

The Devil's Elbow

It had been a long and treacherous journey from our home village twenty-four miles north of York. Looking back, everyone but David agreed that we had been foolhardy by ignoring the weather forecast, that we should have stayed put and enjoyed ourselves at home, safe and snug and warm.

These pre-Christmas trips to the wilds of Scotland had become a tradition. This was our twentieth year; four couples who shared a passion for hillwalking and wildlife photography, founder members of the Thirsk Wildlife Photography Club.

One motivation was our accommodation had been fully paid: £5,860 including heating and Internet. In addition, there was a £2,000 'surety' on my card, an amount held to cover damage and breakages and to ensure we left the property spick and span on departure. On receipt of these monies, the Danish owner had emailed us the codes for the electronic lock on the rear entry door and the alarm system.

From the photographs on the website for *Dachaigh a' Chreagain Dhuibh* (Home of the Black Grouse) we were promised spectacular views of the Beaully Firth and the Black Isle. A trip to see the dolphins at Chanonry Point was high on our agenda with a visit to The Singleton Distillery Visitor Centre also on our hit list.

Everything we needed had been planned with military precision and thoroughness by my partner, a retired R.E.M.E. officer who had served in Afghanistan and Iraq. David, who almost lived inside his iPad, had developed a long and detailed checklist for everything we might need including emergency supplies. He had used this iPad list while packing the Landy and its rooftop boxes, every item labelled, stowed and photographed in position, cross-referenced for easy retrieval.

We always use his vintage Landy, a vehicle which David 'worships', spending endless hours maintaining and tweaking, closeted in our garage cum workshop with his group of like-minded Landy enthusiasts, all ex-military. Although this long-wheel based Discovery is eighteen years old, it has been upgraded many times to include the best off-road technology to manage its four-wheel drive and ABS braking system, with a recently improved military grade Sat-Nav and an 'all-singing, all-dancing' mapping and infotainment screen.

As a retired accountant, I usually do the bookings, other admin issues and deal with the money. On this trip, as the designated 'quartermaster', I shopped with David to ensure we had ample food and a good supply of wine, gin, mixers, soft drinks and sparkling mineral water. David oversaw the malt whisky box. Weather permitting, we planned to spend most of the daylight hours outdoors, but I had also packed a selection of favourite board games and pre-loaded my Kindle with some new e-books, in case the weather confined us to barracks.

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Alan and Susan had pulled out the day before departure; both had Covid. That left six of us: Derek and Marge, both retired vets; Janis and Fiona (Fee), early retirees from Yorkshire Police; David and me, Ellie (Elaine). With only six of us, we had more space, a definite bonus. I always find David's Landy uncomfortable, especially if I'm forced to sit in the back. With the roof boxes full, the swaying, restless ride makes me travel sick which means I'm usually perched up front beside whoever is driving.

For most of our journey, we were faced with icy slush on the roads and heavy freezing sleet reducing visibility. Our first stop was at Tebay North Services near Shap summit. At that point the sleet had turned to rain so on we pressed, hopeful the worst was behind us. As we left Glasgow the rain turned again to sleet. On the M80 heading for Stirling, we were slowed to a walking pace by driving hailstones.

At our refreshment stop near Perth, I surreptitiously scanned *Google* on my phone, but it seemed there was little chance of finding decent hotel accommodation. As we left heading north re-joining the notorious A9, the sleety hailstones became heavy snow. When we stopped for fuel at Inverness, it was clear that David was exhausted, worn out. He had been driving for nearly ten hours covering three hundred and fifty miles. We prevailed upon him and he reluctantly agreed that Janis should take over the task of driving for the final thirty-odd miles of our last leg. Within minutes of setting off again, he was curled up in the back inside a sleeping bag, snoring.

About five miles north of Inverness the intensity of the blizzard increased, bringing a white-out with most of the road signs obscured by frozen mud. Without Janis's excellent driving (she had been with the police traffic section) we would almost certainly have given up and turned back to civilisation. At the Torre roundabout we were delayed in a slow, stop-start queue by traffic blocking our preferred route via Dingwall. David's fancy Sat-Nav offered a detour, adding only a few miles.

At Muir of Ord, in the dark at just after seven o'clock, we had a last chance to stop and look for overnight accommodation but with only twenty-three miles to go to our destination we pressed on. Even with full beam, we were unable to see more than a few yards ahead, moving at walking pace with snow swirling in the headlights. Fortunately, there was no other traffic on this mesh of narrow farm roads.

I noticed that the temperature gauge was reading *minus* 12 and wondered if the heating at the lodge would cope with such extremes.

