

Freshfield Icefield (from the March/April 2000 issue of *Explore*)

The Freshfield Icefield is only a dozen kilometres, as the crow flies, from the immensely popular Wapta Icefield along the western edge of Banff National Park. Nearly as large as the Wapta, it boasts higher peaks and an arguably deeper snow pack. In other words, the Freshfield is an ideal destination for ski mountaineering and advanced touring, with spectacular views and long runs back to a central base camp. Yet on two recent five-day expeditions to this undiscovered gem, the only fellow creature I've seen is a badly-misplaced black bear.

The reason for this scarcity of winter visitors is, in a word, access. Unlike the two-hour-plus jaunt into Bow Hut on the Wapta, it's at least a day-and-a-half grunt with 30-kilogram packs to reach the Freshfield, where a former Alpine Club of Canada hut has been relocated, for lack of business, to the nearby Campbell Icefield.

There are two access routes, both challenging. One is to depart the Icefields Parkway at Saskatchewan River Crossing, follow the hopefully still frozen Howse River - we virtually ski skated on bare ice - and pick your way up through two fractured icefalls on the Freshfield Glacier. The other is a more direct, 2,000-vertical-metre slog up the Mummery Glacier from the south, trying to pick the perfect late spring date when the Blaeberry logging road is almost bare but there's still enough snow above to avoid a lengthy approach on foot.

Of course, modern technology provides a simple, albeit more costly alternative - a helicopter ride from the Blaeberry road north of Golden, B.C. Thus last May long weekend, three of us were whisked in about 10 minutes to the Helmer-Gilgit Col on the Continental Divide, the pilot carefully landing us just outside Banff National Park.



Knife-edged summit ridge on Waitabit Peak

Once the helicopter had departed, Gabrielle, Ray and I skied up the gently-angled slopes of Mount Barlow on the southeastern edge of the Freshfield. (We roped up the first couple of days until we felt confident the snow pack was deep enough to cover the crevasses.) But our main objective was ski mountaineering on the higher rim of peaks to the west, so we pitched our tent on the upper Mummery Glacier and the next morning carefully kicked steps up the short, steep slope to the Gilgit-Nanga Parbat col.

The plan, to descend to a broad bench and establish a central base camp, was aborted when a snow storm forced us to prematurely camp at the 3,000-metre col. Over the next three days, this lofty perch provided magnificent views of Mount Mummery to the south, the commanding Mount Forbes to the north and the dazzling white expanse of the Freshfield Icefield at our feet.



Gabrielle on Mount Bulyea summit looking at Mount Barnard

In the meantime, however, visibility had shrunk to a few feet, limiting our afternoon foray to a GPS-guided ascent up lowly Mount Gilgit. The swirling clouds also revived unpleasant memories of a previous Freshfield expedition, when after an arduous two-day approach under glorious skies, our party pitched the tent just as the peaks vanished in a whiteout. The ensuing storm lasted three days, threatening several times to flatten the tent and making simple trips to the excavated bathroom an adventure.

But this time, the mountain gods relented. The next day dawned clear and we excitedly made turns in surprisingly deep late May snow below the fractured east face of Mount Trutch. We stopped when we saw, 100 metres ahead, tracks leading to a black lump in the middle of the glacier. The lump suddenly arose into a young black bear, which galloped away till it reached an ice cliff, where it disappeared into a hole from which it fled two days later.

Worried about the food stashed in our tent and advancing clouds, we turned back, taking a quick detour to kick steps up the steepening north face of Nanga Parbat Mountain before the skies closed in. The next two days were an icefield rarity, cloudless, and we roped up and donned crampons and ice axes to tackle a ring of peaks - Trutch, Waitabit, Bulyea and Barnard, which at 3,339 metres is the highest mountain on the Freshfield.

The beauty of ski mountaineering on this elevated icefield is skiing to 3,050-metre-plus (10,000-foot) cols and quickly ascending the rest of the way on foot. The downside is several of these summit ridges are knife edged; coupled with the hot sun on south-facing slopes, we twice turned back just shy of the top. But the slope up our final peak, Mount Bulyea, was pleasantly wide and we spent an enchanted hour on top overlooking a sea of ranges.

Alas, the civilized world beckoned, and we were soon swooshing down the Mummery Glacier till the snow suddenly ran out in Mummery Creek; at one point, I lost my balance while tiptoeing along a ledge and plunged into the icy waters. We then spent an agonizing hour thrashing through 100 metres of alders which, with skis extending like antlers above our packs, involved lying almost horizontally and then rolling over the mid-waist branches. Covered in mud and fresh sap, we reached the car on foot, washed our grimy bodies and cooled three beers in the Blaeberry River and gazed in wonder back at the winter world we'd suddenly left behind.



Uncovering food cache below Nanga Parbat

If You Go

To fly into the Freshfield Icefield, call Canadian Helicopters in Golden, B.C. at (250) 344-5311. Take topo maps 82 N/10 Blaeberry River and 82 N/15 Mistaya Lake.