

# BACK TO BASICS

Last autumn, Alex Roddie felt he was getting a little too comfortable with GPS navigation. So he took to the spectacular mountains of Torridon, armed only with a map and compass, to see how he got on...

PHOTOS: JAMES RODDIE AND ALEX RODDIE

HOW GOOD is your navigation? For the last few years I've almost exclusively used digital techniques in the mountains. I'd always carry a paper map and compass as backup, but the convenience of ViewRanger on my phone or a dedicated GPS invariably won the day. I'd become one of those walkers I used to look down on, peering at a screen instead of navigating with map and compass. Had my skills become rusty? If the proverbial hit the fan, would I still be able to navigate 'traditionally'?

When I headed up to the Highlands for some early winter Munro-bagging with my brother James, I decided to use map and compass alone to guide us up and down our chosen hills. I won't say that the result was a wake-up call, but there were certainly a few surprises.

## AN EARLY START

"We need to set alarms for four if we want to be on the ridge for sunrise," James had said the night before. James is a nature photographer who laughs in the face of early starts. I'd just endured a hellish train journey up from England and was feeling a lot less eager, but after seeing the amazing forecast my enthusiasm grew.

Torridon has fascinated me for years, but for various reasons I had never climbed a single hill there. I had, however, hiked the Cape Wrath Trail twice, and had come to regard the wild stretch of country round the back of Beinn Eighe to be the best section of the trail. Beinn Eighe's complex corries and soaring summits proved an irresistible temptation. James had done the route taking in both

Munros several times, so with at least one of us knowing where we were going I decided that it would be a good choice for my reintroduction to traditional navigation.

We arrived at the car park in Glen Torridon in the dark. The faintest glimmer of twilight illuminated the eastern horizon as we geared up, breath pluming in our torch beams. James pointed uphill. "It's a steep slog, but it gets you up high quickly." He wasn't joking. The walk-in warmed us up in no time; I can't say it did the same for my night-nav skills, though, as the path was obvious and the only direction was up.

By the time we reached the broad shoulder between Stuc Coire an Laoigh and Spidean Coire nan Clach, golden light was flooding the landscape, picking out every pinnacle and buttress on nearby Liathach. We'd made it to our viewpoint in time for a sunrise of stunning clarity. After taking photos, pausing just long enough for the chill to bite, we continued uphill to the first Munro. Spidean Coire nan Clach is a sneaky one: a glance at the OS map might fool you into thinking that the trig point marked 972 metres (3188 feet) is the summit, but the true Munro lies north-east along a rocky ridge, and is higher at 993m (3257 feet) (Harvey's British Mountain Map of Torridon makes this slightly more obvious). I felt pleased at my map-reading skills for noticing this. In poor visibility it would be easy to assume you'd reached the Munro at the trig point.

## A TWILIGHT DESCENT

After admiring the expansive views down into the lochan-

[right] Climbing Beinn Eighe - with map to hand



Photo credit: James Roddie



## Mountain navigation

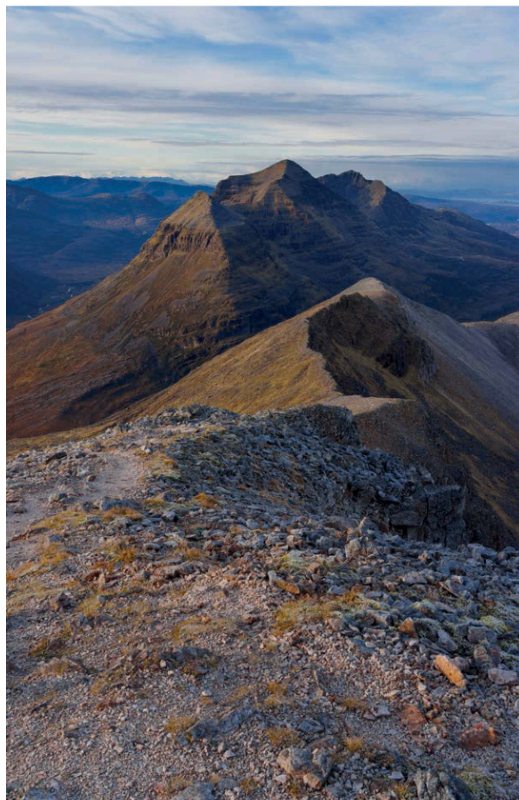


Photo credit: Alan Roddie



[above left] View to Liathach from Beinn Eighe [above right] Distant views from the summit ridge  
[below] Fogbow from the summit of Slioch

