

THE MIGHTY DEERSTALKER IN THE BORDERS IS ONE OF SEVERAL NEW ADVENTURE EVENTS THAT HAVE SPRUNG UP AROUND THE COUNTRY. **RICHARD ROWE** DONS HIS HEAD TORCH AND JOINS THE FUN

THIS IS LUNACY. It's early March and I am standing in front of a stately home in the Borders huddling for warmth with 500 or so other oddly dressed runners. To my left, there is a man with an ironing board strapped to his back; to my right, a motley assortment of runners dressed as lairds, fairies, William Wallace and seemingly everything in between.

Welcome to The Mighty Deerstalker, one of a host of new adventure events that have cropped up around the country – and almost certainly one of the more eccentric.

Although only in its second year, the event has already gained something of a cult following. Created by the organisers of the Rat Race urban adventure series, the Deerstalker is a joyous – and extremely muddy – romp through the hills, rivers and forests of the Tweed Valley, with a few checkpoints to be ticked off along the way.

The event, which starts and finishes at Traquair House near Innerleithen, sees competitors choose from what is billed as a '5km-ish' route (the Deerstalker) or a much tougher '10km-and a bit' option (the Mighty Deerstalker); both involve multiple river crossings, serious uphill slogs and various cunning obstacles.

Runners in the longer race complete the second half in darkness with just the half-light of their head torches to guide them off the hill. Crucially, given the spirit of the event, participants are encouraged to dress up – hence the number of deerstalker hats, tweed and fake antlers on show.

But despite a sense of the absurd whipped up by the



MUD, SWEAT

organisers, this is a tough race; or at least it felt that way to an adventure running novice like me. The winning time in the shorter race was just under the hour mark – now that's a long time for 5km, with or without the 'ish' – while most competitors trudged in after considerably longer.

The longer race is a more serious undertaking altogether, particularly when darkness falls. While this year's winner came in at well under an hour and a half, many took almost four hours to complete the race. I lumbered over the finish line, completely spent, after just over two hours.

However, while hard going for those new to this kind of running, the Deerstalker is small-scale in the grand scheme of adventure races. In fact, purists would say that it is not even an adventure 'race' at all; traditionally, that is a term applied to multi-discipline events held over several days, with plenty of tricky navigation along the way.

"Some people get caught up in the terminology," comments Detail Events' Gary Tompsett, the brainchild behind

the Deerstalker. "Technically, the Deerstalker is an adventure run, not a race, but it doesn't matter. It is all about experiencing the adventurous side of running."

The Deerstalker is deliberately designed as a somewhat off-beat introduction to the sport, essentially tempting runners off the tarmac and onto muddy trails. "Adventure racing can be seen as quite an elitist thing and that can put some people off," believes Tompsett. "We wanted to take some of the seriousness out of that, but still provide a challenge."

And if switching people on to this kind of event is the goal, then it has been achieved in spades. The second Deerstalker event saw a total of 800 runners compete in the two races, almost double the number of the year before.

Having captured the imagination of adventure runners in the Borders, Tompsett is now putting the finishing touches to the Dirty Weekend – a more ambitious event being held at the same venue in early July. Competitors can take their pick from what will be a festival of adventure



Looking lively: competitors in the shorter '5km-ish' Deerstalker race prepare for the off (left); the bedraggled author manages a grimace (right)



AND TEARS

sports: the Dirty Dozen, a 12km trail run along the lines of the Deerstalker; the ACE Race (Adventure Challenge Endurance), an adventure race that combines running, biking and kayaking with one and two-day options; and the Polaris Challenge, a mountain bike navigation event held over two days.

The Dirty Weekend typifies the expansion of these kinds of events from more traditional hotspots in the Highlands. Here, races such as the Strathpuffer (a 24-hour mountain bike race in Strathpeffer – in winter), the Highland Cross (a charity coast-to-coast duathlon from Kintail to Beaulay) and 10 Under the Ben (a 10-hour mountain bike marathon in the Nevis Range) are now all well established.

