

Climbing all the 11,000-foot peaks in the Canadian Rockies (this article was first published in the Alpine Club of Canada's *Gazette*)



The Helmet, summit ridge

The nice thing about pursuing a goal others have attained is you can do so at your own pace and for your own reasons, well removed from any spotlight. As all the 11,000-foot peaks in the Canadian Rockies had already been climbed by at least two people – fellow Calgarians Don Forest in the late 1970s and Rick Collier in the mid-1990s – my only reward was the quiet satisfaction of climbing with good friends in some of the most spectacular mountain terrain in Canada.

So after topping my final 11,000er, Twins Tower on the Columbia Icefield, in mid-June 2002, I was pleasantly surprised to receive a steady stream of e-mail and phone congratulations from the local mountaineering community. It was gratifying to be in the company of those who appreciated such a peak-bagging quest and was a reminder of how many people had climbed a lot of these peaks. Indeed a year later, three good friends finished the list, including two, Forbes and Roman, who got me started on the quest in the late 1980s.

So what's the secret to getting up these farflung peaks that range from rock climbs and glacier ascents to scree plods? You need a broad range of skills, not the least of which are endurance and persistence, sometimes bordering on obsession. Most of all, as a moderately-talented climber like I can attest, you

need friends who can haul you up the tougher peaks like Alberta and Robson and quiet the whimpering on uglier, looser ones like Deltaform, the Goodsirs and, again, Alberta.

Before I began climbing, in the early 1980s, I remember hearing from a grizzled ACC member that to qualify as a full-fledged member in those days, you had to have climbed three 10,000-foot peaks. That's well beyond my ability, I thought. (It's something I felt a number of times in the ensuing years as I embarked on successively harder peaks such as Bryce, Robson and, yes, Alberta).

So I was very pleased in 1982 or 1983 to get up my first 11,000er – Mount Temple, on a Calgary Section trip; I can still see the goose bumps on the legs of leader Althea Shaw as the snow flakes tumbled down that late June day. Typically, the summit was socked in, only to completely clear as we reached Sentinel Pass on the descent.

The next spring, I got up Mount Columbia with my early climbing companions, Nancy and Dennis, followed a few years later by Mount Hector – both trips on skis. In 1988, I hooked up with Forbes and Roman, who were well on the road to duplicating Don Forest's feat. That spring and the next, I got up seven 11,000-foot peaks on the Columbia Icefield, and the hook was set.

I accompanied Forbes and Roman on many of their remaining peaks and looked for other victims willing to go up 11,000ers the former had already climbed. Obsession soon struck and for each of a couple of years in the early 1990s, I squeezed in eight or nine 11,000ers during the Rockies' brief alpine season.

Memorable ascents during those years included all three Goodsirs (yes, the Centre Goodsir is a peak... maybe, but which peaks are distinct mountains and which are under or over 11,000 feet is another story) on an August long weekend and the two summits of Bryce and Robson on back-to-back weekends. The latter climb was punctuated by a lightning storm coming off the summit – our ice axes sizzled like bacon in a frying pan – followed by a bivouac above the Schwarz ledges on the mountain's south side. Other unplanned bivouacs included a soaking, bone-chilling night on Deltaform on Labour Day, a starry, shivering night on Whitehorn on the May long weekend and an embarrassing night out on Fryatt, when Kelly and I couldn't find our tent, a few hundred metres away, in the dark. Such character builders were balanced by big high-pressure systems – Resplendent on skis in early April and five smoky but cloudless days climbing Clemenceau and Tsar.

