



The dawn ghost

In this exclusive extract from his new book, *Moonwalker: Adventures of a Midnight Mountaineer*, Alan Rowan describes an unforgettable early morning encounter above Loch Quoich

Illustration: Andrew Terrill

MIDNIGHT. I AM SITTING IN THE OFFICE OF A NATIONAL NEWSPAPER IN Glasgow. For the past 12 hours, I have been helping run the sports desk. As usual, my job has been a constant battle to keep everything moving forwards: assigning writers their tasks, compiling a plan for tomorrow's sports pages; discussing these stories at an editorial conference; deciding which pictures and headlines to use and trying to read all the reporters' copy as it comes in.

All the while, the phone has not stopped ringing: reporters, photographers, readers, marketing departments and freelancers trying to sell a story. Pages are designed, revised, ripped up, redesigned, edited and proof-read. And every so often a hand grenade of ever-changing news is thrown at you.

The tension and stress builds by the minute. By deadline, you are so full of adrenaline that sleep is impossible. Some will go home for a late supper or a drink, some to watch television. But I have a compulsive desire to be in the mountains, and for most of the 1990s I had my sights set on the Munros, Scotland's 3,000 foot peaks. With 284 to conquer, I had decided to make the most of my time. Instead of joining the thousands of other walkers on the hills at weekends, I could have the wild places to myself by travelling there straight after finishing work around midnight.

On this night, as on so many others, I disappeared into a deserted office to appear minutes later, in true Clark Kent-style, changed from my suit into mountain gear.

IT'S A LONG RUN just to get to the foot of Gleouraich and Spidean Mialach, especially after a hard day and night in the office. But I had my intrepid explorer's hat on so off I went on the four-hour run to paradise.

The heat during the previous day had been stifling, and thick mist gripped the floor of the glen during the latter part of the journey. Spidean Mialach means "hill of the louse", not a particularly appealing name. It is more likely to refer to midges, also an unwelcome prospect, but the air was happily and rather unexpectedly midge-free.

The hills are on the Quoich estate, where stalking is big business. The main advantage for the walker, however, is that the paths giving access to, and across, the hills are superb. The circuit starts on a well-cut path which pushes up through thick stands of pink rhododendron before opening out, and I was making swift progress up the hillside despite not being able to see three feet in front of me.

By the time I was about 500ft up from the road, I could see a faint, red glow appearing through the mist. It became stronger with every step

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I took until virtually the whole hillside was cloaked with a reddish tinge. Then I popped up through the low-lying band of cloud into total visibility.

It was a classic inversion – everything below me was invisible, shrouded in a sea of white cotton wool, while above, sweeping across the slopes of the hill, were the ochre streaks of a 4am sunrise.

Many hill-goers can live their entire life without experiencing an inversion. When they do, it is the stuff of wonder. When you set out in the early hours they become 10 a penny, yet every time they instil a sense of wonder. This was one of the most intense I had ever seen. My head and shoulders were clear but the lower half of my body was still mostly hidden, creating an almost cartoon-like quality.

I kept heading up, always finding the path of least resistance. But the inversion was not finished yet. As I rose, so did this phenomenon, always staying just a few feet behind me, as if not sure of the route.

As the path swung out to traverse along the side of a grassy face on the south-west ridge, I looked down to my left to try to catch a glimpse of the little finger of Loch Quoich which splits the flow of the mountain from Sgurr a'Mhaoraich over the divide, but it was hidden under a sea of cloud. My route then shifted round to the right for the final push.

By the time I was sitting at the summit of Gleouraich, the cloud base was a vast, white ocean, covering everything in Scotland except the high peaks, which jutted out like islands from the sea. I felt as if I was the only man on earth.

Gleouraich translates as “the peak of uproar” or “noise”, a reference to the bellowing of the stags when in rut, but today there was hardly a sound. It was as though the weather was holding its breath. I stood at the huge, beautifully engineered beehive cairn and absorbed my surroundings. It was one of those all-too-rare moments of serenity, a time to drink in the majesty of the occasion for as long as possible.

The heat was stifling, so the inversion was going nowhere fast. The grand highway eastwards from the summit of Gleouraich provided new views down into the remote northern corries with the peaks of the South Shiel Munros popping up above the cloud sheet behind, seven in a row. As I walked along towards Spidean the inversion sat just below the ridge.

As I approached the drop into the low point between my two hills, I could not see any ground. The pass, the Fiar Bhealaich, had vanished. The cloud was pouring over the col like a massive waterfall and Spidean appeared as an island I could not reach.

Logic told me the path went into the mist and continued easily up the next slope, but my sleep-deprived brain was once again questioning my reasoning. What if there was just a bottomless pit once I stepped into that cloud?

It sounds mad now but that little doubt was nagging away, providing a mental obstacle to overcome. After a few minutes' debate with myself, I continued tentatively, descending into the cloud to find – surprise, surprise – terra firma and no problems.

If I had thought normality had been restored, the Quoich hills had one last surprise. As I took a diagonal line down the open hillside, the

band of cloud was still clinging on as far as the eye could see. And heading towards me, but still hundreds of feet below, was a figure.

This was a first. Never before had I seen anyone on the hills at this time of the morning, but here he was striding uphill on the same trajectory as I was going down. What kind of lunatic would be climbing a mountain at this time of the morning?

I stopped – and so did he.

I stood still – so did he.

I waved – so did he.

I dropped my rucksack to the ground to get a drink. So did he. Only now he had a little rainbow encircling his head. Something was not right. As we drew closer and closer, he started to fade away until, when I was just a matter of feet away from meeting this kindred spirit, he vanished.

Then it hit me – the person I had alighted on heading up the hill was me.

It was a Brocken Spectre, a light reflection of yourself often seen during inversions. With the cloud below me and the brilliant sunshine behind, I was reflected into the cloud and then bounced back as a mirror image of myself.

I had seen a Brocken Spectre on a few occasions. The name comes from the Brocken peak in Germany, which is said to provide the ideal conditions to conjure up this striking illusion. The strange event was first recorded back in the 1800s and there are tales of walkers being so spooked by the sudden appearance of these shadowy giants they almost fell to their deaths in panic. Normally, they are huge figures, standing stock still, with a large round head similar to an Afro hairdo and the legs tapering ever outwards near the bottom, as if the figure is wearing flares. The spookiest thing about it is the 1970s style.

This one was different. It appeared to be just the same height as myself and was walking freely. The photograph I managed to take does not do the incident justice – it looks like an alien in a ball of light.

When my colleagues at work asked what I had been up to that morning I told them: “I was on a mountainside 150 miles away at 6am playing with myself.” ▲

Moonwalker: Adventures of a Midnight Mountaineer is published by BackPage Press and costs £9.99 in paperback. For more information, check out munromoonwalker.com

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