



AAC Publications

Life Essence

Five Journeys to Northwest Canada's Vampire Peaks

The de Havilland DHC-2 Beaver floatplane slowly spiraled downward, aiming for a tiny, emerald-green lake. The contrast between spruce trees and glacial ice formed a defining line between the harsh forested wilderness and rugged mountainscape of the Northwest Territories. On touchdown a small but unmistakable message, assembled from duct tape and sleeping bag insulation, became visible on the shoreline: "HELP."

It was early August 1999. Brad Jackson, Nan Darkis, and I had traveled from Colorado to visit the remote Vampire Peaks. We had been inspired by a 1998 Climbing magazine article that presented amazing images and promised loads of free climbing potential on 1,000-

2,500-foot granite walls. Our pilot, Warren LaFave, owner of Kluane Airways, had assured us that our team was only the fourth he had ever flown there. The third team, which he had dropped off just two and a half weeks earlier, was still in the Vamps, and he had not heard a peep from them.

Debris was strewn a hundred feet in either direction from our tie-up on shore. Torn-apart food cans, tattered wrappers, fuel canisters with bite marks, and ripped clothing littered the otherwise serene tundra landscape of dwarf shrubs, sedges, mosses, and lichens. But the climbers were alright. Their unprotected cache by the lake had been ravaged by a grizzly while they were climbing, and they had spent eight days scavenging the remnants for sustenance and searching for the radio that went missing during the incursion. Had our team not showed up, with 12 more days before their scheduled pick-up, those fellas might not have fared too well.

The Vampire Peaks, part of Nahanni National Park, are located in the Logan Mountains, a sub-range of the Mackenzie Mountains, summer home of woodland caribou, mountain goats, Dall sheep, and bears. These rugged peaks were shaped by the last ice age, and are some of the highest in the Northwest Territories. Mt. Sir James MacBrien (9,052'), the second-highest summit in the range, is a formidable highpoint at the apex of a long rock ridge forming the Lotus Flower Tower and Parrot Beak in the well-known Cirque of the Unclimbables. Twenty-five miles to the south of the Cirque stands the tallest peak in the Northwest Territories, Mt. Nirvana (9,098'), home to several easy fifth-class routes and a collection of 2,000-foot walls, possibly only having one established route [AAJ 1966, 2001]. Fifteen miles northwest of the Cirque are the Vampire Peaks.

Perhaps the biggest attraction in the Vampires has been the stunning collection of granite spires flanking the southern aspect of Mt. Appler (8,569'). Soaring like high-rise buildings, this trio of columns, known as the Vampire Spires, comprises Vampire Spire (990'), the Canine (600'), and the Fortress (1,500'). Each has a distinctive fang-like summit, with the Vamp and the Fortress side by side and the Canine tucked behind. Two miles east of the Spires is the Phoenix, a 2,600-foot wall on the northeastern aspect of a multi-buttressed, unnamed ca 8,530-foot massif. The Vampire Peaks also host half a dozen other impressive granite features, some still unclimbed. Moraine Hill (8,838'), five miles to the south of the Vampire Spires, has an impressive assembly of south-facing walls and at least one established mountaineering route. A mile to the north of the Spires is a big, possibly unclimbed granite peak dubbed "The Warlock" (ca 8,316'), which also has a formidable south-facing big wall. Vague reports suggest many of the prominent peaks with were climbed by fourth-class routes in the early to mid-1900s. The first difficult rock route was recorded by Mike Bengé, Jeff Hollenbaugh, and Greg Epperson in 1994, when they made the first ascent of the Vampire Spire via

the Infusion (V 5.11 A2+).

My first outing to the Vampires, back in 1999, was blessed with warm, dry weather and yielded several new aid routes as well as the second ascent of Vampire Spire and loads of bouldering. Thus began my fascination with this remote area. The well-featured granite is black, gray, and gold and peppered with profusions of knobs and big feldspar crystals. The cracks tend to be undulating and slightly flared, with a side of grass, though the steeper terrain yields splitter corners and flawless crack systems. This collection of boulders, walls, and jagged peaks became my sanctuary, an alpine climbing haven without the hassle of overseas flights, remote and free from the carnivals of hype and crowding.

