

North Wales White Guide

Reconciling Conservation and Recreation
Winter Climbing in Snowdonia

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Recent good winters have resulted in lots more people climbing on the snow and ice, leading to concern about the possible effects of all this activity on the special plantlife of Snowdonia's mountain cliffs. This is especially so as the southerly location of Snowdonia means that we don't always get good snow cover and the effect of snow and ice climbing in these poor conditions can be damaging.

A visit to Clogwyn Du (by the CCW and BMC), following the very busy 2009/10 winter climbing season, found that 'the condition of the ledge and crack vegetation did not look to have been affected'. Nonetheless, the growing popularity of winter climbing means that we all need to be aware of our potential impact and take steps to minimise it.

Unlike seasonal climbing restrictions for cliff nesting birds, managing access at important plant sites can't rely on temporary restrictions as the plants are there all the time. Many of the cliffs which are important for winter climbing are large, vegetated and loose and so haven't been fully surveyed for their plant life. (Carting a couple of 300m ropes up to the top of the **Black Ladders** to do a survey on abseil would be fun!).

However, there are a number of places where we know that rare species grow or which are particularly rich in plants and these need special consideration by climbers when deciding when, where and even how to climb. This doesn't mean that we can climb with abandon everywhere else, as there may be rare species we still haven't found, but these places do need particular care, especially as some of the large, more broken and vegetated cliffs may never have been disturbed before.

The topos in the centre of this bilingual guide show these special sections of the cliffs highlighted in **green**. Many of these have been surveyed from scrambling around in the summer months and so are near the base of climbs or on rock steps higher up the cliff. This is particularly the case at **Clogwyn y Garnedd** below the Snowdon summit where large areas are accessible in summer. Some cliffs, such as at **Clogwyn Du**, have been surveyed on abseil - here the most important areas are on the upper left (looking in) and around the lower end of *Clogwyn Left Hand Branch*.

Some cliffs have had minimal survey because of difficult access. For example you will see a small part of the **Black Ladders** highlighted in the topo, but there must be so much more on this cliff! In other places such as Cwm Idwal, the whole of **Clogwyn y Geifr** has been highlighted because it is known to be one of the best sites for mountain plants in the UK. We can often judge where the best plant sites might be by knowing the geology of a cliff; the richer the rocks and soils, the richer the plantlife. However, that doesn't always work as in some places water seeping from above can bring in lots of nutrients to otherwise acidic rocks and some rare plants prefer less rich rock types.



Tall herbs on Clogwyn y Geifr, Cwm Idwal photo: Barbara Jones

Some of these areas have arctic-alpine plants in cracks and crevices which are shallowly rooted and so could be damaged and easily dislodged by the tearing action of ice axes and crampons in marginal snow and ice conditions or even more by clearing out a runner placement. In other areas more 'ledge' vegetation can be found out of the reach of grazing sheep. In summer on cliffs with suitable rock types a riot of colour and diversity of plant types can be found with many herbs such as globeflower, roseroot and angelica growing and sometimes giving the appearance of hanging gardens. Go to the base of the **Black Ladders** in summer and you will see good examples. These are most easily damaged by climbing when the turf is not frozen and when trampling will break up the vegetation cover and erode the soil.

If you plan to climb a new line in one of the special areas marked on the topos be sure to tread carefully. If you are in any doubt then contact the **CCW** (j.roberts@ccw.gov.uk) or the **BMC** (elfyn@thebmc.co.uk) for advice.

In good winter conditions with a build up of neve and ice, there is not usually a problem with the passage of climbers; the problems start in marginal conditions, when there is a thin cover of snow or ice and the turf is not frozen. The vegetation can also be partially frozen or 'aerated' where there are many air spaces in the plant cushions or on the vegetated ledge. These will freeze hard later in the season, but whilst they are aerated, they can be easily damaged when trying to get a secure axe placement. The use of dry tooling techniques on mixed routes (such as torquing a pick into a crack) is also a potential problem.



Jon Ratcliffe on **The Sting** V 6, Clogwyn y Geifr photo: Si Panton



Tall herbs growing on the Black Ladders photo: Barbara Jones

What is 'best practice' and what are 'good conditions'?

- Finding out about conditions beforehand will help to save you a potentially wasted journey. Before deciding on a prospective route consult as many weather forecasts and condition reports as possible. These days you are spoilt for choice so there is little excuse for arriving at the crag uninformed. A quick flick through the various winter climbing blogs, news websites and online forums should help you build a picture of what is happening on the mountain cliffs. If you don't live in the area a local contact is useful too.



