



## AAC Publications

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### **Recon: The Cirque of the Unclimbables**

Far from unclimbable, these peaks and walls have lured climbers for more than 65 years. And there's much more to do.

**"Is OK? Is OK?"** The heavily accented voice crackled in the worn headset protecting my ears from the rattle-hum of the floatplane as we circled through dark clouds obscuring the peaks below. Judging from the firm grip on my knee, Spanish climber Eneko Pou was not enjoying the turbulence as we bounced through the sky, hoping to find landable conditions on Glacier Lake, airstrip for the legendary Cirque of the Unclimbables in the Northwest Territories.

Eneko and his brother Iker were heading in to attempt the second ascent of the Great Canadian Knife (VI 5.13b) on the stunning southeast face of Mt. Proboscis. It was the summer of 2000 and the weather, like many seasons before and many after, had been a bit temperamental. I had just spent a few weeks in the Cirque, hoping to climb the famed Lotus Flower Tower. Warren LaFave, bush pilot and owner of Kluane Air and the Inconnu Lodge, had picked up me and my climbing partner a few days before, but now he'd decided he needed an English-speaking "co-pilot" for the touchy conditions that day, so he pulled me from the lavish confines of his lodge and jammed me in the back of the plane for what turned out to be a pretty wild ride.

Incessant drizzle held hostage any view of the mountains above Glacier Lake as we taxied to shore. The Pou brothers brushed off the rowdy landing with grace as we pulled hundreds of pounds of gear from the plane. Soon a part in the clouds revealed the towering monoliths a few miles away. ¡Venga ya. Venga hombre! Not even the fog of mosquitoes could conceal the warmth of their smiles.

Whether approached by aircraft or overland, these intensely remote peaks foster a profound sense of adventure long before the rack leaves your pack. The Cirque of the Unclimbables (which is actually several cirques) is simply magical. The glacially carved walls and lush alpine meadows are similar in grandeur to those of Yosemite Valley. It's perhaps no coincidence that the mighty walls of both venues were once called "unclimbable," but now offer some of the most astounding rock climbs in the world.

### **EXPLORATION**

The Logan Mountains have attracted intrepid adventurers since the 1870s, when the Cassiar gold rush inspired the daring to travel by boat up the South Nahanni River in search of fortune. The Nahanni originates in the Mackenzie Mountains, the far northern extension of the Rockies, and winds south along the border of the Yukon and Northwest territories, passing close to the northern and eastern ramparts of the Logan Mountains before joining the Liard River some 350 miles to the south.

In the early 1930s the ostentatious oil and uranium tycoon Harry Snyder took advantage of the revolutionary floatplane to make the first recorded forays into the northern Logans; for a time, the intimidating batholithic intrusions in this area were known as the Snyder Mountains, but the name didn't stick. Ultimately they became known as the Ragged Range, a subrange of the Logan Mountains, which in turn is a subrange of the Mackenzie Mountains. Nearby Mt. Ida, named after Snyder's wife, and Brintnell Creek (which feeds Glacier Lake), named after his pilot, still hold their original names.

Climbers began exploring the area in 1952, when the Yale Logan Expedition, a party of six led by Dudley W. Bolyard, flew in to Glacier Lake (then known as Brintnell Lake) and made the first ascents of West Cathedral Peak and half a dozen peaks south of the Cirque, including Mt. Ida and Die Eisspitze. Bolyard's 1953 *Canadian Alpine Journal* article described "unlimited possibilities of virgin mountains rivaling the Alps and Cascades in grandeur and difficulty."

This inspired Arnold Wexler, a research engineer from New York who helped pioneer the idea of dynamic belaying and made the first ascent of nearly 50 Canadian mountains, to plan his own trip to the area. In 1955, after an aerial recon piloted by the famed George Dalziel, Wexler and his team decided to explore a cirque of granite peaks towering to the northwest of Glacier Lake. Upon closer inspection, Wexler declared most of the peaks "unclimbable," thus giving the Cirque its lyrical and enticing name. Nevertheless, he and his team completed the first ascent of Mt. Sir James MacBrien (the highest peak in the cirque, at 9,051 feet, and second-highest peak in the Northwest Territories, after Thunder Mountain). They also climbed Middle Cathedral Peak, Pentadactyl Spires, and the Echelon Spires, as well as a few other significant summits.