I returned to the Vampire Spires in August 2003, with Hank Jones, to attempt the first free ascent of the Fortress via the route Cornerstone (V 5.10 A2), first climbed by Matt Childers and Cogie Reed in July 1998. This route follows an incredible series of corners and straight-in cracks that just scream “free me.” As with the other two spires, the premier wall on the Fortress is the south face. Five hundred feet of splitter dihedral, a big multi-tiered ledge, 400 feet of even more splitter dihedral, another big ledge, 350 feet of straight-in cracks splitting a headwall, a really big ledge, 250 feet of corners and chimney, and the summit—that’s the Cornerstone in a nutshell.

Our first attempt after a rainy, tent-bound week revealed incredibly clean crack climbing and a big unknown: Following features right of the Cornerstone, someone had installed a heavily bolted route up to two-thirds height of the wall. But who? Warren LaFave had assured us that nobody else had flown into the Spires since my previous trip. This “new” line followed an incomplete, five-pitch route started by John Young in 1998, and then climbed several new pitches before joining Cornerstone at the top of pitch seven. The bolt count was approximately 27 (1¼-inch Petzl self-drives) with anchors every 25 meters. We later learned Kurt Albert and three other German climbers had paddled from near the Tungsten Mine, following the Little Nahanni (class IV) and South Nahanni rivers to access the Vampire Peaks “by fair means.” They spent approximately eight days in the area, establishing this route (VIII+) on what they called Vampire Peak. They then went on to climb the Lotus Flower Tower in the Cirque before floating 150 miles by the Nahanni out to Blackstone Territorial Park.

Our trip that year was a rough one for weather. Out of 24 days, we spent only five actually rock climbing. But four days before our chopper ride out, the skies cleared and the fluffy white stuff on all the mountaintops quickly began to melt. In a manic, disaster-style, 26-hour effort, we managed to free the Cornerstone with some variations. Our 12-pitch route (You Enjoy Myself, 1,800’, V 5.12) followed the original line up fantastic corner systems for six pitches. Then we diverged to the right and climbed a nice, flared crack system to the top of the headwall. For the last pitches, we climbed left of the Cornerstone, skipping a short rappel the first-ascent team had used, and accessed a more straightforward crack system to reach the summit, completing the formation’s second ascent and first free climb.

Not even a full year passed before Hank and I were 30 hours deep into the northbound ramble, bound again for Vampire granite. With at least that many hours still to drive, we got word that a group of three from Flagstaff also was planning a trip to the Vamps. Nothing worse than feeling like somebody’s going to swipe your project, but our stoke was undampened. We met the other group at Kluane Airways’ plush Inconnu Lodge and shared the cost of the helicopter ride into the Vamps. They were planning an aid climb, and Hank and I had free-climbing ambitions, and so our two groups coexisted harmoniously in this alpine haven.

This time our goal was the first free ascents of the Vampire Spire and the Phoenix—the two proudest features in the area still without free climbs. We thought was the best-looking contender for a classic free route on Vampire Spire followed the tallest stretch of wall; Hank and I dubbed it the Coffin, after the shape of a large alcove at two-thirds height. We had climbed the first few pitches in the rain the year before while working a thin nailing route. (The three climbers from Flagstaff finished this aid route, calling it Nosferatu, V 5.9 A2+.) On the Coffin, after a couple of

hundred feet, straight-in cracks funneled into a big shaft, barely narrow enough to stem across, for several pitches. Mixed crack and face climbing then led toward a big roof. Up to this point, our route had followed good, dry rock with difficulties around 5.11+. The pitch leading to the roof was to die for—flared fingers in a steep corner that slowly opened up into what looked to be 5.12 liebacking—but it was soaked. After aiding up to the roof through the cold wetness, I could see a shimmer of blue ice back in the bowels, loads of it, the cold heart of a Vampire. A “fun” 5.11 fist folly out the left side of the roof brought us to two wide crack pitches and the summit. The Coffin (310m, V 5.11 A2) will have to wait for hell to warm over for a free ascent.

