

SCRAMBLING IS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR SEASONED HILL-WALKERS TO REACH FOR THEIR INNER MOUNTAINEER – WITH RIDGE ROUTES OFFERING SOME OF THE BEST ADVENTURES OF ALL. DAN BAILEY SUGGESTS SIX SUBLIME SCRAMBLES TO GET YOU STARTED

BEST FOOT FORWARD

A GLACIAL SCOOP OF CRAGS AND SCREE cupping a clear pool in its depths, Coire Toll an Lochan is a scene of show-stopping drama – particularly when viewed, as today, from above. The clifftop bristles with an array of sandstone pinnacles; gammy teeth in a giant jawbone. When I suggest we clamber over these and ignore the walker's path around the side my wife's expression turns both mutinous and faintly green. I offer encouragement. It only *looks* death defying, but really it's fine – just don't fall. This is An Teallach, iconic mountain of the northwest, and if my powers of persuasion win out then we are about to start scrambling.

The word scrambling has an image problem. It sounds trivial, like something you might do to an egg perhaps. Yet it's also an adventure activity – an exciting branch of mountaineering that has seen a steady rise in participation in recent years. Popular it may be, but it's far from trifling. While easier scrambles can be tackled with nothing more than you'd take on a hillwalk, rock climbing equipment is needed on the more challenging routes. Whatever level they aspire to, scramblers need a head for heights and a degree of skill, tempered with sound judgement.

Tiptoeing a narrow no man's land between hands-in-pockets walking and clinging-on-with-your-fingertips rock climbing, scrambling is a nebulous category, its boundaries difficult to define. Routes typically attack fea-

tures that to the untrained eye might look improbable; rough, rocky terrain somewhere between a path and the perpendicular. Hands are used for balance and upward progress, while not falling to one's untimely demise takes concentration. If this sounds suspiciously similar to rock climbing then that's because it is, the sole difference being the degree of gymnastic difficulty. The appeal is obvious. Stepping off the busy walker's paths and onto steep rock is to escape the confines of our risk-averse society; there are no signposts, no safety rails and no rules – how far to push it is entirely up to you.

With their giddy height and aesthetic appeal, ridge routes attract scramblers like mice to cheese. From the Alps-by-the-sea jaggedness of Skye's Cuillin to remote climbs above the snow fields of the Cairngorms, Scotland is embarrassingly over-endowed with ridge-related riches. Many are scrambles, while others are hard enough to be classed as rock climbs proper. The traverse of An Teallach is among the most spectacular of them all.

After a little light discussion we are up and running. Well, not exactly running but rather creeping with the careful deliberation that befits our tightrope-like situation. As promised, the teeth prove to have less bite than their fearsome appearance suggested, though the awareness of impending void bubbles in the pit of the stomach. Exposure is the technical term for this nervy feeling. It may not be everyone's cup of tea, but those who develop a taste



PHOTOGRAPHY: DAN BAILEY

for it tend to come back for more.

The intricacies of scrambling help take our minds off the height. There is an engrossing succession of problems to solve; steep little walls climbed using cracks for hand and foot holds, blocky ledges to teeter along, and sections where we tread what feels like the top of a giant garden wall – with rather more empty air on each side. Autumn sunshine beams from a pastel blue sky and the world rolls out below like a map. An instant convert, my wife is loving every minute of it, grinning in disbelief at the crazy positions, and the way that the route unfolds as we proceed. Scrambling takes hillwalkers of modest abilities into places that only hardened climbers have previously reached. Watch out though – it's addictive.

Scrambles are classed in ascending order of difficulty from 1 to 3, a grade 1 being an exciting but technically straightforward walk with added hands and a grade 3 tantamount to an easy rock climb – a route on which each move has to be pondered and a rope and associated safety gear comes highly recommended.

Beginners should start low, ascending cautiously through the scale only as experience accrues; at grade 3, An Teallach is a good example of a harder route. Here are a few more recommendations ranging across the difficulty spectrum. It's the briefest snapshot of Scotland's many magnificent ridges – but you've got to start somewhere.



Line of sight: the sweeping arc of the CMD Arête on Ben Nevis (opposite); enjoying the adventure on the Northeast Ridge of Angel's Peak (above)



Grade: Nearly 1, but not quite
Start/finish: Glen Nevis visitor centre (grid reference: NN123730)
Distance: 15km (9 miles)
Ascent: 1,650m
Maps: OS Landranger (1:50,000) 41; Harvey British Mountain Map (1:40,000) Ben Nevis & Glen Coe

CARN MOR DEARG ARÊTE, BEN NEVIS

This might just be the best entry-level scramble in Scotland. A stone gangway arcing in a great curve between two 4,000-foot summits, the Carn Mor Dearg (usually abbreviated CMD) Arête perfectly encapsulates the attraction of ridges.

