

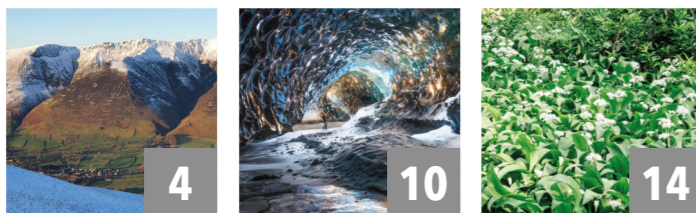


Outdoor FOCUS

THE QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF THE OWPG / SPRING 2024

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The Outdoor Writers and Photographers Guild is the only UK-based association of media professionals working largely or entirely on outdoor subjects. Our members cover every field of activity and all corners of the globe. They include writers, journalists, filmmakers, photographers, publishers and editors, all with a passionate interest in the outdoors. For more information visit www.owpg.org.uk.

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If you'd like to contribute to the next edition of *Outdoor Focus* please send an email with your article idea to alex@alexroddie.com. The copy deadline is **May the 1st**.

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Cover Beinn Alligin / Alex Roddie

YOUR NEW EDITOR



Hello from Alex Roddie

Hello! You might have noticed a few subtle design changes in this issue of *Outdoor Focus*, and that's because this is my first issue. I'd like to thank David Taylor, the outgoing editor, for helping ease me into the role.

For those of you who don't know me, I've been a Guild member for five years and have been working as a professional outdoor writer and editor for ten years. I'm editor of *Sidetracked* magazine and a regular contributor to *TGO*, where I review gear and contribute Wild Walks, skills pieces, and features. I write books, too: *The Farthest Shore* (Vertebrate Publishing, 2021), as well as a series of coffee-table books on long-distance hiking with German publisher gestalten. I write science fiction in any spare time not spent up a hill. I'm also a passionate photographer, mainly in 35mm film – although I also shoot digital for some work projects.

I look forward to serving as the new editor of *Outdoor Focus*, and if you have an idea for a story, my inbox is always open.

www.alexroddie.com | alex@alexroddie.com

CHAIRMAN'S MESSAGE

Stan Abbott gives a rallying cry

As the days lengthen and we approach the business bit of 2024, when members increasingly get out in the great outdoors, it's time for me, as your Chair, to issue a rallying cry.

Having successfully steered the Guild through two years of Covid, we now find ourselves in that Brave New World, in which everything is 'back to normal'... except, of course, it isn't. In our new normal, it's getting even harder to make a living from writing books and magazine articles, or from photography, alone.

Our Zooms organiser, Felicity Martin, did a great job in securing the services of Gary Ennis to lay bare to us what an even newer normal will look as Artificial Intelligence increasingly comes to the fore and, to be blunt, may efficiently carry out routine writing tasks – not to mention designing graphics for us. I commend listening to the recording of this riveting session to any member who missed it.

The Zoom sessions are a positive that came out of Covid, but your Guild works hard to support its members in many other ways – not least through our Awards for excellence, expertly organised by Jetta Megarry.

Your committee is pleased to welcome to its number Alex Roddie, your new *Outdoor Focus* editor, and David Taylor, previous editor of our newsletter. I'm pleased, in the course of my three-year term, which ends in October, to have been able to bring new talent on board – and to inspire belief that our organisation is of value and worth fighting for.

There is, as ever, much still to do. I implore all



members to do two things in the coming weeks as you make the most of longer days and broader views:

- Ask yourself whether the time is right for you to bring your skills to our committee to provide new blood and new ideas;
- Ask yourself who you know who writes about, photographs, or publishes on our great outdoors and – if they aren't already in the Guild, bring them on board (new member rate applies!). Our membership is our lifeblood and it is through growing our numbers that we can achieve the maximum for us all in these times of change.

The Wrong Mountain

Fellrunner **Norman Hadley** decides the Right Path is to climb the Wrong Mountain – and plucks a gem of a day from the embers of the year

A brush with enlightenment

The other day, I went to see my favourite Zen master. ‘Master,’ I beseeched him. ‘Which path should I take?’

Pulling his saffron robes tightly around him, he drew himself to full height and replied with a riddle. ‘Consider a wide valley. On one side rises a mountain of superlative beauty and international renown. On the other is a hill of generally dumpy appearance which appears on precisely no one’s list of favourites. Which should you climb?’

‘Too easy,’ said I. ‘Better to be on a dumpy hill looking at a beautiful one than vice versa. It’d be quieter, too.’

