



PHOTO ESSAY

COLD COMFORT

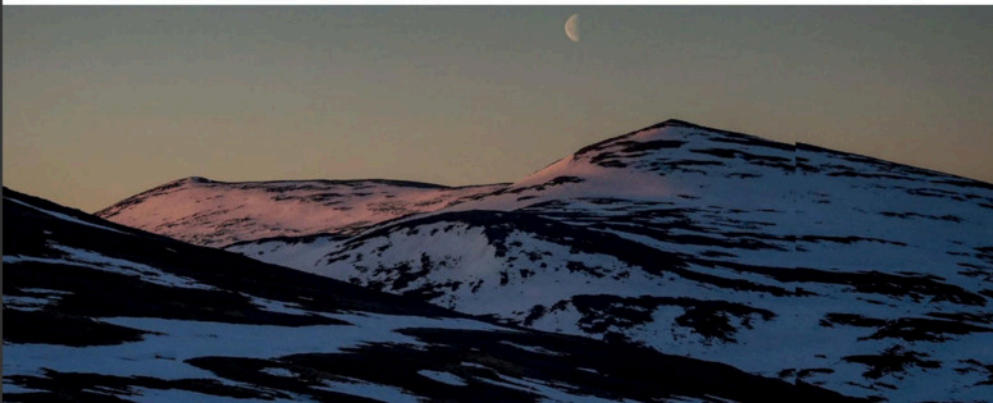
Cairngorms resident *David Lintern* gets the chills when winter comes around. Here he shares a selection of a decade of images from Britain's largest (and coldest) National Park

WINTER CAN MAKE YOU STRANGE; it can change your priorities. You may find yourself creeping out of the house whilst others sleep, a pre-dawn, blue-gold glow low on the horizon, a deep and sticky frost adorning everything. An aching cold may creep in via exposed fingers and the moisture on the inside of your nose start to prickle as you fight to prise open a frozen car door. You may find yourself arriving home many hours later, when all are tucked up in bed again, waddling around on clumsy ankles that ache not from the cold but from walking in crampons all day.

Before: your winter may begin in autumn – extra running, cycling and swimming to build fitness for the coming challenges. During: you may find yourself obsessing on conditions and weather reports, poring over guidebooks and online forums, and there is such a wealth of resource that this may take many fevered hours, and even become a source of paralysis, an excuse not to go instead of a reason to. And after: you may spend more time daydreaming about the days you missed, days you saw others enjoy – ultra-rare, bluebird days of alpine high pressure sitting over a white desert draped in crunchy, grippy névé, days that are generally only countable on the fingers of two hands each year, but whose experiences are so rich that they are extended in the remembering to become timeless. ■

A BLUEBIRD BYNACK MORE
[PREVIOUS SPREAD]

Late in the season, the weather is often more stable. This was my second attempt at reaching the summit of Bynack Morn, and a bluebird Easter bank holiday with crisp, crunchy snow blanketing the boulder-strewn ridge all the way up. Despite perfect conditions on the mountain itself, the walk out via Strath Nethy was treacherous and exhausting, with softer snow covering foot-snagging heather and bog. Scottish winter is never simple!



'Sound is muffled, and our senses heightened'

HALF MOON O' THE BACK OF MACDUI
[LEFT]

March, deep in the heart of the range, and a beautifully benign night overlooking the back of Ben Macduil, camped on the upper slopes of Beinn Mheadhoin (middle hill). A deep and penetrating silence abides. In our otherwise noisy and chaotic world, just that, in and of itself, is a genuinely awesome thing to be in the presence of.

NARNIA COMES TO KINGUSSIE
[ABOVE]

There's the first snow on the hill – and then there's the first snow to glen level! If I don't catch the former, I always try to make it out quickly for the latter, especially if there's no wind and the branches have kept their cover of white. This is a view of the Inshriach hills (on the western side of the Mhoine Mhor) from a little path above Kingussie that I know intimately, at least until it's suddenly transformed into a scene from Narnia.

When you are home, you want to be there. When you are there, you may feel pangs of remorse, even guilt for escaping your more terrestrial body and the duties that come with it.

I know, this all sounds a bit complicated. Wait... are you in a relationship with these cold, indifferent places? Are you cheating on your friends, your partner, your family? Is it a kind of love?

And you may ask yourself: "Where does that highway go to?"