Airy, but never as hard as it looks, long and exciting without being too serious, this geological work of art is an ideal first step for hillwalkers looking to push their boundaries (but not too far). As an engaging non-climber's route up Ben Nevis, the CMD Arête is without equal. Just a few kilometres from the Tourist Track and yet a world away from this perennially overcrowded plod, the ridge is a true high mountain experience, offering unparalleled views of the huge crags on The Ben's wild side.

Beginners should steer clear in winter, however, when snow, ice and wild weather give the CMD Arête an altogether more testing mountaineering edge.



Grade: 1/2
Start/finish: Car park at a bend on the Cairngorm ski centre access road (NH985074)
Distance: 29km (18 miles)
Ascent: 1,500m
Maps: OS Landranger (1:50,000) 36; Harvey British Mountain Map (1:40,000) Cairngorms & Lochnagar

NORTHEAST RIDGE OF SGURR AN LOCHAIN UAINE, CAIRNGORMS

An amenable summer scramble that doubles as a low-grade winter mountaineering trip, the Northeast Ridge of Sgurr an Lochain Uaine (otherwise known as Angel's Peak) is a ridge for all seasons.

But don't underestimate the scale of the task. The near-Arctic landscape of the high Cairngorms is Scotland's real big country. The approach route treks long miles through the Lairig Ghru, our grandest hill pass, to enter the vast bowl of An Garbh Choire, the most magnificent corrie system in the land and home to the longest-lasting snow fields.

Once gained, the Northeast Ridge is like a giant blocky stairway, with a sense of great scale, but only marginal technical difficulty. The return walk is equally memorable, including a stride over the desolate Braeriach plateau onto Scotland's third highest summit. On this day of superlatives the scrambling is only part of a much larger whole.





Grade: 2
Start/finish: Car park on the A87 in Glen Shiel (NG968143)
Distance: 15km (9 miles)
Ascent: 1,380m
Maps: OS Landranger (1:50,000) 33; Harvey Superwalker (1:25,000) Kintail



Grade: 3
Start/finish: Laybys above Loch Lurgainn (roughly NC127088)
Distance: 4km (2.5 miles)
Ascent: 700m
Maps: OS Landranger (1:50,000) 15

FORCAN RIDGE, THE SADDLE, KINTAIL

To up the ante a notch, head west to Kintail for the next step in your ridge scrambling education. The deep trench of Glen Shiel is walled by dozens of charismatic peaks, linked into long strings by graceful crests. This is ridge walking country par excellence, yet real hands-on routes are rare.

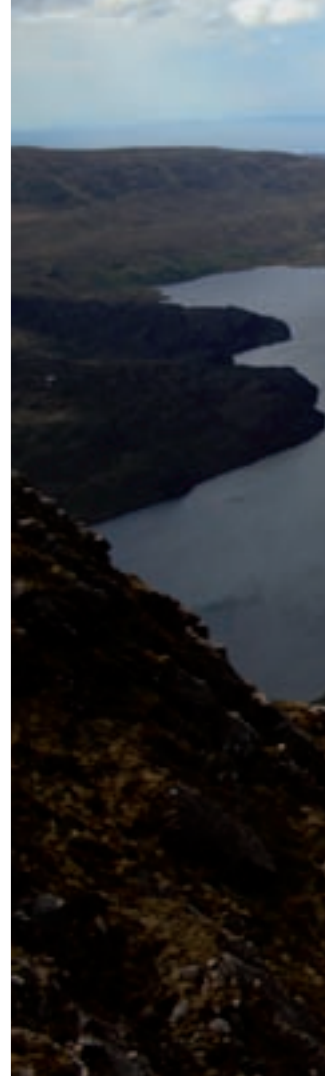
Thankfully the Forcan Ridge more than makes up for the general lack. An engaging scramble on an exposed arête, the ridge leads to the lofty summit of The Saddle, where expansive west coast views reward the uphill effort. A direct line sticking as closely as possible to the crest offers some exciting moments on sound rock, but if it seems too much then some of the best (or worst) bits can be avoided by following a path on the flank.