The last five miles were decidedly an off-road challenge, swaying and slithering along rutted farm tracks filled with frozen slush. Undeterred, guided by the re-assuring Sat-Nav display, on we went, desperate now to reach the promised warmth of our off-grid eco-home accommodation beside a small unnamed lochan which, according to the booking website had SSI status because of its thriving population of Great Crested Newts.

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The scariest part of the journey happened about three miles from our destination when we slithered over the top of a frighteningly steep hairpin bend which we later discovered from an Ordnance Survey map at the lodge was called The Devil's Elbow. The road surface was cambered, this caused by an accumulation of driven snow against the sheer rock face on the driver's side.

Was it foreboding or bravado which prompted me to start the video App on my iPhone to record this part of the journey?

As Janis turned the steering wheel to take us round the bend, the wheels locked momentarily and we slithered sideways to a stop, the top-heavy Landy leaning at a crazy angle over what I sensed must be a sheer drop. Shuddering with fear, I stared out into the blackness beyond the gusting snow, sure we were about to fall to oblivion.

For what seemed like an impossibly long time, the engine whined restlessly as Janis kept it running with the clutch fully depressed and the handbrake on. David, now unbuckled and leaning through the gap between us, issued a stream of calm instructions while Janis fiddled with various levers and pressed buttons. Then, with the four-wheel drive gearbox reset, Janis let in the clutch slowly while applying gentle pressure to the accelerator and we inched ever so slowly back nearer to the centre of the narrow dipping bend leading down towards the lochan now appearing ahead on the Sat-Nav display.

As we neared our destination, the snow turned to heavy rain and the temperature gauge began to climb, settling at minus seven.

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The driveway at the rear of *Dachaigh a' Chreagain Dhuibh* was covered in deep, crisp, pristine snow. In the glare from the Landy's headlights, the long modern structure looked dark and unwelcoming and we were reluctant to get out into the pulsing hailstones.

Running through my mind was the recurring thought: *This is a disaster in the making.*

Wearing a headtorch and holding his iPad, David approached the door, removed a glove and tapped in the security code then tried to door handle. The door remained firmly locked. We crowded round, watching.

Janis said, 'Do you think the mechanism is frozen solid? Would a little heat work?'

'Worth a try,' said David. 'I have a mini blowtorch in the front roof box but my best guess is that the power is down. It comes from a battery system charged by a water turbine from a river up there somewhere.' He pointed to the ridge which towered above the lodge and its outbuildings. 'My best guess is the turbine mechanism up at the dam is frozen. Freeing it could be a big task, maybe even impossible.'

As David had predicted the lock mechanism did not respond to gentle heating.

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'OK, time for plan B', said David. 'Drat, the iPad is down, no telecom signal, can't get the map from *G-Drive*. From memory, that track over there goes directly to the turbine hall. Best I have a look-see.'

Back at the Landy, he handed me his iPad. Then, hefting his survival rucksack containing his quick-fix tool kit, he set off up the steep track wearing ice grippers on his boots and using walking poles, head down, his headtorch lighting the slippery wet frozen snow covering the rutted tracks, moving slowly but doggedly as his feet skidded on the underlying ice, the ultra-bright safety light on the top of his helmet flashing every few seconds.

In a low voice, Janis said:

'Should one of us not go with him? What if he slips and breaks a leg.'

Knowing David was in his element, on a 'mission' to unblock the turbine and restore power to us, I replied:

'No, let him do it by himself. He won't want anyone cramping his style, slowing him down.'

Shining his small pocket torch towards a large garage-like structure which loomed in the distance, beyond the lodge, Derek said, 'If the power is down, the whole place will be frozen. Let's try the outbuilding, see what we can find. If we get stuck outside, maybe we could camp out in it for the night.'

With David gone, Janis began to re-assert command. Now armed with a huge police torch, she said, 'Worth a try Derek but camping out in a shed is not exactly what we signed up for is it? Ellie, maybe you could try phoning the owner, see if she has any suggestions. Right then Fee, let's check the perimeter to see if there is any other way to get inside. Maybe we'll get lucky and find the patio doors have been left unlocked. If we can get in that way, we can use the log burner.'

'Right, Margy,' said Derek, 'Come on, we'll check it out.'

Left alone, staring at the codes on the iPad, a thought occurred. In case David had miskeyed, using my phone torch, I tried entering the digits again.

No luck. The words were muttered: '*Bugger! Bugger! Bugger!*'

A few minutes later the entire rear yard was illuminated by bright lights. From the side of the outbuilding, Marge called across to me:

'Ellie, Derek says you should try the door lock again. The batteries had tripped but he has no idea why. He reconnected them and said to give it a go while he monitors the gauges.'

