

## Munro-bagging

By Cathy Whitfield

Why do you do it? It's all too easy to think of reasons not to do it; especially at 6.00am on a Sunday when the cat is curled behind your knees and rather relying on you not getting up 'til noon. But you get up anyway, for the sole reason - just at the moment - that you arranged to pick up Fred and Mike, your regular walking partners, at 7.00am and you're damned if you'll give them an excuse to accuse you of wimping out. It seemed a good idea in the pub on Friday, but now, shivering with the cold - since even the central heating thinks it unconscionably early - you begin to have your doubts.

You get ready anyway, and thank God you packed your rucksack the night before, for at 6.00am your brain is not up to making decisions about what to take. It's all you can do to wash and dress and make your sandwiches - dry bread and thin ham - that through some alchemy of your rucksack will, in 7 hrs or so have converted themselves into Food of the Gods. But that is a long time in the future and after a bowl of cereal and a banana (nature's energy bar) you attend to the task at hand and dress carefully in your lucky thermal top. It has holes, but you wore it on that excellent day on Creag Meagaidh so you can't risk not wearing it now. Same goes for the lucky socks. It's cold in the house so you pile layer on layer and, just in case, you stuff an extra fleece into your rucksack. Most of what you take is for just-in-case; the thicker fleece in case it's cold; the thinner fleece in case it's too hot in your thicker fleece; the camera in case it's clear at the top; your binoculars in case that speck in the sky turns out to be a golden eagle; the first aid box in case you are called upon to treat a compound fracture with the contents (five band-aids, a pair of tweezers and some anti-midge cream).

You arrive only five minutes late to pick up Fred and Mike. All of you claim to have been up for hours and enthuse about the day and its prospects, pretending not to be bothered by the heavy look of the sky and the wind that is stronger and colder than the forecast. Fred, you notice, in spite of being up for hours, has not found the time to wash. Mike, you notice, has had a cooked breakfast (cooked by his wife, it turns out). The smell of both will bring on that vague travel sickness you always get on these long journeys, so you hope Mike isn't going to fart all the way as usual. But, as usual, he does.

It's a long drive. A feature of Munro bagging is that you start off with the nearest ones but then, when you no longer feel up to these early starts, the far away ones necessitate just that thing. You feel vaguely guilty about using the car and contributing to global warming, but congratulate yourself that at least there are three people in the car. In any case you suspect your use of petrol pales into significance - in global warming terms - with the emissions from Mike's bowels that he regards as a reason for jollity rather depreciation.

Eventually, after only a few near-death experiences on the A9, you arrive at your hill, but in spite of your early start there are at least three cars there already and coloured jackets are making their way up the track. You put on your boots and, as usual, they hurt in a different place from last time. You shiver and put on your thicker fleece, even though you know that ten minutes later you will be taking it off. And finally, after the usual argument about the best way to get out of the car park, you set off to bag your Munro.

Ten minutes later, you stop to take off your fleece. Actually, it's a good excuse to stop for although the walk-in is on a good track, Mike is setting a fast pace. You try to keep up (since you don't want to bring up his rear) but find yourself beginning to pant. Why am I doing this? You ask yourself. It won't be the last time you ask that day. You stop regularly on the way up to divest yourself of all those layers until you are down to your lucky thermal top and your joggers. All that fleece might be light to wear, but it's dammed heavy to carry. However, you know that once you've had your lunch your rucksack will be lighter again - but wish you hadn't thought about your lunch for, in spite of it being only 10 o'clock, it begins to prey on your mind.

The gradient steepens and the path becomes one grind after another. You try not to grunt. You don't have the breath for grunting. But for a while you welcome the steepening and narrowing of the path for it shuts Fred up for the first time that day. That endless moaning on about office politics was getting you down. Why do I do this with Fred and Mike? You ask yourself, forgetting your need for an incentive to get yourself up and out - and the global warming argument. After a while you wish you had the breath to talk politics. Sweat is trickling down your spine and you find yourself stopping to look at the view every few paces, and developing a sudden interest in geology. (What an interesting rock! Could that be basalt?)