Miles Perkin making a pick placement into the frozen turf ledge above the lower crux on **El Mancho** VI 7, Clogwyn Du photo: Tim Neill

- In some cases, particularly in poor visibility, it won't be clear what the local conditions are like until you arrive at the base of the cliff. Upon arrival you should make an initial assessment. Firstly, the ground, and in particular, the turf, should be well frozen. If, when you place your axe in the turf, it comes out wet and muddy it is quite easy to see that conditions are just not right for winter climbing.
- Ideally everything should be covered in snow and ice, and should be obviously wintry, but many modern mixed routes rely almost exclusively on frozen turf (note the hint - it has to be frozen!). An ascent in 'soft' conditions cannot be claimed as a legitimate winter ascent. You are very likely to cause significant damage; you may also ruin the route from a climbing point of view by ripping off key turf placements.
- Good technique can help minimise damage – practise in less sensitive areas, and hone your skills before getting out onto the more fragile sites highlighted here. An experienced climber will know where to look for the best placements and consequently is less likely to cause damage.
- It is important to keep your tools sharp. A sharp pick will create less damage, it also requires less effort to use and is more likely to enable a decent first time placement.
- Good footwork is important – careful placement of crampons is far more efficient, and again, is less likely to lead to damage to the turf and vegetation. Try to avoid any sort of scrabbling or wild kicking. Consider using mono-point crampons – they encourage a more precise style and allow for a greater degree of accuracy.
- Rock-placements are essential for belays and protection but avoid clearing turf and vegetation out of cracks on these venues – these really are the most fragile areas where the rarest plants (including the Snowdon Lily and similar protected plants) are found.

Finally, consider this statement from the Countryside Council for Wales:

"Any deliberate or reckless actions that damage protected plants or habitats could lead to a prosecution, and create significant access restrictions in the future."

Plants to look out for

This section gives details of some of the important plants which can be found on the cliffs which attract winter climbers. Some can be seen during the winter, but others will be cowering in cracks to escape the Welsh winter weather. The latter are particularly vulnerable if any clearing out of cracks and crevices is carried out.

***Polystichum lonchitis*/Holly Fern [pic 1]**

A rare fern in Wales only found in a few places in Snowdonia. It will be around in winter and has a characteristic toothed edge to the fronds so can be recognised. The picture shows the kind of habitat it likes - crevices with some shelter.

***Saxifraga oppositifolia*/Purple Saxifrage [pic 2]**

This is well known as it is the first species to flower, often in February and can flower through the snow, so winter climbers could well see it. It remains above ground in the winter as a trailing mass of small branches or a more compact mound and can be recognised by the tiny opposite leaves with a minute glistening secretion on the end as shown in the photo.

***Silene acaulis*/Moss Campion [pic 3]**

This is a cushion plant which can cling to steep rock faces as shown. It doesn't flower until late-May/June but the cushion shape is distinctive (a bit like a smaller version of the thrift cushions you get on sea cliffs). It could well form a frozen cushion which is tempting for an axe placement, but it wouldn't be very secure and so for environmental and safety reasons should be avoided.

***Lloydia serotina*/Snowdon Lily [pic 4]**

This species is well known, but nonetheless rare. The picture (from **Clogwyn Du**) shows the type of crack it grows in and how this could be damaged by excessive cleaning or flailing of axes! The leaves and flowers die back completely in winter, just leaving the remains of bulbs sticking out slightly from the crack.



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Crag Topos

The crag topos in this section show the areas where we know rare species grow or which are particularly rich in plants that need special consideration by climbers. These areas of the cliffs are highlighted in **green**. Providing conditions are good you can climb in these areas, but it is essential that you are extra careful and tread as lightly as possible.

