

THE MUNROS IN WINTER

HOW HARD
CAN IT BE?

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ALL OF THEM. BACK TO BACK. TRAIL MEETS A MAN
WHO SAYS "BRING IT ON!"

...and this is him.
Steve Perry, strong
contender for Britain's
Hardest Bloke.



It's the kind of drizzly evening best spent watching telly. Instead I'm stood in a layby, in the dark. The wintry tops are choking on cloud, and a breeze wafts its cold fingers down my neck as I peer through the blackness. I'm waiting, nervously, for Steve Perry. He's four hours late, but I can't hold it against him. To say he's a man on a mission understates the case. It would be a bit like calling Pelé a decent footballer, or Shakespeare a reasonable playwright.

Steve Perry is a master of the art of suffering; and right now, as you read this, he's working on something very special. I've come to snoop on his masterpiece in progress – Winter284. This is Steve's audacious attempt to walk all 284 Munros in one winter season, back-to-back,

solo, and without land-based transport. It's a feat that no-one has ever managed. Leaving his partner and two-year-old daughter in Yorkshire, the 34-year-old has taken a break from an engineering career to spend four months in the hills, raising funds for Cancer Research UK. But Steve's is no ordinary charity hike. This 1,500-mile death march could well be Britain's toughest walk. Indeed, few expeditions anywhere in the world could be as challenging as the Munros in winter. Think about it. Scottish winter: weeks on end of freezing rain and low cloud, ploughing knee-deep snow, clinging to icy crests scoured by gales, pinpoint navigation from before dawn till long after dusk, all day, every day, in all weathers, usually with nothing to look forward to but yet another gruelling wild camp at the

Winter Munros: lovely, aren't they?
Now imagine doing all 284 of them.
In one go. No, didn't think you could...

BEN WINSTON

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The mighty Liathach (Munros number 249 & 250): just one of the monsters awaiting a really knackered Steve around 11 March, all being well...

TOM BAILEY

“Doing a walk like this really restores your faith in humanity”

end of each long slog, trench foot, blisters and frost nip. For most of us the Munros represent a lifetime of trips, yet Winter284 must be done by the end of March.

Given all this, I muse, surely the man is a fruitcake. Either that, or he's a stony-faced Olympian, with a thousand-yard stare and no time for softies. Neither would be my preferred company for a day in the hills.

Just as I'm beginning to think that there's almost anywhere I'd rather be, a headtorch bobs into view, weaving between the skeletal trees. “Right,” he grins with a broad Todmorden twang, “who's up fer t'pub?” Perhaps this won't be so bad after all.

It has been a day of high wind and low visibility. Snow might have slowed Steve's progress, but he's still managed to bag the four Munros that menace the west shore of Loch Lomond, a big, beefy bunch including Ben Vorlich and Beinn Ime. He doesn't seem half as tired as I would be in his place. In fact, today has been pretty much par for the course. The long hard hike from Mull to Loch Lomond is now under his belt. In his first week Steve has ticked 14 Munros, and wild camped in foul weather every night. I am clearly in the presence of a pro. He's tough, sure,



but what makes him think he's tough enough? Physically, he's no Superman: lean, of average height and with weather-lined features that hint at his exhaustive exploits. From fell-running to winter hill-walking, Steve's is an impressive track record. He was the first person to walk from Land's End to John o' Groats via every 3,000ft peak on the mainland (in summer), so he's well used to charity fund-raising solo epics. His previous trip

built a working knowledge of practically every ridge and wrinkle in the Highlands. It also taught him how far determination can get you. Knowledge and resolve are both going to be tested to the limit this winter.

“I've been craving this for days,” sighs Steve, wiping Guinness froth from his lips. “It's my body telling me I need iron.” If only we all had such a convincing excuse. Now thawed out and steaming gently by the fire, he's babbling ten to the dozen. Extended periods of isolation have that effect on people. Views he's seen, people he's met, gales he's battled. “I'm comfortable with my own company, but it's lovely to have an occasional natter,” he admits, well into his third pint. “An occasional shower wouldn't go amiss either.” Reassured he's a nice guy, I ask how he feels about being alone in potentially risky situations. “Imagine you're lost on a hill in the dark, and it's snowing. You might be worried, but so long as you've got the right kit you're going to be okay, fundamentally,” he explains. “That's a big thing to get your head around.” So, does anything actually scare him? “Killer whales,” he replies without batting an eyelid. “I have nightmares about them.”



Summitting Ben Lomond – “an easy day”.