‘You have chosen wisely,’ said he. ‘To be honest, you could have figured this out without inventing me at all.’ Whereupon he vanished in a fictive cloud of incense.

A better hill than it actually is

I mention this because Clough Head, the northern terminus of the Helvellyn range, is unlikely to ever be voted Lakeland’s best-loved hill – but Blencathra definitely is. And Clough Head could scarcely be better

situated for viewing Blencathra’s vast, riven south face rising from the pastures of Threlkeld. When it carries a coating of snow, the effect is of a gigantic wedding cake from which hungry guests have carved mighty wedges.

For this and other reasons, this end of the Helvellyn ridge, collectively known as the Dodds, makes a superb winter outing. Reascents are small, the going generally easy, the paths well marked.

Avoiding the plague

The year 2020 was stuttering to a close, and not before time. For much of the year, the hills had been placed out of bounds by the coronavirus pandemic. From my Lancashire home, they floated like some mythic island on my northern horizon, tantalisingly out of reach.

On the penultimate day of the year, I grabbed my chance. The forecast was crisp and cold, so I pointed the car over Shap to enjoy some easy, ice-free motoring on the M6 and A66. Once I reached the lanes of Matterdale, however, everything was coated in glistening sheets of snow-ice. With suspiciously light steering, I gingerly nosed the car as close as I safely could to the foot of the hills, where the Coach Road heads over to St John’s in the Vale. But, before I reached my intended

destination, a crashed and abandoned four-wheel drive blocking the lane was the clearest possible signal to stop driving and get on my feet. I stashed my two-wheel-drive-at-best car in the nearest layby and laced up my shoes.

Taking to my feet

If ever there was an occasion for metal studs, this was it. They bit into the icy road like a snow leopard’s claws, giving total assurance. I trotted past the forlorn and abandoned pickup truck and ran the last mile of road before heading onto the broad northern ridge of Great Dodd. The snow was firm, but it must have only recently crisped up – someone had preceded me in snowshoes and there were ski tracks off to my right.

As I gained height, the wind blew colder, so I pushed the pace to keep warm. Blencathra was already looking magnificent, but I knew it was only getting started; it would look even better from Clough Head and better still as the sun started to dip.

First, I wanted to run all the Dodds, so I kept going south, down to Watson’s Dodd and up over Stybarrow. At Sticks Pass, I paused for thought. Midwinter’s shadows were already lengthening and, in a rare moment of self-restraint, I fought off

the temptation to keep going over Raise, White Side and perhaps Helvellyn itself. Superb though this ridge is, it would have meant night falling before I reached the view I had come to see. So I retraced my steps to Great Dodd before loping down the ridge to Calflow Pike and Clough Head.

Best seat in the house

For comedians, magicians and mountaineers, timing is everything. As I reached the last summit of the day, the light had started to honey up, casting a rosy glow over Blencathra’s crenulated crown. Parapentists rode gentle updrafts on the north-western slope, or soared out above the green pastures of the Vale of Keswick. I let my mind circle among them, giddy with the thrill of it.

Time was pressing on and, although I of course carried a headtorch, I was conscious that falling temperatures would only make the icy lanes icier. I didn’t fancy a night trying to sleep in a car tilted into a ditch. So I bounded down the north-east ridge to the Coach Road and the last few miles to the car. With the lanes now slippery as a politician’s promise, it was a grateful motorist who made it safely to the Troutbeck Inn and the freshly gritted A66. A challenging year had saved its best for last.

Blencathra from Clough Head



A LOOK AT SUBSTACK

Ronald Turnbull finds a new way for writers to not earn any money

Lean and hungry after long months of not quite enough to eat, you paddle your bark canoe up a backwater, clamber up the rocks beside the rapids and emerge to a high plateau where you haven't been before. What forms of wildlife live up here? And are any of them good to eat?

A small creature scuttles through last year's dead undergrowth. Sort of scaly, sort of spiny, not very big but encouragingly plump. Hunt it down, attempt to squash it with a sharpened stone? Or stride onwards, looking for bigger and more nourishing prey?

This is exactly how most of us are feeling right now about the new species of thing called a Substack. Small but possibly tasty, with wagging social-media type ears and a long bloggerish tail trailing behind it.

Strictly speaking, Substack is a new and slightly different sort of blog platform. Its styling tends to the tasteful and literary, tempting us towards short-essay-plus-a-few-pictures sort of content. It's pretty easy to set up and to post on. Like every internet platform it has aspirations as some sort of social media, so there are likes, and followers, and re-postings, and commenting on one another's stuff. But its distinctive feature is this: we make money out of it.

