

Clemenceau Icefield Loop

(July 30-August 8, 2005)

The long journey on foot to and from the Clemenceau Icefield – starting from and finishing at the Jasper-Banff Highway – is one of the Canadian Rockies' great wilderness mountaineering expeditions. Along the way, it traverses long stretches of icefield and passes some of the grand, high peaks of the range including Alberta, the Twins, Columbia, Clemenceau, Tusk and Tsar. The scenery is varied and spectacular, the alpine camping is superb and chances are you'll see more signs of grizzlies than humans. Indeed, we saw no other people for an eight-day stretch.

Yet few bother to make this superb pilgrimage. Why? It's about a five-day walk each way under relatively heavy loads (it helps to have a food drop near Mount Clemenceau), requires good route-finding skills and numerous icy river and stream crossings, and involves much up-and-down travel over high passes, loose rock, gravel-strewn black ice and rock-hard moraine. In other words, it's too much effort for most folks, especially if they can afford the short helicopter ride straight into the heart of the Clemenceau to bag a couple of big peaks.

But if you relish the full adventure of a long journey, the Icefields Parkway access is your only viable alternative, with the removal this summer of the bridges and culverts on the upper Sullivan River Road. The remaining Icefields Parkway options add about two days, each way, to the trip but are amply rewarded by the increased amount and diversity of stunning wilderness scenery.

After three trips on foot via the Sullivan, I wanted to access the Clemenceau the long way. I particularly wanted to travel the amazingly broad and flat upper Athabasca Valley, where one looks up nearly 2,000 metres to the summits of Mounts Alberta and Columbia and the Twins. Though seldom traveled by mountaineers these days, this was the access route, on horseback, for the first ascents of Alberta and King Edward and the first explorations on skis of the Columbia Icefield. Along the way, we did in fact find evidence of old camps including tree carvings, ancient whisky bottles, fuel tins and an amazing glass lantern.

Our plan was to dedicate two full weeks to a looping expedition, starting on the Icefields Parkway just north of the Columbia Icefield and finishing at Sunwapta Falls, some 50 driving kilometres to the north. Briefly, our inbound route (see map) went over Woolley Shoulder, down Habel Creek, up the Athabasca Valley and then along a subsidiary channel to gain the Chaba Icefield near Chaba Peak. Once over a short but key rock step, it would be undulating but relatively straightforward travel over the Apex Glacier and then down the Clemenceau Glacier. At the nearby head of the Tusk Glacier, a camp would be established for several days of climbing surrounding peaks such as Clemenceau, Tusk, Pic Tordu and perhaps Shackleton and Duplicate. The outbound leg promised to be

about three days along a relatively new but reportedly routine route north to gain Chisel Creek, where a supposedly disappeared glacier and some scrambling would lead to a trail to Fortress Lake. After bushwhacking around the lake shore, it would be a long but easy day out on the broad trail along the Athabasca River to Sunwapta Falls.



Map of Clemenceau Loop – route in fainter red line, clockwise

The reality, of course, was much different. A badly-abscessed tooth of our trip coordinator was a constant worry and ultimately derailed any climbing plans in the Clemenceau area. So, too, did an air drop from a fixed-wing plane that exploded about a third of our food cache on the icy ground of the Tiger Glacier. And the Chisel Creek exit was much more challenging than advertised, with one final canyon almost stopping us cold, virtually within sight of the wooded trail down to Fortress Lake. Still, we managed to complete the entire loop, though it involved 10 straight days of eight-to-10-hour travel with big packs to pull it off.

Day 1 – Colin, Liz, Rob and I set off under partly cloudy skies, bearing packs of 20-plus kilograms. Our late-morning departure means the Sunwapta River is

surprisingly high and of course very chilly for the half dozen braided channel crossings. We continue up the good trail along the left side of Diadem Creek to the bivy sites beneath Woolley and Diadem, where we briefly chat with two climbers waiting to tackle those two 11,000ers the next day. A good route up a little depression leads to snow just right of a little glacial-fed lake. From there, it's up the middle and then slightly right of the infamous Woolley Shoulder, which seems unusually toilsome, with little trail to follow and a fierce, cold wind nearing the col.