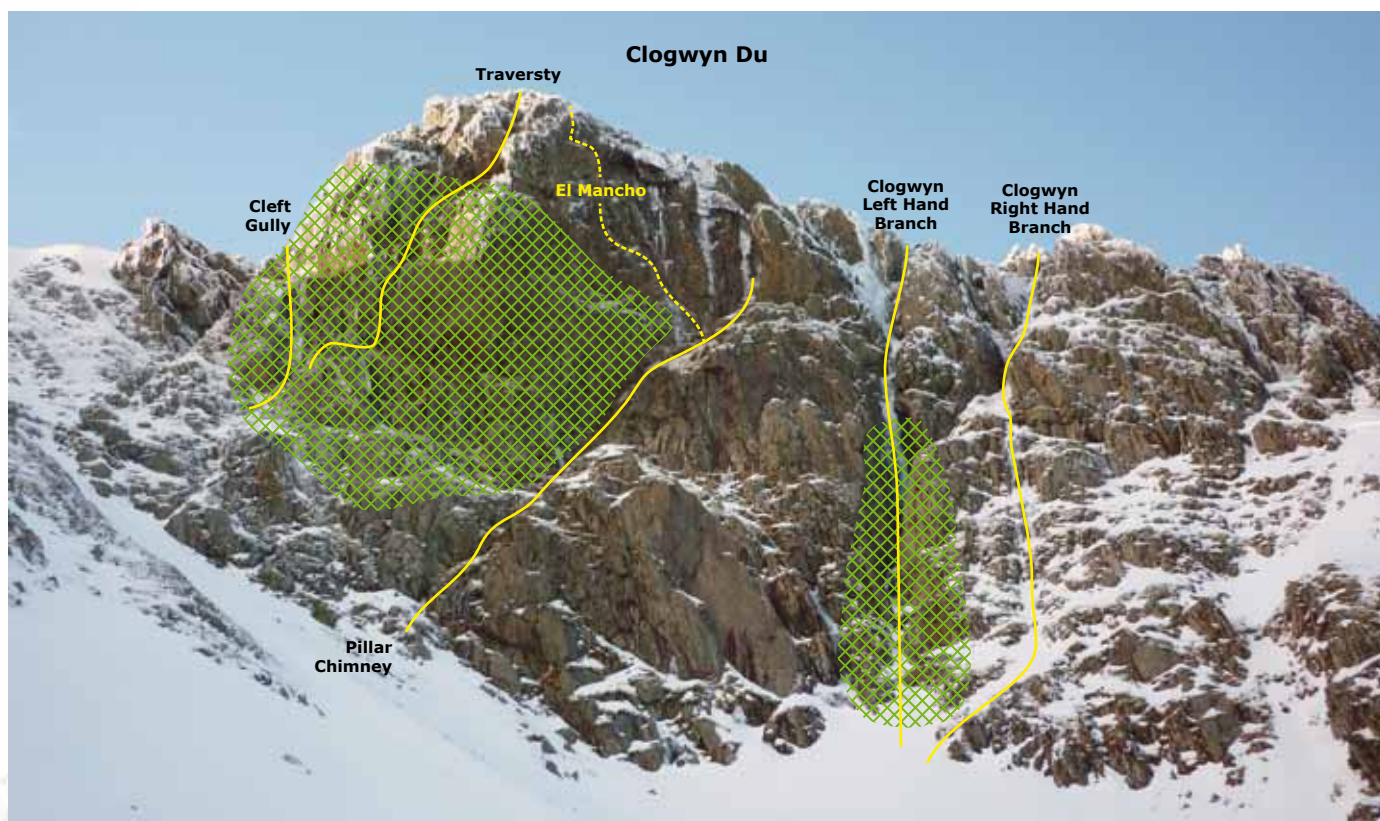
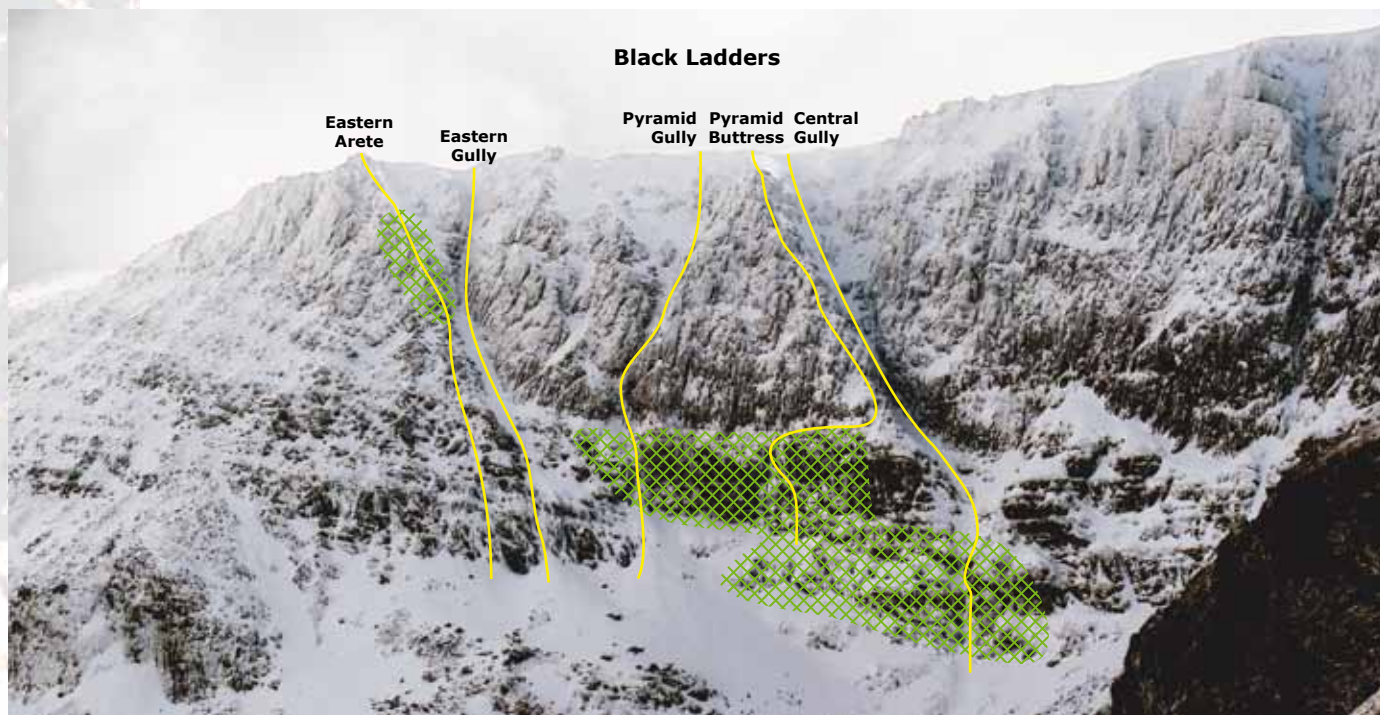
Topo Key