“Today will be easy,” yawns Steve as we wake the following morning. “First Ben Lomond, then a section of the West Highland Way.” Though I climb hills for a living, I'd never class a Munro and a 28km march as more or less a rest day. That's the difference between Steve Perry and your average punter. But though solo, he's never alone.

“Doing a walk like this really restores your faith in humanity,” Steve enthuses. “Because it's all in aid of charity I keep getting offered random help from people who've seen me on the news. I've stashed supply parcels at strangers' houses all over the Highlands. Thanks to their support I can re-stock with food, gas, maps and batteries every few days without having to divert to towns.” Stashing things is a major part of his

Munro man Steve grinds into his 1,500-mile odyssey.



A rare bit of company, and an even rarer bit of warmth.

game plan. Wherever possible he'll make base camp in a glen and nip over the summits unencumbered. Densely-packed Munro groups lend themselves to this rucksack-free approach, while on the more isolated peaks he reverts to packhorse mode. Today Steve's going so lightweight he might as well be the Naked Rambler. In contrast to my bulging 40 litre pack he's sporting just a tiny bumbag. The kit list is a minimalist's dream: headtorch, map, compass, cheese roll, a mug so he can drink from streams, and the clothes he stands up in. “This

but I've no time for that programming nonsense. It only comes out of the bag if I need to know my precise grid reference.” Beforehand I worried, not unnaturally, that he'd leave me for dust. But our pace is more steady-but-relentless stride than crazy sprint. As Steve says, “You can't rush it, or you'll never get there.” Whatever the weather, whatever the terrain, he'll keep to the same measured rhythm. And that's why he'll probably succeed. For an instant I almost envy Steve's quest – so much time alone outdoors, just when the hills are at their

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Attacking Ben Lomond. Conditions like these will be the norm for most of Steve's trip – if he's lucky.

emptiest. But it's not all going to be this gentle. As well as being an endless test of determination, Winter284 will throw up some formidable obstacles. Aside from the unlikely event of a killer whale encounter, which particular bits will he be glad to see the back of?

“The Cairngorms,” he blurts, before I've finished the question. “They're huge, remote and Arctic. If I'm not lucky with the weather I'll be right out on a limb. I may even have to consider using snowshoes. The Cuillin Ridge is the other really daunting stage. In full-on winter nick it's a major technical climb, a couple of days of Grade IV. I'll not be soloing that, but two experienced climbing friends have offered to share my rope. Then again, when I get to Skye the ridge will probably be dripping with rain. It usually is.”

We approach the little-visited northern flank of Ben Lomond, hopping the bogs before climbing into a world of cloud and frost. One inevitable feature of any Scottish winter trip is the unpredictability of conditions: deep snowdrifts one day, bare grass the next. Since this can count against you, Steve is keen to get ahead of schedule whenever practical. “If we have a really snowy spell and I'm slowed right down, my daughter might forget what I look like before I make it home.” He may be joking, but on a journey such as Steve's, this separation must be really hard to deal with. Contact

with loved ones is limited to occasional crackly mobile phone calls, usually when standing shivering on a stormy summit.

Today's summit is a windswept ice rink. “Fifteen down – and I don't want to work out how many to go,” he pants, tagging the trig point. Descending in thick mist, we suddenly find ourselves on the edge of an unexpected drop. It's a reminder of how much sustained focus Winter284 demands. When Steve is alone there's barely any margin for error.

Safely back on the lakeshore, several hours' walk still separates us from dry clothes and sleep at Inverarnan, beyond the northern tip of Loch Lomond. Already it's dusk. Since this is the season of gloom, Steve spends hours every day by torchlight. “A lot of people are wary of walking after dark, but if you can navigate, where's the harm? My stages are so long that I've got no choice.” Right now navigation is easy, thanks to a well-trodden West Highland Way. Still, it's a fair slog, with nothing but fatigue to concentrate on. My feet are now burning and my knees seizing up. Even Steve looks a little rumped. And tomorrow, he's got four Munros and a lousy forecast ahead. As far as I'm concerned, he's welcome to the lot.

Amid all the 'fun', I've forgotten to ask the most obvious question – why do it at all? There are easier ways to raise money. But Steve loves the hills, and he'd probably think it a daft question anyway.



STOP PRESS!...STOP PRESS!...STO

As we were going to print, Steve slipped and broke two ribs near Gael Charn – but he's still going! By the time you read this, he should be on Munro 176 – the West Highland peak Gairich. Watch this space!