The cold and high cloud shorten the usual slack-jawed gaze at the East Face of Alberta and the “Black Hole” of Twins Tower’s North Face. Instead of the usual route down to the Alberta hut, we head south over good scree east of Little Alberta, dropping nearly 600 metres to reach a sublime meadow campsite beside a stream, with views looking way up to the summits of Twins Tower and West Stutfield. About 7 hours to camp.



Descending towards the Black Hole beneath the North Face of Twins Tower

Day 2 – After watching a guided party going up the Japanese Couloir route on Woolley, we continue descending toward the Black Hole, stopping to admire waterfalls running down the steep faces before skirting right to avoid cliff bands. A further descent down and alongside a rocky streambed lands us safely beside a small glacial lake/cave near the bottom of the Tower’s North Face. After a short but chilly crossing of the braided Habel Creek, we follow its increasingly raging left side, with the occasional detour into the woods. Along the way, we find an old

climbing camp, complete with still intact whisky bottles, a fuel tin and a marvelous glass lantern.

Habel Creek empties with a rush onto an Athabasca Valley floor that is flat, more than a kilometre wide and covered in twisted dryas plumes and pink washes of broad-leaved willow herb – a unique landscape. After lunch, we don running shoes and begin crossing a series of braided but relatively low channels up the middle of the valley. The chilly interludes are more than



Frigid stream crossing

compensated by views of Alberta's West Face and the Twins, now high above us on the left, and, ahead of us, the show-stopping north aspect of Columbia and the broad bulk of King Edward, the latter a splendid sight from this low angle. In the distance, we spot a golden elk cow and calf, which bound into the forest when we're still distant – much different than their semi-tame cousins around

Banff. We stop in late afternoon to camp on the stony river flats, building a bug-beating fire from bleached branches.



Athabasca Valley camp (Columbia on left, King Edward right)

Day 3 – Start the day off with a baptism of low but searing cold channel crossings. Soon, we’re swinging right to follow an upstream branch of the Athabasca River to the north of King Edward. After a few more channel crossings, we stay to the right side of the main channel, passing by more muted evidence of another camp. Just before the stream heads into a canyon, we head up briefly into trees, which miraculously give way to a little alpine valley, leading up delightfully firm benches to the edge of a large lake.

This is the former toe of the Toronto Glacier, the first disturbing evidence the lower glaciers of the Rockies are fast disappearing. Indeed, we don’t have to touch this remnant glacier at all en route to our high alpine camp. Instead, we skirt the rocky shore, riddled with tiny moraine-like ridges. We can’t quite squeeze by an icy bulge at the lake’s far end and so have to carefully crampon up and over its gravelly nose. We also have to cross a couple of side streams, including a thundering surge of thigh-deep, mesmerizing water cascading over slippery boulders. Beyond, there’s some knob-and-kettle-like glacial deposits and some scree to reach our tiny alpine haven high to the right. No handy water other than snow patches and seeps but we’re mostly sheltered from the gusting rain now falling and the views over the badly-diminished Sundial Glacier to the north and the Watershed Glacier to the south are fine indeed.

Day 4 – Colin's had a sore tooth from day one and it's now exploded into a full abscess, with excruciating pain quelled only by downing a few Ibuprofen every few hours. At one point, he almost begs to have someone take the vice grips and yank it out.

We climb briefly from camp and drop onto the southern end of Chaba Icefield. A gentle rise for nearly 5 kilometres brings us to the critical step just south of Chaba Peak. With blustery winds and spitting rain, I put on a down jacket to stay warm for the climbing ahead.



Heading to Chaba Peak

We tackle the rock step to the right of the low spot that skiers rappel going the other way. Rob leads up steep snow and then onto slabby steps. The grade is low fifth class and the holds reasonable but with big packs, crampons and piles of teetering debris, care is required. From a two-piton belay, Rob carefully goes up the slab, putting in one more piton at a high step. A short traverse left on steep, wet snow leads to the summit (nearly two hours with four people) and we quickly drop down steep snow on the other side.

