

A LAND-ROVER'S RAPID CLIMB OF BEN NEVIS.

Ben Nevis is no Everest but it is still the highest mountain in Britain, and although it has been climbed by wheeled vehicles, even in 1963 no vehicle seems to have been able to beat 24 hours or thereabouts for the round trip.

To the Scottish Area of the Land-Rover Owners' Club this presented something of a challenge, and it was in any case high time a Land-Rover went to the top.

A reconnaissance in June 1962 saw a Land-Rover climbing the first 750 ft, in 20 minutes. This was enough. The climb was obviously possible and a very uneven, and obviously the line of the track was the only feasible route. The problem was one of avoiding the ultra soft places on the lower slopes and the ultra steep and rocky parts higher up, but apart from these extremes and a number of awkward gullies there was nothing, although very rough indeed by ordinary standards, worse than the sort of rough going which Land Rovers have coped with for years as a matter of course overseas, always assuming much shorter time was also possible.

The route was obvious enough from the map but the track from Achintee was known to have been washed away in several places below the 2,000 ft. contour and therefore the only feasible route lay by way of the Distillery, through the river, up a steep climb to the 1,000 ft. contour and then along a gradually rising slope between two streams, the Allt Coire an Lochain and the Allt a' Mhuilinn, which led up to the 2,000 ft. contour, rejoining the track just above the Lochan Meall an t-Suidhe.

From this loch the mean slope is of the order of 1 in 2, but very rocky and reasonable weather.

But this is never a safe assumption and when 2 Land-Rovers laden with camping gear set out in August 1962 they set out in a violent gale and heavy rain which was already several hours old. The countryside was sodden and the Ben was hardly likely to be drier. It wasn't.

The first 750 ft. took nearly four hours, the next 400 ft. another 3 hours, the wind was vicious, the rain constant and horizontal; crossing the first crest brought no relief; even a slight down gradient over soft peat and turf would not bear the weight of the Land-Rovers, which had to be winched almost as much as they were driven. It became obvious that at this rate the expedition, although still moving, would never reach the summit and get down again in time to get home by Sunday night.

And so the climb was abandoned with angry relief, and the afternoon was spent getting down again. Even this took nearly 3 hours. From dawn until four-thirty in the afternoon is a very long time to spend climbing 1100 ft.

But the Ben was very much still there and was undoubtedly vulnerable, and although the weather could easily destroy all chance of success another assault, obviously, had to be mounted.

So on June 7th 1963 a team consisting entirely of members of the Scottish Land-Rover Owners' Club, and of whom most had been on the 1962 attempt, assembled at Fort William with three Land-Rovers - an 88" Wheelbase Petrol,

which was to make the assault, with an 88" Diesel and a 109" Petrol as support vehicles to carry camping gear, which, should the weather break might well be needed.

They started with all three vehicles from a point on A82, about half a mile north-east of the Distillery at Lochy Bridge at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, crossed a stretch of flat soft ground, drove through the River Lundy, over the light railway, and on up the steep grass and bracken slope which led to the first crest - this time in superb weather.

Driving on through the Allt Coire an Lochain, the point where the 1962 climb had been abandoned . the three went up more steep and broken peat and heather slopes to a point just below the Lochan Meall and t-Suidhe, where the camping gear and the two "short" LandRovers were to be dumped for the night. This was below the Lochs because although no one was likely to steal the Land-Rovers quite a number of people used the track not far ahead and discretion is the better part of leading others into temptation.

This was at 7 p.m. and 1800 ft, up just 4 hours out from the start point. The crew then returned to Fort William with the Long Wheelbase. At 8 a.m. the next day - Saturday - they set out again, taking the Long Wheelbase up to 1100 ft. and walking on to the two 88"s. Moving off again at 10 o'clock, both vehicles moved up to the Loch; at 10.20 a stop was made to set up the tents and remove the wheels from the 88" Diesel. These were loaded into the 88" Petrol which was itself shod with 7.50 x 16 tyres - which are of course optional on Land-Rovers.

This Land-Rover made light of the extremely soft going which followed until the track was reached. This is the track from Achintee, which had been the route used in the early climbs of the mountains but which was now quite impassable to vehicles lower down because of wash-outs. Here the 9.00 tyres were replaced with the 7.50's which had been carried in the back, and the Land-Rover continued up the rocky track towards the summit. Traction was on the whole goody but in many places the track was very narrow, with many tight corners and the most awkward of angles and slopes. Not a place for inaccuracy or an unstable vehicle for the drop down to Glen Nevis is straight and clear for 3000 ft. - and more.

A break for lunch was made at mid-day - the crews needed it even if the Land-Rover didn't.

In fact it would be interesting to know who was most frightened - the driver in the Land-Rover or those outside watching him? Towards the top there was an appreciable amount of snow which was up to 5 ft. deep in places. The Land-Rover overcame most of these by repeated charges; full ahead until the snow packed up solid under the frame, reverse, and then hard ahead again. In only three places did the hydraulic winch on the front have to be brought into play - twice in very deep snow and once to haul a rock out of the way. In fact on the whole climbing was only resorted to in five places.

Ultimately the summit was reached at 3.30 p.m. just 8 hours and 40 minutes running time from the start.' This time is of course exclusive of the return to Fort William and back, the lunch break and the setting up of the tents (which

were there only in case of emergency and were not used), but includes the stop for wheel changing - fair's fair.

The descent was comparatively simple and the Land-Rovers were back at sea level - give or take a few feet - by 9 p.m., 4.5 hours from the top.

Exact comparisons with the times of previous attempts are not easy to make since the early climbs in 1911 and 1929 were made up the track and are not comparable but certainly took a great deal longer. The figures for the climb by another four wheel drive vehicle in 1962 are only quoted up to 3700 feet - some 700 feet below the top - but this apparently took over 15 hours, the whole expedition lasting two or three days. But by any standards there is no doubt that this climb by these Scottish Members and their Land-Rovers is a tremendous achievement and required not only the right vehicle, but also much effort, courage, and skill.

During the entire 13 hours 10 minutes of the round trips the Land-Rover used only 8 gallons of petrol and of mechanical trouble there was none. Indeed provided no-one dropped the Land-Rover into the Glen why should there have been? The going was very rough by any standards, very difficult, very wet and very rocky, but this is what Land-Rovers are built for - amongst other things.

The members of the expedition are listed below in alphabetical order. This was a Team and Club operation and all played their part.

B. Anderson.	(Hawick)
A.D. Ballantyne.	(Peebles)
E.E. Blackadder.	(Falkirk)
A. Brooks.	(West Linton)
J.S. Bruce.	(Hawick)
J. Fleming.	(Melrose)
W. Grieve.	(Hawick)
W. Irvine.	(Hawick)
D. Reid.	(Glasgow)
R.C. Sergeantson.	(Edinburgh)
G. Stewart.	(Larbert)
J. Woodward.	(Forfar)
C. White.	(Melrose)

End.