Lots and lots of money, if you believe Substack's own advertising. You can create a free one for all the world to see, but the real idea is to charge them: a minimum rate of \$5 every month, or \$50 a year. (From that, Substack takes 10% plus a transaction charge.) And even if you've only got 1,000 subscribers, that's a tidy little income right there.

So will we make money?

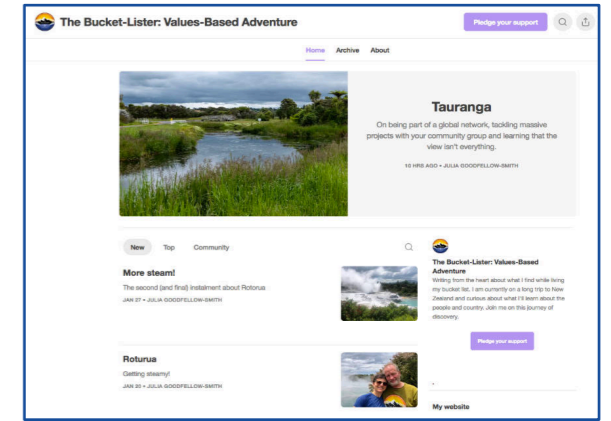
The answer to that one is – perhaps. But also, perhaps not. Substack's top 10 contributors make over \$1m a year each; but 90% of Substack's contributors make zilch. The most successful

Substacks seem to fall under current affairs briefings from established journalists or else from the far Right; sports pundits; and writers instructing other writers about writing.

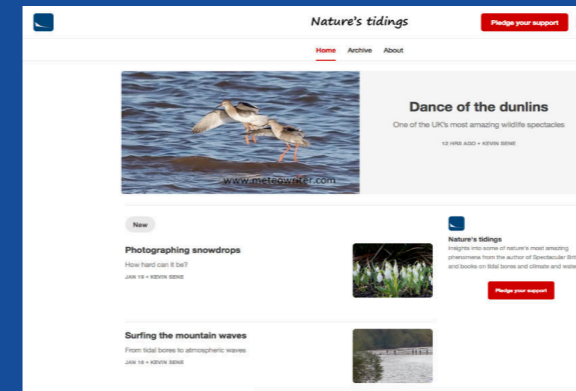
As another strand, some academics offer useful or interesting information, free, for their own gratification or as a public service. One I like is Hanna Ritchie's 'Sustainability by Numbers' – her day job being big data relating to climate change. The US-based 'Your Local Epidemiologist' has similar appeal. A typical post on those two receives around 100 likes, suggesting a readership around 1,000. 'Lost in the Archives', with weekly short essays about women associated with Cambridge University, has sparked interest with 600 subscribers in its first two months (reflected in 50 likes and 30 comments on a recent post about Virginia Woolf).

No OWPG member is currently running paying Substacks, but a handful of us are running free ones. They can be found by googling 'Substack' + their name. If you subscribe to something you don't like, it's straightforward to unsubscribe again.

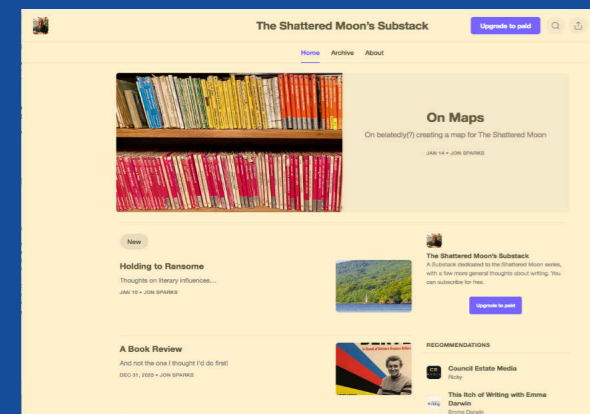
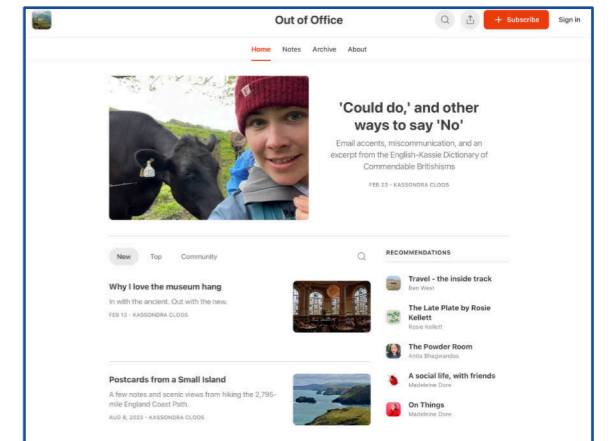
The Bucket-Lister from Julia Goodfellow-Smith is a travel blog (she's currently in New Zealand), but also supporting her two books on the interface between outdoors and self-help genres. She's posting fortnightly to over 200 existing subscribers harvested from her existing website and blog but continuing to slowly grow. She plans now to put the archive of existing posts behind a paywall. (Over 90% of what's read on Substack is free content.)



