



## The Big Wall Belt

Three Huge New Walls—And a Whole Lot of Potential—in the Coast Mountains of British Columbia

### INTRODUCTION

By Chris Kalman

**IN THE SPRING OF 2017, I was looking for something big, remote, and wild to climb in the upcoming summer, but I didn't have the time or money for a place like the Ruth, Baffin, or Karakoram.** I knew that a 50-pitch rock route had been climbed on Mt. Bute in the Coast Mountains, not too far from Vancouver, and I figured there just had to be good granite between there and Squamish. So I hopped on Google Earth and started playing with the controls—zooming, panning, spinning, adjusting the angle. Suddenly my jaw hit the keyboard. What the hell was *that*? The somewhat distorted imagery seemed to show a sheer buttress of white rock jutting 1,400 meters into the sky. The shade from that apparent rocket ship of stone, and some nearby peaks, cast an entire valley into toothy darkness. Not knowing any other name for the place, I called it the Dark Valley.

A few months later, my friends Miranda Oakley and Austin Siadak and I crested the snowcone summit of that massive buttress in the last golden light of a long summer day. What had started as a deep dive into Google Earth's vortex of pipe dreams and half-baked ideas had somehow manifested into the biggest first ascent—actually, so far, the biggest ascent—of my life.

But if I was surprised at our success, I was downright flabbergasted to discover, not long after our return from the Dark Valley, that two *other* first ascents of roughly the same length had just been done, not far to the south. Upon further research, I came to learn that the valley we'd visited was merely the tip of a very large, very exciting iceberg. I have taken to calling it the Big Wall Belt of Canada.

The Big Wall Belt runs along the western flank of the vast, sprawling, and seldom-traveled Coast Mountains, extending generally northwest from Squamish for several hundred miles, all the way to the Alaska border. To come up with a reasonable estimate of the amount of exposed and climbable rock here would require data modeling tools far beyond my comprehension and a helicopter with an unlimited fuel budget. But spend a few minutes on Google Earth exploring the area shown in the map found with this story. You see those seemingly endless granite walls lining deeply bifurcated valleys and alpine gorges? Most of them are unclimbed. Now multiply what you see there by the entire Pacific Coast of Canada.

The most developed portion of the Big Wall Belt is undoubtedly the Eldred Valley, northeast of the town of Powell River. Climbing there dates back to 1988, when Rob Richards and his brother Casey put up Psychopath (600m, V 5.10+) on Psyche Slab. In 1993, Richards brought Yosemite big-wall tactics to the valley when he and Colin Dionne climbed West Main Wall in capsule style over seven days, establishing Mainline (VI 5.11 A4). Six years later, Matt Maddaloni and John Millar spent three weeks in the valley establishing Funk Soul Brother (12 pitches, VI 5.10 A4+) on Carag Dur. Later that season, Aaron Black and Dionne teamed up to climb Amon Rûdh—Black would go on to make at least four trips to the Eldred, eventually partnering with Sean Easton to climb Call of the Granite (23 pitches, V 5.12 C1) on West Main Wall in 2005.

In the years since, the Eldred has matured as a climbing destination, though it remains rarely visited. It can even be found on Mountain Project, and was described in greater detail in the *Climbers Guide to Powell River* (Chris Armstrong, 2002). Still, the Eldred is anything but climbed out. In 2014, the 500m West Main Buttress finally saw its first route with Brent Goodman and Matt Hodgson's *Against the Current* (500m, V 5.11+ C1). Rob Richards himself was still at it in 2017, nearly 30 years after he authored the Eldred's first route, climbing Mormegil (500m, 5.10 C1) on Amon Rûdh with Evan Guilbault and Matt Hodgson. According to Guilbault, 30-plus pitches were added to Amon Rûdh in 2017. More importantly, logging projects threatening old-growth forests surrounding Amon Rûdh were postponed in early spring of 2018 for two years due to public pressure.

Less than 20 miles northwest of the Eldred as the crow flies is a much less-visited region called the Daniels River Valley. In the 1985 *Canadian Alpine Journal*, the prolific Coast Mountains explorer John Clarke described the Daniels as "the most beautiful arctic alpine wilderness, studded with lakes, small glaciers, and heather ridges." He noted that the upper valley hosted enormous cliffs, one of which he estimated at 3,500 feet high. "This is probably the least traveled area within a hundred miles of Vancouver," he said, "a marvelous stretch of wilderness, still left to the goats, wolverines, and ravens." Clarke extolled the Daniels in the *CAJ* again in 1990, even sharing a picture of a huge and attractive wall. But nobody took the bait until 1998, when wall before bailing. The first complete Daniels River wall climb wasn't done until last summer.

Why, exactly, three separate expeditions into hitherto untouched corners of the Big Wall Belt took place in a single two-month span in 2017, after receiving almost no attention during the three decades since John Clarke described them in print, is beyond me.

