

ELEMENTAL RUNNING

Matt Maynard tackles 71 miles of wicked hills, weariness and a wee dram of whiskey on Scotland's Great Glen Way

Photos Jimmy Hyland, www.jhparchive.co.uk

I've been poking around this remote corner of Britain for the past few days. Nothing is quite as it seems. On the first day I explored a wilderness reserve with a gamekeeper who plans to reintroduce wolves. We met at 4pm, driving deep into 'rewilded' land. Instead of sheep and deer, here they guard small flocks of ancient trees. The wolves, he explains, will one day do the guarding. Trees will return biodiversity to the mountains stripped to grass.

Running is possible for 20 hours a day without a headtorch in high summer. The sun does set, but seems to get stuck beneath the horizon. The same evening of the wolf trip, we go for a shakeout jog from Inverness at 10:30pm. The sun is still shining. Over the next hour, forests

and lochs turn a brief navy-blue. The sun is back a few hours later.

I'm here to run the 71-mile Great Glen Ultra, along the Great Glen Way National Trail from Fort William to Inverness. When I signed up, I knew I could complete the distance. But injury struck eight weeks before the event, just as I was cranking up. On a measly diet of rehab and biking I limped my way into summer. By race day I feel recovered, but my lack of training now puts me into territory as unfamiliar as the landscape we are setting out for.

Into the twilight

We begin at 1am. The pack of runners is quiet as we pace down the Caledonian Canal

in the twilight. Some runners don't bother with head torches, but I keep mine on and strike up conversation. Today there's nothing to be frightened of, but 300 years ago the Great Glen was clan country. Fort William, now behind us, kept out the rebels of the Jacobite rebellion. Tales of brutal executions, mountainside battles and death by exposure to the elements haunt these parts. Wolves haven't been seen here since 1680 and are incorrectly maligned as a threat to humans (blame Walt Disney for that).

I run a little too quick down the 10-mile towpath, knowing I'll pay the price by morning. The Great Glen →



SCENE SETTER

Meet the organisers

A team dedicated to challenging you

Super keen ultra runners Bill and Mike went one step further than most of us and actually transferred their idle post-run chit chat into reality – and BAM racing was born.

Bill, who has completed the multi-day Gobi Desert Challenge, the Brecon Beacons Ultra more times than he can remember, and pretty much every Scottish ultra including the West Highland Way, initially suggested the project kicked off with the Glenmore 24-hour race in Scotland.

So in September 2011, 27 runners took part in the inaugural race which saw Dutchman Jeroen Renes storm to the title. Shortly after that, November's Glen Ogle 33 was created, which is now one of the most popular ultras in Scotland.

Since then, the team have expanded the race calendar to include the Great Glen Ultra and the Glen Lyon Ultra.

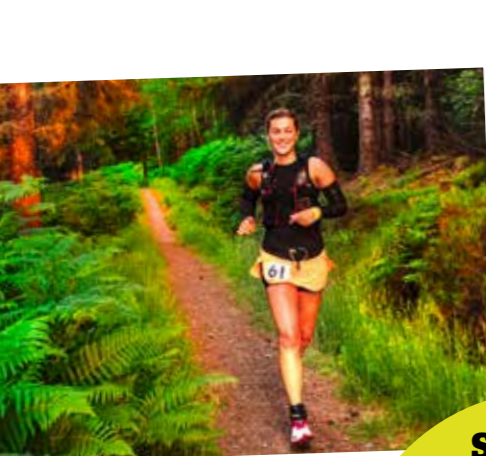
Mike, a veteran of the Mararathon des Sables, is also keen to stress that the events are nothing without the people that the organisers refer to as: "BAMmers – an army of willing, dedicated volunteers standing out in all weathers cheering our runners on, helping to give our races the atmosphere that's so often discussed after an event.

"Some are runners themselves, others are not, but each role played is just as important as the next one."

■ For more information on next year's events go to runyabam.com



The Great Glen Way on a sunny day – running doesn't get much better



SEASON FINALE

Just as this issue of Trail Running goes on sale, BAM racing's last event of the year – the Glen Ogle 33 – takes place. The race is run on quiet forest paths and isn't too technical, so perfect if you're just starting to find your ultra feet.

Way eventually breaks into forest trails beside the imaginatively named Loch Lochy. Inside it's dark and cool, and for the first time in days it seems like night has finally fallen. I'm running with my long-time adventure pal James. We take turns to set the pace, tell awful jokes and identify hills steep enough to warrant a walk. Approaching the aid station in North Laggan, a volunteer shouts out our numbers and our personal selection bag of race food is passed to us. James is a much better runner than me these days, but neither of us are going to win any medals on this particular outing. Sometimes, when it's 4am in a Highland woodland, it's better to share your crisps and flapjacks than go running off alone. Soon the sun is hovering back on the horizon. We rejoin the canal at Aberchalder, and the water steams like an Icelandic geyser in the day's first rays. The whole Great Glen Way is, in fact, a geothermic liability. The

Kessock Bridge at Inverness is built to resist earthquakes, after a 1901 tremor caused chimneys to fall and a crack to appear in the Caledonian Canal. Our entire route has been created by earth-heaving activity around 350 million years ago.

My pace is the only thing not smoking this morning. Lacking sufficient coercion in training, my knees are misbehaving on the Tarmac. Crunching away like Kellogg's Cornflakes, I bargain them into a slow jog before collecting my breakfast food bag at the 30-mile checkpoint.

Siege tactics

By Fort Augustus. The cornflakes in my knees are turning razor-like and it feels like I've gone too deep. In 1746, a siege was successfully waged here by the Jacobite rebels as they attempted to return the ousted Stuart family to the throne. Now fully 272

years later we try the same tactics by having a sit, a good moan and refusing to move at the aid station car park. We power-hike in silence on a steep road as the heat begins to ping from its surface. It's into steep conifer and Scots pine forest from here. A few competitors trickle ahead of us. Then it's into open country, high above Loch Ness, the trail contouring between beds of purple heather. The photographer Jimmy Hyland startles up from one of these for a high-five. It keeps us going, but other runners continue pushing past.

Wonky with whiskey

From the route's high point it should be a wonderful view over Loch Ness. I should see waters peeling away through a glacier-gouged valley, hillsides pockmarked with beech and the occasional golden eagle swirling on thermals. But I'm asleep. James couldn't keep pace with my moaning

during the climb, and sensibly pushed on ahead. I set my alarm for 15 minutes of shut-eye and I'm out like a candle in a Highland hurricane. Groggy eyed and short of excuses I eventually plod across the hillside into the village of Drumnadrochit. Scottish race director Bill is here with a bottle of whiskey in his hands. Accepting his shot glass of medicine, I wobble onto the woodland climb of Creag Nay. Soon the stands of conifers begin weaving in front of my eyes. Next thing I know, a runner is above me, asking if I'm okay. I try a little slurry conversation, but my guts are messed up from my energy gel breakfast, and it comes out as a

fart. I push on alone to the finish. Scotland's Great Glen race has been bruisingly brutal. Over the last 70 miles the beauty of its hills, its history and the wild plans for its future have condensed in my imagination. As I approach Inverness, this connection to the landscape I've been moving through forms a curious knot in my throat. It hasn't been the race that I'd wanted and crossing the finish line I let out a howl of relief. The wolf hasn't quite run free this time. Hopefully in the not too distant future, there'll be a chance for it to scamper over these Scottish hills once more. **TR**

'The connection to the landscape I've been moving through forms a curious knot in my throat.'