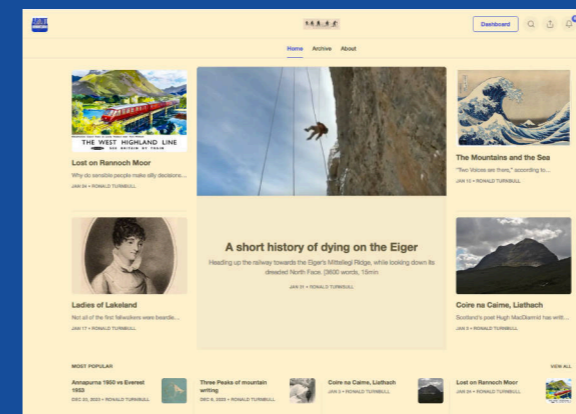
Nature's tidings, Kevin Sene's one, supports his new book *Spectacular Britain* with four posts since the start of the year. It's currently free, with an option of \$8/month subscription. Posts are a mix of nature writing, scientific insight and personal anecdote.



Out of Office from Kassondra Kloos, her lively and well-illustrated walking/writing blog, transferred to Substack in mid-February 2024, and discusses what it is to Not Be British while hiking and writing in Britain. Free, with an option to pledge future support.



The Shattered Moon from Jon Sparks is a 'writer's shed' type blog, roughly fortnightly, supporting his self-published science fiction series of the same name. After two months, it has a handful of subscribers; its role is as support for his series of novels.



About Mountains, my own Substack, posts a short essay (around 1,000 words) every week on the history of hillwalking and mountaineering. The free newsletter rose to 50 subscribers in the first two months, but has plateaued off at that level. I plan to run it for six months before considering whether to put part of it behind a paywall (or, I guess, close it down).

BIG WEEKEND 2024

Kevin Sene takes a look at what's in store

This year's Big Weekend will be from October 11th–14th, 2024, near Shrewsbury

After a gap of more than 10 years, our next Big Weekend will be held in Shropshire, close to the England-Wales border. Shrewsbury is the nearest town, its historic centre almost encircled by a loop of the River Severn, the UK's longest river. The two main bridges, the English Bridge and Welsh Bridge, hint at the town's once strategic importance, and the many listed buildings include 16th-century timber-framed houses and the 11th-century castle and abbey. Popular viewpoints in the Shropshire Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty include the Long Mynd and the Wrekin.

FSC Preston Montford

We will be staying at the Field Studies Council's headquarters at Preston Montford, about six miles west of Shrewsbury. The centre is set in the grounds of a large estate, managed to preserve a rich variety of

habitats, including an area of semi-ancient woodland. The River Severn passes nearby. The main house is an 18th-century listed building, but we will be staying in a modern annexe with a mix of twin bed and triple ensuite accommodation. We'll have exclusive use of a large meeting room with a comfy bar area nearby seating 20 people or more. There will be a modest single room supplement as usual.

Programme for the weekend

Planning has already started with the usual mix of workshops and outdoor activities plus the AGM, awards ceremony, and meal on the Saturday evening. The book table is now well established, and gives the chance to see what other members have been publishing and buy a copy if you wish; feel free to bring examples of your own work.

The Shropshire hills offer several

interesting possibilities for hillwalking, and an activity based around the Severn seems essential; we're looking into boat trip and canoeing options. For a gentler walk, the Severn Way passes close to the centre and runs alongside the river for part of the way into Shrewsbury. A historic tour of Shrewsbury is a must and, to explore even further back in time, Stan Abbott has offered to lead a Neolithic tour of the area.

Getting there

The centre is easily accessible by road and there are regular trains to Shrewsbury. By bus it takes about 15–20 minutes to Preston Montford with a 10–15-minute walk to the centre; we hope to offer transport back to the station on Sunday, as buses don't run that day. At the centre there is space for motorhome parking with shower access, while Caravan and Motorhome Club



Shrewsbury Castle

Historic Shrewsbury



Common room and bar

members have the option of a site nearby with electrical hook-ups.