What I do know, after talking to the instigators of the other two expeditions last summer, is that there were certain immutable truths of climbing in the Big Wall Belt that we all experienced. There are grizzlies. There are bushy cracks. Rainstorms come in quickly and ferociously. The rock is impeccable. The walls are really big. We also came away from our journeys all parroting the same wide-eyed message: There are a hell of a lot more walls out there to be climbed.

Chris Kalman is an associate editor of the *AAJ* and author of the books *As Above, So Below* and *The Index Town Walls: A Guide to Washington's Finest Crag*.

## **ANSWERING CLARKE'S CALL: THE FIRST ASCENT OF RED ALERT WALL**

**By Travis Foster**

**"RED ALERT... Red Alert... Rock climbers: There's a 3,500-foot granite cliff on the south side of the upper Daniels. Go do it. Red Alert... This is not a drill."**

That was the call to arms that John Clarke wrote nearly 30 years ago in the 1990 *Canadian Alpine Journal*. Yet, to our knowledge, the wall in question had seen only one attempt since then, in 1998, when Damon Kessell and a bevy of less experienced partners made it a third of the way up the face on two separate occasions.

In July 2017, Drew Leiterman and I decided to answer Clarke's call. After an exchange with some friendly loggers in a currency found most agreeable at the top of Powell Lake—a case of Lucky Lager beer—Drew and I were dropped off approximately 10 kilometers away from our soon-to-be base camp in the Daniels Valley by a lumberjack we took to calling "Steve: Man-of-the-Daniels." Steve told us that every now and then a grizzly will come over the ridge into the Daniels from the Toba Inlet and be "pissed right off" to find no salmon. He had found three dead black bears one year. Imagine our terror when, our very first night in the valley, a black bear came sidehilling through the alder with a full-grown grizzly thundering after him! Neither of them paid much attention to us, but we each slept with one eye open that night.

We spent a few days cutting trail and hauling all of our food and gear to the base of the Red Alert Wall, which faces west on the south side of the southwest-to-northeast-angling valley. The first 570 meters of our chosen line climbs what we called the Miami Slabs. (The name comes from a song by the band Against Me! that bears the same title and, more importantly, the same feeling.) It took us two long days to climb and haul these pitches. By 11 p.m. on the second night, we staggered onto a long bench we named the Halfway Highway (even though it's only about a third of the way up). The next morning, after a well-deserved sleep-in and a nice breakfast, we deliberated about what to do next. We decided to stash a bunch of gear here and continue, not exactly "fast and light" but at least a little less encumbered. We used the remaining daylight to fix ropes and prepare ourselves to launch the next morning.

For the first time since we arrived in the valley, the air felt heavy that night. Just to be safe, we rigged the portaledge's fly off a cam, but we left the ledge in its bag. Predictably enough, at some ungodly hour we woke to the rain, which seemed to be laughing at us. We dashed to the fly and wrapped ourselves in it like a blanket, passing the rest of the night trying to sit-sleep. As soon as it sounded like the rain had abated, we moved our condensation-soaked selves to action and rigged the portaledge properly. In the morning it was still raining on and off, so we took the opportunity for more sleep and woke around noon. It was evening before things dried off enough to even think about climbing.

On the fifth day we woke early and juggled and hauled up to our high point. For nearly 400 meters we followed a massive right-facing corner system of mostly clean, mostly fun free climbing, and rigged camp at the top of the corner. The next morning we slept through our alarms, and once awake we agreed that simply to push our three ropes up would be enough to call the day a success. Ahead of us was the biggest question mark of the route, a section we called the Choss Band.

We spent the entire next day trying to surmount the Choss Band. Drew started aiding, sticking to the route we had planned from the valley, but it proved too wet and tricky, so he down-aided and decided to try free climbing up and left instead. From the top of his pitch, I continued on the same trajectory through fun and balancey face climbing, with thin protection in small cracks and flakes.

We started our seventh day on the wall with jugging to our new high point and then making a 70-meter, straight-right traverse across the top of the Choss Band. This was followed by another full rope length through easy terrain heading up and right. Figuring out how to haul these traversing pitches was interesting, to say the least. Eventually we were able to make our high camp underneath a pair of arches that looked like a great frown, just above the Choss Band. The next day we fixed our three ropes up the nearly vertical, 340-meter expanse of stone we named the Incredible Headwall. The top looked agonizingly close, but after some difficult free and aid climbing we elected to return to camp and blast for the summit in the morning.

