

## Cassie's Challenge 2026 – Successful Completion Report

Alan Elwood

Sunday 10 May – Monday 11 May 2026

My attempt began on the afternoon of Sunday 10 May alongside my good friend Billy Reed. Before arriving in Annalong, we deliberately drove the final road section from Carrick Little back to the harbour so that, should the attempt still be alive at the end, the finish route would already be familiar.

After organising kit and supplies at Annalong Harbour, we were joined by Harry, whose final piece of advice proved surprisingly important — not to turn left too early at the harbour steps on the return, but instead to continue to the end of Main Street and enter the harbour correctly from behind the harbour bar. Missing the official finish after everything involved in the round would have been disastrous.

Following some final good luck wishes, Billy and I set off from Annalong Harbour, crossing the river and hugging the shoreline before beginning the steady climb through the opening checkpoints. An early delay occurred when Harry caught back up with us to explain that the tracker had failed to activate properly (user error I am sure). Thankfully, with help from Rowan at Primal Tracking, the issue was resolved.



We climbed steadily through Rourke's Park, Round Seefin and Long Seefin towards Rocky Mountain. From Rocky Mountain we followed the Mourne Wall before climbing over Chimney Rock and descending across Blaeberry and Spencer's Mountain. Conditions were favourable as the recent Mourne fires, although devastating for the landscape, had burned away

large areas of heather and made some sections quicker to cross than normal. The route descend towards Bloody Bridge River with excellent views opening towards Newcastle and the coastline as evening light stretched across the sea.



From Crossone we moved steadily across Millstone Mountain and Thomas's Mountain before making the long climb to the summit of Slieve Donard. Reaching Donard felt like a major psychological milestone. Conditions had become colder and breezier and, after descending to the col with Slieve Commedagh, we were met by Gail Martin from Dromore Athletics Club with much-needed food supplies including pasta and pre-salted boiled potatoes. That support made a huge difference both physically and mentally.

From Commedagh Billy, Gail and I continued through Shan Slieve and Slievenamaddy, after which Gail left us, Luke's Mountain, Slievenaglogh and Slieve Corragh before reaching the familiar line of Slieve Beg, Cove and eventually Slievelamagan. By Lamagan the light was fading rapidly, and head torches became essential as we descended into Ben Crom Reservoir.

At Ben Crom we stopped for a proper refuel. I prepared a freeze-dried meal and added warmer layers as temperatures had dropped sharply. It was also here that Billy's support on the round came to an end as he returned through Silent Valley to his car.

From Ben Crom onwards, the real challenge began.

The overnight conditions were some of the worst I have experienced in the Mourne for navigation. There was no moonlight or starlight and thick mist reduced visibility to only a few

metres, reflecting the head torch beam directly back into my eyes. The night became even more complicated when my watch failed completely shortly after leaving Ben Crom, leaving me with no accurate awareness of time or whether the round was still achievable.

My original intention had been to approach Slieve Bearnagh via the Brandy Pad, but instead I chose to cut directly across the boggy ground between Ben Crom and Bearnagh. That decision immediately caused problems as my bearing drifted and I found myself much closer to the cliffs above Ben Crom Reservoir than intended. Eventually I reached rocky crags beneath what I thought was the summit, only to discover ten minutes later that I had somehow returned to the exact same spot. At that point I stopped, reset mentally and properly relied on map and compass again. Once I trusted the navigation process instead of assumption, I soon located the Mourne Wall at the top of Bearnagh and regained confidence.

Navigation was easier through Slieve Meelmore, Slieve Meelbeg and Loughshannagh but at Doan I spent almost twenty minutes confirming I was on the true summit and not the false top hidden by mist. From there I continued towards Carn and Ott Mountain, only to miss Ott top slightly again due to no visibility before doubling back to correct the error. During this section I also disappeared waist-deep into a bog, losing a glove and spending several minutes extracting myself and grateful I had thought to pack spare gloves.

Eventually I descended towards Ott Car Park where Hugh Suffern from Dromore Athletics Club was waiting with hot rice and coffee. Even with vehicle lights visible somewhere ahead, the mist was so dense that I could barely see the car until nearly at the car park. At Ott I learned that I was approximately three hours behind schedule. Stephen Bickerstaff then joined me as we headed towards the western Mournes. Having company again after the isolation of the night made a huge difference mentally.

We moved steadily across the western peaks including Craigadoo (new to me) before descending towards the River Bann crossing just as daylight finally began to appear. After hours of darkness and mist, the return of daylight lifted my spirits enormously and gave me renewed belief that the round might still be salvageable. From the River Bann we climbed onto Slievenamiskan and onwards to Cock Mountain before Stephen had to leave for work. I then continued alone towards Hen Mountain, Rocky Mountain and onwards through Tornamrock and Pearse's Castle before the steep climb onto Shanlieve and the draining ups and downs towards Deer's Meadow. Reaching Deer's Meadow proved to be another major turning point. Geoffrey Collins from Lagan Valley Orienteering Club was waiting with porridge and rice and informed me that the time was only 9:11am. My own calculation beforehand had been that if I could reach Deer's Meadow before 10:00am, then finishing within 24 hours was still realistic. For the first time since the difficult overnight section, I genuinely believed success was possible again.

Leaving Deer's Meadow I climbed steadily over Slieve Muck and Slievenagore before descending towards Silent Valley Reservoir. After asking a walker for the time and learning it was 11:30am, I realised I had approximately ninety minutes to reach Slieve Binnian and leave myself two hours to return to Annalong.

The climb onto Binnian was one of the hardest sections of the entire round. Exhausted physically and mentally, I simply focused on continuing to move. Eventually I reached the summit and discovered it was exactly 1:00pm. Somehow the timing had worked perfectly, and I now had precisely two hours remaining to reach the finish.

The descent from Binnian was slow and careful, but eventually I reached Carrick Little Car Park and turned onto the road back towards Annalong. Along this final stretch, supporter in cars began to cheer and encourage me onwards, providing a huge emotional lift during the final miles.



Finally, after almost twenty-four continuous hours in the Mourne Mountains, I returned to Annalong Harbour where Harry's family, Geoffrey and others were waiting to welcome me home.

Crossing the finish line and successfully completing Cassie's Challenge was an overwhelming moment. After the navigational difficulties, weather, equipment failure and exhaustion of the final hours, simply reaching the end felt surreal.



More than anything, the round was a reminder that challenges like this are never completed alone. The support, encouragement, food drops and presence of others throughout the attempt were absolutely fundamental to the successful outcome.

Cassie's Challenge proved to be one of the hardest and most rewarding mountain experiences I have undertaken.

**Alan Elwood.**