



Alex Roddie

A CAIRNGORMS LEARNING CURVE

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AN 'ARCTIC' SAFARI IN THE HIGHLANDS

As a hillwalker and backpacker who seeks images in wild mountain landscapes, I've long believed that these journeys fall into one of two categories – image first, or adventure first. Put another way, what is the main objective? If you're heading out there looking for specific images, chances are that everything else is secondary to that goal. You're carrying more photographic gear, and once you have the images you want it's probably time to head home. Adventure-first trips, by contrast, are all about the experience of being out in the wild, and any images you create are a nice bonus. You're probably carrying less gear and you might not care if conditions are less than perfect.

For the last few years, I've been firmly in the second camp. My trips have been lightweight and ambitious, usually carrying the bare minimum of camera kit; if you put yourself in the path of adventure often enough, and if the adventures are good enough, the images will come. So, the theory goes. Though there's some truth in it, I'd long been curious to see if there might be room for a middle path. Could I combine slow, thoughtful, previsualised landscape photography with a big winter mountain journey?

THE PLAN

When a gap in my calendar coincided with a stunning forecast in early March 2020, I decided to see if I could have my cake and eat it too.

I wanted to head deep into the Cairngorms to one of the places I'd longed to photograph in winter for many years; the Loch A'an Basin. The route I'd planned was ambitious for winter, at over 30 miles in length and crossing three Munros – doubly ambitious with such deep snow cover. I'd need snowshoes and winter camping gear, which would result in a heavy pack. Additional lenses, tripods, filters and other photographic items would add to my burden.

I knew what I wanted. There were two views in particular: a shot looking directly along the frozen length of Loch A'an to the dramatic Shelter Stone Crag from the slopes of A' Choinneach, and a dawn image of the Shelter Stone Crag, Hell's Lum and the Stag Rocks from Beinn Mheadhoin. The first would require a telephoto lens, the second a moderate wide-angle. There were a few other images I was looking for as well, including one in Rothiemurchus forest and – if conditions behaved themselves – an image of the Belt of Venus illuminating Stob Coire Sputan Dearg.

My bag, when packed, looked gigantic. The weight was nothing short of appalling. I felt tempted to abandon plans for intentional landscape photography and stick to the run-and-gun approach I knew best, but another look at the forecast convinced me; this was as good a chance as I'd ever get.



Alex Roddie

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A WALK THROUGH THE WOODS

It started with a walk up through Rothiemurchus to Glenmore, where I'd arranged to meet my friend Chris Townsend. Although I'd done this walk several times before, there's always something new to see in the forest and I took my time on the clear paths between the trees, always on the lookout for potential images. Opportunistic snaps aside, my chance for something a bit more studied came at a ford. I took my time setting up the tripod and spent fifteen minutes experimenting with light, form, movement, and composition. It was time well spent. I came away with an image that pleased me – nothing spectacular, but closer to what I was looking for than I'd have managed without those extra minutes of study and contemplation. I resisted the urge to look at my watch and feel bad about my slow progress. This was what I wanted. Above me, a perfect snowline reflected bright sunlight.

'I've lived here for thirty years, and I never tire of the place,' Chris said to me a few hours later as we walked up through regenerating pine forest to Ryvoan Pass. *'There's always something new to see.'*

We camped beside the River Nethy, at a flat spot with good views into the Cairngorms where the thin snow cover had partially melted away. I'd originally planned a high camp up on the plateau for that first night. We hadn't managed to walk as far as I'd hoped that afternoon, but as we wound down from the day's walk and pitched our tiny backpacking tents beside the river in the deepening evening chill, I didn't really mind.

A ford in the forest



Into the heart of the Cairngorms from the summit of Bynack More

A VIEW ALONG LOCH A'AN

Overnight, the temperature dropped to -2.5 degrees C – enough to firm up the snow outside my tent and add a delicate tracery of frost to the inside as I brewed coffee and warmed up. Dawn painted brushstrokes of extraordinary pastel colours over half the sky.

Our ascent of Bynack More was easier than expected in the deep snow thanks to the snowshoes we both carried. The glare from sunshine soon became strong

enough that we needed sunglasses, and I began to worry that the light would be poor for landscape photography as more and more of the wispy high-level cloud seemed to be dissipating. The drama of the Cairngorms is a flighty thing; in the right conditions there's nowhere in Scotland with such presence, such majesty, but in the wrong conditions they can seem almost without scale, lending a flatness to views. Good light and detail in the sky are needed to bring out the best in the Cairngorms. I felt more hopeful as we neared the summit ridge. More cloud had started to blow in, but not too much. The sun

had melted off some of the snow on the rocks, but deep sculpted drifts filled every hollow and scoop. Above, the mountain's ridge rose in a bulky crest to the 1,090m summit where I knew there were excellent views into the heart of the Cairngorms. The landscape was coming to life.