LOCATION, LOCATION

For many competitors, it is not just the physical challenge of the events that appeal, but also their location; Scotland is certainly blessed with a landscape that lends itself to such

racing and there is a chance for competitors to savour some of the country's most breathtaking scenery – albeit often through gritted teeth.

And it was the lure of the location – plus a very persuasive team mate – that convinced Penny Granger to enter the Hebridean Challenge for the first time last year. A five-day epic, the 'Heb' sees competitors in pairs or larger teams run, swim, cycle and kayak the length of the Western Isles from Barra to the Butt of Lewis – a course of up to 700km in length.

A keen climber and mountain biker based in Edinburgh, Granger entered the race as part of a team of five – “four girls and a token boy”, she says rather unkindly. “It was a friend's idea. We liked the sound of the challenge, but also the actual journey involved.”

The team shared the various disciplines between them depending on individual strengths, with Granger doing much of the mountain biking together with one other team mate.

RACING STRIPES



Whether you are an adventure racing novice or a grizzled veteran, there are plenty of events to choose from year-round. Many offer a variety of categories so that you can select a race to suit your level of fitness (or madness). Others just pitch you straight in at the deep end. Here are a few recommendations to get you started:

THE MIGHTY DEERSTALKER

www.themightydeerstalker.com

DIRTY WEEKEND

www.dirtyweekendadventure.com

THE RAT RACE (EDINBURGH)

www.ratraceadventure.com

THE HEBRIDEAN CHALLENGE

www.hebrideanchallenge.com

THE STRATHPUFFER

www.strathpuffer.co.uk

HIGHLAND CROSS

www.highlandcross.co.uk

10 UNDER THE BEN

www.nofussevents.co.uk

For more information on the wider world of adventure racing, visit:
www.sleepmonsters.co.uk

Training involved weekly rides around the Pentland Hills outside Edinburgh, plus days out on the hill on weekends.

Even so, the Heb was still a shock to the system. "I regularly found myself having ridden 50km and been up a huge hill before the time I would normally start work in the morning," she says. "It was a strange feeling."

Others, it seems, just can't get enough of that feeling and take a certain masochistic glee in pushing themselves harder. Inverness-based Colin Maclean has entered plenty of events in recent years, mostly involving hill running and mountain biking, but entering the Heb for the first time introduced him to sea swimming – not a discipline he is particularly in tune with, he says.

Maclean trained hard from January to the start of the race in July, including swimming off the coast around Gairloch. However, he still found that part of the race hard going. "I'm a duff swimmer," he says. "I did three swims and came pretty much last in two and second last in the other."

The swimming also found him at his lowest ebb. "I was in the water at 6am on the final morning having not slept at all the previous night. It was not good. It took me hours to get going, but I had two pies at lunchtime – real athlete's food – and that sorted me out."

However, the five-day format and gruesome terrain suited Maclean and his team mate so well that they won the pairs category – despite Maclean's reticence about his swimming ability. "Luckily, my partner is a top kayaker who has spent much of his life paddling around Harris, so that helped us make up a lot of time," he says. "It was strange, but the tougher the ground and nastier the weather, the better we did – it levelled out the field in a way."

But even an event as gruelling as the Heb is most definitely not just for top athletes. "For many people, it's about competing with themselves, rather than those at the top," says Maclean. "I'm probably the same – I do well enough, but don't really challenge the guys at the very top."

And that's the beauty of adventure running, racing, or whatever you want to call it. There are so many events now that you can pick and choose the right level of challenge for you. Just don't forget your antlers if it's the Deerstalker you decide to enter. ■

"I REGULARLY FOUND MYSELF HAVING RIDDEN 50KM BEFORE I WOULD NORMALLY START WORK"



Pedal power: road cycling during the Hebridean Challenge (top left); competitors in last year's 10 Under the Ben (left)