly climbed up, my mind drifted back to a conversation Kyle and I had the evening prior. Occasionally, old fears creep back into my subconsciousness, or at least, they resurface enough to be heard. And on this occasion, it was going out alone. It is not being outdoors that is difficult, it is a lingering effect from being very sick a decade prior. The symptoms at the time were unpredictable and would come on suddenly and with such strength that they occasionally would feel debilitating, whether from pain or panic. It has not been that way for a very long time, and yet still, there are times when I go out alone and I remember how suddenly and unexpectedly those symptoms would come on and my brain naturally asks the 'what if...' question. Funny enough, I like going out on solo forays. Relaxing both body and spirit, but letting them fly free and unencumbered. But, every so often, that old question pops into my brain. I try not to let it affect me, but I think anyone who has ever experienced something similar can relate. The knowledge that your body can betray you so quickly is frightening, and it is something you remember and carry with you. It sticks with you, and it subtly shapes you long after you have stopped thinking about it. We carry it with us.

The way up to A'Chralaig is incredibly straight forward. I followed the trail up to the ridge and followed the ridge in a general northerly direction uphill. There were a handful of patches of snow on the route, but the trail itself was clear and easy. In fact, I'd go so far as to say it was quite enjoyable. The summit of A'Chralaig was marked by a massive cairn that was about six or seven feet wide. The base of it was so wide and the rocks so sturdy that I was able to scramble up to the top of the cairn! *Bonus! The tower was so large it was creating a shade spot! Yes!*

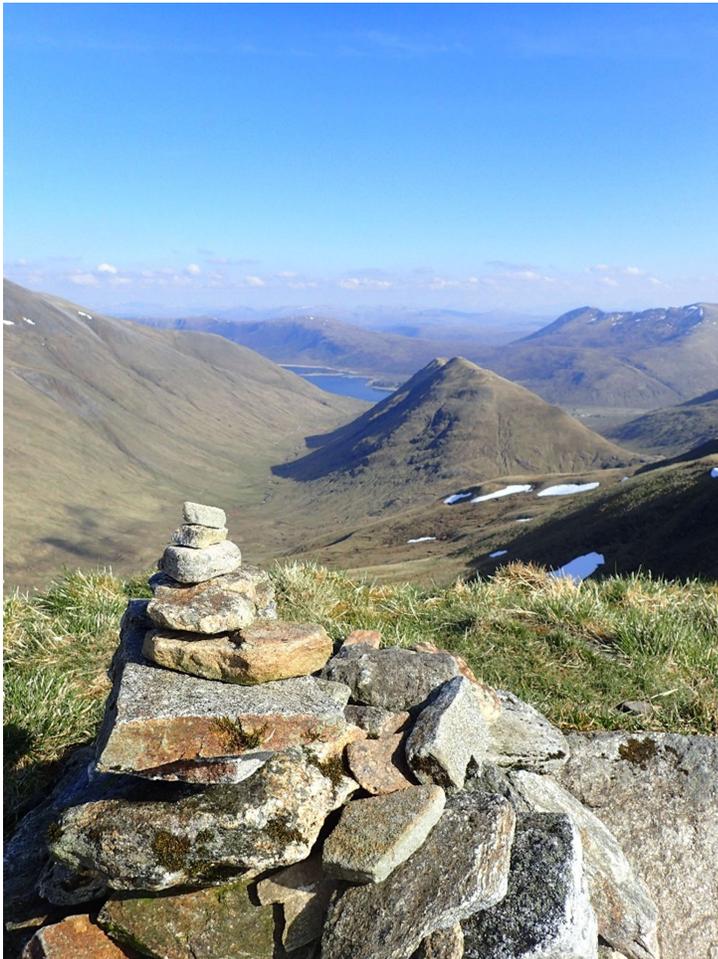


From A'Chralaig I once again headed in general northerly direction along the ridge. Again, overall pleasant. There was a track to follow and the terrain was moderate. I followed the ridge up and over Stob Choire na Crailieg, a bump on the ridge over to Mullach Fraoch-choire. Along the way, I tried to observe the terrain over to the next summit, but also in the valley and up Ciste Dhubh. I was contemplating hopping over there if time permitted. *Why not use the daylight hours good and proper?* While my eye kept

training down into the valley I noticed a speck moving northerly as well. It was the gent from the A87 layby! Shortly after that, I noticed that on the southwest side of Mullach Fraoch-choire there were a handful of deer and they were standing and laying on the snow!! *What a study in life this part of the valley was turning into!* I cannot ever remember seeing deer laying in the snow. There was something about it that was imminently thrilling and pleasing. It seemed so playful, particular and just relatable. Like I was spying some secret moment, one that proved all creatures have more in common than not, and today that was finding a cool refreshing spot!