At 7 a.m. on July 14, our ninth day on the wall, we were back at our high point and ready to fire to the top. We hoped to be back at high camp for lunch. Unfortunately, the Incredible Headwall had a different idea. What had looked to be cruiser climbing turned out to be more wet and thoughtful aid—the summit pitch took hours inside a saturated and mostly crackless left-facing corner. After some slimy small-nut placements and delicate hooks, I top-stepped on a perfect horn, grabbed some thick branches, and gleefully swam through the foliage to gain the summit at 5 p.m.

After our special bro moments on top, a bite to eat, and some photos for our moms we started to rappel. We hand-drilled a single-bolt rap route until the Halfway Highway, where we were able to continue on with the descent line installed by the 1998 party. It took us two days to return to the base.

I am under no illusion that this was by any means a world-class ascent, but it sure was a good time. And for two bush-league believers on their first big wall, we certainly impressed ourselves.

**Summary:** First ascent of the Red Alert Wall in the Daniels River Valley by the route Jungle is Massive (1,290m, 25 pitches, VI 5.10 C2).

**About the Author:** Travis Foster grew up with Drew Leiterman in Cranbrook, BC, skipping classes to do kick flips then, quitting work to go climbing now.

## **SACRED STONE: A JOURNEY INTO THE SUPERUNKNOWN**

**By Evan Guilbault**

**1995. Powell River climbing legends** Rob and Casey Richards are deep in the Daniels River Valley doing forestry work. Soundgarden's "Super Unknown" blares from the speakers as they turn a corner 25 kilometers in. Out of heavy clouds, a giant appears. More than 1,200 meters of granite soars above them. Super Unknown, they agree, is a fitting name.

Rob and Casey were both in their prime at the time, but for reasons I still don't understand, they never attempted the wall. In fact, nobody did. In 2016, I made a recon mission with my friends Colin Landeck, Max Merkin, and Cameron Moustaffi to see the valley I had been dreaming of for three years. On that first trip, we did nothing other than clear out the old logging road that goes to the base of the Red Alert Wall. Filled with priceless beta, I returned to my home base in the Eldred for the remainder of the season. But the stage was set for Colin and my return the following year.

On August 4, we left the beautiful seaside town of Powell River, traditional territory of the Tla'amin and Klahoose First Nations, to venture deep into our backyard. Our friend Norbert and his wife ferried us across Powell Lake and left us alone with two bikes, 100 kilos of gear, and 25 kilometers of logging road to travel to access the Daniels. The first crux of our trip was simply figuring out how to get all of our stuff from point A to point B. For us, the answer entailed cutting down nearby alders to build a sturdy "rickshaw" with our mountain bikes.

With the gear hoisted between the two bikes, and Colin and myself jogging alongside the makeshift vehicle, we traveled 16 kilometers in four hours, which was far more efficient than we had hoped. Beyond there, the road became brushy, so we resorted to shuttling loads the final eight kilometers to Stokemaster Camp, directly beneath the improbably long, white tongue of granite that marks the base of the Super Unknown, which faces northwest on the south side of the valley.

By noon on August 5 we had all of our gear at camp. Organized and comfortably gawking from our hammocks at these stone sentinels, we began building the trail to the wall that evening. We macheted a path to the river, which was fast-moving but only calf-deep and easy to cross. The next day we made our way through the majestic groves of ancient cedars that led to the base of the wall: 400 meters of shimmering, glacier-polished slabs extending from valley floor to the base of our intended route and onward into the sky. With a glimpse from the toe of the wall, we headed home for a final dinner full of "who knows" talk.

By 8 p.m on August 7, Colin and I had lines fixed up to the slabs to our first bivy. Game on. In the morning, Colin wove up 120 meters of foreshortened slabs to the base of the Multi-Corners—six perfect corner systems all stacked atop one another. I took over, leading up and over the Gusher Gulley, which was as sweet as the fruit candies for which it's named, split by clean, impeccable crack and corner systems. We set up camp on top of pitch six, underneath a 300-meter-tall overhanging amphitheater of stone.

The next morning started mellow, but two pitches into the day I found myself pulling 5.10+ mantels above tiny cams and stoppers that probably would not have held a fall. Beautiful finger cracks took me to a tree belay 60 meters higher. Above us, a Jurassic mass of thimbleberries and devil's club clung to the cliff, 600 meters off the valley floor. Colin led a wild jungle pitch, slashing his way through

head-high vegetation with an ice axe we'd brought specifically for this purpose.

Colin gently nailed his way up pitch ten: a flawless, 35-meter, off-vertical finger crack in a corner—perhaps the most beautiful pitch of the climb. Atop a comfortable belay pedestal, he handed me the rack as daylight disappeared. “It’s 30 feet of 5.5,” he told me, referring to the upcoming ledge system where we planned to bivvy. What followed was a full 60 meters of jamming and stemming—more like 5.8. We finished the pitch by headlamp and began the night’s gardening, hacking the devil’s club out of our bivvy for two.