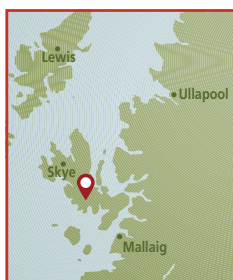
To add more meat, and an extra Munro tick to the day for those that are that way inclined, visit neighbouring Sgurr na Sgine on the way home.

LURGAINN EDGE, CUL BEAG, ASSYNT

Looming implausibly out of a rumpled landscape of lochan and bog, the sandstone mountains of Assynt are eccentric individuals. Celebrity peaks Suilven and Stac Pollaidh invariably draw the biggest crowds, each offering superb scrambling, but they are not the last word in local ridges.

Cul Beag is perhaps best seen from the single track lochside road at its foot, a squat pyramid of layered rock. Forming the edge of a gully on the mountain's west face, the Lurgainn Edge is one of the best hard scrambles in the area. The long slog up a mucky lower tier belies the fun to come, but don't be deterred; above comes a long stretch on rough rock, weathered into curvy forms so typical of sandstone. The exposure is breathtaking, a sense of space and seriousness that mean this route can only be recommended to more seasoned scramblers and climbers. Don't leave home without a rope, a helmet and an affinity for steep vegetation and the odd loose block.





Grade: Moderate/Difficult (these are the lowest rock climbing grades)

Start/finish: Sligachan Hotel (NG486298)

Distance: 11km (7 miles)

Ascent: 970m

Maps: OS Landranger (1:50,000) 32; Harvey Superwalker (1:25,000) Skye: The Cuillin

Easy does it: tip-toeing along a knife-edged section of the Forcan Ridge (opposite); Stac Pollaidh from Cul Beag (above); retreating from the third pinnacle on Pinnacle Ridge, Sgurr nan Gillean

PINNACLE RIDGE, SGURR NAN GILLEAN, ISLE OF SKYE

Early autumn can be a productive time to visit Skye, when summer's floods of midges and tourists have subsided for the year and the rich collage of land and sea is cast in crisp sunshine (well, sometimes).

Sitting at the northern end of the incomparable Cuillin, Sgurr nan Gillean is the archetypal mountaineer's mountain, with no walking routes to its spire-sharp summit. Seen in distant profile the ranked towers of Pinnacle Ridge offer an obvious and compelling challenge, with around 1,000 metres of fall-off-able ground. Rated an easy rock climb rather than a scramble per se, this saw-toothed line is one of Scotland's best mountaineering trips, and well suited to accomplished scramblers aspiring to greater things.

With engaging route finding, butterfly-inducing heights and even an abseil at one point, few climbs in the country have such an Alpine ambience – although you may want to hook up with a local guide if your group is not so confident with rope work. As with all the best mountaineering adventures, getting to the top is only half the battle. Descent is via the misleadingly named Tourist Route, a tricky grade 3 scramble in its own right. Don't relax until this is safely behind you.





Winter warmer: following the trail in deep snow west of Meall Dearg, Aonach Eagach (above); a tricky section on the pinnacles high above Glen Coe (right)



Grade: 2 in summer or II in winter
Start/finish: Layby on the A82 near Allt-na-reigh (NN174567)
Distance: 10km (6 miles) on the hill and several more along the road back to the starting point
Ascent: 1,150m
Maps: OS Landranger (1:50,000) 41 or Harvey British Mountain Map (1:40,000) Ben Nevis & Glen Coe

AONACH EAGACH, GLEN COE

Your hill gear needn't be consigned to the cupboard at the first flurry of snow; ridge climbs can be enjoyed in any season. The white stuff completely transforms the hills, lending them a powerful, savage beauty. But snow and ice pile on whole new layers of challenge too, turning even basic summer scrambles into serious winter expeditions on which ice axes, crampons and specialised skills are de rigeur.

A justifiably famous middle grade summer scramble, Aonach Eagach with added snow is a different beast altogether, a complex and time-consuming tussle with unsafe cornices and frosted pinnacles that rear almost 1,000 metres above the Glen Coe road. Once committed escape is impossible, and it's not unknown for slow parties to end up spending an unplanned night out – yet on a day of sunshine and glinting snow, this could be the climb of your life. Aonach Eagach is not suitable for winter novices, though it's certainly a worthwhile goal to work towards. If in doubt consider enlisting the services of a local mountain guide. ■

Appetite whetted? For much more on Scottish ridge scrambling, pick up a copy of Dan Bailey's *Scotland's Mountain Ridges*, published by Cicerone. A companion volume, *The Ridges of England, Wales and Ireland*, was published in June. www.cicerone.co.uk