This time the entry code worked. As I opened the door, the foyer lighting came on automatically. A low beeping sound and a steady amber pulsing lamp led me to the security

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system panel near the entrance to the main lounge. Through the open doorway, I could see the huge room lit by Janis's torch as she fiddled with the patio doors. I entered the second code to silence the security panel. The building sprang to life and lights came on in the lounge as Marge and I entered.

Derek joined us with a big smile on his face. Like David, he was a practical man, another DIY enthusiast. He explained that they had found a way into the outbuilding through an unlocked rear door to discover an array of wardrobe-sized *Tesla* battery packs, all fully charged. By studying the circuit diagram, he had managed to find a switch to reconnect them to the lodge complex.

He added, 'I'm not a hundred percent sure but it looks as if the water turbine restarted while I was watching the panels. It could be David has fixed it. I'm not certain but that what it looks like. He'll be able to tell us when he gets back.'

Fee tapped on the glass wall. Marge strode across and unlocked the patio doors to let the pair in.

The house was bitterly cold. In the main lounge a digital display near the log burner showed the internal temperature was plus 3.4 and minus 9.7 outside.

Taking off her gloves as she moved, Fee went directly to the log burner. Kneeling, she read the instructions card, loaded a few logs then pressed various buttons. A gas poker ignited, the logs caught fire, adding a bright reddish glow from flames flickering behind the glass door. The poker shut down automatically. Within a few minutes the room temperature began to climb.

Outside, large, soft snowflakes began to fall from a dark sky.

The digital display read plus 15 inside and minus 12.2 outside.

I remembered the online blurb had said the house was super-insulated with four layers of energy saving glass making the lounge largely self-heating from available sunlight, even in winter.

I assumed command:

'Come on guys, let's get unloaded while I call David and try to persuade him to leave the turbine inspection until tomorrow.'

As the others set about unloading our food and drinks stores from the Landy, I tried to reach David but there was no signal on my phone.

Then I remembered: he would probably have his new high-powered walkie-talkie radio handset with him as part of his emergency kit. I checked the glove compartment and found two handsets from the set of three he had purchased recently. We had used them

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to great effect a few weeks earlier to position a batch of tiny line-of-sight re-sender pods from camera traps at a remote badger set, using this network to relay video images back to a laptop at our converted farm steading.

I fired one up and tried to reach him. No luck.

The storm was now a white-out, but I took comfort in the fact he would set up a bivouac with his survival tent and tough it out. For us to try to follow him up the track would be foolhardy. Reluctantly, taking a charger stand for the radio with me, I retreated to the lodge.

Janis met me in the foyer and handed me a mug of Earl Grey decaf.

'Any luck with David?'

I explained.

'Well Ellie, as you know David is trained for this sort of situation so let's just hope he is not injured. I suggest we go ahead and eat while you keep trying to reach him. And joy of joys, Derek has found the heat pump control panel and reckons he has it running. If you take off your boots, you'll feel the floors are noticeably warmer, underfloor heating it said in the online brochure. Fee is taking charge in the kitchen, preparing veggies. Your fish pie is heating in the oven so we should be able to eat in about an hour. Marge is serving G&Ts and has opened two bottles of red to breathe and has loaded the whites into the wine cooler. Methinks it's time to take a shower and find a change of clothes. Chin up Ellie, David will be fine, he's a survivor. And as we well know, he has the luck of the Devil. Yes?'

'Yes Janis, I know, I've heard all his tales of derring-doo many times over but he was much younger then and given the amount of driving he's done today, he must be exhausted. I'm hoping he made it to the turbine hall and is sheltering there but if push comes to shove, d'you think you would be able to drive the Landy up that track to try to find him? That slope looks almost vertical but, in this weather, it might be the only way to reach him. There is no way any of us could walk up there. It would be madness, wouldn't it?'

'OK Ellie, here's the deal. Let's eat first. You keep trying with the radio. I'll stay off the booze and if we can't raise him, I'll have a go in the Landy, but just you and me. We'll leave the other walkie-talkie here with Derek to keep them in the loop. But look, stop worrying. I'm sure David will be snugged up in that super-duper survival tent of his and, when he gets organised, he'll be in touch on his radio. Yes?'

'OK, good plan, thanks.'

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The meal was a subdued affair. Every five minutes or so I moved to the foyer and tried to raise David on the radio. No luck.

I looked at my plate: the fish pie, carrots and green beans were untouched. A few mouthfuls of parsnip and ginger soup was all I had been able to manage.

