

How Kathy Murgatroyd became the first woman (and only the second person!) to successfully complete the 287 Scottish Munros in a single expedition, taking 4 months 11 days.

How does a girl from the New Forest in the South of England get to be the first woman to do a continuous round of the Munros? I was the first woman and the second person to do this. (There is an interesting parallel here with Dame Ellen MacArthur who sailed around the world, having been raised in Derbyshire about as far away from the sea as you can get in England.)



I taught myself to map read. I had a New Forest pony, and I used to get the map out after I'd been out on the pony to see if I could work out where I'd been. From there I graduated to the Duke of Edinburgh's Award and the outdoor centres belonging to Hampshire County Council. From small beginnings, my knowledge was growing! I trained as a PE teacher, but was unhappy teaching Girls PE in Coventry, and resigned my job with nowhere to go. Two weeks later I'd landed a job at an outdoor centre in Pitlochry, right in the centre of Scotland.

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It was on a Munro bagging trip that I spotted an entry in a bothy book: "Passed through on Long Walk. Hamish Brown". I'd read his book! No, I can't do that, I've a good job, a tied house, a car, a normal life. However, the seeds had been sewn...

There were no role models. I couldn't, in a world we can scarcely imagine now without the internet, find any information about other female long-distance walkers. There was, away back in my memory, a distant thought that there'd been some female who'd tried to do long-distance walking eating grass and drinking carrot juice, but I couldn't even remember her name, and I did remember she'd been unsuccessful. So I just had to assume that it would be possible for a woman to complete a Munros-in-one trip as a man had done it.

I resigned my job (and with it my house) distributed my worldly goods around my friends' garages, and went off to the French Alps for a winter's ski instructing. This had one great advantage: I returned very fit. I'd also taken my typewriter and all the relevant maps out with me and had plenty of time to do the route planning.

Some of the scenery was spectacular, including temperature inversions when I broke through the clouds with only the mountain tops visible.

I returned with four days to go, to my then boyfriend's house near Edinburgh, and spent the remainder of my time food shopping, packaging the food into five-day lots, checking how to put up my tent, and packing everything into a large rucksack. Fortunately, my new boots, one of the *first(!)* ladies' models, never gave me any trouble.



The walk could not have been done without my boyfriend's support. As well as keeping a computer check of my progress, he used to meet me most weekends, bringing fresh food and the next food pack, and did some of the walks with me. I still managed to do about 190 of the then 276 mountains solo. Remember that then, there were no mobile phones, no internet, and no GPS. Everything was done by map, compass and red telephone boxes!

I started my walk on 1st May 1982 and finished on 11th September the same year. I was never convinced I could do this walk as I was knocked off my feet by the wind seven times on my first mountain and then I fell four days behind because of horrendous weather conditions. When I finally did get back up a mountain it was to find full winter conditions. That was definitely the hardest part, right at the start, physically and mentally.

The next hardest part was much later. I was a long way behind on my schedule when I approached the Great Glen, the south-west/north-east split in Scotland, from Fort William to Inverness. This was a psychological halfway mark. I was contemplating giving up then and coming back and finishing the following year. I hit a very low point.



What kept me going? I don't really know, but maybe just a little niggles at the back of my mind telling me not to give up. Doing the trip in two halves, although it would have been a momentous first for a woman, wasn't what I'd set out to do.

On another occasion, I was asked at interview how did the interviewers know I wasn't going to run off after six months and get married? They wouldn't have dared to ask a man the same question.

The best bits were what I'd thought they would be – only fewer of them! I awoke one morning with a herd of red deer looking at me from very close by. On another occasion, I came across a herd of sleeping deer and I saw two separate deer calves. My sense of hearing became very acute; I could hear a butterfly's wings touch the rock as it took off into flight. Some of the scenery was spectacular, including temperature inversions when I broke through the clouds with only the mountain tops visible. One memorable people encounter was at the end of a day: I was putting up my tent on the beach, a short distance away from a large frame tent. A head appeared. "If you can find your mug, there's a cup of tea!"



The question of what advice I would give to anyone inspired to take up a big challenge is a difficult one to answer, as each person is different. Some low points are most probably inescapable. It's how a person reacts to these that result in success or giving up. If you think you can do it, you most probably can. Correct preparation and knowledge are key. Believe in yourself.

Luckily, it is nowadays much easier for women and girls to take on traditionally male roles than it was when I first entered the world of Outdoor Education. One of my bosses only employed female staff because he had to, as there were girls attending the courses there. On another occasion, I was asked at interview (obviously would not be allowed now) how did the interviewers know I wasn't going to run off after six months and get married? They wouldn't have dared to ask a man the same question. How I've approached these situations differed according to context. I stuck at a job where I had an unsympathetic boss for four years, putting up with his behaviour until I could reasonably get another job whilst it still looked good on a CV. At the time, there was no one who would have believed me to complain to, but I didn't need to stay. Know when to stand up for yourself, have respect for all your colleagues, and they should respect you too.

Bothy: a remote mountain shelter, possibly previously used as a house for a shepherd or gamekeeper.

Bothy book: a visitors book placed in many bothies for people to record their walks and climbs.

Munro: a Scottish mountain over 3,000ft or approximately 914metres, according to a list started by Sir Hugh Munro. Nowadays because of more accurate height recordings, the list has changed slightly.

Hamish Brown: the first person to do a Munros-in-one trip. Temperature inversion: in this case, clouds in the valleys only, caused by moisture condensing as colder, heavier air descends down mountainsides. The result is bright sunlight at a higher level.

Written and photographs by Kathy Murgatroyd 10 December 2020