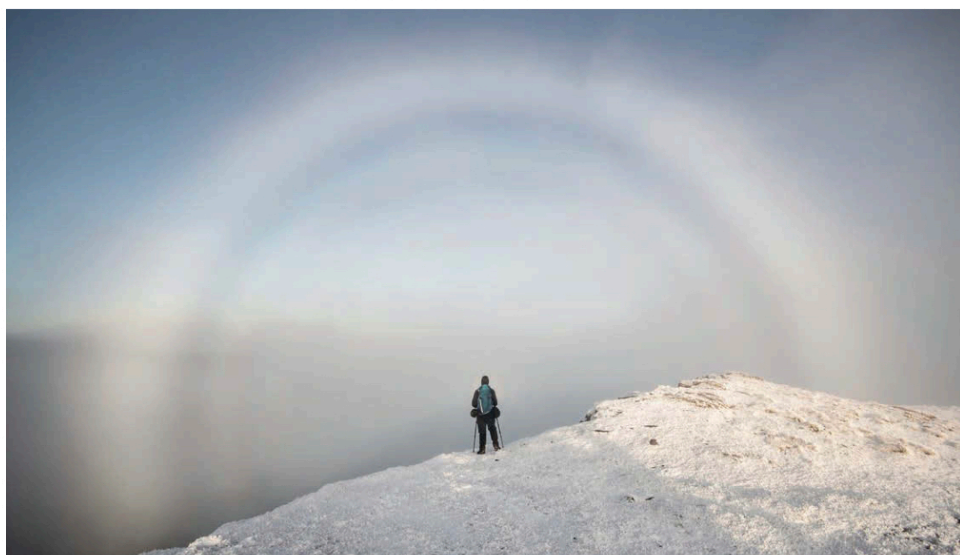


Photo credit: Alan Roddie

speckled hollow of Coire Ruadh-staca, we retraced our steps back to the trig point and continued along the sweeping ridge towards the second Munro, Ruadh-stac Mor. Conditions could hardly have been clearer, so this was no real test; but I made an effort to tick off terrain features and keep track of our relative position – something I can be guilty of neglecting when using GPS. The stony plateau of Ruadh-stac Mor, when we reached it, rewarded us with even better views than the first Munro. Far below us to the north-east, I could make out the spot where, months earlier, I'd enjoyed a great wild camp with Chris Townsend while hiking through on my second Cape Wrath Trail.

The descent into Coire Mhic Fhearchair took us past the famous Triple Buttress – an improbably steep complex of crags looming over the blue mirror of the loch below. The descent was obvious enough at first, down an eroded scree chute, but the path soon fizzled out. James knew the way, but humoured me by keeping quiet. Time to consult the map. Ordnance Survey showed no path at all; Harvey showed a path on the east side of the loch. I decided to head directly downhill to the near end of the loch, then contour around the eastern shore. After a rough few hundred metres of frozen bogs, tiny lochans and rocky terraces, we made

it to the water's edge and there, sure enough, we found a path again. From the loch's outflow the map showed an easy track all the way back to the road in Glen Torridon.

### "I THINK IT'S THIS WAY"

For the next day, our aim was Slioch. This isolated peak commands a dramatic position above Loch Maree and the regenerating pinewoods of Coille na Glas-leitir. The ascent began after crossing a rickety bridge over the Abhainn an Ehasaigh, where the path split into several forks; time for me to start navigating again.

We were joined by James' partner, Nicole. This time we didn't have the safety net of prior knowledge. "I think it's this way," I said, pointing along a fork through bushy heather. The ground soon levelled out, and we entered an area of semi-frozen bogs where deer tracks branched off in all directions. James was less sure. "I'm getting the feeling we should be over there."

We stopped to scrutinise the map. I was convinced we were going the right way, although I urged the others to keep questioning my decisions. In the end we kept going on the course I'd set, towards a small bealach west of Meall Each. After a while we met another path coming in from





[above] A view over Loch Maree through swirling mist – blink and you'll miss it

the right – I'd been out by perhaps 100 metres. Above, the snowline crowning Slioch's ramparts had been retreating in the warm sunshine, but a biting wind found us as soon as we stopped for some lunch. From the broad bowl of Coire na Sleaghaich we could see only a little snow remaining on the mountain's upper slopes. The path became vague, but it was easy to follow the burn uphill until a much clearer path slanted down from a higher lochan west of us. An eagle flapped lazily overhead.

