

# Recondite

This is a story as much about failure as success, about stupidity, comedy, camaraderie and tenacity - all set on a grand wilderness stage. Trite as it sounds, it's also about the journey ultimately being more important than reaching the summit.

The summit in this case is Recondite Peak, a mountain in Alberta's central front ranges that is unknown to most seasoned climbers. Recondite isn't even named on the topographical map sheet it dominates, a slight from mapmakers who perhaps instinctively knew it was an obscure heap of rubble. Yet it was a peak I attempted five times and walked a total of nearly 400 kilometres through the roughest country imaginable just so I could stand atop its crumbling summit.

The obvious question is why bother? I'd like to say this obsession perfectly fits the definition of a hobby - an activity with no purpose other than its pursuit. But I had an ulterior motive: a list.

There are arguably 54 peaks in the Canadian Rockies that exceed 11,000 feet (3353 metres) in height. Climb them all and you will have surmounted a lot of rock faces, big glaciers and long ridges and seen some amazing country, much of it rarely visited by humanity. To date, only a couple of intrepid mountaineers have climbed all the 11,000ers, but a number of others are furtively closing in on the target, including two Calgary-area climbers who quietly lured me into the quest in the late 1980s.

Recondite Peak is the runt of the 11,000er list, stretching a mere three metres of shattered limestone above the benchmark; given the imperfections of measuring elevation, its candidacy in the club is questionable, though not sufficiently so to deter true peak baggers. Recondite lacks the visibility, the historic allure, the classic lines or the vertical challenges of 11,000ers like Robson, Assiniboine or Deltaform. Compared with such famous peaks, Recondite is an alpinist's walk in the park, a scree slog that scarcely requires a rope, though it does demand a keen eye for rockfall.

Recondite's chief attribute is its isolation. Its summit is nearly a 40-kilometre walk under heavy loads from the Icefields Parkway, north of Lake Louise. It is a walk that includes thigh-deep stream crossings, swamp wallowing, boulder hopping and bushwhacking through mossy forest. To get there, you must also climb more than 600 metres to reach Dolomite Pass, then lose all that elevation and more on the way down Dolomite Creek to Isabella Lake and then along the Siffleur River. Indeed, after some 30 kilometres, you are actually 100 metres lower than when you started, with a 1,600-metre gain to the summit still staring you in the face, much of it on scree akin to ascending a down escalator. Nearly spent after all this, you must again make the long climb back over Dolomite Pass before stumbling down to your car.

Needless to say, you run into few folks back there, other than the occasional fisherperson casting for trout in Isabella Lake or the odd backpacker doing the Dolomite-Pipestone Valleys loop. And once you cross the Banff National Park boundary into the Siffleur Wilderness beyond Isabella Lake, humanity vanishes and the trails, if any, are likely travelled only by moose or grizzlies. But curious wildlife could have spotted me and an assortment of climbing companions on five expeditions to this hinterland in four years.

My first attempt to climb Recondite was easily the most harebrained. A friend, Forbes, and I decided to approach it on cross-country skis in early April, 1992. We doubted it had been climbed in winter and didn't know if it was feasible or safe. Worse, we were trying to squeeze into two days what most parties would have tackled in no less than four under summer conditions.



Forbes runs out of snow on first attempt

Nonetheless, we blithely set off under 20-kilogram-plus packs from a small pull-off just north of the Mosquito Creek Youth Hostel. One advantage of skis was we could quickly descend down the avalanche-prone slopes north of Dolomite Pass. The disadvantage was we later got lost and thrashed around in knee-deep snow for an hour, sapping much of our energy. The really bad news arrived just before Isabella Lake, when the snow suddenly disappeared, and we were literally walking on skis across grassy hummocks. Fortunately, we were subsequently able to follow remnant patches of snow and ice along the banks of Dolomite Creek until we reached the subsidiary drainage of the Siffleur River that led to Recondite. Exhausted, we dropped our packs and worked our way up the narrow valley till it opened up. Alas, we couldn't see the aptly-named Recondite and returned in defeat to camp along the Siffleur. This easily-predicted failure was punctuated by a white gas stove that caught on fire, a slip on icy rocks into a frigid creek and a sodden snowpack that collapsed under us as we made final telemark turns back to the car.

The second attempt was even more abbreviated and included a third masochist, Roman. This time, we were embarking in August of the same year, though a trail closure because of a resident mother grizzly and cub meant taking a more circuitous route via Helen Lake and thus gaining and then losing another 100 vertical metres. On the drive in, I suddenly had the horrible realization I'd forgotten to pack the tent poles. Undeterred, we decided to test the critter-proofness of a locked warden's cabin at Isabella Lake, something that is now impossible, given the heavy bars across doors and shuttered windows of such back country lodgings. It was all for naught, anyway, as a summer snowstorm the next morning soon had us beating a soggy retreat.