Next steps

That's the plan so far, and we hope you can make it for what should be an interesting and enjoyable social weekend away. New members are particularly welcome and you can take part in as many (or as few) activities as you like. Check-in should be available from 3pm, with activities starting that evening and running through to Sunday evening. Many members stay the full three nights, leaving after breakfast on Monday, but you are welcome to make a shorter trip if you can't do that. We'll be sending out an initial email about plans in late April to get a feel for interest in the various activities on offer; bookings will then open in late May.

Hope to see you there.

What Makes a Great Photographer?

Ronald Turnbull shares some thoughts on the award-winning photography of **James Rushforth** – and reviews his OWPG Zoom presentation



↑ James Rushforth

Stunning photography: it's one of those traditional noun-adjective pairings, along with inspirational writing, iconic mountains, awe-inspiring views, prestigious (or alternatively coveted) awards, and so on. But when the pictures came up on the screen at the Awards Dinner on Great Cumbrae last October the brain did go into a state of mild shock. Amazed. Bewildered. And yes, somewhat stunned.

A circular tube of ice cave, scaled on the inside like a fish, leading up to an eyehole with a perky person popped in at its centre. A high-wire walker crossing the sky above two Dolomite mountains. A pack-ice pattern seen from a sailing ship's masthead. A perfect

jewel of an Icelandic mud pool.

Three things go to make a seriously great photographer (winner not only of the OWPG Award but of many others even more prestigious and/or coveted across the world). The three things are kit, talent, and time.

James's Zoom talk allowed us – once we'd recovered from the state of awe-inspired bewilderment induced by the photos themselves – to gauge the importance of each of them in his career so far.



James himself describes what got him his start as mostly luck. He took some action and mountain shots in the Dolomites with a simple £300 camera (insert tech spec of



simple £300 camera here, but obviously, nothing that special; checking back it was a Canon G12). And by pure luck, some of them got picked up by prestigious magazines, leading to further commissions. I'm more inclined to describe that kind of luck as talent. These days there are literally millions of images drifting around in the photosphere. The one that snags the eye of the picture editor from *National Geographic* takes luck, yes; being in the right place in the right light. But also the eye and imagination to take the James Rushforth photo as against, say, the Ronald Turnbull one.

As James's career started to pay for himself, he upgraded his kit. For starscapes big enough to print across a double-page spread, yes you need an expensive lens. But what impressed me was just how little time James spent celebrating those lenses. And his processing: often no more than the auto button in Lightroom. Sometimes, even,

the auto button applied in batches. The piece of equipment that got most talking time was, in fact, the electronically equipped camper van with its detachable handle.

Because, once the stunned brain recovered, the aspect that really struck it about James's photo process was the time, hard work and planning that goes into each award-winning photo. The pre-survey on Apple Maps. The Photographer's Ephemeris to

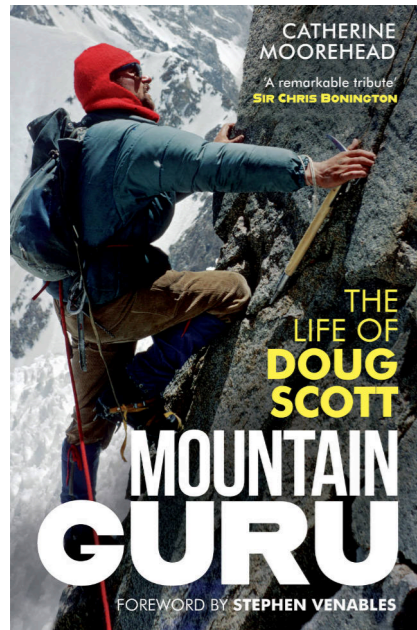
determine not just the time of day but also the exact date, even several years in advance. The 2,000 different takes of the dragonfly in flight. The 300,000 one-star to four-star shots stored in the cubic foot of hard drives, whirring away quietly in Kendal to be accessed in an instant from the camper van up on the Icelandic tundra.

And the detachable handle? That's the bit of the camper van that left him locked out of it, with the temperature at ten below freezing and night coming on, on that lonely road at the edge of the Iceland icecap. Fortunately, the screen of his phone showed he'd at least got a decent signal. Unfortunately, that phone, shining so merrily, was lying on the passenger seat inside the handle-less van.

What did James do? James is a photographer. He photographed his predicament. Just right for next time he's doing a talk to some photographers about his photography process.

The full set of James Rushforth's OWPG-Award winning photos was in the November 2023 *Outdoor Focus*, www.owpg.org.uk ('what we do' menu). The Zoom presentation is online for the next few months – if viewing this on paper, link through from the 'Zooms' forum of the OWPG website (preliminary login required) or direct via tinyurl.com/Jan-OWPG-Zoom (Passcode: Ye=Le14s). Or simply visit www.jamesrushforth.com.