Forbes and Roman had young families and demanding jobs. Thus we typically squeezed into two days what sane people would tackle in three or four, and peaks such as Cline, Willingdon and Sir Douglas became exhausting day trips. The prime example was bagging the Lyells and Mount Forbes during a summer in which I hadn't climbed at all and was just getting over the flu. On the first day, we walked all the way in past Lyell Meadows and continued for an hour onto the

glacier before setting up camp. The next day, we traversed all five Lyell peaks. The third day, not realizing we could stay high on the glacier, we dropped about 4,000 feet to cross the aptly-named Glacier River and then climbed a similar elevation to a campsite below the Forbes North Glacier. The fourth day, we climbed Forbes and then went all the way out. My quads were so sore, I hobbled like an old man down the moraine to the river crossing and had to be helped into the bathtub when I got home.



North Twin, North Ridge

Of course, such whirlwind successes were matched by grand failures. My nemesis was Recondite, a barely 11,000-foot peak so obscure it's not even named on the 1:50,000 topo map. It took me five attempts and nearly 400 kilometres on foot to reach its rubbly summit. The first attempt was a harebrained, two-day ski trip in April that ended when the snow, and time, ran out. The second attempt, I forgot the tent poles and we slept on the floor of an open cabin before an August snowstorm chased us home. The third, we went a valley too far, crossing the raging Siffleur River, and climbed the wrong peak. On the way out, Roman sprained his ankle hopping a log and limped nearly 30 kilometres back to the car, which we reached at nearly midnight. On the fourth attempt, Roman and I got all the way to the false summit, but without crampons, ice axes or a long enough rappel sling, we were forced to turn around within spitting distance of the unexpectedly icy summit. Several years later, I finally went back on a Labour Day weekend and, ignoring blowing snow and a freezing wind, made it to the top in a whiteout.

Nancy Hansen was on that trip and helped me get up my last three, isolated peaks, using her uncanny ability to pinpoint a brief high-pressure system and unwavering determination to not turn around. Thus in 2000, she, her husband Doug and I set out for the long march across the Clemenceau Icefield, summiting Tusk (a marginal 11,000er) on the one day out of five it didn't rain.

Then in late August of 2001, Nancy phoned and asked if I was interested in climbing the toughest peak of them all, Mount Alberta. I said sure, when do you want to go? This afternoon, she replied. Forbes, Roman and I had climbed one pitch of the East Face before being rebuffed by a snowstorm on the one bad weekend of the glorious summer of 1998, when more than half a dozen parties summited Alberta. As far as we knew, no one had climbed it in the ensuing three wet summers.

The face was still somewhat snowy, but Nancy was undeterred, so we carried on, reaching our bivy site in 13 hours, which turned out to be the shortest of our three days on the mountain. Nancy led most of the way up the nine or 10 pitches of the loose East Face, which was followed by a kilometre of snowy ridge; one cornice nearly stopped us a few hundred horizontal metres from the summit, which we reached at 8 p.m. Not surprisingly, we had to bivouac halfway back along the ridge, at about 11,500 feet. It was so cold in our bivy sacks, I had to remove the liners to get my feet into my frozen boots the next morning. After many hours of tangled-rope rappelling, we reached the Alberta hut at dark and raced out the next morning. I nearly tipped over crossing the Sunwapta River in my hurry to catch the warden who was checking out my car and our overdue whereabouts.

In June 2002, we finally got a brief, high-pressure system over the Rockies. Again, Nancy called mid-week, and a day later we were doing the long ski trudge up onto the Columbia Icefield and over to the Twins. In 1988, I had stood on the summit of the North Twin and looked in horror at the narrow ridge of the connecting Twins Tower, with thousands of feet of drop-off on either side. Fourteen years later, it looked no less intimidating. But after tiptoeing down the icy, crevassed slope from the North Twin, the ridge was relatively wide and we kicked bucket steps up to my final summit.

As we skied back to camp, safely beyond any difficulties and looking forward to the celebratory nip of scotch, I took quiet satisfaction at the end of this 20-year voyage and wondered what my next mountaineering adventures might be. A week later, a congratulatory e-mail had an addendum: new topo maps, it said, showed an 11,000-foot contour on both Mounts Warren and Cromwell.

Note: A year later, Forbes, Roman and Nancy all completed their 11,000er quest.