Janis pushed up from her seat, checked her watch:

'OK Ellie, let's do it. Let's get properly toggged up and make sure we have everything we need. Yes?'

Sitting in the Landy, the radio in my hand sparked to life:

'Ptarmigan to Ring Ouzel, come in please. Listening. Over.'

'David, are you alright? Where exactly are you?'

'About half a mile up the track from the lodge, in my tent. I was nearly back with you when I slipped. My left ankle is crocked. Tendons, I think. Can't walk.'

'Ellie, let me speak to him, please,' asked Janis, her hand reaching for the radio.

'Ptarmigan, this is Red Kite. We were just about to come looking for you. I'll try to bring the Landy up the track to bring you home. We are snug and cosy warm here. The power is restored, everything up and running except the Internet. And there's no phone signal either. Derek thinks the power outage was some sort of trip switch fault, but we'll need you to check it out, make sure we are safe, electrically. He thinks the dials show the turbine has re-started. Yes? Listening. Over.'

'OK, Red Kite, most definitely worth a go, I've taken Landys up worse than that, back in the day. Just let the four-wheel drive and integrated braking technology work and go softly, softly on the gas pedal, OK? You'll find that the first section is the worst. Once you are over the ridge there is a long slow bend before the track levels out to a slow gentle climb along the edge of a gorge with the river below you. After you pick me up it will be impossible to turn the Landy round, so you'll have to drive the full distance to the carpark at the dam. It's about three miles, I think. I'll tell you the turbine story later. Bloody freezing here. Bring a hot drink in a flask, please. Any chance of some soup? Listening. Over.'

'How about parsnip and ginger. Listening. Over.'

'Delish! Listening. Out.'

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It took the best part of two hours to get David back to the lodge.

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Marge had strapped him up and Derek plied him with a large malt with added hot water, a toddy. Fee had provided a food tray with his saved fish pie and veggies, a platter he had scoffed hungrily as he told us his tale while showing us jerky video clips on his mobile phone.

The turbine had stopped running because a raft of logs and debris had blocked the screen stopping water flow to the turbine rotor. The ends of the logs had been gnawed - by *beavers!*

There had been no mention of beavers in the wildlife section of the online brochure but we were all aware of the various re-wilding initiatives nearby, attempts to re-introduce the Eurasian Beaver (*Castor Fiber*), an indigenous species which had been hunted to extinction in Britain over four hundred years ago. Perhaps the Danish owner was unaware.

Could 'our' beaver colony be the most northerly in Britain?

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In the days which followed, the storm continued to rage outside, confining us, making us restless and slightly tetchy, the bickering mainly started by Janis and David niggling about 'facts', information which we could easily have checked on *Google*, if we had had our promised Internet or a phone signal.

(Much later we would learn our earlier traffic delay at the Torre roundabout had been due to a road closure caused by fallen power lines and damage to the telecom's infrastructure, repairs hampered by the ongoing bad weather.)

When the debate became overwhelming, I retreated to our room and read my Kindle, often dropping off to sleep, chilling out. The word which came to mind was *therapeutic*.

On our final full day, we woke to a bright, cloud-free ice-blue sky. Our spirits soared, and our usual bonhomie returned.

Inside it was plus 23; outside, only minus 2.

Perfect!

The views to the south and east over the Beaulieu and Cromarty Firths to the glistening North Sea were spectacular. I spent some time framing images for my *City & Guilds: Photography (Landscapes)* course.

Fee and Marge loaded the empty bird feeders and bird table with seeds and grubs from our supplies and knocked out the ice from the bird bath, filling it with warm water.

As we snacked our breakfasts we snapped happily at the visiting birds, mainly acrobatic finches, robins and tree sparrows with a few long-tailed tits in the mix, these smaller species competing with a dozen or so noisy starlings and four scolding, bullying magpies.

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Then a surprise: a single rock dove arrived, probably driven inland from its normal coastal habitat by the storm, we thought.

With the feeders refilled and fresh water in the bird bath, we left David videoing and snapping our busy avian visitors.

Hoping for a sighting of our elusive beaver neighbours, we trekked up the path in bright sunshine to the dam. Sadly, although we found lots of evidence of their largely nocturnal work, we saw no actual beavers and had to settle for lots of snaps of their three connected lodge mounds built across the delta of a sizeable tributary burn near to the point where it joined the main flow of the river.

Our high note, a consolation for the dreadful weather and no beavers, was our first ever sighting of the rare capercaillie (*Tetrao Urogallus*), a species now on the Red List with an estimated remnant of five hundred birds confined entirely to the Scottish highlands. Crouching and whispering, we watched, videoed and photographed four birds, three huge and majestic males and one smaller and less flamboyant female. They were foraging in a loose grouping on the edge of the pine forest where the beavers had been at work on the birches and willows which edged the riverbank. None of the birds was ringed and it was pleasing to see they were all in good condition, apparently thriving.

