

## **SAIL CALEDONIA**

<http://www.sailcaledonia.org>

### **THE GREAT GLEN RAID 2012**

This year's Great Glen Raid is my second attempt, my first being a bit of a wet affair in 2011! The whole saga started in 2009 when my friend and neighbour Mike Lawson started a boat building venture <http://www.northboats.co.uk> and I became his first customer.

With Feadhanach "gentle breeze" in Gaelic completed late that year I started looking for somewhere to sail her. Mike suggested the Portsoy Traditional Boat Festival would be a good place to start so in June 2010 that is where I headed and first became aware of the Great Glen Raid in the form of a flier.

I booked my place for the 2011 event, the following June soon came around and off I went with my boat, into one of the most intense weeks of learning I have ever experienced (and also one of the most enjoyable) the weather that year was quite extreme with winds above F5 from the south west for most of the week and gusts of 50 knots on the second day one of which caught my boat broadside on and unceremoniously dumped me into the canal in the first rowing race on day two, this was the first of two capsizes the second of which occurred on Loch Ness at Fort Augustus which resulted in a burst buoyancy bag and the end of my "raiding" that year. With Feadhanach hitching a lift on Fingal of Caledonia our floating clubhouse <http://www.fingal-cruising.co.uk> for the remainder of the week.

Not one to be put off by a couple of duckings I resolved to come again the following year and to be better prepared for any conditions that the Great Glen may throw at us. One of the other competitors that year was a Dutchman named Bart who is a very competent sailor and a canny tactician when racing. During the last few days of the event Bart told me how he would have liked to come again but because his boat needed a crane at either end of the event he did not think he would be able to make it for 2012, so we decided to team up, I would let Bart skipper my boat and I would crew. Through the following winter I had Mike install permanent buoyancy lockers fore and aft and in the early spring Bart came over to "tune " the boat and do a few modifications to her rigging.

With car packed and boat hitched we set off from Aderdeenshire on the Saturday morning with low cloud and mist on the hills, the weather soon started to improve and by Avimore we were driving along in bright sunshine.



We arrived at Lochaber Yacht Club in Fort William to find a hive of activity as fourteen boats struggled to find room to rig up and take their turn to use the slipway; it was a lovely atmosphere with lots of familiar faces from last year's event and many new ones to get acquainted with.

The weather forecast was for blue skies and a F3 to 4 on Loch Linnhe but as is the norm up here in Scotland the F3 to 4 was looking more like a 5 to 6! So after a race briefing in the Yacht club we were all ferried out to our boats by the safety ribs for the race to Corpach. With Bart in control we jockeyed for position at the start line and got off to a flier beating our way up the loch into a stiff breeze and choppy water.

With the wind strengthening and the tide starting to run against we were soon starting to take a bit more water aboard than I would have liked and with me having to hold the headsail sheets and balance the boat bailing was not an option! About half way through the race we had to tack

away from a ship coming down the channel which cost us several places in the standings and after that, with about six inches of water sloshing about in the boat it became a simple matter of survival! With Bart's expert hand on the helm though we managed to cross the finish line the right way up and take 8th place which for me was a huge relief and a boost to my badly dented confidence of last year. Bart showed some more of his skills as a sailor by sailing us all the way into Corpach sea lock in a head wind, strictly speaking this is against the canal rules but the lock keeper who gave us a line had a big grin on his face! Now with time to catch my breath I was thinking here we go again I can't see us getting through the week without a ducking, even with all of Barts knowledge!

Later that evening we all returned to Lochaber Yacht Club for supper and a few beers and to hear each other's stories. I learned that one of the four Bayraider boats had capsized but all was well under control with the safety rib on the scene in moments and everyone back aboard and racing in short time, a tribute to the professional organization that is a trade mark of this event especially with regard to safety.

Sunday morning dawned bright and clear in Corpach basin and after a hasty breakfast I am off to Inverness with the car and trailer whilst Bart takes Feadhanach through Neptune's staircase with the rest of the fleet.

With the cars and trailers safely parked up in Dochgarroch we head back to Fort William in the Fingal mini bus and arrive at the top of Neptune's staircase to be told we have ten minutes to eat our packed lunch and prepare for the first rowing race to Gairlochy! I hastily donned my sailing gear and joined Bart aboard Feadhanach and readied the oars for the race start.

The fleet was started in pairs at two minute intervals; we were grouped with one of the new bayraiders, a boat called "craic" with a crew of three gentlemen from Germany. We manfully tried to keep pace with them, but with their two oarsmen to our one and the headwind which was to be a permanent fixture for the week, we were slowly left behind but still managed to finish in 7th place which I considered to be a result. We moored up for the night at Gairlochy under the watchful eye of the snow goose perched on the side of the Nevis range.



