

Another 11,000er: Mount Warren (11,030 feet) – May 9-11, 2007



Approaching Mt. Warren, summit on right skyline

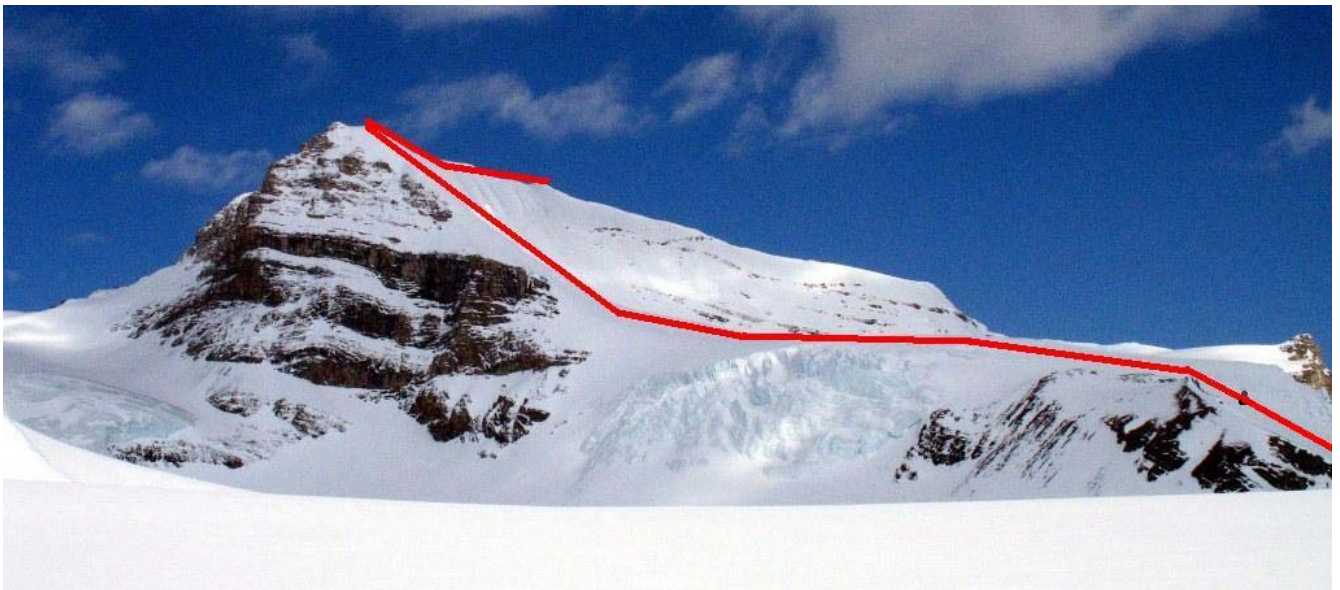
Just after climbing the last of the 11,000-foot peaks in the Canadian Rockies, I received a cautionary email suggesting there were two more – not on the original list but showing contours of 3350 metres (3353 is the magic mark) on newer 1:50,000 topo maps. One of these was Mt. Cromwell (see report under “Mountain Trips”), the other was Mt. Warren, on the Brazeau Icefield near Jasper, which is listed in *The Rocky Mountains of Canada-North* as 3300 metres.

I was fairly skeptical about these new topo maps, having seen numerous errors elsewhere and – having staggered across the finish line after 20 years of sporadic but at times intense effort – being reluctant to admit I still might have unfinished business. But a few things made me take notice. First, the height of adjacent Mt. Brazeau had been upgraded by more than 50 metres on the same map. Second, on an unsuccessful winter attempt on Warren, fellow 11,000er-finisher Nancy Hansen had a good look at the peak in comparison to 3500-metre Brazeau and seemed pretty confident the former was over 11,000 feet. Finally, another member of the 11,000er club, Rick Collier had climbed it in 2005

(<http://www.bivouac.com/TripPg.asp?Tripld=5683>) and his altimeter read the summit as 11,070 feet. I'm not particularly impressed with the accuracy of altimeter readings, compared with GPS readings (see Cromwell report), but it was yet another piece of supporting evidence.

