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SRC: MERRICK FOREST STAGES IN "GREAT NICK"

The stages to be used on this year's Merrick Forest Stages Rally on September 6th have been given the "thumbs up" by the man who prepares the route notes for competitors.

Bill Sturrock of Scotmaps has driven through the six stages in the Galloway Forest and declared them to be "in great nick".

With just over 43 stage miles, and only 69 road miles, the "Merrick" is one of the most compact rallies on the County Saab Scottish Championship calendar, and last year won The Chairman's Cup for best SRC event.

The event also has the advantage of being just 25 miles from the ferry port at Stranraer - which is an important consideration for Irish competitors.

Keen to build on last year's winning format, the organisers have gone one better this time by bringing the pre-event formalities of signing-on and scrutineering into Newton Stewart itself - cutting out the previous 15-mile round-trip to Bladnoch Distillery.

For the first time, the rally will start and finish in the centre of Newton Stewart - with the main thoroughfare - Victoria Street - closed off, to provide a spectacle for the public.

On leaving the town, competitors will head north to the first test - the 6.23 mile stage at Loch Derry.

From there, it is on to Glentool Forest and the Drumjohn stage - at 8.82 miles the second-longest of the runs.

The cars will then head to the purpose-built service area at Glencaird, which was deemed a major success when used for the first time in 2007.

After the first 30-minute service stop, competitors will drive the short distance to the 7.26 mile third stage at Arroch Hill, before tackling the two shortest stages at Balloch and Linfern - each just over 3-miles in length.

Competitors will then have the benefit of a 70-minute service break at Glencaird in preparation for the famous Glentrool test - regarded by many as one of the best rally stages in the UK, and which this year will total 14.04 miles.

To further spice up the challenge, much of the Glentrool stage will be run in the opposite direction to last year.

The cars will then head back to Newton Stewart for a champagne finish, followed later by the rally prize-giving taking place at the local cinema.

Rally manager Allan Marshall reckons they have come up with a winning package.

"We've pulled out all the stops to combine the best of last year's inaugural "Merrick" with new features - such as the town-centre start/finish. I think it provides a really attractive event for competitors and spectators alike".

A major incentive for SRC-registered competitors, is the offer of free-entry into the season's finale, the McRae Stage, for those who improve their seeding on the "Merrick".

As the penultimate round of the County Saab Championship, this year's "Merrick" promises to be one of the best yet, as 21-year-old Dumfries star David Bogie and Jimmy Girvan of Inverness continue to fight it out for title honours.

Last year on the "Merrick", Girvan just got the upper hand over his young rival and was declared the winner after a tie-break. But with Bogie fired up after taking full points on the "Speyside" earlier this month - to add to two previous maximum scores - the 1990 champion knows he cannot put a wheel wrong in the Galloway forest.

The competition is fierce across all classes - with Gretna's Mike Faulkner - second-equal in the points - and team-mate Steven Clark, currently fourth-equal with Bogie, and third overall on the "Merrick" last year - among the likely front-runners.

Competitors from the Motoscope Northern Historic Championship will also take part this year, running ahead of the main field.

The Glentrool Mini Rally will run in conjunction with the main event and offers competitors a reduced mileage event of approximately 30 stage miles, which forms the counter in the Palmerston Furniture Five of Clubs Championship.

There will also be a Trophy Rally for those competitors who are unfortunate enough to retire early, giving them the opportunity of a run through the final Glentrool stage.

The "Merrick" is jointly organised by Machars Car Club, and the Scottish Sporting Car Club.

Full details and regulations for the event - which can be downloaded - are available at www.merrickstages.co.uk

For news and updates of all SRC rounds, go to www.scottishrallychampionship.co.uk

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