The next morning dawned with blue skies once again and more interestingly not a breath of wind to break the glass like surface of Loch Lochy. After a fine breakfast served from the billycan <http://www.thebillycan.co.uk> our mobile breakfast kitchen, we all gathered on Fingal of Caledonia's deck our floating club house for the morning race briefing. The forecast was for the wind to pick up through the course of the morning, so a race was arranged around a pre-placed set of inflatable yellow buoys down the length of Loch Lochy to Laggan. We set off with sails set but hanging useless in the still air under oar power for the start line. We had been told at the race brief that the use of oars was to be permitted in this particular race, so after the start signal the entire fleet of fourteen boats began to row for all they were worth down the loch under a clear blue sky and a rising thermometer, and to a man all praying for a breeze to pick up, even a head wind would do! But alas the wind gods were not going to play ball today so we ended up having to row the whole length of Loch Lochy, no mean feat I can tell you!

With another decent result under our belt coming in 11th place the fleet entered Laggan lock and tied up on the other side to eat lunch and rest our leaden arms in preparation for the afternoons rowing race to the Great Glen water park on Loch Oich. Once again we were started in two's at two minute intervals for the two mile or so race to the swing bridge and Loch Oich. I have to thank both mine and Barts forethought at this stage for we both had spent quite some time in the previous few months practicing on rowing machines, it may not have helped us get

better than a 10th place finish but it did prevent either of us suffering from the blistered hands and painful arms that many in the fleet were by now complaining off!



That evening we were treated to a very tasty barbecue supper, and with everyone feeling just a wee bit weary, after a few beers it was off to bed to recharge the batteries ready for day four and Loch Oich.

Up bright and early Tuesday morning and yet again the water is like glass! After breakfast the race brief was an optimistic affair with much talk of good winds to come with the result that the forthcoming race would be sail only with no rowing allowed, didn't hear any complaints about that! To make things more interesting there was to be quite a complicated course around the buoys at the far end of the Loch and the navigation through the middle would be interesting with lots of shallow water to navigate. Feadhanach has a very shallow draught though and with the light winds we would be able to raise the centre board and sail in just inches of water, maybe an advantage who knows!

We were allowed to row to the start line and by then there was just a zephyr or two beginning to ruffle the waters of the loch. We were at a slight advantage in these conditions and so found

ourselves in the leading four boats of the fleet but Pathfinder was the one to catch, with Colin her builder and designer squeezing ever fraction of a knot out of the light airs as he and Jane used their weight to heel the boat to try and fill the sails.



As the morning wore on the breeze gradually increased and slowly we lost our advantage as the bigger boats started to over haul us, we had an exhilarating end to the race though, with some lovely reaching around the course buoys at the far end of the loch to finish in 9<sup>th</sup> place.

The fleet gathered at the end of Loch Oich to await the swing bridge opening and then it was a rally along the canal reach through Cullochry lock and on to Kytra lock with some of the boats with engines giving those of us without a much appreciated tow. Once through the lock it is time for a lunch break before the second race and highlight of the day the row into Fort Augustus.

Once again we are under starters orders and set off in twos for the two and a bit mile row to the top of the Fort Augustus locks and once again we finish in 9<sup>th</sup> spot. By now we have come to the conclusion that the middle of the pack is a good place to be! We have to wait for an hour or so at the top of the staircase for our turn to lock down into Fort Augustus, but no one gets

bored as there is plenty of banter and lots to see, not least of which are the antics of the young (and not so young) crews of our three safety ribs as they chunter around like whirligig beetles at the top of the locks. This earns them a mild rebuke for wasting fuel from the boss man Martin!

With all the boats now sporting flags and bunting we enter the locks and drop down through the centre of town attracting much attention from the tourist and visitors.



On through the swing bridge at the bottom of the flight of locks and we are greeted with our first sight of our next challenge, the brooding expanse of Loch Ness in all her glory, our spirits are lifted though by the sound of Mark our resident piper on Fingal of Caledonia standing in his usual spot on her stern and blowing a cheery tune on his pipes.

Tuesday night and the bright lights of Fort Augustus beckon, this is Fingal's catering staffs night off so after a refreshing shower we all head into the town for dinner. Bart and I join our new German friends in the Bothy for some pleasant conversation and a nice piece of steak, after pudding we all head up the road to the Lock Inn for a wee nip or two and to say hi to our hard working Sail Caledonia crew who are "letting their hair down" so to speak! Just before I turn in I stand on Fingals bow and look out up the length of Loch Ness into a freshening breeze and wonder what she has in store for us tomorrow.

Loch Ness was very “atmospheric” the next morning, with low clouds clinging to the mountains on either side and a fresh northeasterly breeze which promised some hard work ahead.

After mulling things over the day before we, along with Craic had decided that discretion was the better part of valor, and had withdrawn from the Loch Ness challenge, leaving only two boats to take on the grueling trip to the end of the loch and half way back again to Foyers. Turaco 3 and Curlew had set off hours before whilst the rest of us were still wrestling with our duvets, I wished them a silent good luck as we gathered for the morning briefing.

With strengthening winds forecast I set about persuading Bart that reefing really isn't for “pussies” and it might not be a bad idea to do just that! In the end we took the sensible option to put in a reef and take down the spritsail too just in case.

