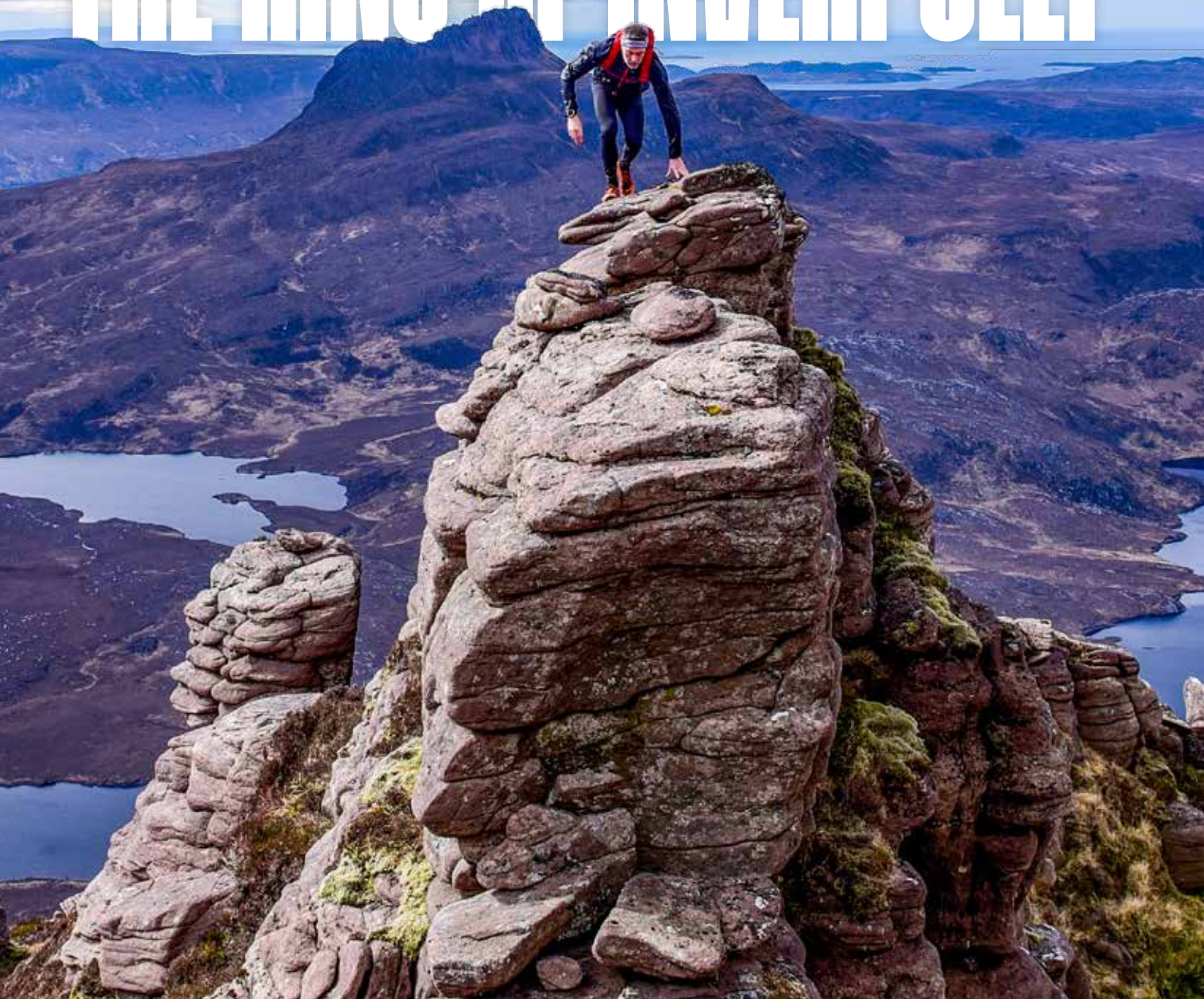


WORDS & PHOTOS WILL HERMAN

THE RING OF INVERPOLLY



The last six miles had been hard, rough and slow. To the south, Stac Pollaidh was lost in the clag as soft veils of rain closed from the coast. To the north, Suilven rose as a hazy wall from the lochan-studded moor, though it had come no closer it seemed in the hour since. Twenty-four miles in. Sixteen, perhaps seventeen, still to do. I ran the calculation again, trying to reduce the distance yet to cover. Only two more climbs. That sounded better.

