

FISHING & SHOOTING

ALASTAIR ROBERTSON

🐦 @Crumpadoodle

To the Game Fair at Scone where Waffle and Crumpet held court. Crumpet was enthroned on a polished aluminium chair, acknowledging passers-by and a steady stream of well-wishers. Waffle, being only ten months old, waffled about under everyone's legs and did her trick with our daughter of leaping straight up into her arms, to general adulation.

I do sometimes wish I were a dog – life would be so much simpler. Crumpet's only real faux pas was to crap outside the Anthony Woodd Gallery stand. This was a marked improvement on last year when she selected the carpet of the Glenalmond Tweed Company as a suitable recipient of her favours.

The dogs sold more copies of *Robertson's Guide to Field Sports* than I could have possibly hustled by myself. "Rather like begging with a small baby," observed a not very good friend.

Life would be much simpler as a dog

The Highlands MSP Jamie McGrigor came and tried to talk while messily eating an Aberdeen Angus burger. What was noticeable among those who stopped or came to see us was that a great many were not madcap shooters, fishers or stalkers but had often been out when they were young, and they had never forgotten the early thrill of mucking about in fields or burns.

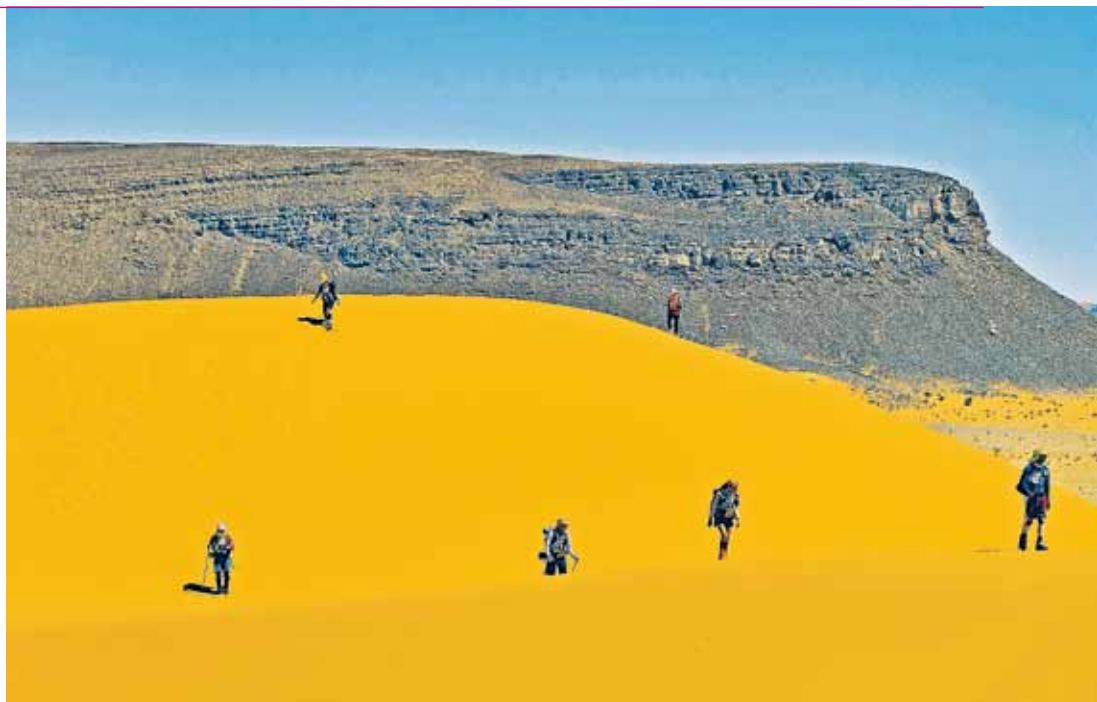
But life had moved on, what with babies and having to earn a living, and now they were city-bound and had lost the link, but came to Scone to remind themselves, half wondering if they might take it up again.