We trudge up and down across the ensuing glacial bowl, but with soft, over-the-boot snow, the trail breaking is slow and the leader's boots quickly get wet. A gusty, wintry wind at plus-9,000 feet makes our rather frequent stops chilly ones; an extra, half-hour rest is needed to melt snow on stoves to fill our empty bottles. We finally crest a pass – to the right of the second hump from the left – which leads fairly steeply but directly down to flats, where we hurriedly erect camp near

a large crevasse and get out of our wet boots; I eat dinner in my sleeping bag. Worried about further damaging my previously frost-damaged feet, I wrap one sodden boot in a garbage bag and put it in my sleeping bag for the night.

Day 5 – The skies have completely cleared, and there's frost lining the tent. It's early August and I've had much warmer mornings high on the Columbia Icefield in spring. Everyone's boots are frozen solid and we have to fill our Nalgene bottles with hot water and jam them in the boots to thaw and slightly warm them. Still, my bad big left toe is numb by the time we're ready to go.



Trudging down the Clemenceau Glacier beneath Duplicate (left) Tusk and Clemenceau

The good news is the glacier is nicely firm and, without crampons, we effortlessly cover in one hour a distance that consumed three weary hours the day before. Thus we quickly round Apex Mtn. and, after cutting the corner too fine, head straight across to get around the left end of some steep, serrated terrain. After going around some big crevasses at the head of the Clemenceau Glacier, we descend its left centre, going right of some little ice bulges before swinging left closer to Duplicate Mtn. What was a little snow bowl when I was here five years ago is now shockingly boulder-covered ice.

From the bottom of this ice, we traverse left over rubble to gain a spectacular alpine bench, an elevated island of green in a surrounding sea of rock and ice (camped here on the way out in 2000). Rob can't stop whooping in amazement at this alp, with its bird's-eye view of Clemenceau's East Face, the amazing

thickness of the Duplicate-Tusk Icefall to our left and, above it, the triangular big wall of Tusk.

We drop from the far end of this meadow towards the Duplicate Glacier. I take an easier line down the hard pack, further to the left, while the others take a more direct and exposed line. From the bottom, I look up to see them gingerly traversing a rock hard moraine slope, Colin cutting steps with his ice axe to prevent a steep and very long slide down the cheese grater incline. Safely at the bottom, we cross the surprisingly white and hummocky Duplicate Glacier, hopping a few glacial streams, and then traverse hummocky debris to reach the left moraine of the Tusk Glacier. Soon, we drop onto the mostly bare glacier and easily walk up its centre unroped.



Glacier stream hopping below Duplicate-Tusk Icefall

It's late in the afternoon, but we're keen to get to our food drop before any wolverines do. Earlier in the day, our fixed-wing plane had circled over us in acknowledgement. Unfortunately, the food was dropped in the morning, when the little bit of snow remaining on the lower Tiger Glacier was still rock hard. After we set up the tents, Rob and Colin head off to find the cache. Though the three boxes are more or less intact, about one third of their contents has virtually exploded; even my little day pack looks like it has been slashed several times with a big knife. Some fuel has been lost and some bags and bottles are ripped or shredded. Boxes of crackers are all crumbs, for example, and my plastic peanut butter jar is in shards, though a small Nalgene bottle of Drambuie is intact. For the most part, the denser stuff (Power, fruit bars, foil-packed dinners) has survived while bagged items like oats have large holes, if they've survived at all. We salvage what we can, rebagging leaking containers, and throw the rest into a pile, along with the boxes, for burning.

Day 6 – Colin's face is continuing to swell and the pain is often intolerable, plus we've lost about four days of food and fuel. So though the weather is fine and the two peaks he primarily came to climb – Clemenceau and Tusk (I'd already climbed then and the others are somewhat indifferent) – rise right above us, we decide to head out after a half day of rest. I use the time to hike up Reconnaissance Ridge, on the left edge of the Tiger Glacier, to get some better photos of the standard route up Clemenceau. The lower tongue of ice we used to start the route a decade ago is nearly gone now and there are surprising amounts of ice even higher up. Across the way, the snow-ice gully leading to the Tusk-Irvine Col has all but disappeared (August 5).