In 1960, a team led by the dauntless William "Bill" Buckingham followed Wexler's path to the Logans. Buckingham, a Wyoming mathematician and avid Tetons climber, would go on to make more than 50 first ascents in the Logan Range and create skillfully drawn maps and trip reports that continue to inspire climbers. Undoubtedly intrigued by Wexler's proclamation of a "Cirque of the Unclimbables," Buckingham and his team made this the focal point of a month-long visit, during which they named and climbed nearly every substantial summit in the area by way of clever and circuitous fourth- and easy fifth- class routes. Perhaps their greatest achievement was the first ascent of Mt. Proboscis. Described by Buckingham in *AAJ* 1961 as "rising like the dorsal fin of some great prehistoric beast," Proboscis hosts a proud 2,000-foot wall on the southeast face and has one of the toughest summits in the Logans. The 1960 south ridge route (IV 5.7 A2) remains a challenging endeavor to this day.

Buckingham's reference to "a mountain sheared in half" inspired the immensely talented climbers Layton Kor, Jim McCarthy, Dick McCracken, and Royal Robbins to pay Proboscis a visit in August 1963. Backed by the American Alpine Club, the team established the Original Route (VI 5.8 A4) up the southeast face, proving these massive walls were, in fact, quite climbable.

The next peak that lured climbers to the cirque was the soaring 2,000-foot pillar that Buckingham named Lotus Flower Tower after climbing it by way of the connecting ridge between Parrot Beak and Phenocryst. Lotus Flower's southeast-facing wall was impressively featured and lined with cracks, and Jim McCarthy returned for an attempt in August 1968 with Sandy Bill and Tom Frost. Over three days, the men followed a great line with flawless crack climbing, with an evening of entertainment (for two of the team) in which a bivouac hammock disintegrated. ("The sound of parting seams was drowned by Jim's cry of anguish," Bill wrote in the *AAJ*.) Their route was graded V 5.9 A1 and subsequently became one of Steck and Roper's *Fifty Classic Climbs of North America*—today it remains one of the most sought-after alpine objectives in North America.

Sandy Bill returned in 1973 with Joe Bridges, Laura Brant, James McCartney, and Galen Rowell to make the first ascents of Bustle Tower, via the west ridge (IV 5.9 A1), and Terrace Tower, via the northeast corner (III 5.6). They also made an impressive effort on the large southeast face of Parrot Beak, the last big unclimbed wall in the Cirque. (The wall was not climbed until 1981, when Canadians Perry Beckham, Scott Flavelle, Dave Lane, and Phil Hein finished the job.) More influential than the 1973 team's climbs was Rowell's brilliant photography and subsequent writing, which exposed the area to an international audience and ushered in an era of unprecedented popularity.

## **THE MODERN ERA**

In one single year, 1977, the number of recorded routes in the Cirque more than doubled. A big group of Austrian climbers came away with several substantial ascents. Gustav Ammerer, Karl Kosa, and Erwin Weilguny made the first ascent of the northeast face of Proboscis (V 5.9 A2). Erich Lackner,

Kosa, and Weilguny climbed the southwest wall on Flattop (IV 5.7 A1). Hilda and Rudi Lindner did the first ascent of Middle Huey Spire's south face (IV 5.9 A3) and also Phenocryst's big south buttress (IV 5.7 A1). Meanwhile, Belgian climbers Jacques Collaer, Renzo Lorenzi, and Jacques Ramouillet established a route up the largest section of wall on Bustle Tower's south face (VI 5.10 A1).

