

The highest bike in Scotland?

When I was young, I didn't like hillwalking and running and all that exercise bit mainly due to being dragged along into it by my father who was very keen about it all, in fact he competed regularly (as did my elder brother) in athletics. It wasn't until my youth that I began to appreciate the mountains of Scotland! I then made it my goal to get into the hills as much as possible and experience "our" fresh air and "our" stunning views.



Happily, my wife also enjoyed similar pursuits, albeit going up actual hills was beyond her, although long, flattish, walks were definitely her domain. We then had two children over the space of a few years, so it became more difficult to get away. After a few years of abstinence from the hills, I could feel them calling again. I spoke to my wife and the only condition she made was my getting someone to help while I was away as she was working later. Fortunately for me, my sister-in-law was more than willing, so all I really needed now was food and drink for the adventure!

The day arrived and it was slightly spitting with rain. Not to be deterred, I fitted the bicycle carrier to the car, strapped the mountain bike in place and set off, out to Glen Tanar – an hours drive, near Aboyne, with the purpose of cycling out to the base of Mount Keen, the most easterly Munro (mountains over 3000ft), and then walking up.

I arrived at the car park, paid my £1 charge for parking (I was the first car there) and set off, full of enthusiasm. After 10 minutes cycling I decided that I was definitely over-dressed. I made my first stop, to remove my fleece and get a quick drink of water. I carried on, the next stop being the Half-Way-Hut. Another drink of water – it had been up-hill and rough all the way and I was roasting! Thankfully the small amount of drizzle was helping keep me cool. I eventually broke out of the forest (Glen Tanar has the largest Caledonian Forest in the region and is the third largest pinewood in the U.K. and, apparently, contains nationally important populations of Capercaillie). The rest of the way out was fairly flat, but there was a slight headwind so it was a hard slog, I could only manage around 9mph along this part!



I arrived at the base of the mountain, 7-1/2 miles covered and around an hour cycling, and discovered a couple of families packing up their tents (there is a large grassy area there, enough for at least one full size football pitch). I stopped and had a quick snack, admiring the view all round. I then set off again, pushing my bike up the hill; I had earlier decided that the hard push up would be worth it, just for coming down at the end! Oh, boy did it hurt!



I eventually made the top after a further hour and two miles push, but I made a lot of stops on the way. At the top the wind was blowing quite hard, with some dampness in the air so it wasn't too pleasant – the views were also obscured by low cloud. I propped my bike against the Trig point, took some photos and 360 degree panoramas for my website (www.virtualscotland.org.uk), had another quick snack (and phoned home to tell them of my progress) and started down again. For quite a distance down I could not get on the bike, it was simply too steep and rocky! After a while though, there was a smoother path that I could use, so off I went! I eventually ran out of this smooth part, so I had to get off – quite spectacularly though, straight over the handlebars! I was wearing my helmet, so no damage done, but a mental note to myself, “take more care when dismounting”. After another spell of cycling I came across a couple of people walking up. I'm not sure if they were impressed that I had taken my bike up, or astonished? They had left their bikes at the bottom, so maybe it was the latter! Carrying on down, I reached the bottom after half an hour. A quick stop for water and I was off again, back along the track, but now with a slight tailwind! I was now able to touch 30mph in sections, and I comfortably maintained 25mph until I reached the forest again, where the track became rougher. I passed several more people now, mostly on bikes, heading out to the mountains. After half an hour I was back at the car park again (which was quite full now), absolutely exhausted, but it was totally worth it!

Maybe next summer I will get out into the hills more often and I will have to start taking the boys, or will I rephrase that and say that they can come along if they want to, just-in-case I head full circle and turn into my dad?