Unfortunately, our good weather window lasted only a few hours. We made it back to the lodge in time for a late lunch, with driving sleety rain on our backs. By mid-afternoon the sky was dark and white-out blizzard conditions had returned.

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On our final morning, as part of the agreement, we cleaned the premises thoroughly, with David checking and re-checking our work to ensure everything met his exacting standards. With Janis taking the lead, we filled out the online questionnaire attaching photographs and recording our experiences. However, we did not include in our comments any mention of the discovery of the beaver colony, deciding to keep it as 'our secret'.

Although we had been up before dawn, we underestimated the time needed for cleaning and tidying and it was a few minutes after noon before we set out. As David could not yet drive, Janis took the wheel with me sitting beside her, my iPhone at the ready.

In daylight, our homeward traverse of the Devil's Elbow was far scarier than in the dark when the blizzard had concealed the true danger. Moving at a crawl, slithering, stopping, starting again, Janis kept us near to the centre of the curving track still slicked with ice covered in deep snow, heading steadily towards the summit and the vicious hairpin. Eventually she eased us up onto the 'elbow', an outcrop perched over a narrow gorge thirty metres below. With nerve-shredding concentration, Janis negotiated the hairpin at a snail's pace. Then, with the worst part behind us, we were heading downwards, slipping

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and slithering on the steeper but straighter downslope to the narrow track snaking beside the river in the valley below.

Against a background of the engine and gearbox whining, the second traverse through the Devil's Elbow had been made in total silence. When we were safely onto the more level track, I turned off my recording, noting it had taken us eighteen minutes.

Derek was the first to speak:

'Janis, you are an absolute genius. That was amazing driving. And to think you did it in the dark first time around, during a white-out blizzard. Fantastic.'

We all jumped in at that point, adding our thanks, commenting on how lucky we had been. Then, from the rear section, his bandaged leg stretched out, peering at his iPad, David said:

'Hey, confession time folks. *Mia Culpa*. We should never have been on that track over The Devil's Elbow. I've been checking out what happened. The official access road to our lodge is through the pine forest. Had we stayed on the designated route via Dingwall as originally planned, we would have been on a completely different approach and would have arrived at the rear of the lodge on the track which leads to the dam and the turbine hall.'

He held up his iPad with the route highlighted in purple.

'Look, it continues from that turbine hall car park alongside the river to join a forestry access road well beyond the beaver lodges. If we had approached from the road out of Dingwall it would have been so much simpler. Mind you, in the dark, in that white-out blizzard, it would still have been a challenge to get past the trees the beavers had brought down.'

'Yeah, but we lived to tell the tale, eh?' chirruped Fee.

I added, 'And I have both videos to prove it! Scariest videos ever!'

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Safely on our way, now on the tarmac road heading out of Muir of Ord, the snow began to fall again. Within minutes it was another white-out.

From the back, sitting opposite David, Fee said:

'Hey guys, from my phone App it says this snowstorm is going to be with us all the way home. I vote we stop while we are ahead and hole up nearby for a day or so.'

For the first time in days, my phone had a signal.

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'I agree,' I replied. 'Let me have a look on *Trip Advisor*, see if I can find anything decent in the way of a hotel, one with good food.'

Marge added, 'My App says it should be clear around here tomorrow, so if we stop over tonight, we could try for Chanonry Point and the Dolphins tomorrow.'

'And the Singleton Visitor Centre too', added David.

'Yes please, surely we can't miss out on that, not when we are so close', chortled Derek.

'Works for me,' said Janis. 'That's the best bit about being retired, grabbing opportunities when they arise, yes?'

Using *Google*, I found us three double rooms at the Kingsmill Hotel in Inverness and booked us in online for two nights using my credit card.

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In mid-January, prior to the next meeting of the Thirsk Wildlife Photography Club, we all met up for a buffet lunch at our place, including Alan and Susan, now recovered.

As we usually did on these occasions, we took turns to present our individual 'best ten' selections of stills and a ten-minute video using our plasma screen television.

My video selection was an edit of both iPhone records entitled:

"The Devil's Elbow: a death-defying experience."

We watched in silence.

When it finished, Susan said, 'Oh my God! I'm so glad I missed that trip. Horrible.'

David said, 'No, it was brilliant, really brilliant. A great demonstration of what the Landy can do.'

'Did I ever tell you about the time in Afghanistan when . . .'

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