

A Memorable Mini Marathon

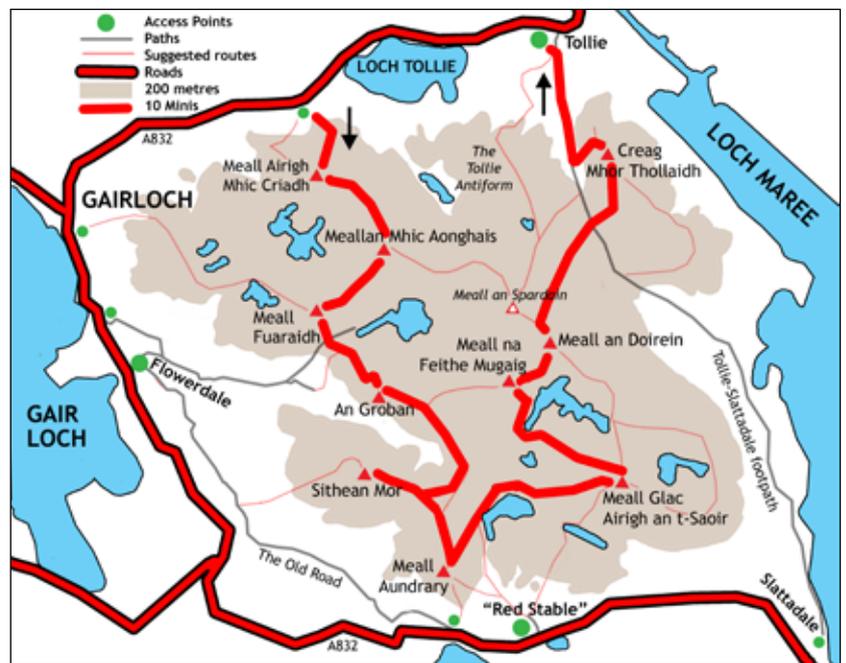
The Himalayas may have their 8000 metre mountain, the Alps their 4000 metre peaks, Scotland its 914 metre Munros. But east of Gairloch, in the block of land enclosed by Loch Maree and the A832, we have the Minis: ten of them. To qualify, these miniature mountains must reach 300 metres or higher, with a 50 metre drop all round. They may lack height, but they make up for this by their character, their variety, their views, and their impressive wealth of exposed rock.

Mini-bagging has not taken off yet, and most of the hills are rarely visited. But a breakthrough has now been made: on Saturday 22nd June 2019, a team of four Bootleggers plus Rufus the dog achieved the first continuous walk round all ten Minis in a day! OK, it's only 20 kilometres (12½ miles) on the map, and about 1400 metres of climbing, but the terrain is so rough and so complicated that it feels like twice as much. Only one hill has a worn path up it, and the ground varies from heather and peaty moorland to bare rock (lots of it), with boggy areas to be avoided and cliffs to be circumvented.

We left transport at the finishing point, and then five of us set off from the small quarry at the top of the Gairloch-Poolewe road where the fence has a stile. We climbed slowly up to the foot of the first hill, determined to conserve energy as we had little idea of how much we would need on this walk. Typically varied ground with outcrops of slabby gneiss took us to the rounded top of **Meall Airigh Mhic Criadh (349m)**. Our aim was to average one hill per hour, and we came close to achieving that; but we also enjoyed a lengthy stop on every summit to eat and drink and admire the view, which added at least two hours to our time.

On the col before the next hill, **Meallan Mhic Aonghais (367m)**, a lochan held a pair of red-throated divers with one chick. Aonghais gave an easy climb, mostly on sloping rock, and great views. Next came **Meall Fuaraidh (369m)** where a small cliff barred the way, marking the rock's transition from gneiss to amphibolite. We found a way up and reached another very rocky summit. So far so good: energy levels were satisfactory, but then the first three hills were relatively easy.

We dropped down to the Flowerdale hydro track, the only built path we encountered until the Tollie-Slattadale path at the end. One of our party, who had planned on only doing the first three, went down to Flowerdale from here. The remaining four of us, plus dog, crossed the burn and took the small worn path



Looking ahead from the first hill: lots of rock, and the next two Minis beyond (left and right)



Loch Airigh a' Phuill and Meallan Mhic Aonghais (left) from An Groban

up **An Groban (383m)**, the finest of the Minis. As if to reinforce its credentials, Alpine lady's-mantle oddly flourishes on the summit, a true mountain plant. It is the most visited of the Minis, but we saw no-one here or anywhere on this walk (not even an Alpine lady).

It was a refreshingly breezy and partly cloudy day, but showed signs of improving as we followed An Groban's delightful ridge. Our next target was the neighbouring hill, **Sithean Mor (384m)**, but it looked a long walk away, across the deep glen. The only major route-finding decision of the walk was whether to go steeply down into the rough and boggy glen and up the other side, or take a longer detour and maintain height. There was some disagreement about this, but we did the latter, reaching Lochan a' Charbaid and entering the area burnt by fire earlier in the year: unpleasant walking over charcoal

ground and charred heather stalks. Fresh grass and tormentil leaves were beginning to re-green some areas. Rock and steep blackened turf took us to the top of Sithean Mor. Five hills achieved, five to go.

We returned to the lochan and headed for **Meall Aundrary (327m)**: a remarkably complex and rocky hill, but the summit was easy enough to reach by grassy gullies. It is usually reached from the Red Stable, and is the lowest and most southerly of the Minis. The next hill, **Meall Glac Airigh an-t-Saoir (391m)**, looked a long way off, beyond the large Loch nam Buainichean. We followed the loch shore, some of it on narrow ledges, as far as an old shieling settlement, and then climbed diagonally upwards through bracken and heather at first to find the top. This Mini (rocky, of course, and now back to gneiss) is the highest point on a ridge and has the least impressive summit but some of the best views.

A straightforward walk, for which we were now grateful, took us to the southern arm of wonderful Loch na Feithe Mugaig. We refilled water bottles at the outflow burn and then followed the shore before climbing easily up to the next Mini. It is not named on the map, but the name **Meall na Feithe Mugaig (369m)** seems suitable: a minor but pleasant hill, with seven other Minis in sight. By now the sunlit view over the loch towards Slioch and the Torridons was extraordinary, the air was calm and mild, and we congratulated ourselves on being in such a wonderful place in such a perfect evening: a good excuse for a lengthy rest. The shortest Mini-link came next, to **Meall an Doirein (420m)**, the highest of them all: a broad very rocky hilltop, decorated by conspicuous pegmatite outcrops. Nearby Meall an Spardain fails to achieve Mini-ship because the drop is 7 metres short.

Now the end was in sight: a formidable-looking final hill, **Creag Mhor Thollaidh (343m)**, also known as Tollie Rock. We reached the Slattadale path at a lochan guarded by a noisy greenshank, climbed a grassy angle up the side of the hill, and finally reached our tenth and last Mini. Triumph! (But we forgot to bring the champagne.) The final descent of a rough grassy gully



On Sithean Mor, Rufus contemplates Meall Aundrary



The Torridon skyline from Meall Glac Airigh an-t-Saoir



Slioch and Loch na Feithe Mugaig



We made it! Creag Mhor Thollaidh

needed care and took us to the path and a last mile to the road.

We had started walking at 8.15am, and finished at 9.45pm: 13½ hours for the first Mini-traverse! Luckily it was the day after the year's longest day, and we finished in daylight. We were suitably impressed by our achievement, although of course that time will easily be beaten when this Mini Mountain Marathon becomes popular.

How lucky we are to have this small mountain range on our doorstep!

Jeremy Fenton