The remaining twelve boats of the fleet got themselves ready and out to the start line in good time and waited for the signals. We had an interesting start tacking just inside the line but with too little way on to get round we ended up ramming Lochnagar which is John our starter and race organizers floating office, much to his bemusement! Soon we were in our usual position in the middle of the fleet beating manfully into the wind and watching the larger boats disappear into the grey



horizon.



It seemed that old Nessie was in a benign mood this morning, as yet again the weather forecast bore no resemblance to reality and we found ourselves languishing at the back of the fleet, our caution in setting a reef soon turned out to be un-necessary as the stiff north easterly of the early morning began to ease, so we decided to shake out the reef and drop down the gears, and as we began to overtake Mohican and Storm the rain started to fall at a steady pace. Bart made an interesting discovery though, it seem Feadanach was handling much better with just the staysail and no spritsail which led to a lengthy debate as to whether she would benefit from the addition of a genoa to her sail wardrobe.

As we approached Foyers the wind dropped even more leaving us to eventually limp damply over the finish line in 9<sup>th</sup> place.



We were directed to the mouth of a small river by a couple of the lads from one of the safety ribs who were standing waist deep in the water to guide us past the shoals and on up the river to the overnight moorings. After striking the sails and making the boat secure we had a pleasant walk of half a mile or so through a bluebell carpeted wood to where Fingal was moored for the night. After a freshen up we sat on the deck sipping a beer to watch the two “Loch Ness Challenge” boats cross the finish about 45 minutes apart. Good effort well done both.

After supper a few of us took the opportunity to stretch our legs and climb the steep road up to the Craighdarroch Hotel which sits close to the falls of Foyers and has great views of Loch Ness and, more interestingly a bar renowned for its stock of excellent malts!

The next morning the damp weather was a distant memory and Loch Ness looked like a sheet of glass, not a common sight! Over breakfast there was much talk about another day of grueling rowing from the crews, but during the race brief we were assured by our illustrious leaders that the wind would arrive in good time.



We readied the boats and one by one nosed out of the river and in three lines head were towed the mile or so up the loch by the safety ribs and Slip Jig our “mother goose” to the start line off the power station jetty at Inverfarigaig, by the time we were under starters orders the promised breeze was just beginning to ripple the surface, so it looked like the oars could be left in the bottom of the boat after all.



The wind steadily built from the north east again and we fell into the familiar routine of tacking up the loch, Feadhanach was so well balanced at one point that we did an entire leg of about half an hour without having to touch the tiller sheer magic!

By the time we entered Urquhart Bay the wind had freshened to a good F4 we past close under the ramparts of the castle where we had a tussle with a numptie in a rowing boat with an outboard who refused to give way causing us to put in an extra tack to round the mark. The winds around the bay and on the western side of the loch in general were starting to get to be a handful and Bart had to use all his skill to keep us upright as the fetch started to build and once again we started to ship some water. For a good hour we battled through the worst of the waves on towards the big blue tent of the Rock Ness Festival and slowly the conditions grew more comfortable. The race called for a figure of eight around the marks at this end of the loch with the result that we found ourselves once again in the company of the front runners for a while, there were some very fluky winds around too with gusts coming from all directions and wind holes caused by Torr Wood that had to be negotiated. We rounded the buoys in the correct order though and beat our way towards Lochend and the finish line to take the flag in 11<sup>th</sup> place.

As we approached the entrance to the canal the wind started to die so once again the oars came out and we made our way slowly into Loch Dochfour hugging the west bank to allow the Jacobite Queen to pass by.

The fleet was waiting in a small bay in loch Dochfour where we joined them to ready the boat for the final reach to Dochgarroch and the welcome sight of Fingal moored at our final destination. The raid was far from over yet though as we still had two more races to go, but first some refreshments and tales of a great days sailing and a good night's rest.



Friday morning brings news of near gale force winds on the Beaully Firth so it is decided that the final race on the firth is to be canceled, but we will have the last of the rowing races from Dochgarroch to Tomnahurich Bridge. Once through the lock at Dochgarroch we start the rowing race into the teeth of the gale, it's a real struggle along the four mile reach with the boat almost standing still in the gusts but we struggle on and finish in 10<sup>th</sup> place. At Tomnahurich six of us elect to haul out at Caley Marina and the rest of the fleet decided to finish the journey at North Kessock. In a perverse sort of way I am glad not to complete the coast to coast journey as it gives more incentive to come back next year and do it all again. But I am chuffed to bits at competing in all the races and not coming last in one of them!

Once the job of getting Feadhanach safely stowed on her trailer and back to Dochgarroch is complete I can turn my attention to preparing for the forthcoming nights festivities. The village hall is ours for the night and Mark has his band Poit Dhubh <http://www.poitdhubh.co.uk/> set up on the stage. After a last fine supper from Tree and the team we have the formal prize giving ceremony and photo call, and then the band gets everyone warmed up and itching to dance.



With an eclectic mix of fine Gaelic music and some excellent sea shanties and poetry from the Raiders and their guests, the night is a rousing success and one to keep in the memory for the dark winter months.