That same year, American climbers Steve Levin, Mark Robinson, and Sandy Stewart made the first free ascent of the 1968 south face route on Lotus Flower Tower (V 5.10+), creating a big-wall free climb accessible to many climbers—in an extraordinary location. This team also noted and removed large amounts of trash from both the route and the campsites in Fairy Meadows.

By the end of the 1980s, most of the big features in the Cirque had been climbed, and the next logical step was to start picking the plums between the older routes, with a focus primarily on free climbing. "The best rock climbers of the nineties are even more divided than those of my era in the sixties and seventies," wrote Galen Rowell in AAJ 1993. "However, today's antagonists are far less likely to be operating in the same arena. One discrete group trains almost exclusively for competition, while another pursues adventure on ultimate rock walls." Rowell persuaded Todd Skinner and Paul Piana to try to merge the two approaches in a free attempt on the southeast face of Proboscis in 1992. Their goal was the world's most continuously difficult alpine free climb.

Todd and Paul completed the first ascent of the Great Canadian Knife (VI 5.13b) after weeks of navigating through a sea of feldspar crystals and cracks; their line is outrageous when compared with older routes that follow naturally protected cracks—it follows a bolt-protected arête for nearly half its length. Two years later, Scott Cosgrove, Jeff Jackson, and Kurt Smith added another free route to this mighty wall, Yukon Tears (VI 5.12c). Although it follows a more natural line than Piana and Skinner's route, it too required a good deal of bolt-protected climbing.

As the new millennium began, however, climbers still found plenty of new routes and first free ascents without extensive bolting. In August 2001, Jonny Copp brought his legendary stoke to the Cirque, and he and Josh Wharton established Pecking Order (V+ 5.11 R) on the southeast face of Parrot Beak with only two bolts. They also managed the first free ascent of Via Costa Brava (VI 5.12 R) on Proboscis, on sight in nine hours, and a base-to-summit speed record on the Lotus Flower Tower of 4 hours 26 minutes. Timmy O'Neill joined Copp on Bustle Tower to make the first free ascent of Club International (V 5.11b), and Brooke Andrews joined him for the first ascent of Don't Get Piggy (V+ 5.12a), a significant variation to Club International.

Several other impressive first free ascents fell that same year, thanks to the efforts of Yan Mongrain and Jay Knowler, who opened the White Tower (III 5.11) and Light in August (IV 5.12-) on Terrace Tower. Mark Reeves and Steve Sinfield established the Hustler (V 5.10- R) on Phenocryst Spire that same season. Clearly, the Cirque still had solid offerings for the skilled and willing: The combined bolt count of every free route established that year was below that of Fitzcarraldo, a controversial and paradoxical German route put up just a few years earlier.

In the 1990s, German climber Kurt Albert had begun practicing what he perceived as a new twist on the alpine ideal of "fair means," by recanting motorized support while traveling into remote climbing venues. In July 1995, Albert partnered with Stefan Glowacz, Gerd Heidorn, and Leo Reitzner, parked their rental car at Flat Lakes, near the Tungsten Mine in Yukon Territory, then paddled canoes down the Little and South Nahanni rivers to the confluence of Brintnell Creek for approximately 80 miles, before setting off on another 13 miles of rugged foot travel. Their exit strategy would be to follow the overland path back to the South Nahanni River, where they would paddle another 250 miles to reach the Liard River. While in the Cirque, they established Fitzcarraldo (V 5.12b) on the north pillar of Mt. Harrison Smith, thus becoming the first group of modern climbers to eschew air support to open a big-wall route in the Cirque of the Unclimbables. Yet their loads included many pounds of bolts—they placed 50 on the 16-pitch route.

The approach by river and land has gained some popularity and offers guaranteed adventure in case

the weather limits climbing. In 2013, Tim Emmett and Sean Leary hatched an ambitious plan: They adopted the river and hike approach, but upped the ante by using stand-up paddleboards. After visiting the nearby Vampire Peaks and wingsuiting off Vampire Spire, they wanted to climb the Lotus Flower Tower and wingsuit off that one as well, but they had to settle for an impromptu skydive into the Cirque from the skids of a helicopter that happened to be in the area for geology work.