Bullying myself between an endless repetition of low ridge lines, short steep drops and sharp climbs, wading through deer grass gathering ticks as I went, I stumbled among the tussocks while midges swarmed at the slightest pause. Now, with the river crossing beneath Suilven in sight, I pushed again. Beyond its banks I knew a path would ease the last stretch before the stiff climb to the saddle. But passing beneath a small stand of rowan, the spatter of deer keds dropping like stones put paid to any sense of relief. I swiped and swore at the flies to no avail as they stuck to my skin, burrowing and biting, before pulling them roughly away one by one and clawing at the next.

In the half-light of dawn as I packed for the day ahead, I had wondered about the height of this river – even at low summer levels the crossing is knee deep. Now, in frantic haste, I waded in without a care, the peat-stained flow rushing in a soothing embrace of my thighs, almost reaching my waist as I twisted and pulled the last of the flies from my neck before drinking directly from the river – clean, peat-tanned water never tasted so sweet. And for the first time that day, there was no longer any question about finishing or not. I had crossed my Rubicon and ploughed on. I would be the fifth person¹ to complete the Ring of Inverpolly, almost exactly 27 years after the inaugural round. As those familiar with the brief description of the round given on the Scottish Hill Runners website will know, ‘the culprit was Alec Keith’. And a better use of that noun I have yet to find.

Keith recorded a time of 13 hours and 12 minutes on 30 August 1998. There are no other records of attempts, successful or otherwise, until Francisco Javier Cabrera Valdes completed the round in 2020. He recorded a time of 14 hours and 12 minutes despite adding considerably to the distance through poor route choice². Two years later, in good, dry conditions, he returned with Luke Taylor, and the pair finished in a remarkably fast time of 11 hours, 41 minutes and 8 seconds, establishing the current record. To fully appreciate what such a time requires it is not sufficient to run over these hills individually, for it is the ground between that requires the greatest effort, and where the potential for route-finding errors is highest. And it is here, amid the tussocks, bog and deer grass that motivation will most likely fail. There are few rounds where the going is quite so relentlessly rough – and while the summits fall far short of Munro status, each one must be climbed from near sea level. Without question, it is a route for the connoisseur. Or perhaps simply those so afflicted that the suffering passes for the norm. Another such runner set out in 2023. Writing a poetic account of his round in the Scottish Hill Runners journal, Arron Sparks recorded a time of 16 hours and 22 minutes.

In thick cloud, dropping on plated pink sandstone from Cul Mòr, I had no intention of doing anything other than seeing how I felt after the next climb. I knew the hills well, and was under no illusion that I was far from fit enough to give such a round my best. Two months earlier I’d broken



PREVIOUS PAGE: Will on the west nose of Cul Mòr with Stac Pollaidh behind. ABOVE: A golden eagle on Creag nan Calman, Cul Mòr.



two toes on the Great Lakes fell race. It was the latest in a litany of injuries that had plagued the last few years, continually hampering attempts to regain any consistent level of fitness. I'd returned to the hills too soon and still the toes throbbed painfully as I dropped into the heather beneath An Laogh. Beyond, the climb of Cul Beag reared skyward, an early test of resolve for any Ring of 'Polly' aspirant. Like so much that follows, there is no path, not even a deer trod to ease progress, and the gradient steepens as height is gained before the col brings the most temporary relief. Another upward thrust follows, ending on the summit at 769m, every metre of which is immediately relinquished on another long, rough descent to Loch Lurgainn. It is a pattern that is set to be repeated with tedious inevitability, and I paused for a moment, thinking of the eagles I had been so close to on these hills two years past, watching their vast wings furling and yellow talons curling as they lifted into watercolour skies, before plunging through the gorse that now hides the way on from all but those who know. To my surprise, I felt remarkably fresh and pushed on along the river bound for Beinn Tarsuinn and the Coigach hills beyond. I would reassess on my return to the road beneath Stac Pollaidh. There was a long way to go even before then and now as the clag lifted, the day was warming rapidly, the humidity rising as I reluctantly left the path, toiling through the heather above Allt Clonaigh.

The Coigach hills are among those I favour most in Scotland and despite the nature of the day's venture, there is good running to

be had on these summits that lie between sky and sea, where the Summer Isles lie scattered before a Hebridean horizon, the hills of Harris clearly visible on a good day, reaching north from the Long Island that floats as though a mirage beyond The Minch. With the steep climb to Ben Mór Coigach dispatched, Sgùrr an Fhìdhleir followed, its remarkable summit given no more than a moment in which I recalled countless others perched on that same airy top gazing across all that now remained. There is no finer viewpoint of Coigach and Assynt than this, though there is but one redeeming feature of the descent that follows – this being the promise of the shortest line to Stac Pollaidh. It is runnable in a fashion at first, as is the low ground between the lochs that leads to the road, though waist-high scrub offers some reassuringly rough thrashing to gain it, and a return to the day's realities.