And you may ask yourself: "How do I work this?"

Apologies to Talking Heads aside, this is how my winters are now. My name is David, I live in the Cairngorms, and I am a winter-holic. Or is that a chionophile? Whatever we call it, I am indeed in a relationship with these hills, and relationships need nurturing. I try to keep the unhealthier aspects of my obsession in check, but in winter it can be a bit of a rollercoaster.

The Cairngorms are a particularly demanding place to travel because of the scale and relative lack of access involved. In Britain, that scale is unique, as is the



NIGHT, LIGHT MAGIC
[ABOVE LEFT]

An example of a more intimate winter scene. Last year, whilst other photographers went high above an inversion to find the aurora, I went bikepacking with my 8-year-old daughter in Glen Tromie. Late at night, after she fell asleep, I played with my head torch and iPhone to conjure a different type of lightshow. I'm not sure it would have occurred to me to photograph this with 'the big camera'. It's always worthwhile trying to use different tools, playfully.



A TREELINE TRANSITION
[ABOVE RIGHT]

Just after Christmas 2020, I camped on Carn Eilrig, a pyramidal top above the Rothiemurchus Forest at the edge of the central massif. The following morning, I snowshoed in an arc back towards the Lairig Ghru as the wind grew to a gale. This shows the treeline where the mountains meet the forest, a landscape that, ideally, should be much more common in Britain. I think margins, borders and edges are very special. For humans crossing the range via historic passes like the Lairig Ghru, they signify the transition in a journey from one stage to another. And wildlife adore them.

THE WARDEN OF GLEN FESHIE
[TOP]

Now I live in the area, my photographic preoccupations have evolved. I still enjoy the grand scenes but am increasingly interested in the people and their connections with the place. This is Lindsay, the semi-live-in, unofficial warden of Rough Aiteachain in one of Scottish rewilding's top visitor attractions, Glen Feshie. His ongoing presence at the bothy has sparked controversy; but as with most Trials by Social Media, the bigger story is more complex and nuanced. Meanwhile, he keeps a watchful but friendly eye on somewhere that otherwise risks becoming a victim of its own success.

PHOTO ESSAY

UATH LOCHANS

Uath Lochans is a popular local spot, and this is one of its most photographed scenes. That said, it's a little more unusual to see it with very fresh snow cover. On the map, the lochans are arranged in the shape of an animal pawprint. They are kettle holes, depressions created by huge fragments of glacier at the end of the last ice age. Sediment filled in around the blocks, which then melted to form pools. Uath is Gaelic for hawthorn, although the lochans are now mostly fringed by pine.



PHOTO ESSAY

POLAR PLATEAU

Full-on winter conditions on the long approach to Ben Macdui from the north corries. Continuous snow cover can play tricks with the mind, meaning it's much harder to judge scale and distance. This was my first visit to Ben Macdui in winter, and I can still recall the cocktail of disorientation, intimidation and exhilaration I felt when I realised we had all that white desert to cross. What an utterly fantastic, otherworldly landscape this is. I still find it remarkable that a place like this exists in Britain at all.

PHOTO ESSAY



THE MAGICAL GREEN WATERS OF COIRE ADAIR
[ABOVE]

An image from a few years ago, and an early foray into Coire Adair under Creag Meagaidh cloaked in heavy, early-season snow. It was incredibly slow going, so much so I never made it to the summit. The colour of the water is exactly as I saw it. I've often wondered whether I should clone out the tree branch in the image, but that wouldn't be true to the place. I've been back many times since – often for the Munros, once or twice for easier winter climbing amidst those crags, and once even to help with Visual Impact Assessments for a legal case around industrial development in the area.

A CHRISTMAS EVE SUNSET
[RIGHT]

Sunset on Christmas Eve just off the summit of my local hill, Creag Bheag ('small crag'), looking towards Newtonmore across the moors as a wisp of an inversion licks at Creag Dubh ('black crag'). This was a family walk, and a rare cold but sunny day over the festive period, which can often be a dark and moody time, weatherwise. Living amongst northern mountains over the winter months, you learn to watch the forecasts closely, and take each and every chance for a vitamin D boost!