With less than a week left in camp, the two of us searched for an alternative free line up the spire. Our attention turned to a finger-sized splitter 100 feet to the left of the Coffin’s initial pitches. This crack went up 210 feet to a ledge, then wandered up less than vertical terrain, before moving around to the north side of the spire for several hundred feet. On these last pitches we found an incredible overhanging fist crack followed by a steep offwidth—lucky for us, a hidden jug rail inside the maw kept this stretch under 5.12. The glory pitch was a 5.9 corner crack laser-cut by God and broken only by the spike of the Vampire’s pointed summit. We named our route Dark Side (1,000’, IV 5.11+); this marked the first free ascent and the first one-day ascent of the Vampire Spire.

A few years passed, and my incomplete project to do the first free ascents of the three most prominent features in the Vampire Peaks gnawed at me. Another NWT vacation was in order. At this point, coughing up another \$7,000 to go “free” climbing in the wet, albeit beautiful, north country was becoming a little outrageous, considering it costs about the same to visit the Charakusa Valley in Pakistan. But I needed another dose of Vampire tranquility.

In the interest of cutting costs, I investigated the approach used by the Germans. The paddle-verus-chopper savings are huge if you have the time, and the added adventure is priceless. It seemed the best strategy would be to paddle/hike in, then hike/fly out. You could save more and not use any air support by following the South Nahanni out to Blackstone, as the Germans did, but the added river time and car shuttle costs are considerable. In 2006, once again, Hank and I stuffed into the cab of his red truck. In the back, our familiar tools for adventure were tucked away in haul bags and duffels, along with one new addition: a raft.

The Little Nahanni starts from Flat Lakes and is accessible by truck via the Nahanni Range Road. Its cold waters begin as a shallow, 50-foot-wide creek meandering around small islands and oxbows, and through tight forests of stunted spruce and willow. The mountains are rugged, with loose and variegated sedimentary layers of sandstone and limestone folded into colorful, mineral-rich striations. After several miles, tributaries raise the volume and the bumper-car ride turns into class IV whitewater. Big drops and tight wave trains through narrow canyons make up at least a third of the 50-mile float trip. Once the clear, fast water converges with the slower, dark green water of the South Nahanni, the game goes from paddling for life in the torrents to paddling for warmth and speed in the flats. Four days on the water gets one to a gravel bar by the drainage below the Vamps. Hiking from the river is no easy task; tight forests lead to shrubbery and slick, tundra-covered talus; it takes two days to hike about eight miles up the steep drainage to Vampire Lake and the northern terminus of Moraine Hill Glacier.

It was a bad season in 2006. Incessant drizzle soaked the 2,600-foot wall of the Phoenix. Above the wall, a snow- and ice-covered ridgeline guarded what we believed to be a virgin summit. On a pleasant day we attempted the northwest rib of the mountain in a desperate attempt to summit the peak. We climbed loose 5.8 for 1,800 feet before being stymied by ice-covered rock. The terrain we’d covered to that point was undesirable for retreat, and to the north and the south the ridge dropped a thousand vertical feet into unknown and unpleasant territory. With our ropes uncoiled, nearly committed to an epic rappel from off the north side, we heard a faint hum. Slowly growing in magnitude, the hum became a whirlwind of helicopter blades and airflow. Mr. LaFave was in the house—he buzzed by close enough for us to make eye contact, and Hank dismissively waved him in for a landing. LaFave soared away, out of sight, and we chuckled at the prospect of jumping from

our tiny perch into the small aircraft. Moments later, with no warning, the blast from circling helicopter blades about blew me over. A skid bounced around on the rock's edge, the door popped open, and Warren gestured for us to "get the fuck in!" And so ended our first Phoenix adventure, with no summit and thus no conclusion.

In 2012, with the help from the Copp/Dash Inspire Award, Jeff Achey, Jeremy Collins, James Q Martin, and I laid plans for another go at the Phoenix. Jeff, Q, and I paddled in. We worked it out so Jeremy would helicopter in with our remaining gear and meet us in base camp below the Phoenix, four days after we left Flat Lake; these tactics kept us light on the river and saved us from the grueling hike.