Stac Pollaidh, for all its popularity and diminutive height, remains a remarkable mountain. To enjoy its bristling ridge however, you must return another day, for the route climbs steeply via a dank gully, directly to the summit tower, with only the short scramble³ that remains offering any sense of what has attracted hillgoers in their thousands to this, the smallest of the Ring of 'Polly's hills. And here, finally, commitment is required. Little more than a mile of easy stepped path to the south will lead those who choose, to the road, while to the north lie the last two summits – Suilven and Canisp – and before that, the long, lonely miles across the moor.



PREVIOUS PAGE: Richard Bolton on Sgùrr an Fhìdhleir. BELOW: Panorama of Suilven, Cul Mór, Stac Pollaidh, Cul Beag. ABOVE: Will Herman on Suilven.





ABOVE: The Ring of Inverpolly – starting and finishing in Elphin, it is 40 miles including 15,400ft of ascent and seven summits, to be taken in the order Keith prescribed: Cul Mòr, Cul Beag, Ben Mòr Coigach, Sgùrr an Fhìdhleir, Stac Pollaidh, Suilven, and finally Canisp. Map © Scottish Mountaineering Press.

The day's heat had given way once more to slow-moving showers that mirrored my progress as I dropped toward the lochs and ploughed on into purgatory until, with the biggest river crossing behind me, Suilven reared ahead, thrusting skyward, suddenly close and impossibly steep. The exquisite novelty of easy running that I'd enjoyed all too briefly beneath, ended abruptly with a dramatic bonk. I remember little of the climb to the saddle other than stumbling and falling repeatedly while forcing food and salts down. The nausea passed on the last rise to the summit, just as the clag that had swallowed all that had gone before finally embraced me, quickly turning to cold rain and a chill wind that ushered in the night. Dropping from the saddle in failing light, the end apparently in sight, I felt strength surging through me and ran happily for the river and a path I knew well. It would lead me high onto the northwest ridge of Canisp, though it would be dark long before I reached the summit. Here the terrain would change once more, the mottled pink and brown hues of coarsely rounded Torridonian sandstone giving way to the pale shattered quartz of Assynt. But the descent would be a simple matter – I'd run the line on at least three occasions: head down bearing southeast before cutting back sharply to the south and crossing the last of the rough ground to meet the path that would bring me to Cam Loch and the last level miles to the finish.

An hour later, cursing my stubborn insistence on navigating in traditional fashion, I was lost, weaving drunkenly between sharp boulders, wholly reliant on the compass, confidence fading fast. I could see nothing

beyond the narrow pool of light before me, silvered rain illuminated, flickering as it swept across the moor. It occurred to me then, that if I simply headed due east, sooner or later I would hit the road, and that this might now be quicker than following Keith's line back to Elphin. A short while later, on the verge of changing direction I stumbled across the path. Only to lose it immediately. And so it went on for what seemed an age until I slipped on the black wet stones of Cam Loch. A long moment passed before I understood where I was, so thick was the night. I had lost so much time I no longer cared and simply stood a while longer in the shallows as it dawned on me that I was nearly done. After 16 hours and 28 minutes I stopped where I had begun, on the narrow empty road that winds towards Knockan Crag, the grandstand view it affords of the Coigach and Assynt hills lost in the cold and vast dark space all around.

It was perhaps inevitable that I would one day set out on the Ring of Inverpolly. It was a round I had known of for well over a decade and while others had now completed it in significantly faster times, it seemed of little consequence. I had challenged myself and in running alone, entirely reliant on my own ability to navigate the rough terrain in often poor conditions, I knew I had achieved all I had aspired to when the idea first lodged in my subconscious, inspired by another's vision. The culprit was of course, Alec Keith.

BELOW: Coigach and Assynt skyline



FOOTNOTES:

1. While extensive research has revealed no additional records of completion, it is entirely possible others have done so in the intervening years.
2. fastestknowntime.com/fkt/luke-taylor-francisco-javier-cabrera-valdes-ring-inverpolly-2022-04-23
3. A short, exposed scramble (Grade 3) via an open chimney on the south side of the ridge is required to reach the summit of Stac Pollaidh. Descent is via the same route. Rockfall has made the direct ascent of the summit tower more difficult – it is now V.Diff.