



AAC Publications

Tara Tower, The Source

Canada, Northwest Territories, Cirque of the Unclimbables

THE TRIP STARTED as a 10-year-old dream of Luke Holloway's, one of my longest climbing partners: Boat the Little Nahanni and South Nahanni rivers to Brintnell Creek, hike into the Cirque of the Unclimbables, then boat the Nahanni for another 100 miles to the Unesco World Heritage Site at Virginia Falls. Luke used to be a river guide and had always dreamed of combining boating and climbing. I signed on immediately because it sounded like a great adventure. I didn't know much about boating, and the unknown was alluring.

The plan was to start at the headwaters of the Little Nahanni on the west edge of the MacKenzie Mountains. This approach to the Cirque of the Unclimbables had been pioneered by Kurt Albert and crew in 1995. Luke, Carmen Cross Johnson, Colleen Weeks, and I got dropped off by floatplane at Flat Lakes on July 28. It had rained every day of the month, and the river was nearly at flood stage. The pilot who dropped us off, Warren LaFave, told us that the rivers were as big as he had ever seen them; in fact, he had just rescued some canoeists attempting to boat the Little Nahanni.

We inflated our 11-foot white-water raft and put in. Over the next four days, we boated 90 miles of amazing class 4 white water down the Little Nahanni. Another day of flat water on the South Nahanni River, with a sweet downriver wind, deposited us at the inflow of Brintnell Creek, 140 miles from where we had started.

We packed up the raft (it weighed about 85 pounds), picked up our gear, and hiked six miles through the bush to Glacier Lake. Hiking through shin-deep bog and moss with these backbreaking loads was brutal—one of the longest six miles I have ever done. We shouted and talked the whole way for fear of spooking a grizzly in the thick bush.

Finally we arrived at Glacier Lake, the usual drop-off point for visitors to the Cirque of the Unclimbables. Here our friend Pat Goodman joined us with the climbing gear and the ladies flew out and began their journey home. Pat, Luke, and I then spent about four weeks exploring the Cirque of the Unclimbables.

When we arrived in the cirque (a four-mile and 3,000-vertical-foot ass-kicker of a hike in its own right) we had been on the go for two weeks, boating and hiking every day without a rest. But the weather was splitter, and so Luke and I immediately headed up to climb the famous Lotus Flower Tower.

After repeating a few more routes and finally enjoying some forced rest days due to rain and snow, we all started exploring Tara Tower, the tower immediately to the left of Lotus Flower. It held two old aid routes and hardly any recorded history. We began working on free climbing the tower whenever weather permitted. We had a mix of conditions, but over the next few weeks, climbing in poor and cold weather, we managed the first free ascent of the Tara Tower, establishing a superb route that deserves to become a classic: The Source, 13 pitches, V 5.12. Our line starts on the original route up the southeast face (Loeks-Putnam, 1975, VI 5.9 A3) and then breaks right after a couple of pitches and climbs independently to the top. [The other route on the face, the Eric Weinstein Memorial Route (Austrom-Down, 1984, VI 5.10 A3) is farther to the right.] The team spent four days working on the route; we freed all the pitches but ran out of time before making a continuous free ascent. We placed six protection bolts and bolted rappel anchors.

Finally the weather shut down entirely the first week of September and the snow level was set to drop 3,000 feet. We broke camp, shouldered 100-pound loads, and hiked back to Glacier Lake. Pat flew out of the mountains with our climbing gear and another team. Luke and I had decided to stick with the original plan, checking all of the "what if" pipedream objectives we had laid out at the beginning.

The next day we paddled across Glacier Lake and dropped into Brintnell Creek for 10 miles of serious class 5 white water. The boating starts with back-to-back big drops (10 and 25 feet) that you have to run in sequence, as there is nowhere to stop between them. With just the two of us and a single boat, it made for a very serious day. I was fully trusting Luke with my life, and he was trusting me to hit my strokes and stay in the boat. But with 40-plus rivers and hundreds of class 5 drops under his belt, Luke was fully in his element. We managed to stomp the lines and complete the first raft descent of Brintnell Creek (it had been kayaked at least once, in 2001, by Will Gadd and team).

Finally we joined the Nahanni once more and continued south for 100 miles to Virginia Falls, our final destination. We arrived there only to find out that plane troubles would not allow a pickup for an additional two days, so we rationed our food and spent a hungry couple of days waiting for our ride and enjoying the massive and unique waterfall.

– David Allfrey, USA

Images



Luke Holloway starting the upper headwall on the first free route up Tara Tower, a neighbor of Lotus Flower Tower in the Cirque of the Unclimbables.



Luke Holloway, a former river guide, led the first raft descent of Brintnell Creek to depart the Cirque of the Unclimbables.



The southeast face of Tara Tower. (1) Loeks-Putnam, 1975. (2) The Source (13 pitches, V 5.12, 2017). (3) Eric Weinstein Memorial Route (1984).



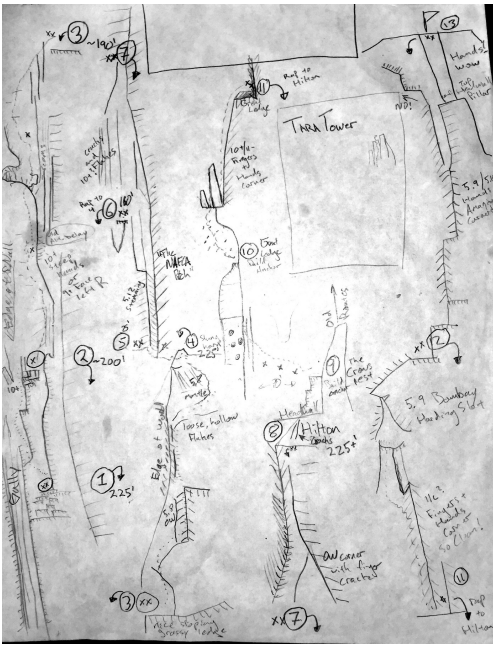
Luke Holloway leading pitch six of the Source on Tara Tower.



Looking up the southeast face of Tara Tower.



Luke Holloway on pitch three of the Source on Tara Tower.



Top for the Source (V 5.12) on Tara Tower.

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