Back at camp, we wearily pack up, burn the scattered or badly damaged goods down to ashes and then head down the Tusk Glacier. After some intervening rubble, we descend the Duplicate Glacier and cross over to continue down the lower Clemenceau Glacier. We then get onto some black, rubble-covered ice (have to go on our knees, with weight completely off our feet, to inch by one spot) and keep going down until a huge circle of cliffs stops us cold. A steep, hard slope to the right is also exposed and involves crossing a raging torrent of a side stream, so we dejectedly turn around and trudge back up to the glacier's toe, where we camp right on the ice, putting in a couple of ice screws and hammering in those wonderful North Face pegs to secure the tent. Gusts of warm wind waft over us as we eat dinner and admire the upper faces of Shackleton and Tusk in the distance.

Day 7 – After six straight days of travel with overnight packs, our legs are weary. Colin's gums and right cheek are swollen, and the puffiness is moving up into his eye – a worrisome sign. But without a satellite phone (if you had one, would you make a \$3,000 chopper call at this point?) and with a still reasonable supply of painkillers, we soldier on under clear skies.



You should see the other guy

We continue up the left side of the Clemenceau Glacier till we can exit onto easy slopes, topped by a gentle moraine slope. This leads to yet another superb and extensive alpine meadow overlooking the entire Clemenceau area. We walk to its far end then down some old glacial rubble to what Colin aptly calls the Armless Man Lake. Easily cross its outlet stream; further down, it's the same torrent we looked at the day before. We then descend an amazing, unique little gully: a mostly dry stream bed dotted with huge boulders and flanked on the right by a glacier-polished slab the height of Burstall Slabs. With some rock shoes and a bolt gun, you could put up dozens of fine friction routes.



Walking below a huge, gorgeous slab

We exit it across a moraine and can see the Chisel Pass we need to reach in the distance. But as we've discovered, Point A to B ain't necessarily easy. A traverse across a scree slope and along a goat path through some woods leads to an impassable cliff band. Going to the top of the woods and then traversing hard, exposed slopes is not a safe option so we drop the better part of a thousand feet to bypass the cliff via a low moraine. We've been out of water for more than an hour and so, four days after frozen toes, we're nearing heat stroke, exacerbated by mosquitoes. After each guzzling a litre of water from a clear, cold stream, we slog up through teetering boulders to finally reach a ridge crest. Fortunately, it's an easy walk off the end to a fine campsite beside a small lake fed by a braided waterfall.

Colin's infected tooth provokes a nose bleed, the dripping blood attracting from nowhere a sudden swarm of beetles. Another clear, warm night.



North Face of Mt. Clemenceau

Day 8 – Legs are tired every morning now, even as the packs gradually lighten. We cross the outlet stream at 8 a.m. and then begin a long, rising traverse to Chisel Pass – more than three hours to reach its crest. The vanished glacier the fixed-wing pilot promised is not quite gone; a steep icy slope terminated by a bergschrund forces us to go left around a hump and down a moraine. After lunch at a glacial-fed lake, we traverse some rubbly slopes on the left, finding a rocky little depression to descend safely to the valley bottom.

The narrowing of the raging creek into a canyon just ahead is our last real obstacle. If it goes, we'll have two easy days of trudging. If it doesn't, we'll have to turn around and go back the way we came in – maybe seven days of walking, with about three days of fuel and Colin's tooth still a ticking time bomb. Besides crossing a violent stream, the right-hand slopes look hard, exposed and likely end in a cliff band. An upper, exposed traverse on the left looks no better. The canyon itself is a polished, three-foot wide plunge – also a no go. Colin, though, finds the key: a lower bench on the left that leads to a wet, slippery but single rappel that finally lands us on safe ground.



Crux rappel along Chisel Creek canyon

The other good news – Colin’s swollen infection has just punctured, releasing a torrent of greenish goo and more importantly easing the pain. A dentist later informs him a punch to the face would also have worked; if only I’d known.

The elements aren’t quite done with us, though. After we set up camp and build a fire on the stream flats beyond, a sudden storm blows in, the winds so violent it almost flattens my summer tent. We crawl inside, holding up the flapping tent to stay dry until the storm blows over.