The Phoenix had been named in 1998 by Matt Childers, Harrison Shull, and John Young, the first team to climb the huge northeast face. They followed a direct line up the steepest part of the golden wall and called their route Freebird (VI 5.10 A2+). Since then Tyler Stracker and Matt Christie had added an incomplete line right of Freebird, following somewhat incipient features for four to five pitches before gaining splitter cracks and corners that flow to the top— they made it up nine, very long pitches before being thwarted by bad weather, and called their line After School Special (A.S.S.), V 5.10+ A2+. In 2004, Jasmin Caton and Amelia Patterson climbed A.S.S. up to Smurfagetti Ledge, a terraced ledge system, and then joined Freebird; they were forced to retreat several hundred feet from the top, and they called their variation Wallflowers (VI 5.10 A2).

I'd seen enough of the Phoenix to know that the free line would loosely follow A.S.S. up the proudest part of the wall, so we focused our attention there. Pitch four proved to be the headiest section, after which we left A.S.S and followed our noses up virgin rock, uncovering several fantastic crack climbing pitches. In four days we climbed seven pitches, freeing them all, and we placed only one protection bolt. Two days of drizzle forced a rest day, followed by a day of hauling supplies up fixed lines to our highpoint.

We rejoined A.S.S. on our eighth pitch, which involved a delicate 5.11 traverse into "Yo Momma's Got a Wide Crack"—a rope-stretching odyssey of five-inch bliss, made casual by big features inside the crack. That dropped us off at a nice, flat ledge below the five-star, 5.10+ "Dixie Crystal Corner" pitch: 200 feet of perfectly cut, 90-degree corner. A nondescript 5.8 section brought us to Smurfagetti Ledge, where we spent a cold, wet night. In late August the nights last only five hours but get minutes shorter with each passing day.

Above our bivy we climbed up and right, following a steep, flared hand crack (5.11-) into a big, right-facing dihedral feature. We followed the dihedral for a long pitch, passing the A.S.S. highpoint, and then climbed virgin terrain into some wild chimneys. At the top of pitch 14 we joined Freebird and reached the Wallflowers highpoint. The remaining four pitches followed convoluted chimneys and corners with difficulties around mid-5.10. At the top of the wall we found a small cairn containing a register signed by the Childers party. Our entry was the second—we had successfully free-climbed the wall, onsighting all but three pitches out of 18, with our efforts spread out over six days. Every pitch was led and followed free. We used fixed lines to the top of pitch seven before committing to the wall.

Our next objective lay approximately a quarter-mile away and at least 1,000 feet higher: the real summit. What in years past had been an icy snowfield was on that day a somewhat casual romp up dry ridgeline, with very little snow travel. We stashed the pointless ice gear we had carried up the wall and cruised up the ridge to make the peak's first recorded ascent. After high-fives and an all-night rap session, we got back to camp around 7 a.m., 46 hours after leaving. The Phreenix (VI 5.11) is by no means a cutting-edge free climb, but without a doubt this rig is a modern-day classic.

I do not know who named the Vampire Peaks, but to me the name sparks a feeling of mystery and enigma. During the second ascent of Vampire Spire, I distinctly heard an ensemble of "voices" in my head, resounding like ballroom chatter for well over 15 hours. At first I attributed this to dehydration,

but both of my companions later spoke of experiencing the same phenomenon. Maybe it was something else. All great mountain ranges have a spirit. In the Vamps it's born from supernatural legends of vanishing tribes and dismembered prospectors, from nearby place names like Deadmen Valley and Headless Creek, and from the ghostly mist that wreathes granite spires rising unexpectedly out of a land of rivers and lush forests. It's that spirit that sets the Vampires apart from any other climbing destination on Earth—and that keeps calling me back.

Summary

An account of five expeditions to the Vampire Peaks in Northwest Territories, Canada, culminating in the first free ascents of Vampire Spire, the Fortress, and, in 2012, the Phoenix Wall. Jeff Achey, Jeremy Collins, Pat Goodman, and James Q Martin climbed the Phreenix (VI 5.11, 18 pitches) and summited the previously unclimbed Peak ca 8,350' in August 2012.

About the Author

Pat Goodman, 35, developed his obsessive appetite for vertical adventure on the crumbling flanks of Shiprock, near his hometown of Farmington, New Mexico, at age 16. Since then he has sampled the vertical wilds of China, India, Pakistan, Venezuela, Canada, Mexico, and Europe. He owns a hardwood flooring business in Fayetteville, West Virginia.