But eventually the gradient eases and the narrow stony path becomes a broad muddy track that leads you into the centre of a wet peaty bealach only to abandon you to find your own way out. You leap from tussock to tussock or take long detours around liquid smears of hill, following Fred, which is a mistake, for he has longer legs than you and leaps like some demented goat across channels and pools, leaving you to flounder muddily in his wake. There is at least a mile of this before the final climb to the top which, when you reach it, turns out not to be the summit after all (which could have been predicted from your map). You are disappointed, but pretend to have known it all along, and try not to sage wearily at the cairn that marks this false peak. (Why do I do this?)

By this time the clouds have swept in and hidden the true summit. There is a darkness in the West that you suspect means rain to come, but you deny this to each other with bravado and a pretence of understanding the weather better than the BBC. (Those clouds will lift once the wind veers ..). They don't, of course, and you find yourself walking in a sea of mist that blurs your glasses and drips from your hair and you haven't the faintest idea in which direction you ought to be going. Fred does though, even though he hasn't taken out his compass. You'd like to stop and get yours out just to check, but don't want to be left behind in the mist and so you trail miserably along in his wake, not entirely convinced by that instinctive sense of direction that goes with his instinctive understanding of meteorology. Fortunately you meet some people coming down - not from the direction you are going, but no doubt they got lost on the way. (At least that's what Fred tells you later when they're out of earshot). You stop and chat about the weather, the route, the hill. They, it turns out, have already done the top out to the West you'd decided not to bother with, and are heading for their second Munro - one so far away that you hadn't even considered doing it. Fred, who has no sense of distance or timing, develops a dangerous enthusiasm for adding yet another Munro to your tally and you and Mike have a hard time talking him out of it. It would only take an extra hour, Fred declares, having not even looked at the map. But that's Fred for you. (Why do I do this with Fred and Mike?)

You set off up the stony slope, a boulder field of huge granite lumps. The bigger they are the more likely they are to tilt. You clamber up with extreme care, terrifying yourself with thoughts of breaking an ankle, since you don't have much confidence in Fred or Mike's ability to set a compound fracture using the contents of your first-aid box. They, not having your vivid imagination, go skipping on ahead leaving you behind in the mist, feeling cross and wondering why you didn't go walking on your own, since you are on your own now in any case and you wouldn't have had to put up with Mike's bowels and Fred's office politics. You feel very cross for a time (why the \*\*\*\* do I do this?) but after the boulder field, easier ground is reached; thin grass among stones, pale fans of scree, pink granite gravel, and you know you are near the top. The cloud seems lighter, thinner, and strangely luminous, as if you are closer than usual to the sky. Which of course you are.

Your breathing eases, the pain in your knee fades, and there is a spring in your step as you follow the faint trace of a path that leads to the summit. The mist thins and lightens and the horizon of white on white is broken by a faint grey hummock - a cairn of rocks loosely decorated by a scattering of fellow-summiteers. The wind brings you the sound of voices, strangely muffled. You walk easily to the cairn and find yourself just ahead of Fred and Mike who, having missed the path on account of Fred's unerring sense of direction, had taken a detour to the west.

And then the cloud lifts, the sun breaks through and the world goes silent. All around are peaks, layer upon layer of hills, streaked with scree and the last wings of snow. The colours are all the shades of grey and brown and dull ochres. You think them the finest colours in the world, and Fred and Mike the best mates in the world. Now you know why you are there. Why you do this.

Fred touches the cairn, muttering something under his breath you suspect to be 'one hundred and sixty three'. It's an afterthought. Later you will have the pleasure of ticking it off on our chart, planning the next assault of the next on the list. But now there are other pleasures to be felt. You let your rucksack slide to the ground and with the loss of weight almost feel as if you could fly. On cue, two ravens soar over the ridge, croaking to each other tumbling on the wind. And you think, This Is It! This is why you come, why you get up at 6.00am, drive hundreds of miles, and tramp through bog and rain. For this moment of standing on a summit beneath moving clouds and ravens with other people who are here for much the same reasons. For looking around and down and seeing in the distance other peaks that you might have climbed, might climb again, might still have to climb. And, seeing them, you have a sense of where you are, where you have come from, where you are going.

And why.