BOOK REVIEWS / *Roly Smith*



Mountain Guru: The Life of Doug Scott
Catherine Moorehead
Birlinn, £25 (hardback)

I first met Doug Scott 48 years ago when I attended a lecture he gave to students at Trent Polytechnic in Nottingham. This was the start of a lifelong friendship, and that night I recall we ended up at his Nottingham home, consuming a rather large bottle of red wine with his first wife, Jan. And in 2006, I was honoured to present Scott with the Guild's coveted Golden Eagle Award at Sedbergh School for his outstanding record as an Alpine-style climber and his unstinting charitable work in the Himalaya. That admirable support for the Sherpa community through his Community Action Nepal and Community Action Treks schemes gets the recognition it deserves in this absorbing new biography. Scott is rightfully acknowledged as a climber who, having made his name climbing

some of the highest peaks in the Himalaya, devoted the later part of his life to giving something back to those usually unheralded communities who made these climbs possible.

He will always be remembered as the first Englishman to climb Everest with Dougal Haston in Chris Bonington's 1975 South West Face expedition. But that wasn't a typical Scott-style expedition; he made his name for elegantly simple Alpine-style ascents, usually without the use of oxygen.

Perhaps his most gruelling expedition, described in chilling detail here, was his amazing survival after breaking both ankles in a pendulum fall near the summit of the 7,285m Ogre with Bonington in 1977, and his epic eight-day crawl on hands and knees back to base camp.

Described by Bonington as: 'an extraordinary climber and a great humanitarian', Doug Scott will always be remembered as a climber who gave something back.

The Lost Paths: A History of How We Walk from Here to There

Jack Cornish
Michael Joseph, £20 (hardback)

This long-awaited but important new book by the Head of Paths at the Ramblers comes at an opportune time. Under the Government's imposed and recently extended deadline to 2031 for the registration of all rights of way, nearly 50,000 miles of Britain's footpaths remain unrecorded and

risk being lost for ever. Making the case for urgent action, the author presents one of the best researched and most comprehensive surveys of the history of public access to Britain's countryside that I have read in recent years. The only small complaints I have are that, apart from a few maps, it is not illustrated as it surely deserves to be; and the Doctor's Gate trespass of 1909 was on Bleaklow, not Kinder Scout.

In 2017, Cornish walked 1,500 miles as part of a five-year quest to discover and explore these threatened footpaths. Cornish skilfully delves into the social and political history of many routes on his marathon trek, and describes them in his well-researched and clearly expressed narrative. He admits to falling in love with the local path network, evocatively calling it 'a spider's web of history, laid on the land'.

Starting from ancient, prehistoric trackways, such as the Ridgeway, and the movement of

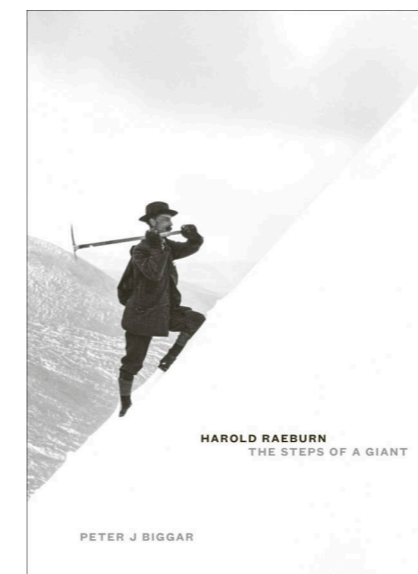


animals and salt to market, he takes us along lych ways, drovers' roads, pilgrim paths, parish roads and turnpikes to the coming of the railways and the iniquitous Enclosure Acts of the 18th and 19th centuries to urban and city footpaths. Strangely, canal towpaths seem to be overlooked.

Every route described is illustrated by the author's own personal experiences and observations along the way, which brings both the threatened paths and the history of the countryside into vivid life. Highly recommended.

Harold Raeburn: The Steps of a Giant

Peter J. Biggar
Scottish Mountaineering Press,
£16 (hardback)



Raeburn was one of Scotland's greatest ever mountaineers, who left a legacy of over a dozen still-intimidating climbs bearing his name across the Highlands.

Among his many groundbreaking achievements

were the winter ascents of Tower Ridge and North-East Buttress on Ben Nevis and Crowberry Gully in Glencoe in four days, cycling between Fort William to Glencoe. His ascent of Green Gully on the Ben in 1906, having first failed on The Comb, was the hardest ice climb achieved at the time and was unsurpassed in difficulty in Scotland for nearly three decades.