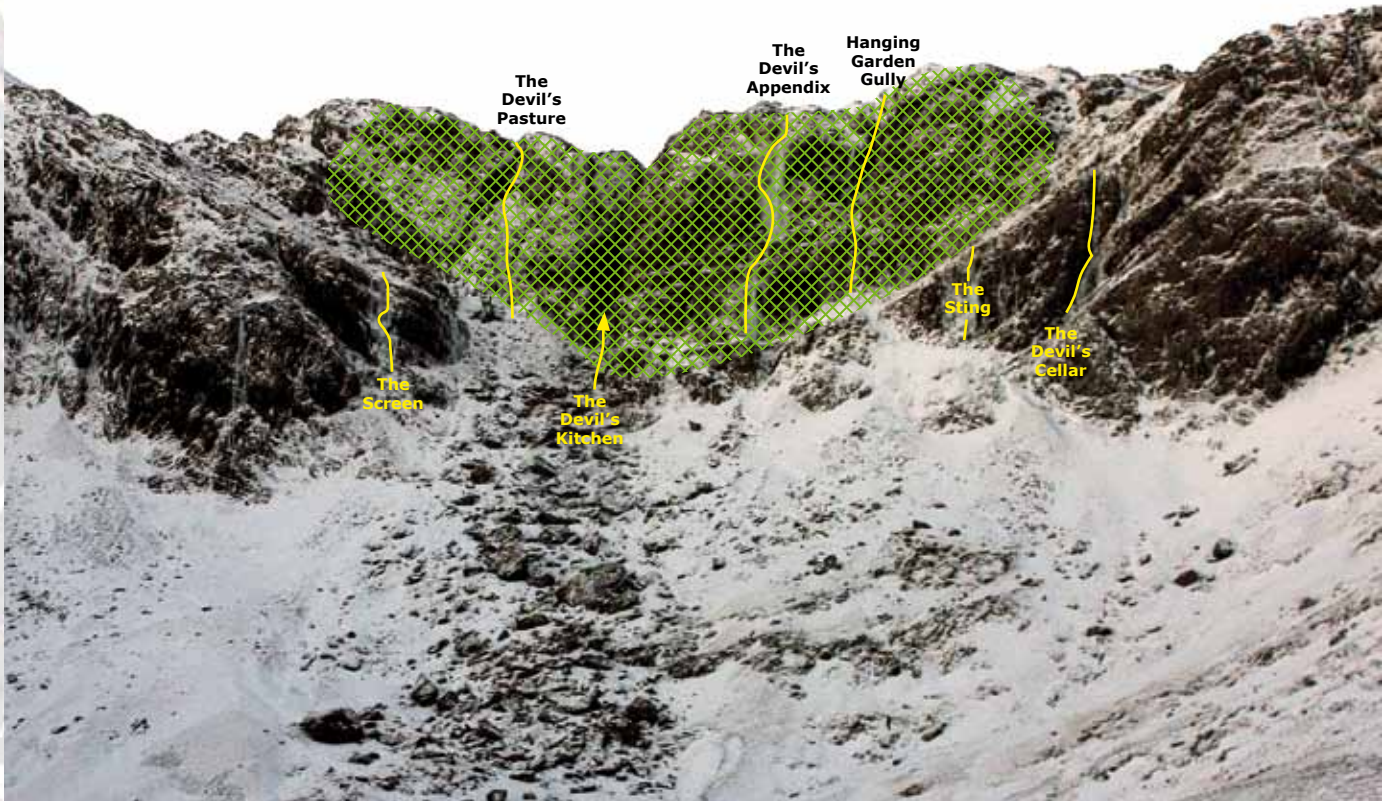
Take care, this is an area where rare species or potentially vulnerable vegetation may be found.