### CHASING SPECTRES

Above the lochan, we climbed steep broken ground dusted with snow and rime ice. Cloud soon blew in on the freezing wind, transforming the landscape from benign autumnal hill to a winter mountain with teeth. I watched, spellbound, as a Brocken spectre formed, vanished and reformed again to my right, a vast ragged halo projected in the blue sky above it. We all looked, enthralled. The character of the walk had changed so suddenly.

With the clag down and the path masked by snow, it was time for some compass work. I navigated to the first false summit – which took longer to reach than I expected – and

then across a plateau to the second at 980 metres (3215 feet), where we found a trig point. "Is this the top?" James said. Nicole asked to look at the map, and confirmed that the true summit, at 981 metres (3218 feet), was about 100 metres due north. Brocken spectres and their fogbows kept us company as we battled through spindrift and deepening wind chill. The true summit, marked by a cairn, offered tantalising glimpses down the Atlantic Wall and across Loch Maree, one of the finest views in the Highlands.


We'd spent so long enjoying the atmospheric conditions that darkness overtook us on the descent. There's a particular feeling that comes from being high on a mountain when it's getting dark – reverence, perhaps, mixed with excitement and just a tinge of alarm. How would my recovering nav skills cope with a benightment? The steep, vague section through boggy terrain beneath Meall Each looked very different on the way down and in the dark; we were glad we'd first tackled it in daylight. We didn't need the compass again, but sustained attention and a few discussions about the right way saw us safely back to the bridge and the long, flat path back to the car. The moon smiled down at us out of a clear sky. Slioch had given us

views, Brocken spectres and a few navigational teasers as part of the bargain. What more could you ask from a day out in the Scottish hills?

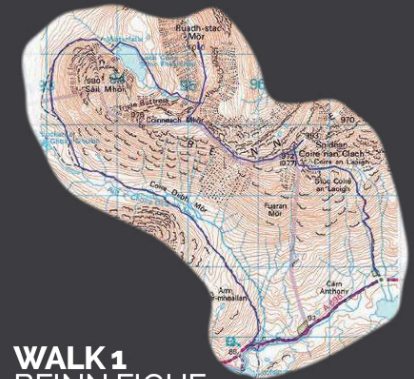
### USE IT OR LOSE IT

Digital navigation has come on a long way, and is now very effective if you use the right gear and have the right skills. But my reintroduction to traditional map-and-compass work was an eye-opener. I'd forgotten how much more engaged with the landscape you are when you don't have an electronic sidekick watching out for you. Rather than thinking a problem through for yourself it's easier just to hit that 'position fix' button. We've all done it, haven't we?

Relying solely on my instincts again felt like a step into the unknown – and I did make a few small errors. In less forgiving circumstances, small errors can snowball. I won't stop using GPS or smartphone mapping apps, because tech can add a useful perspective, but I will say this: map-and-compass skills remain absolutely fundamental. You can't navigate safely by GPS without this underlying know-how.

Besides, all tech can fail (yes, even map and compass, but that's a different conversation). Your safety depends on you being able to navigate confidently and accurately even if a battery dies in the cold or you smash a screen on a rock. 

## ABOUT ALEX'S ROUTES



### WALK 1 BEINN EIGHE

**START/FINISH** Car park in Glen Torridon **GR: NG979578**  
**Distance:** 17.4km/10.8 miles  
**Ascent:** 1215m/3986ft  
**Time:** 7-9 hours (summer conditions)

**Munros:** Spidean Coire nan Clach (993m), Ruadh-stac Mor (1010m)

Fhearchair could present an avalanche risk. The stream crossing in this corrie is often challenging in spate.

**Route notes:** A challenging mountain walk with some steep, rough ground, and a few steps of basic ungraded scrambling. Under snow the descent into Coire Mhic

**Maps:** OS Explorer 433 (Torridon – Beinn Eighe & Liathach); Harvey British Mountain Map Torridon & Fisherfield

### WALK 2 SLIOCH

**START/FINISH** Car park near Kinlochewe **GR: NH038623**  
**Distance:** 18.3km/11.4 miles  
**Ascent:** 1111m/3645ft  
**Time:** 7-9 hours (summer conditions)

**Munros:** Slioch (981m)

**Route notes:** This is a long walk, often boggy, and with vague paths in places. The final few hundred metres are steep and rocky.

**Maps:** OS Explorer 433 (Torridon – Beinn Eighe & Liathach); Harvey British Mountain Map Torridon & Fisherfield

Map credits: OS Maps