Raeburn pioneered climbs in the Alps, Norway and the Caucasus, attempted Kangchenjunga in 1920, and was the climbing leader on the ill-fated 1921 British Mount Everest Reconnaissance Expedition. Tragically, the latter was to be his undoing, precipitating a deep depression that eventually led to a mental breakdown and his death at 61 in 1926.

This sensitive, revealing and long-overdue biography is illuminated with extracts from Raeburn's own elegant writing and moving accounts from friends and climbing companions. The only criticism I have of this intimate portrait of a master mountaineer is the poor reproduction of images, which are inserted into the text and not treated as independent sections.

The Cairngorms & North-East Scotland

Iain Young, Anne Butler and Heather Morning
Scottish Mountaineering Press,
£35 (hardback)

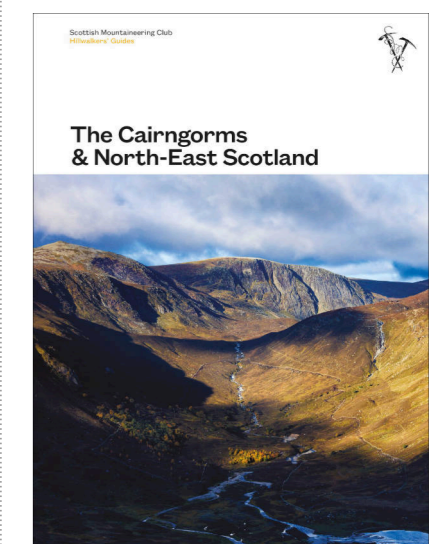
This lavish guide is the latest in the area-by-area coverage the Scottish Mountaineering Press is providing to the keen Munro and Corbett-collector. The

outstanding photography also gives the armchair stravaiger a glorious opportunity to explore and enjoy the tundra-like plateau.

The vast, 8,000km² plateau contains several of Scotland's highest Munros and a wealth of other distinct hills. But this comprehensive, if expensive, coffee-table guide also includes lesser-known summits around the Angus Glens, Speyside and Glenlivet, Glen Shee, Drumochter and Atholl.

Route descriptions for all the listed and notable hills are accompanied by colour maps, and the superb photography shows the region in all its varied and often unpredictable moods. Passes, long-distance paths, bothies and hill rounds are also described.

The history and folklore of long-forgotten communities who lived in the shadow of these forbidding heights is also explored, along with their sometimes tragic and violent human histories, in this comprehensive and beautifully produced guide.



The Wild Food Cabinet

Free is the man who sees beauty where others use weedkiller, says **Andy Hamilton**, author of *The First-Time Forager*

If you look upon my garden you might see a tangled mess. The biggest eyesores are blackberry vines hanging over the fence, and a nettle patch so big that it often barricades me from my shed. A couple of steps down the steep slope you'll find rose bushes that have never been trimmed flaying their long spiky vines against hazel and hawthorn when a gust of wind takes them for a merry dance. These are interspersed with a carpet of dandelion, giant sow thistles, thistles, chickweed, jack-by-the-hedge, hogweed, and alexanders – an invasive plant

that came over with the Romans. It's easy to mistake my slice of the world for an ugly and unkempt one.

Our eyes are trained to see beauty, conditioned to what is acceptable. To most, trimmed lawns, maybe with some bulbs and perennials flanking them, are beautiful. Thirty years ago I might have felt the same and I wouldn't have been able to see just how much joy, freedom and food there could be in an overgrown garden. However, if you shut your eyes for a moment, you'll hear the buzz of a thousand bee wings, the sounds of countless

grasshoppers and crickets rubbing their legs, and the calls of robins, blackbirds, great tits, coal tits, goldfinches, blue tits, blackcaps, and the occasional wood pigeon as they come to visit my little patch of heaven. They all see what I see: abundance.

Actually the garden has been lightly managed and all the plants I mention, along with walnut, blackcurrant and apple, are edible. You may have already twigged that – and I imagine it's not a shock to find that dandelions are edible. Yet the majority remain unharvested due to persistent

opinion that they are bitter. Raw, yes, they can be a bit of a challenge when you are used to the usual greenhouse-grown salad leaf. However, think of the potato or aubergine; uncooked they are about as tasty as a spoonful of elastic bands. They need to be prepared properly.