The third attempt, a year later, was both pathetically comic and harrowing. Once again, it was a two-day forced march and, leaving Calgary at 4 a.m., we had raced over the 24 kilometres to Isabella Lake by late morning. The only thing we'd forgotten this time was the map. Fortunately, Forbes and I had been there two winters earlier and knew the way up the side drainage off the main Siffleur valley. The only problem was the summer trail traversed through forest beyond Isabella Lake, and it was thus difficult to see the side drainages on the valley's other side. After awhile, the trail disappeared altogether and we side-hill gouged along a mossy slope until finally deciding to descend through a boggy meadow to the valley floor. Even this late in summer, the crossing of the Siffleur River was nearly waist deep and made possible only by using a fallen tree as a handrail.



The watery shortcut to Isabella Lake on the approach

Safely across, we headed up the side valley and camped on a lovely gravel bar surrounded by peaks. The next morning, we were up by four and - after a hasty breakfast of instant oats and tea - underway before five, our headlamps lighting the way over grassy rocks until the sun arose. The slopes were covered in loose scree, but the scrambling was easy and by mid-morning we were excitedly nearing the top. We didn't find the false summit we'd read about in the guidebook, but we didn't worry when we reached the summit cairn, which we practically levelled in a vain attempt to find a register containing the cryptic accounts of earlier ascents.

As we basked in triumph, a high cloud lifted and we could see to the near southeast a higher-looking peak. As we descended, a niggling doubt became a sinking realization we had climbed the wrong mountain. The peak was in the right location in the side valley, it was just one valley too far north. In retrospect, we took comfort in knowing the peak we'd climbed, unofficially called Perren, had likely only been scaled once or twice before and that its valley had rarely seen human footprints.

But the feeling at the time was embarrassment, coupled with the knowledge we had tacked on 10 unnecessary kilometres and had once again to cross the raging Siffleur. This misadventure became a true epic when, the same day, Roman sprained his ankle while hopping over a fallen tree and limped stoically for nearly 30 kilometres till we reached the highway in utter exhaustion after midnight. On the drive home, we changed drivers several times in a valiant struggle to stay awake.

Instead of being chastened by this defeat, we were more determined than ever to get up Recondite. Thus in early October of that same year, Roman and I set out once again. The approach now familiar to us, we made rapid time to Isabella Lake under a steady drizzle, found the right stream crossing and side valley and by late afternoon were setting our tent up under clearing skies at the foot of Recondite, which at last we could see. While the peak itself was rather nondescript, the lofty bench we were camped on was stunning, with a tiny stream winding through meadowy boulders beside us and a ring of impressive rock and snow faces leaning over us.



Recondite Peak (west ridge on right-hand skyline)

Early the next morning, we scurried up a scree slope to a col then scrambled up the pavement-like limestone of the southwest ridge. As the route got cliffier, we dropped down a small cleft in the rock and traversed onto the loose rock of the south face, where we met a surprise. An icy layer of verglas covered this slope and, without crampons, it required delicate footing to move up to the false summit. Here, a second surprise awaited us - the rock was too shattered to hammer in a piton, and we didn't have a nylon sling large enough to loop around the large block of rock and thus be able to rappell, or slide down a fixed rope, to a notch 10 metres below. We also didn't like the icy appearance of the final, short slope to the true summit. Thus, almost within spitting distance of the top, we sadly turned around and made the long trek back to civilization. Some mountaineers would have said this was close enough and moved on to other objectives. Not us. In fact, Roman and Forbes went back a week later and, with the ice miraculously gone from the south face, were on the summit shortly after dawn and back in Calgary the evening of that second day.



Bill down climbing on west ridge on fourth attempt

That left me with the difficult task of convincing others of the dubious charms of the approach and climb. But three years later on a dreary Labour Day weekend, I found five fresh victims. It snowed for awhile en route but we kept going, switching to running shoes for the marshy shortcut to Isabella Lake. With a larger, slower group, we made camp at the entrance to the side valley, where that night we were serenaded by a howling wolf.

Under leaden skies, five of us headed out early the next morning. By the time we reached the ridge, light snow was whipping past our faces. Two of the party turned around, but only an earthquake was going to stop me this time. Arriving at the false summit in an icy blast of wind, we three donned all our warm clothes to set up the rappel, slid into the notch and a few minutes later were standing on top of the world. I couldn't see a thing and there was time for only a few hasty summit photos, but there was no wiping the smile of relief and accomplishment off my face.



Bill finally stands on storm-bound summit of Recondite Peak

The only thing left, the next day, was the long, tedious slog back up to Dolomite Pass. But as I walked up the interminable switchbacks, I found myself slowing down and frequently looking back at the remote landscape that had become so familiar to me. And I caught myself thinking that some day, I'd like to come back.