Not that I'd been sitting idly at home all this time. In the summer of 2004, three of us had made the approach, via Poboktan Creek Trail, to the south edge of the Brazeau Icefield, only to have one of our party fall violently ill. The other party member sensibly didn't want to cross this great stretch of summer glacier with just two on a rope, so we settled for Henry Macleod and a few pictures of Brazeau and Warren. A year later, four of us headed in, only to be turned around, near the start of the descent toward Warren, by postholing snow conditions and deteriorating weather.

Several people suggested it would be much better to cross this 10-kilometre-plus stretch of up-and-down icefield on skis. So this past winter and spring, my friend Colin Jones and I kept a vigilant eye on the forecasts, which never seemed to indicate a two- or three-day window of high pressure. We cursed the forecasts when they teased us, only to change for the worse at the last minute (sometimes inaccurately) and spent considerable time debating the merits of Environment Canada versus The Weather Network: the latter, though generally more conservative, seems somewhat more accurate, even though it's using Environment Canada's raw data.



Route up Mt. Warren

All of which is a long-winded way of saying we finally decided to actually leave our computers and venture into the unknown in mid-week in early May. Which immediately seemed a very bad idea, as it snowed most of the evening drive up the Icefields Parkway and through the night as we slept in the back of my car at the Sunwapta Warden Station parking lot. It didn't look much better at 6 a.m. so

we vacillated until heading over to the station, where a skeptical warden looked at a forecast for us: “It looks like a lot of postholing up Poboktan Trail. I’m not even sure snowshoes would help much.”



Skiing up the snow-dusted Poboktan Trail

But we were on skis – which we carried on heavy packs for a short stretch, before trying to tightrope up the infirm remnants of an old ski trail, which frequently gave way under our skis. There was an ominous lack of snow off the trail, which we would soon be departing, but we decided to go as far as the Maligne/Six Pass route turnoff and then our turnoff up the next valley. Several times, we were ready to call it off, but we persevered, thrashing up the valley and, mercifully, staying on top of the stop along the ensuing meadows.



Skiing up the avalanche-prone bowl south of the Brazeau Icefield; the route traverses above the cliffband, on the right of the picture

Beyond, the big rocky basin below the Brazeau Icefield was firm and nicely snow covered but we nonetheless carefully traversed a short section above a cliffband (not a place to be when avalanche conditions are at all hazardous; better then to approach via the Coronet Glacier). After nine exhausting hours, we reached our snow camp, just below the toe of the glacier.



Camp just south of the Brazeau Icefield

The next morning dawned, mercifully, mostly clear and we were off just before 6:30, making good time on the steady ascent of the glacier to the right of Brazeau.



Near the height of the Brazeau Icefield (Columbia Icefield area peaks in rear)

The descent instantly justified the skies: steep at first and then cruising on lovely, fast snow. The views of this valley were superb, particularly of the North Face of Brazeau, much more impressive than the standard, pedestrian south side.



Cruising on lovely snow down to the "hole" below Mt. Warren



The impressive North Face of Mt. Brazeau from Warren



Halfway up Warren's East Ridge

But now it was time for a 2,400-foot ascent, around the right side of a rock outcrop and then to the base of Warren's East Ridge, where we gave up the skis to slog up the 35-degree slopes. Too often, we punched through the surface, gasping at the end of 10-minute leads and looking futilely over our shoulders for the fictitious third person to kick steps. The ridge eventually leveled off and we plodded beneath a big cornice till finally we were on top.



Nearing the corniced summit of Mt. Warren



Celebrating the summit of another 11,000er... until noticing the real summit was a little further

Out came the magic GPS and I laughed when the immediate reading was 11,000 feet on the dot, gradually increasing to 11,010 as more satellites were picked up. At this point, Colin noticed another high point, beyond a little depression, and said, "Isn't that the summit?" It looked the same height but, having come this far, we trudged on to that final rise, where the reading was a much more conclusive 11,030 feet.



Skiing down the lower East Ridge

From there, it was a long descent and even longer climb to the height of the icefield before cruising back to camp, 10.5 hours after our departure. The next morning, we rapidly descended the hard slopes of the bowl, switching to crampons for the traverse above the cliff band. It was a fine, fast descent most of the way to Poboktan Trail, where we had to abandon the skis for the last couple of kilometres to the car and, soon thereafter, a celebratory beer.



A final thrash down Poboktan Creek Trail