I said goodbye to Chris at the base of the summit ridge. He had things to do later that day, and decided to return home via a different route. Meanwhile, I headed on up, soon swapping snowshoes for crampons as the angle steepened and the snow hardened. An ice axe was needed here too. I kept my camera in its bag until I reached the top. The views from the summit were magnificent and far-reaching, and I changed lenses to capture interesting details on distant mountains. Clouds were swirling over the peaks around Loch A'an now – where I was heading next – and I knew that if I were patient, I'd get the images I was looking for.

Snowshoes back on for the descent from the summit, I crossed a broad plateau of unbroken snow and navigated to the subsidiary top of A' Choinneach where my planned view unfolded in full. Clouds boiled dramatic and dark over the Shelter Stone Crag 5km to the south-west. Loch A'an itself was completely frozen over and covered in deep snow. Everything I'd imagined had all come together: a foreground of exposed rocks, a layered view with depth and grandeur, and a sky to match. Despite being early afternoon, the light – high-key yet with a soft quality over the summits – worked for me. I captured my image and continued on my descent towards the frozen shores of the loch. A NIGHT ON THE PLATEAU

Spot the distant figures





One of the images I'd come for, looking along the length of Loch A'an

Thanks to the deep snow, the journey around the loch shore took a lot longer than I'd planned. I found myself spellbound by the intricate patterns in the ice at my feet. Wind, precipitation and freeze-thaw cycles had driven the surface of the loch into ridges and bands of entrancing colour and texture. It was an entire landscape on a tiny scale. Although the cliffs of the Shelter Stone Crag

ahead were increasingly impossible to ignore, a wild Himalayan scene of cornices and couloirs, it was not the macroscopic that most interested me for now but the microscopic.

I made it to the summit plateau of Beinn Mheadhoin (1,182m) about an hour before sunset. The pull up from

Loch Etchachan (also frozen) had been exhausting. Although the temptation was to start scouting for images right away, I attended to priorities first; setting up a safe and comfortable home for the night, starting with finding somewhere flat to camp. With such uniform cover of frozen snow, I had almost limitless opportunities. My only challenge was creating secure anchor points for my tent pegs in the firm snow. As I worked on autopilot, I was dimly aware of glorious but fleeting light washing over the landscape.

By the time my tent was up and I could spare attention and energy for the landscape again, the light was gone and any opportunity for images with it.

I was disappointed. Arriving half an hour earlier would have made all the difference. Telling myself that I'd get up before dawn, I cooked some dinner and turned in for the night. The temperature was already well below freezing. I had a hunch it would get very cold indeed up here on the summit plateau.

At about 19.00, sensing the soft radiance of moonlight outside, I laboriously got dressed again inside my sleeping bag, pulled on my down jacket and boots, unzipped the frost-twinkling flysheet, and crunch-crunch-crunched out over the snow with my camera in hand. The starfield above failed to compete with the fading afterglow of sunset, or with the brash waxing moon. The silence and the isolation thrilled me as I stood alone in the midst of the vast subarctic plateau of the Cairngorms. Whether or not I came away with any more images, this was worth it.

A microscopic Loch A'an landscape







Dawn glow over the summit of Cairn Gorm



The Belt of Venus over Stob Coire Sputan Dearg

GETTING WHAT I CAME FOR

Waking up early enough for some dawn photography wasn't hard, but getting out of my sleeping bag was. My watch had measured an overnight low of -7 degrees C. At 06.20 I was melting snow for coffee and by 06.45 I was in position with my tripod and camera. This time, I promised myself, I'd be ready.

The light was brief, but it came. After a fiery burst on the eastern horizon, pale and subtle colours lit up the mountains and clouds. The best of the light lasted no more than thirty seconds but I knew that I'd captured one of the images I'd come for; a long shot looking over Coire Sputan Dearg with the Belt of Venus glowing softly above. An hour later, after striking camp and beginning the walk back down to Coire Etchachan, I was treated to extraordinarily clear views towards the Shelter Stone Crag and over the plateau where I'd be snowshoeing out later that day. The photograph almost made itself, and ironically when I later came to process images this became my favourite from the entire trip. Previsualisation and planning had helped me to make the most of the excellent conditions, but there's still something to be said for just being in the right place at the right time.