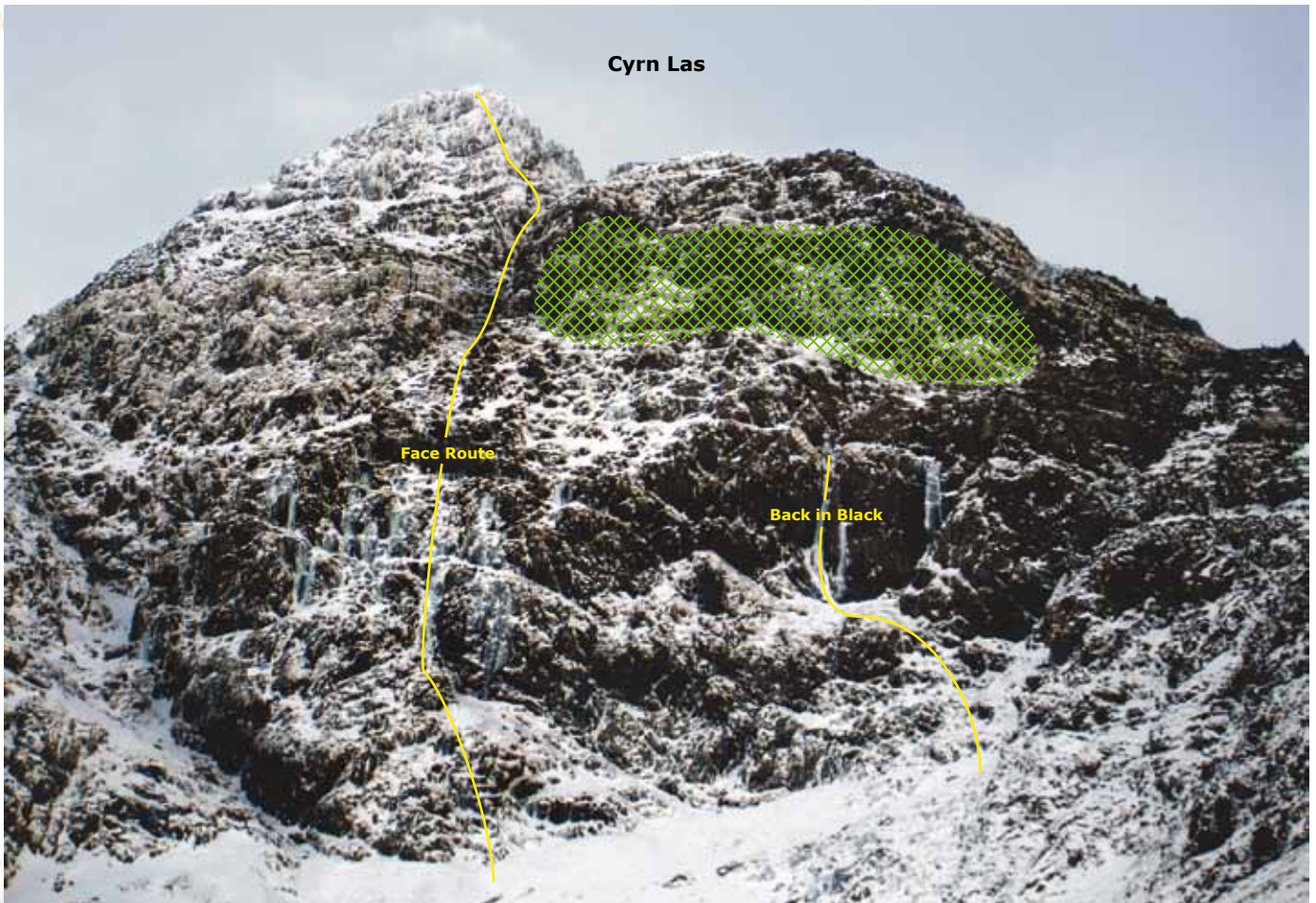
Main route lines to aid identification.



