

GMC 2021 Planner's Report

I hope the competitors enjoyed the event as much as I enjoyed planning it. It has been a long process. Originally interned to be in 2020, I made a first reconnaissance trip round the area in November 2019, to get a realistic assessment of the terrain at that time of year. That trip ended up with me pushing my bike down Glen Gelder in knee-deep snow! Didn't cover as much ground as I'd hoped but it did serve as a useful reminder of the potential for adverse conditions on high ground at that time of year. We had access to most of the Balmoral Estate but much of the higher ground, Lochnagar westwards, would have involved too big a risk of untenable conditions. I wanted to keep the courses mostly below about 700 m. In the event, the one control that was intended to take the A and B courses into the more remote terrain north-west of Lochnagar was removed from the courses at the last minute due to the weather forecast.

The aim was to provide courses that were challenging, interesting and safe - for suitably experienced competitors. We did spend some time checking the more doubtful areas. My son, on a visit home for Christmas, may have been hoping for mince pies in front of the fire, but found himself spending Christmas Eve out in the wind and sleet checking out the north-east side of Conachraig and the steep descent down to the north side of Loch Muick.

The original plan had been to bus competitors to a start near the bottom of Glen Muick. However, with the continuing uncertainty about Covid precautions, we decided that a bus trip was a complication we should avoid and the start and finish should be within walking distance of the event centre in Crathie. That was Version 1 of the courses out the window. The mid-camp location was fixed at Spital of Glen Muick so start and finishing points for both days were defined.

Mar Orienteering Club kindly provided their Balmoral orienteering map for the forest sections. This gave plenty of options for a varied start and finish through the forest. But, once out on the open hill, it was inevitable that both days would have to pass through a relatively narrow Glen Gelder corridor. We didn't have access to the hills east of Glen Gelder and wanted to avoid getting too far into the 800 m+ hills to the west. I wanted to avoid paths and tracks as far as possible. Yes, there was some pretty tiresome terrain off the paths- but I reckon you wouldn't enter an event like this if you just wanted to run long distances along vehicle tracks. I was also hoping to take people into unfamiliar places. I suspect that many participants have, like me, walked or run the main Lochnagar paths more often than they can remember. With these considerations in mind the overall shape of the courses fell into place. Day 1: a fairly direct route south to get to a final loop round the plateau south of Loch Muick. Day 2: over or round Conachraig (Corbett-bagging option if desired) then a less direct route down Glen Gelder back to Balmoral. A long detour west to Sandy Loch for the A and B courses was vulnerable to poor weather (as it proved) but seemed worthwhile to give interesting route choices and varied scenery. Further revisions were required to get the course lengths about right, and to avoid unsafe route choices such as descent of crags or potentially hazardous river crossings. The Day 1 courses were quite long in order to get them onto the hills south of Loch Muick and avoid covering too much of the same ground as Day 2. I had hoped that this would be compensated by shorter courses on Day 2. Given the weather on Day 1 the courses were probably too long but hard to shorten without ending up with longer sections of track running up Glen Gelder.

The courses were all planned, tagged and checked by the end of July. The estate wanted us out of the way for the stalking season in August to October. It took me three long hot summer days to get round all the hill controls (with a few distractions, I recommend Sandy Loch as a place for a swim on a warm summer evening). Hind stalking continued on weekdays right up to the weekend on the event, so all the hill controls had to be put out over two days the previous weekend. A stout team of volunteers probably hadn't bargained for the weather that weekend: heavy rain and un-crossable

torrents. Many thanks to Sam, Lesley, Pete and Ali for persevering in conditions where most people would have stayed at home.

At the end of the event, all the controls were collected in by Sunday evening. An excellent effort by many helpers. Thanks to Marianne, Lesley, Pete, Mike, Graeme, Donnie, Sean, James, Jackie, Colm, Dennis and Dave who coordinated control collecting along with all his many other tasks. I'm very happy not to need to go back again to collect controls. Much as I have enjoyed planning this, for my next trip to the hills I want to go somewhere different from Lochnagar.

I also need to thank Glyn Jones, Head Ranger at Balmoral Estate, for his help facilitating access to the estate and liaising with all the people involved in operations on the estate: factor, stalkers, forestry etc.