In recent years, all-female teams have begun having a significant impact in the Cirque. In 2009, European climbers Ines Papert and Lisi Steurer established Power of Silence (IV 5.13a) on Middle Huey Spire—this effort stands out to me as especially profound, partly because it's a fairly obvious crack line that went unclimbed for decades and also because the pair sent a route at this grade in the Cirque with only a handful of bolts. Papert and Steurer went on to make the first free ascent of Riders on the Storm (IV 5.12d) on East Huey Spire. In 2010, Lorna Illingworth, Madaleine Sorkin, and Emily Stifler established Women at Work (VI 5.12 R), a significant variation to the Via Costa Brava on Proboscis (itself a variation to the 1963 Original Route, climbed in 1992 by Spanish climbers Jose Maria Cadina and Joaquin Olmo at VI 5.11 A1). Women at Work recently has been the preferred free line on the wall.

## **CLIMBING POTENTIAL**

The Cirque of the Unclimbables is not climbed out. The southeast faces of Tara Tower and Tathagata both appear to offer clean granite and have no recorded free routes. Phenocryst's big south buttress (IV 5.7 A1) begs to be free climbed, and Mt. Contact has only one recorded route, Piton Karmik (VI 5.10b A3), established in 2001 by Thierry Bionda, Denis Burdet, and Antonin Guenat; Contact's big, clean southeast face would be all the rage if not for its towering neighbor Proboscis.

In the right conditions—and for the right climbers—the Cirque could be a gold mine for ridge traverses and summit linkups. The most obvious traverse would start up the northeast face of Proboscis then ramble north along knife-edge ridges connecting Flat Top, Mt. Meringue, Phenocryst, Tara Tower, Lotus Flower Tower, Tathagata, and Parrot Beak, and eventually end on the summit of Sir James MacBrien. This would cover about five miles, with more than 4,500 feet of vertical gain, and would require at least 10 new pitches on uncharted terrain.

Not far southwest of the Cirque, the area between Mt. Ida (scene of the first recorded climbs in the Ragged Range) and Mt. Sidney Dobson offers an incredible amount of unexplored vertical terrain. Though the walls of this zone are not as extensive as those in the Cirque, they are not dissimilar in quality and height—and undoubtedly offer more solitude. See a glimpse of the potential in the video below.

The boulders of the Cirque might deserve a visit in themselves. In the summer of 2000, I flew in with a certain boulderer known as Verm, and our supplies included a few crash pads as well as a haul bag full of beer; we finished all the beer, but a few of the boulder problems were left unopened.

## **LOGISTICS**

After all the buzzing activity of the 1980s and '90s, the Cirque was looking a bit disheveled. In August 2000, the Alpine Club of Canada, American Alpine Club, and the Inconnu Lodge hosted the Cirque Project to remove piles of abandoned rubbish and install a much-needed pit toilet in Fairy Meadows, base camp for the Cirque. Bolt-protected sport climbs had begun to pepper many of the Meadows' enormous boulders, and loads of old tat and a few erroneous sport climbs were removed at this time.

In June 2009 the Cirque came under the protection of Nahanni National Park Reserve, which now includes the Ragged Range and nearby Vampire Peaks, making Nahanni the third-largest national park in Canada. The park service has since updated the pit toilet in Fairy Meadows and redirected and vastly improved the approach trail from Glacier Lake.

Climbers tend to visit the Cirque for a few weeks in August, which historically offers the most stable weather. The bugs have abated a bit and you still get 18-plus hours of daylight. That said, climbers have visited the Cirque as early as June and as late as October. The bugs can be horrible in July, and snowpack can be an issue, but 24 hours of daylight is a real bonus. September offers a nearly bug-free experience and a solid opportunity to see the aurora borealis, but the days are cold and quite short, plus the season can end abruptly when snow starts to fall.