HARES OF THE GREY HILLS
[ABOVE]

Mountain hares on the Monadhliath, away from the main range. My nearest Munro is A' Cailleach, an unassuming lump most of the year, except in winter, when a small deviation from the standard approach usually provides plenty of opportunity for wildlife photography. Spotting wildlife can be easier in winter, because footprints become visible in the snow. The antics of these animals are endlessly fascinating. Depending on how hungry they are, they can be quite familiar too.

climate. The plateaux are our only subarctic environment, and the only places big, high and wild enough to do tundra, and polar weather, with some degree of authenticity. It's still not uncommon for mountain roads to close for snow and ice, or repair. Rivers flood, bridges collapse and public transport stalls. So, plans change, and must change again (and again) to accommodate the season's whims.

Especially early in the season, when gratification is deferred more often than not, it is difficult to keep the faith. The weather can be plain awful, and the light nothing other than gritty. Some days it's barely daylight at all. This 'relationship' feels one-sided.

But when it comes together, it's nothing less than spectacular. Snow and ice transform a landscape everywhere, but in the Cairngorms, transformation combines with scale to really boggle the mind. The plateaux of Avon, Ben Macdui and the Moine Mhòr can be bewildering, surreal places even in summer, but complete snow cover really ups the ante. The rolling, featureless topography conjures science fiction comparisons; Dune's Arrakis or Star Wars' Hoth, and travelling through it wearing thick gloves, big boots, and goggles in a whiteout, one could almost be an astronaut. It is a world removed.

Otherwise, all the now well-worn clichés borne from readings of Nan Shepherd still apply. The Cairngorms really do feel as if they go on forever, harbour secrets, contain subtle charms, speak in liquid music, and no, of course they are not to be conquered and never were. ■



GLENMORE SKYLINE

In keeping with our bothy theme this issue, this is Carn Eilrig as seen from an early morning walk out from a tiny wooden howl in the forest. There's something about the light and skyline that speaks to me of the region and the time of year. The hut in question was built by Mikel Utzi, who first brought reindeer to the Cairngorms in 1952, and is constructed from the same raw materials he transported the animals in. The precise location is kept – if not an outright secret – then certainly low-key. I went there specifically to write an afterword to a book, before sleeping the night in Mikel's very own wooden cot, so it now holds a personal resonance for me too.

feels right, as Shepherd did, to highlight the very specific sense of the uncanny in these gentle reclines, the folds and hollows, a certain eeriness I still can't name or fathom but that seems self-evident, particularly at dawn or dusk when buttery storm light arcs slowly across the slopes. In these moments, the range has an atmosphere like no other, again exaggerated under snow, perhaps because sound is muffled, and our senses heightened.

What's commented on far less by mountain writers but is perhaps more relevant to those that live here, are the woods. Old growth forest surrounds much of the range, providing the landscape grammar to the mountain's punctuation: relief and shelter from the austere grandeur of the arctic steppe. We may live in the shadow of the high ground, especially in winter, but we find peace in the glens, with the song of rivers in our ears and our backs to birch and pine. In recent years, snow may arrive at glen level slightly less often, but we are still blessed with something approaching a real winter, every year.

I've lived here for the last 6 years, an unlikely refugee from the city, and I now can't imagine living anywhere else. I savour the yearly cycle and the changes that come along with it. It can bring frustration as well as elation, but always also a sense of connection, perspective, and humility. I feel like I understand my own place in the world a little better when I observe the season's clock. If those of us fortunate to live in and under these mountains must sometimes make changes to accommodate them – to live with them – then that is entirely as it should be. ■

MINIMALIST MOUNTAINEERING *[RIGHT]*

The Fiacall Ridge is a classic Grade 1/2 winter mountaineering route in the Northern Corries, or 'Narries' as they are sometimes called. There's a particular spot where the ground levels out and suddenly, with my friend Mick walking ahead, everything lined up for just a few seconds. Despite first appearances, this is a colour photo, with the clag draining the image of most of the spectrum – and much of the visual clutter also.

GLENMORE FOREST AND THE CENTRAL RANGE *[BELOW]*

First snow on the hill is always a magical time, and it's good to mark it if possible. This shows the semi-naturalised treeline of Glenmore Forest as it meets the central massif, viewed from a little-visited hill above Ryoan Pass. You can see a couple of birch trees still have their autumn colour, even whilst spindrift dances on the slopes above. It is early November, and a volatile, fast-changing landscape.



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'But wait... are you in a relationship with these cold, indifferent places? Is it a kind of love?'