As for the talk at Scone, most had come to shop and watch. For the movers and the shakers, the owners and managers of shooting and fishing, the countryside quango folk and people from NGOs there, it covered what most perceived to be the threat rather than the opportunity of independence.

Cynically, some wondered if independence might be a good thing. The government would be so occupied sorting out the economic chaos, there would be little time or inclination, at least for the moment, to mess about with land reform.

As for the forthcoming Fisheries Review, its chairman Andrew Thin, a career quangonista who emerged from the hurly-burly of Caithness and Sutherland Enterprise, is thought to have written two reports: one for a Yes vote and one for a No vote.

Presumably neither report will make life any easier for owners of fishing or cheaper for their paying guests. It would be a world first if they did.



Desert rose

Alice Morrison had never run a marathon before doing six under the Saharan sun

Run, Johnny, run!" John Colquhoun and I had just walked and trotted the last two sections of the longest stage of the Marathon des Sables together, 52 miles in total.

Hours of pain and comradeship, through the darkness and into the dawn, and we were not going to be beaten to the finish. I had looked over my shoulder and seen a long-striding runner racing towards us. John gathered up his camouflage kilt and we belted for the line, to the cheers of the few people gathered there. We crossed triumphant, shook hands with our defeated friend and limped past the camera to where a cup of hot, sugary tea and a warm Berber welcome awaited us.

I signed up for southern Morocco's Marathon des Sables because it is billed as the toughest foot race on earth. An eternal optimist, I decided that even though I had not run a single marathon, far less six, and even though I am blessed with typical Scottish skin that burns at the thought of a bit of sunshine, this was just the race for me.

Training was tough. Anyone who has run a marathon will sympathise with the sheer, grinding effort of having to get the miles into your legs. Training in the Pentland hills, on stony, uneven surfaces, with plenty of ups and downs and no chance to get into a steady rhythm proved to be invaluable. I also did lots of

core training and Pilates to try to strengthen my middle and get some of the weight off my legs.

Standing at the starting line with AC/DC's *Highway to Hell* pumping out over the loudspeakers, and 1,053 other competitors all kitted out in Lycra and kepis, felt surreal.

That first day set the standard and beat all the pretensions out of us. We had a mile's warm-up and then ten miles of sand dunes. Sand dunes are really hard to run up. You need to accelerate, even if your legs are screaming, and if you don't, you start sliding backwards. Going down, it is a case of big moon steps and no fear of falling. Then there is the tricky negotiation of going round the side, when your feet are braced at an angle and the sand slides away from you. Add to that the broiling heat and a 22lb backpack, and the race starts to deserve its reputation.

The terrain throughout was mixed. Plenty of sand dunes and sandy river beds, rocky passes and long, stony



The sand can be as punishing for running as the heat, main; Alice with her 22lb pack, below left



PHOTOGRAPH: CHRISTOPHE ANGOT

ascents. Dried lake beds threw heat up at you, just in case you weren't feeling it enough from the sun. I was surprised that there was so much ascent and that some of it was tough. The second stage of the longest day, the double marathon, involved climbing up a Jabal (a very steep hill) with fixed ropes at the top.

At night, we were in open goat-hair Bedouin tents, seven or eight of us to a billet, arranged by country. There is no privacy or personal space. You

“At night you syringe blood and fluid out of each others' blisters,,

sleep together, cook your morning porridge together, and syringe the blood and fluid out of each others' blisters. That is one way to cement lifelong friendships.

No account of the Marathon des Sables is complete without a mention of the blisters. For some reason, I had assumed I wouldn't get them. By day four, I had 11. They all hurt. Putting weight on them seemed like an act of madness, but with three marathons still to go, I had to. Painkillers and adrenaline worked their magic and after a while, the pain faded into the background.

Yet no matter how tough, hot, long and agonising some of this ordeal was, the difficulty was eclipsed by the sheer joy of the endeavour and the stunning, barren beauty of the landscape. Running free through the desert miles, alongside your comrades is an experience that is worth the price you pay in suffering.