If you only have a few weeks to visit the Cirque, with no desire for extra discomfort, I suggest air support. Kluane Airways has been flying people into the Ragged Range for more than 20 years. Warren LaFave, the owner, loves the character climbers bring to his world-class fishing and recreational resort, the Inconnu Lodge. Accommodations at the Inconnu upon return from the mountains are generally included with the flight cost—this place is nearly as awe-inspiring as the Cirque. The lodge is about 87 air miles from the Cirque, which means an hour of airtime to Glacier Lake. The trail from the lake to Fairy Meadows climbs about 1,500 feet and takes most heavily loaded folks four to six hours. Helicopter charters eliminate most of the hiking, but the flights are expensive; contact Kluane Airways for pricing and availability: 1-250-860- 4187; info@kluaneairways.com; kluaneairways.com.

If you have a flexible schedule and a strong affinity for adventure, you can access the Cirque via the Little (class IV) and South Nahanni rivers (class II). Most people use canoes or kayaks, but I have jammed three people and gear into a single 10-foot raft with great success. The float trip takes four to six days and will require another day or so of hiking from the river to Glacier Lake, then up to the cirque (12-plus miles). Once finished climbing, you can take a floatplane from Glacier Lake (recommended) or continue paddling down the South Nahanni River (class III) for three to six more days.

Nahanni National Park Reserve requires visitors to the Cirque to check in and out and buy a permit; in 2017, the fee was \$147.20/person (CDN). To register for a backcountry permit, email nahanni.info@pc.gc.ca or phone 1-867-695-3151.

Fairy Meadows is home to whistle pigs and ground squirrels that will ravage your food if you leave it out. Glacier Lake is frequented by bears, and Fairy Meadows is not that far for them to wander, so plan accordingly (hang food/trash and keep a clean campsite). The mosquitoes are ravenous, especially by the lake; head nets and bug spray will help keep you sane. You might want to filter your water to avoid what Yukoners call “the beaver fever.”

It’s essential to practice “leave no trace” in this beautiful place. There is a pit toilet—use it! Stay on established trails, try not to create new campsites, and, although some folks burn trash, I strongly advise against this practice. For the love of all things special, pack it out.

**About the Author:** Pat Goodman, 39, has made nine trips to the Ragged Range, including two visits to the Cirque of the Unclimbables. He lives in Fayetteville, West Virginia.

## Images



Ines Papert and Lisi Steurer making the first free ascent of Riders on the Storm, East Huey Spire.

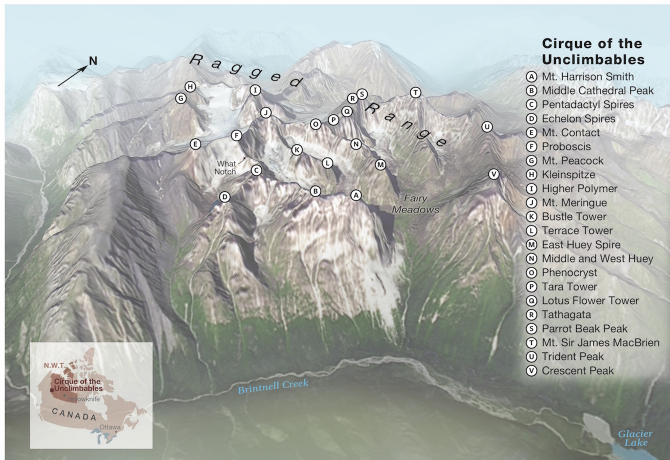


Flying over the Cirque.



Scott Adamson checks out the bouldering around Fairy Meadows, with Mt. Harrison Smith behind.





The Cirque is usually approached by a floatplane to Glacier Lake (lower right) and a stiff hike to Fairy Meadows. Scale varies in this perspective view. The horizontal distance between Glacier Lake and Lotus Flower Tower is about 4.2 miles (6.7km).



David Fay moving up the spectacular 1968 route on Lotus Flower Tower's south face. The rock is peppered with knobs, making for enjoyable free climbing.



The Cirque of the Unclimbables under a late-summer aurora borealis.



During the 1963 first ascent of the southeast face of Proboscis.



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