Dandelion can be delicious. Boil them until a fork can slide into the rib and then drench in a wild seed vinaigrette or a feta sauce and you'll be delighted. This dish is known as horta and is often served alongside mains in Greece. Horta can be made with other wild greens

depending on what is in season and what is in your garden; jack-by-the-hedge, sow thistle, and nettle all make tasty additions.

If that tempts you then you could also try dandelion roots, gently roasted and honey glazed. Or the flowers, abundant on St George's day (April 23rd), tempura battered and deep fried, or fermented into a delicious champagne – similar to elderflower champagne but with rather more delicate and slightly sophisticated taste.

Of that list of plants, alexanders (*Smyrnium*

olusatrumone) might be new to those in northern climes. Along the coastline of Southern England and Wales it can be considered invasive. This makes it an ideal plant to forage as you are never in any danger of overpicking. Considered to be a pest in some places, people will spend a day uprooting it and bashing the living bejesus out of it. It would make much more sense just to eat it.

Alexanders roots, like dandelions, can be maple or honey glazed and roasted. The flavour is strong, perfumed and unusual. If you are not a fan,



TIPS: FORAGING IN SPRING

Spring is one of the best times to get out there for some easy foraging wins.

Wild garlic

Location: broadleaf woodlands.

Wild garlic season is from late winter to early spring. If you miss the leaves pick some flowers and sprinkle on a salad or pickle the seeds to make a punchy condiment.

Jack-by-the-hedge

Location: alongside hedgerows.

Jagged leaves that look like a fat stinging nettle will help you distinguish this punchy plant.

Use in: leaf stems as a vegetable; pesto; very sparingly in horta vrasta (Greek boiled leafy greens) and salads.

Nettles

Location: nutrient-rich soil. Loves to colonise shallow graves!

Use in: soup; also makes an excellent cordial.

Dandelions

Location: anywhere there is a teaspoon full of soil!

Use in: drinks; salads; as a side dish. All parts of the plant are edible.

Pine

Location: mountain paths, planted plantations.

At this time of year you can munch on the tiny male pine cones. These can be fermented or eaten raw and are full of phytonutrients, Vitamin C, and will help boost testosterone.

roasting does take some of that away – as does the glaze. The seeds can be ground and used as a unique seasoning. Alternatively, I like to crush them a little and add to gamey stews. Young leaves make excellent winter greens and older plants can be thrown in the boiling water when steaming mussels to give them a hint of something unique.

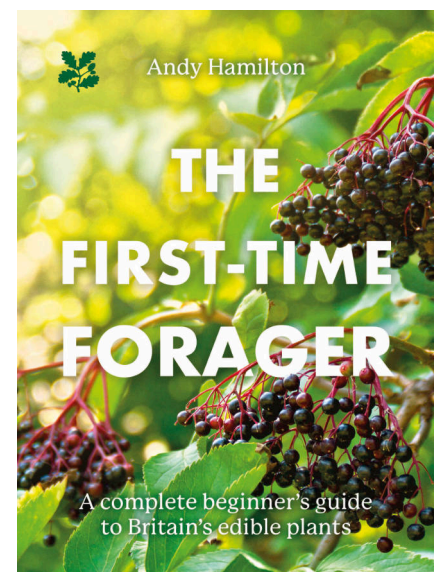
That is perhaps the best way to think of the wild food cabinet: each flavour is a new adventure, something to fire the imagination. There is always something new to learn. The first challenge is learning to identify the plants. This becomes easier with practice. We learn these skills as we go along – and it doesn't feel like learning as we are enjoying ourselves. The best of us know that we are continuing to learn.

Those of us reading *Outdoor Focus* are lucky; our interests have given us direction, purpose, and afforded us a living. If you learn foraging it adds something else too: freedom.

At 25 I moved to the big city, Nottingham. I worked a series of insecure jobs, lived in substandard housing in crime-ridden areas, and often had to depend on others for my subsistence.

A year or two later I moved to a new city, started writing and rediscovered a childhood interest, foraging. I set myself the challenge to be able to identify all the edible plants I could find. In a surprisingly short time I managed to identify about 80% of the native plants in an area. I was no

longer reliant on others for my food; more importantly I could always contribute to a dinner. There is a joy, after all, in being able to give. I love it when I teach children, who then show their parents how to forage. The subtle change of status from dependent to provider gives them a little swagger, a confidence in themselves. They start to see gardens through the eyes of a forager, the abundance rather than the neglect. They see freedom. After all, free is the man who can see food where others want to use weedkiller.



The First-Time Forager: A Complete Beginner's Guide to Britain's Edible Plants by Andy Hamilton (National Trust Books) launches on April 11th, 2024