Day 9 – As promised, a good trail, built by the Fortress Lake lodge owners, leads easily through forest along Chisel Creek. In a couple of hours of pleasant walking, we’re strolling along a final rock-lined path through the stream’s outwash flats to the lakeside lodge. Co-owner Anne is surprised to see four grizzled folks appearing from the wilderness but quickly offers us coffee and cookies, which we inhale while eying the remains of a carrot cake. A flatlander woman from Ohio, here with her three daughters, totters out from her cabin and asks if we’re walking all the way to Calgary.

We now have a five-kilometre trudge around the lake’s south shore. Easy walking at first on a rocky shore line soon deteriorates to fallen logs, slippery rocks and the odd swarm of angry hornets roused from rotting stumps. The occasional foray into the woods is no better – steep side hills, deadfall and thorny spikes of Devil’s club. Rob decides to persevere and stay dry but the rest of us finally say “screw it” and plunge into the water (surprisingly warm) in our boots to avoid most of the obstacles. A final stretch across a mud-sucking bay leads to a fine campground at the east end of Fortress Lake. We wash off a week of grime and enjoy splendid views of nearby Mt. Quincy and down the lake’s 11-kilometre length to the distant Serenity Glacier.



Sloshing around Fortress Lake

Day 10 – A 24-kilometre trail trudge to civilization awaits but a switch to running shoes restores some energy to weary legs. After crossing the bone-chilling, thigh-deep Chaba River, we cross a ridge to reach the Athabasca Valley trail. The forested views are non-existent, mosquitoes hover and our gaunt hips and shoulders ache from the still heavy packs. But the smooth kilometres pass quickly enough and by mid-afternoon, we're stumbling past fat tourists – puffing on cigarettes and trailing children and small dogs – at Sunwapta Falls. A final kilometre on pavement and we're at the Sunwapta Resort, where a few exorbitant snacks tide us over till we can cadge a ride back to our car and inhale a pint and a mammoth burger at the Outpost in Lake Louise.

Afterthoughts – We thought the Chisel Creek option would be three straightforward days, offering a relatively quick and easy exit from, or access to, the Clemenceau Icefield. In reality, it took us nearly five, though an earlier start on day one and knowing the best route could easily cut that to four. Still, good route-finding skills are needed to find the most efficient line and avoid some serious exposure, with a final, wet rappel the final key to reaching the Chisel Creek trail. Using this route as an access would necessitate keeping your boots dry going around Fortress Lake (you wouldn't want wet boots on day two) and then climbing the cliff band to get around the canyon along upper Chisel Creek (pitons probably needed).

Timing – To do either our access or exit routes, you'd probably wait till late July most years so the river crossings would be low enough and the snow on the

higher glaciers firm enough. But by then, routes that benefit from reasonable snow coverage (i.e. the standard lines on Clemenceau and Tusk) could well be troublesomely bare, with perhaps some sketchy crevasse navigation, especially as glaciers continue to recede. The best compromise for mountaineers might be to fly in to the Clemenceau area in mid to late July, climb a few peaks from a base camp on Reconnaissance Ridge and then walk out via the Apex and Chaba Glaciers to the Athabasca Valley.

Clemenceau Loop Campsites

1. Little Alberta – Grid reference 710905. Elevation 7603 feet
2. Athabasca Valley – Grid 657854, 4716 feet
3. Watershed Alp – Grid 576803, 7689 feet
4. Apex Glacier – Grid 483831, 9326 feet
5. Tiger Glacier – Grid 335855, 7462 feet (a drier base camp would be on the far side of the lower end of Reconnaissance Ridge, along the lower, left side of Tiger Glacier – nice patches of greenery, with remnant snow for water)
6. Clemenceau Glacier – Grid 383875, 5850 feet (a lovely meadow above the northeast end of the glacier – Grid 397867, 7200 feet – is much nicer, with a spectacular overview of the Clemenceau area)
7. Lakeside Waterfall – Grid 401905, 6637 feet
8. Chisel Creek – Grid 431966, 5532 feet
9. Fortress Lake – Grid 515011, 4440 feet

Other notable grid references

Below the Chaba Peak step – Grid 552828, 9200 feet
Chisel Pass – Grid 401933, 8700 feet

1:50,000 Maps: 83 C/6 Sunwapta Peak, 83 C/4 Clemenceau Icefield, 83 C/5
Fortress Lake