My high overnight perch on the summit of Beinn Mheadhoin

on landscape

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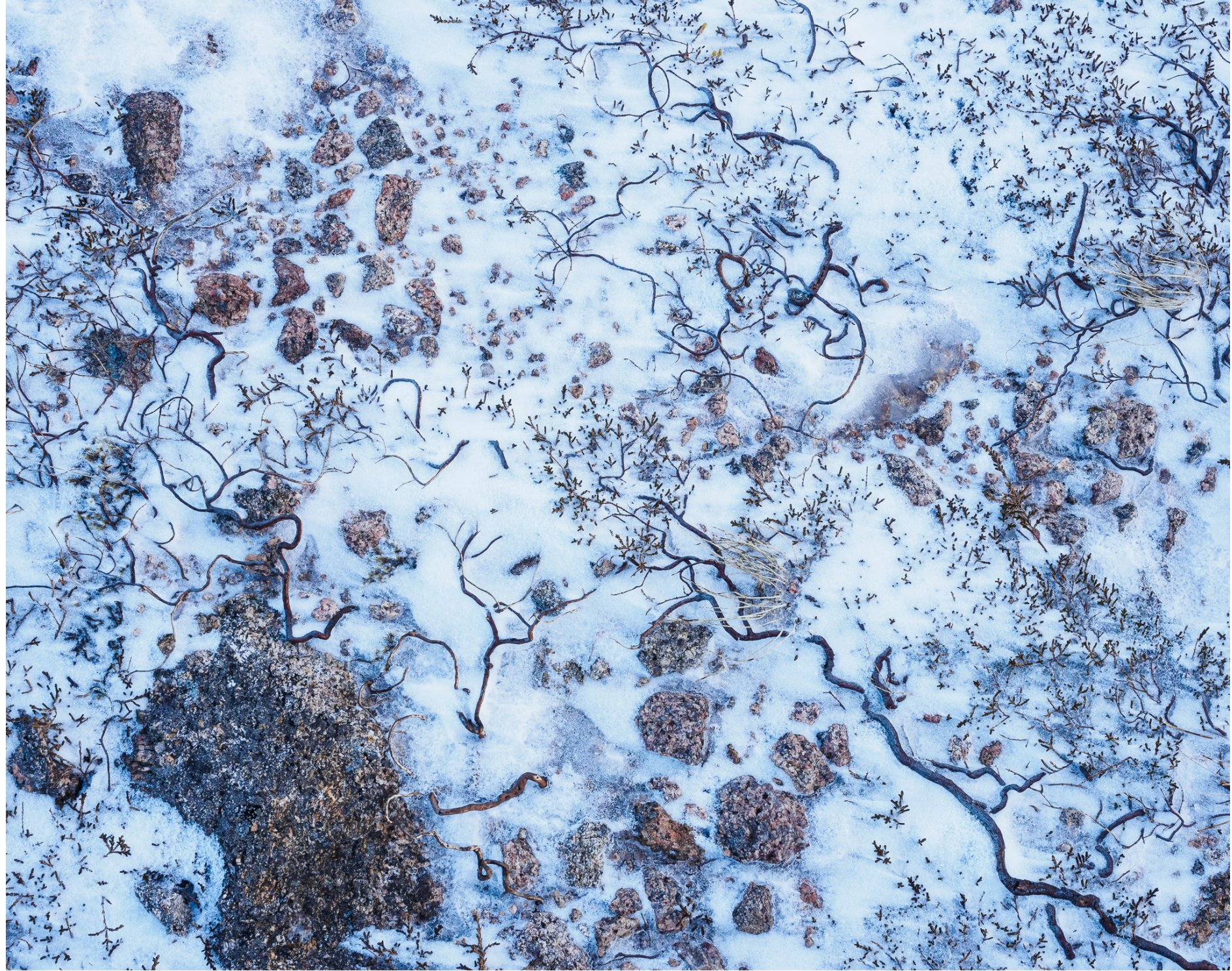


A monochrome vision along the frozen shores of the loch



A microscopic Loch A'an landscape







Dawn glow over the summit of Cairn Gorm



The Belt of Venus over Stob Coire Sputan Dearg



My high overnight perch on the summit of Beinn Mheadhoin



Cairngorms clarity



Looking south



A hastily revealed view in increasingly cloudy conditions



An incredible depth of snow in Coire Etchachan



On the long return to Aviemore