*For ideas on how to start/improve your running go to www.epicrunning.co.uk
For more on Alice's adventures go to www.alicemorrison.co.uk;
www.marathondessables.co.uk*

The Walk

ROBIN HOWIE

www.facebook.com/greatscottishoutdoors



Not to be confused with its bulkier and craggier Munro namesake near Ullapool, this 1008m/3307ft Beinn Dearg lies eight miles north of Blair Atholl. Its broad north/south plateau of pinkish granite scree and boulders, hence red hill, is over-mapped as being covered in scree; in reality the trig point stands amid a jumble of small boulders, but the surrounding slopes are gentle and grassy.

Beinn Dearg, a shy hill only recognisable from the south when close at hand, is usually climbed as a solo Munro (Carn a'Chlamain is four miles to the east, while the northern

pair, Carn an Fhithleir and An Sgarsoch, are even more distant) and is invariably tackled from the south from where three tracks, all cyclable, make light of the distance involved.

The central track from Old Blair via Glen Banvie is the most popular approach, partly because it leads to Allt Sheicheachan bothy, from where to tackle the hill over two days, or simply as a resting spot. Further west is the less attractive Glen Bruar track, accessed from Calvine. The route from Old Blair via Glen Banvie to Glen Bruar forms the southern end of the Minigaig, an old drove road; indeed, the only road north until the construction of Wade's military road

over Drumochter in the early 1700s.

A shorter and more attractive easterly track, also starting from Old Blair, heads above the west bank of the River Tilt then follows the Allt Slanaidh. According to my admittedly out-of-date map of 2002, the track ends at a small hut, map ref 868717, but it does in fact continue north-eastwards to the Allt Sheicheachan and the start of the stalkers' path.

Five years ago, close to the shortest day, Jimbo and I used this route just before the first heavy snow of winter would have made the track uncyclable. The solo return this year was also close to the shortest day.



BEINN DEARG

MAP Ordnance Survey map 43, Braemar & Blair Atholl
DISTANCE 17 miles, of which 12 can be cycled
HEIGHT 900m
TERRAIN Track, stalkers' path, then Munro path
START POINT Car park near Old Bridge of Tilt, map ref 874663
TIME 6 hours, assuming cycling
NEAREST VILLAGE Blair Atholl
REFRESHMENT SPOT Atholl Arms Hotel, Blair Atholl



WeekendLife recommends the use of Ordnance Survey maps © Crown copyright. Media 034/13



THE ROUTE

From Blair Atholl, take the minor road on the east side of the River Tilt, turn left at Old Bridge of Tilt and the car park is a few hundred yards further on, map ref 874663. From there, cycle uphill on the Tarmac estate road to the minor crossroads, map ref 867666. Turn right, north-east, uphill again on Tarmac road to reach a more level wide track, high above the west bank of the Tilt. At map ref 877686, leave the main track (it leads downhill to Gilbert's Bridge) and follow the branch track that goes north by a wooded

area, at first overlooking the Jubilee Rifle Range (close all gates to keep deer out of the newly planted forestry). By now following the west bank of the Allt Slanaidh, the track heads north-westwards to reach the hut, then continues round the secluded west shoulder of Beinn a'Chait. Cycle as far as the high ground above the dip to the Allt Sheicheachan, map ref 850749.

Walk down to the dip and the start of the stalkers' path that slants and zigzags up the hill's southern heathery slopes to reach flatter ground over Meall Dubh nan Dearcag. Nowadays

the worn trodden way heads NNW over oft wet ground, then gently climbs over drier terrain to reach a minor bump, map ref 849770. The terrain is now of typical Cairngorm granite grit, boulders and short grass. Ahead lies a mound of granite leading to the lovely stone built trig point.

Return to the Allt Sheicheachan, climb back to the bike and retrace the cycle route, this time mostly free-wheeling. However, for nostalgic reasons I walked back to the stream, cycled to the bothy of many a happy memory, then returned via Glen Banvie.