Once I descended northeast off of Stob Choire na Crailieg I spotted a trail that dropped west into the valley. *Woot!* I noted that for use later and continued moving along. I could see the ridge got a little rockier closer to the summit, but nothing that looked particularly ominous. In fact, I found it a delightful trail! I imagine if there was snow on the route it could be challenging for a short section, but here on this warm dry day it was nothing short of pleasant. I weaved from side to side between the rocky sides and up to the summit. The summit consisted of a cairn and a small, circular wind break. Also, at this moment in time there was a patch of snow on the north side. Given the high presence of animals in the area I thought the only snow that might be even remotely safe to consume would be snow from the summits so I put a little bit in my water bottle to try to supplement my water supply. There were a few midges on this summit but not enough to be overwhelming. I retraced my steps back to the low point between the two points on the ridge and veered right (West) down into the upper basin. The deer took note of my presence at this point and made a dash in the opposite direction. I felt a bit bad for scaring them out of their clearly delightful spot. But needs must! And I wanted to follow this trail down as far as it would take me.

It started fairly clear but it definitely faded in and out. The last several hundred feet I did without a trail and just cut straight down into the valley. I had scouted my intended route from across the valley and noted three gouges in the base of the hillside. I was planning to go up to the left of those 'scratches' and then head directly uphill. In the valley I crossed the river, which I was able to do hopping on rocks. Once I had descended back down to just below 400m I began the slow climb. Switching gears was incredibly hard. I felt like a turtle might pass me on the uphill. Typically, I like to get to key points and then stop for breaks, but I was just going too slow and I knew I needed to fuel better so I stopped on a grassy section and pulled out some food. It really did help. It was only a quick stop, but I enjoyed just sitting on the hillside alone on a calm day, looking out across the valley. Soon enough I was heading uphill again. The cross-country travel was slower going than if I had a trail, and it pulled on my muscles differently than a trail would have, but overall the terrain was dry enough to move adequately. I came up into a basin on the northeast side of Ciste Dhubh and then slowly, from there, worked my way up to the northeast ridge. On my way up I passed a clear looking stream and dunked my buff in the cool water. *Oh lord, what sweet cool relief!!*



On the northeast arm it became a little rockier towards the summit but the terrain stayed very manageable. It looked doable from across the way but that was in no way a guarantee. I hadn't really referenced the map or GPS much. Sometimes it is nice to just move with the land. To feel your way. And that is exactly what I did here. When I reached the summit I had a quick drink and snack. I'd only been there a minute or two when a guy came up from the other side. *What are the odds?! I hadn't seen anyone all day and now, for us both to arrive on this tucked-away summit late in the afternoon at the same time?!* I was surprised. He was literally fifteen feet in front of me before I noticed him. We struck up a brief conversation about where each of us had come from and where we were going. He headed off downhill as I latched the last few straps on my pack. I was quite literally one minute after him. But as soon as I turned to head downhill I couldn't see him. *What the fuck?* I began walking for a ways and scanned all over the mountain but I couldn't see him anywhere. *There is no way that was a hallucination right? Hallucinations can't tell you things you don't know... right?* I was really having a moment trying to figure out where he possibly could have gone, and if I couldn't find him what that meant about my current state. Fortunately, I did eventually see him heading off down another arm of the mountain. *Lord! That was a close call!* I actually started laughing partly in amusement and partly in relief! I followed the south arm off and down into the valley. In the valley I stayed high on the

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left side trail above the river. This was perhaps the wettest part of the day. The ground here was quite soft and muddy in sections but overall, I was able to keep moving at a fairly good pace.

I lost the thread of the trail at the end and ended up going a bit cross country to hit the A87 and veered left to follow the road a short distance back to the car. Most of the cars had left the layby by this point in the day which meant I was alone while I stripped off my gear. As I laid some on the hood of the car I noticed a spider crawling up the driver side window. I used my pole and flicked it off the window. I was quite satisfied with myself but then turned and saw a big spider on the driver side mirror. *Problem!!!* I was worried that if I tried to flick that gnarly beast off and missed it'd retreat behind the mirror and then that'd become a psychological thriller for the remainder of the trip. Plus, how was I going to get in and out of the car? Because if I opened the door and it got in Lord have mercy! I popped the boot, changed and started loading my kit in while I pondered this conundrum. And as if the heavens heard my distress a car ended up pulling into the layby and a man and woman got out to take photos. And without zero sense of pride I called over to ask them if they were scared of spiders. The gent asked why, walked over, grabbed the spider with his hand dropped it to the ground and squashed it. And truly, he was a gentleman because then he looked in the backseat where I'd seen a few webs to see if he saw anything obvious. Admittedly, I was a little embarrassed because the car was filthy!! But now that the crisis was averted I was able to drive over to the inn for a spot of supper. I ordered what turned to be amazing fish and chips.

That night I walked across the road to their overnight lot put the seats down, got into my pjs and laid down across the backseats of the car. I briefly wondered if anything else was in the car but sleep eventually won out.

Lessons Learned