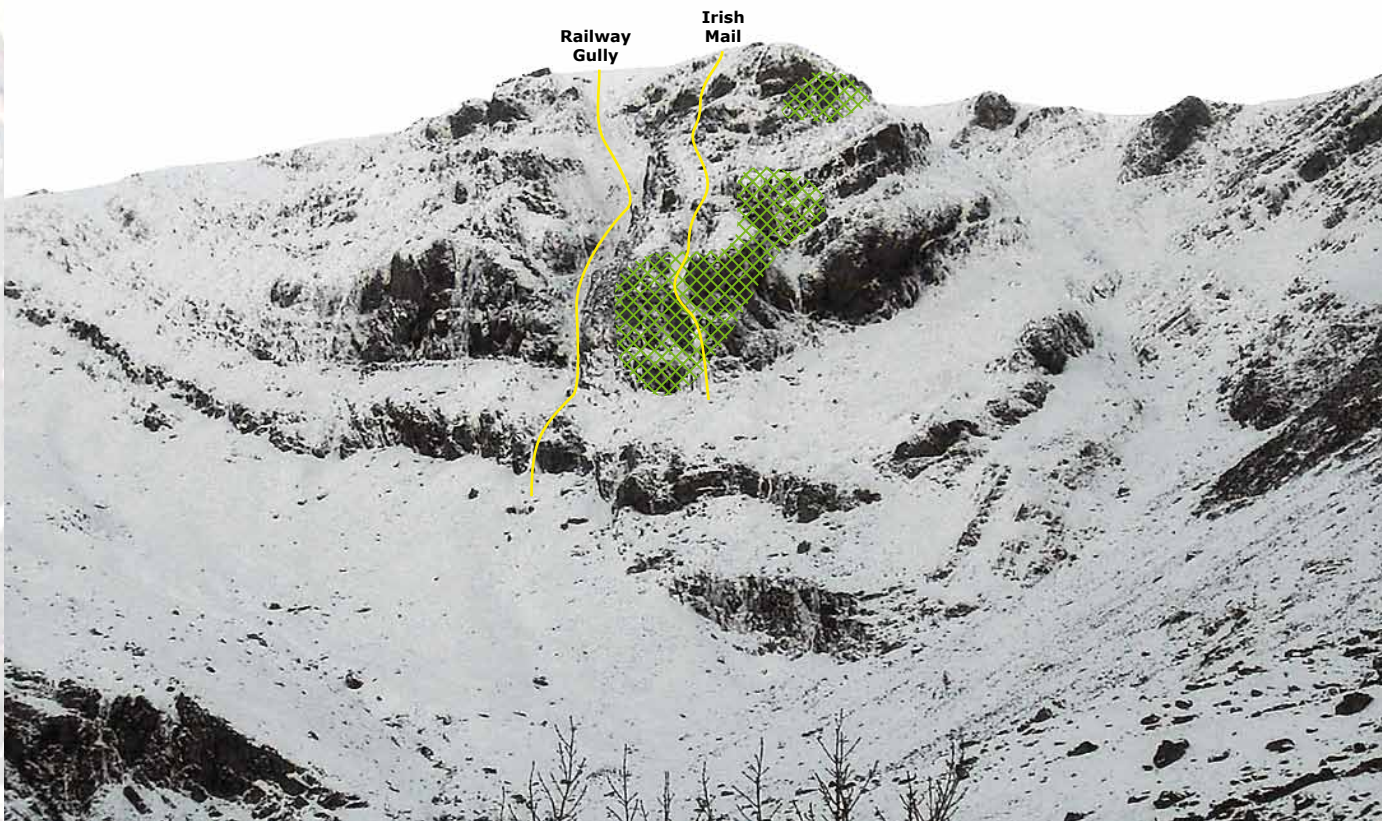
Clogwyn y Geifr



Cyrn Las



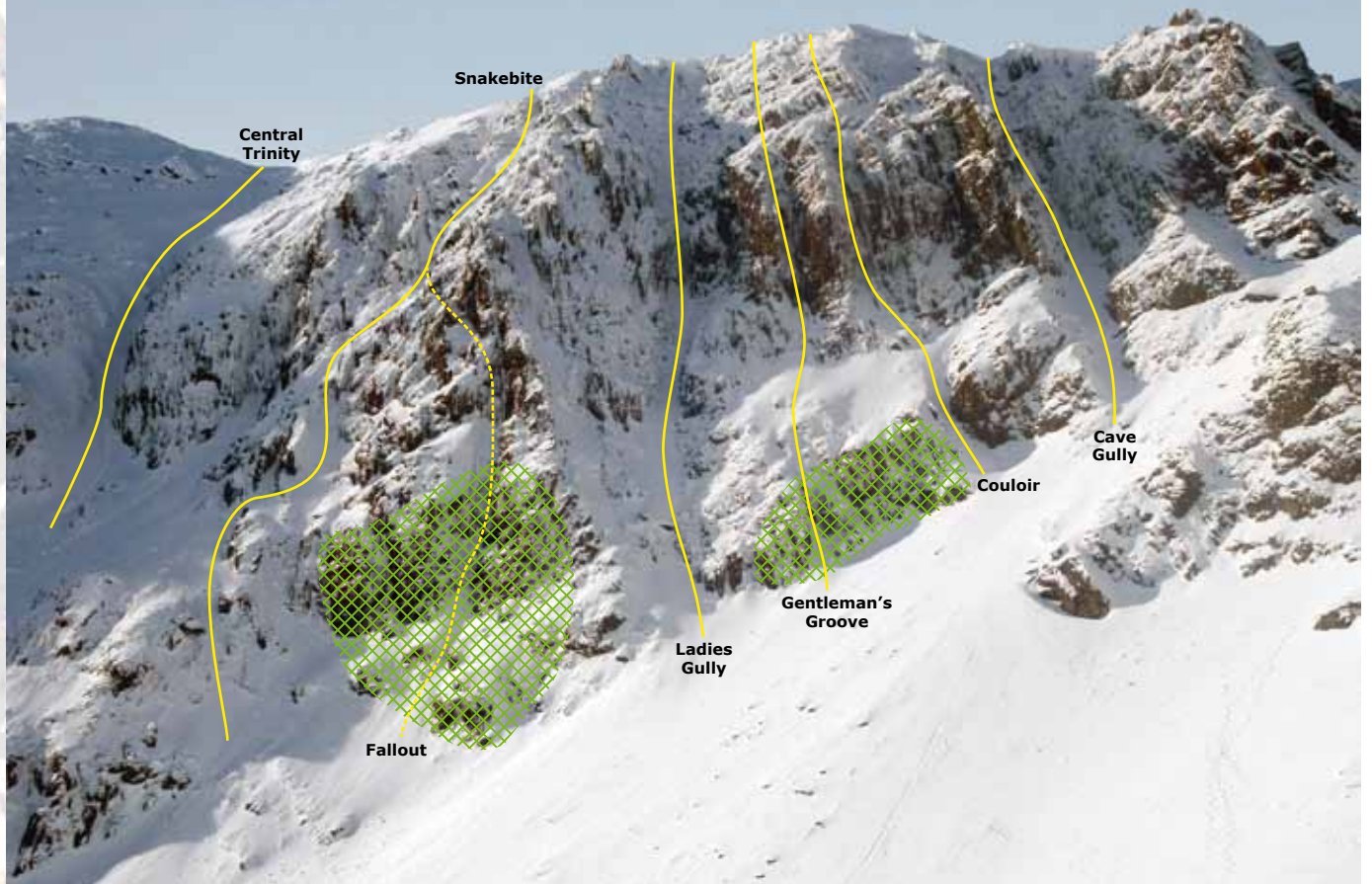
Cwm Hetiau • Railway Buttress



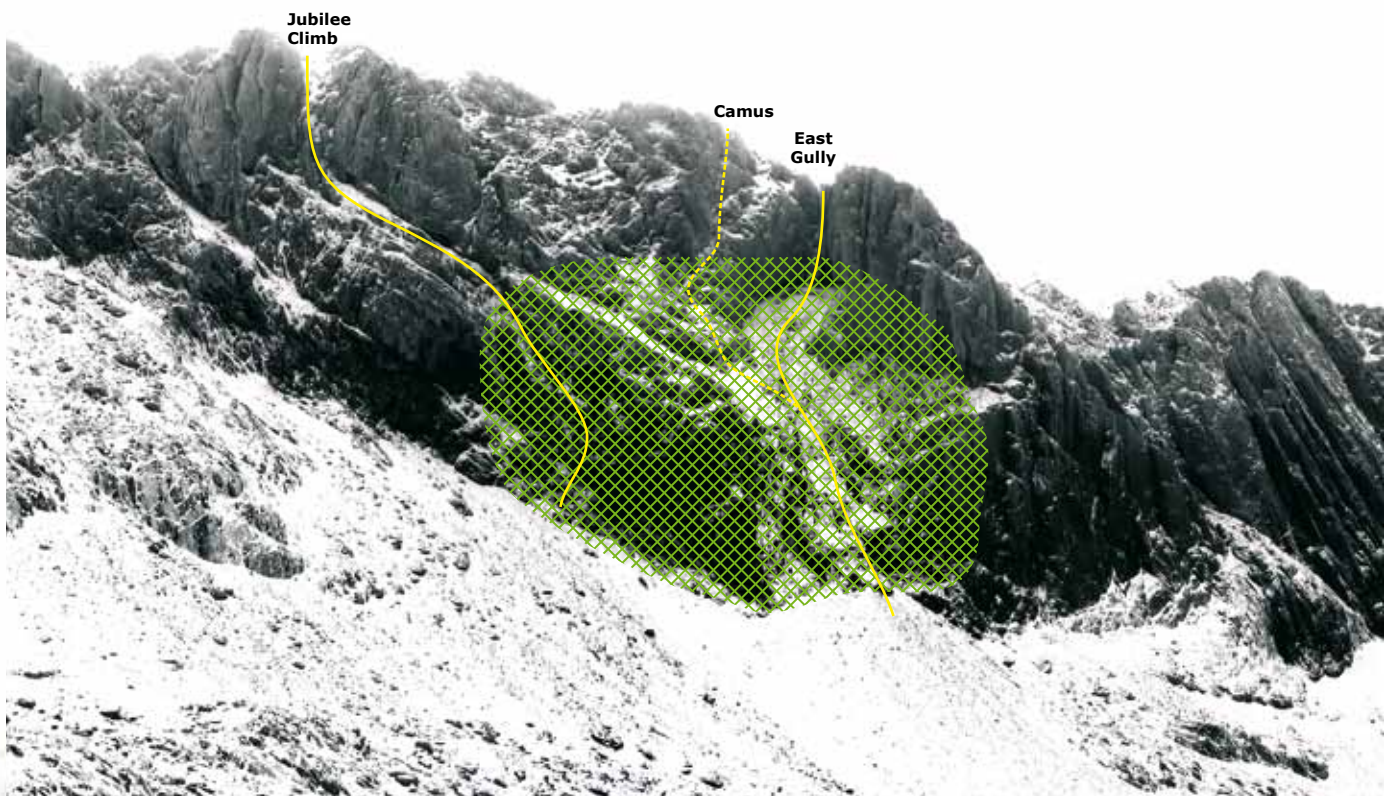
Clogwyn y Garnedd • Great Gully Area



Clogwyn y Garnedd • Ladies Gully Area



Clogwyn Du'r Arddu



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GROUND UP



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Countryside Council for Wales



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RAD (Regional Access Database)

The RAD is the 'one-stop-shop' for all the access and conservation info you need – from nesting restrictions, to conservation advice or preferred parking spots. It can be found on the Access & Conservation page of the BMC website: www.thebmc.co.uk/bmccrag

The BMC recognises that climbing, hill walking and mountaineering are activities with a danger of personal injury or death. Participants in these activities should be aware of and accept these risks and be responsible for their own actions.

Cover: Streaky Desroy on the main pitch of **Couloir IV 4**, Clogwyn y Garnedd photo: Dafydd Davis.