Images



Routes and attempts on the Phoenix Wall. The main summit of Peak ca 8,350' (a.k.a. Mt. Dracula) lies behind the ca 2,600-foot wall. Blue line: Phreenix (2,600', 5.11, Achey-Collins-Goodman_Martin, 2012). Red line: Freebird (2,600', 5.10+ A2, Childers- Shull-Young, 1998). Yellow line: After School Special (1,600', 5.10+ A2, Christi- Stracker, 2002; highpoint marked A). Green line: Unfinished Symphony (1,200', 5.11 A.2+; attempt 1 Childers-Reed-Shull, 1998; attempt 2 Christi-Dillard-Stracker, 2002; highpoint marked U). Black line: Wallflowers (2,100', 5.10 A.2+, Caton-Patterson, 2003; highpoint marked W).



Pat Goodman bouldering the Caribou Crack, near the Phoenix Wall. The new route Phreenix climbs the prominent buttress on the left.



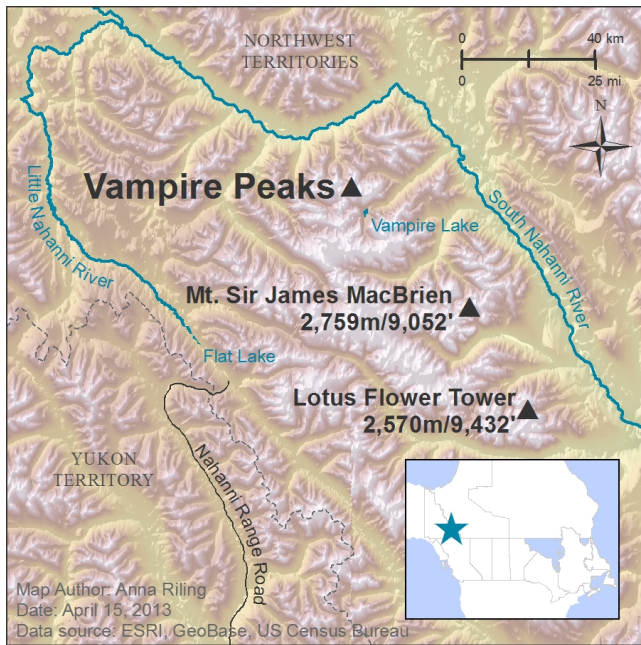
Pat Goodman on pitch seven, the Dixie Crystal Corner overhead.



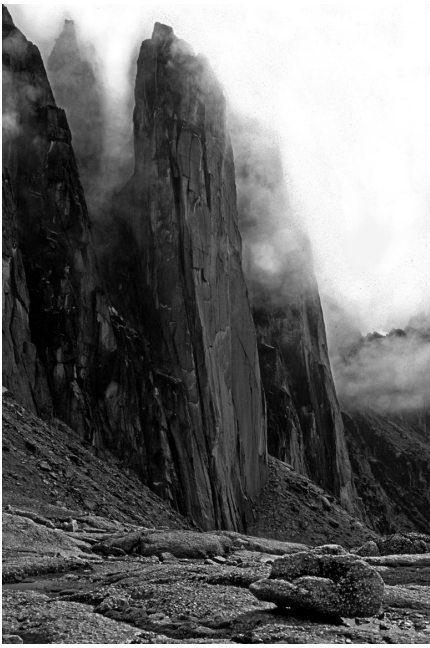
Pat Goodman leading the sixth pitch of the Phreenix.



The Vampire Peaks, as interpreted by Jeremy Collins in his expedition sketchbook. Several of the formations have had different names over the years.



Hank Jones on the Fortress during Goodman's second trip to the Vampire Spires. On that trip in 2003, Jones and Goodman freed Cornerstone (V 5.10 A2) with some variations: You Enjoy Myself (1,800' V 5.12).



The Fortress

Article Details

Author	Pat Goodman
Publication	AAJ
Volume	55
Issue	87
Page	88
Copyright Date	2013
Article Type	Feature article