

Summiting Ireland's tallest Rock Tower

Eagle's Rock, Glenade, Co Leitrim

Caoimhe Gleeson

ON THE 5th AUGUST 2012 three North West based climbers, Stephen Read, Iain Miller and Stephen McCann became the first Irish team to ascend Ireland's tallest rock tower, Eagle's Rock in Glenade, Co Leitrim. The eagle-like rock, which is well known to locals, hill walkers and passers by, is a 330 metre tower of limestone and vertical grass which juts out from the cliffs just north of Glenade Lough. The tower, normally an infrequent residence

▼ Climbing Eagles Rock



▲ On the summit of Eagles Rock

to birds of prey, has only ever been climbed once by an English team from the Craven Pothole Club in 1971.

The Irish team, two of whom specialise in adventure sea stack and sea cliff climbing off the coast of Donegal, described the route as the 'scariest and most terrifying' they have ever completed. Stephen Read is an experienced climber and caver who has spent many days and nights in the underbelly of West Cavan and Leitrim mapping and plotting the cave system of Cuilcagh Mountain and the Shannon pot. Iain Miller is an experienced adventure climber who specialises in climbing sea cliffs, sea stacks and rock towers in remote and inaccessible locations in Ireland and Scotland. Stephen McCann is a FÁS trainee on an outdoor adventure training programme with Gartan Outdoor Education Centre and was on work

experience at the time of the climb.

The team prepared for the climb on the previous day by trekking around the base of the rock tower surveying its climbing potential and finding the original 1971 route to the summit. The route starts at approximately 280 metres above sea level. The base of the route is piled high with huge unstable boulders and limestone rubble which have tumbled off Eagle's Rock and crumbled from the surrounding cliffs. The whole area is nestled on top of an enormous cave system which Stephen Read explored while the other two focused their attention on the vertical challenge of the next day.

Having determined that this was not going to be an 'average' adventure climb the team returned to their base in Dromahair to amass a collection of non-standard rock climbing equipment for the mission that lay ahead. Their



climbing rack included technical ice axes, two alpine hammers, twenty metres of twelve millimetre spare rope, twenty-three assorted pitons and mallions (rock climbing hardware from the 1960's), two snow bars, a huge standard modern climbing rack and three enormous cheesy grins.

The team approached the base of Eagle's Rock from the eastern side of the Glenade valley under damp, unpromising skies. Stephen Read captained the team up all three of the pitches. The route was far from an average rock climb of solid, vertical, promising rock. Rather it was defined by vertical grass, loose fragile rock and a semi-detached pillar comprising of 20,000 tons of boulders defying gravity. Each pitch was more terrifying than the last with the presence of the grim reaper keeping all of the team utterly focused on maximising whatever protection they could muster to ensure their safe return to *terra firma*.

Having defied self doubt, the jitter-bugs and oxygen deprivation owing to excessive hyperventilation they reached the final vertical grassy pitch surrounded by big air, the rolling glens of North Leitrim to the East, and the jagged peaks of Sliabh league to the North West. Safe on the huge summit plateau they roped up in an alpine style and waded through the super thick carpet of the most luxurious soft bouncy heather in search of abseil anchors. With the assistance of a solitary 'tree' and some abseil stakes they each carefully and with enormous trepidation stepped off the tower into the abyss in the hope that a greater



▲ Team on the summit of Eagles Rock and below ▼

being would deliver them safely to the base.

And so once delivered safely back to the uneven rocky base of the pillar, the heavens opened, reminding them that they once again had been afforded a chance to enter into the realms of chaos and explore nature's most hidden and inaccessible gems.

Live footage of the climb can be viewed on: <http://iain-miller.blogspot.ie/2012/08/irelands-highest-tower.html> AND ON <http://www.uniqueascent.ie/>



▼ Eagles Rock PHOTO: EUNAN SWEENEY