As day three dawned, we found ourselves smack dab in the most intimidating section of the wall. Our water was running low, and we still had hundreds of meters of unknown technical terrain to cover. Surrounded by overhanging crack systems, we simply had to have faith and trust our abilities. We decided to leave our bivvy gear and head out light and fast for a summit push.

The morning started with a pendulum into another steep corner system. Some bouldery moves off the belay connected beautiful features up to the Rickshaw Ramp, a third-class path right in the middle of intimidating steep terrain. The ramp was our salvation, taking us onto the Golden Headwall, where the angle of the wall eases and moderate corner systems appear by the dozen. The terrain all started to blend together as we swapped leads for 14 pitches, mostly clean, straightforward corner cracks, with a couple of steep bulges that were easily aided. We felt like we were flowing up this behemoth of stone, committed to the top.

Around 9 p.m. on August 10, just as the sky was lit on fire, Colin and I topped out the Super Unknown. We ecstatically embraced and ran to the true summit. We had just climbed a dream route: ground-up, no bolts, 27 pitches!

**Summary:** First ascent of the northwest face of the Super Unknown formation in the Daniels River Valley by the route Sacred Stone (1,200m, 27 pitches including a 100-meter 3rd-class ramp, VI 5.10 A1). The crux 10th pitch was later freed at 5.11.

**About the Author:** Born in Vancouver, B.C. Evan Guilbault spends his summers in the Coast Mountains with his partner, Zoe, climbing walls, bushwhacking, and rambling on ridges.

## THE DARK VALLEY: A THREE-WEEK TRIP DEEP INTO THE COAST MOUNTAINS

By Austin Siadak

“That thing is taller than El Cap.”

“Definitely.”

Gulp.

During a late-night Google Earth binge, Chris Kalman had found a deep coastal valley filled with waterfalls and massive granite faces that had never been visited by climbers. Was I interested? Of course. We quickly added our friend and crack aficionado Miranda Oakley as a rope gun. In early July, we secured permission from the chief of the First Nation that presides over this land, but only on the condition that we not divulge the exact location. On July 9, on a gray British Columbia morning, we boarded a helicopter, bound for what we had come to call the Dark Valley.

Given the massive unknowns of new-routing in a remote valley where nobody had ever climbed before, we conservatively chose to climb in capsule style. We fixed 300 meters of rope on a day of clear weather and then returned a couple of days later with enough supplies for four days on the wall.

As Chris and Miranda pushed the rope up the wall, I took the lion's share of the big-wall toiling, jugging and hauling our packs up lines fixed by the other two, and building level sleeping platforms out of jumbled blocks and uneven ledges. The climbing was generally easier than we had expected, though often surrounded or covered by abundant shrubbery, especially on the lower third of the wall. At the end of our third day, we found ourselves perched on a beautiful bench system a little less than two-thirds of the way up the mountain, roughly 850 meters off the deck. We organized gear in the setting sun, enjoyed a small campfire on our ledge, and fell asleep beneath a billion stars twinkling above.

In the middle of the pitch-black night, I was jolted awake as raindrops hit my face. Within 30 seconds, a sprinkle turned into a torrential downpour and water cascaded down the rock all around us. We sketchily stumbled up the slick stone to a protected bed of heather and huddled in a pile beneath a tarp, the only thing we had brought for shelter. I shivered uncontrollably as rain pelted down from above and we sipped hot drinks to warm our frozen cores.

We slept late into the next morning and spent hours drying out our soaked gear. By midday the weather seemed to have stabilized and I was getting antsy. It was very late to start a summit push, but the terrain above looked less steep—even 3rd class in parts. At the very least we could begin scouting.

Around 3 p.m. we headed upward. The ridge above our bivy was as easy as it looked, and we soloed long sections up to low 5th class, interspersed with steep heather and a healthy dose of vertical bushwhacking. Higher, we pulled out the rope and I led a few pitches up stepped buttresses, moving quickly in the waning daylight. Soon we were dodging snow-filled ledges and cracks, and I knew we must be close. We trudged up a long snow slope and could suddenly see down into the valley on the other side. We were on top. We hooted and hollered in disbelief and took a bunch of photos of the valley and the mind-blowing sunset light that filtered in from the west.

We made our way back to our bivy in twilight, mostly rapping from trees and bushes. When we finally settled in to sleep, exhausted from the day, we noticed a white glow to the north that seemed to be city lights. Wait a minute, I thought, pulling my sluggish brain through oncoming delirium, there's no city to the north. We watched in awe as ghostly curtains of white light danced in the darkness.

With time waning in the trip, and Miranda sick, Chris and I summited another unclimbed peak on the other side of the valley in a 20-hour push. The climbing was unremarkable, though not bad, as we mostly simul-climbed about 600 meters of 5.9 and easier to the top. The views were unparalleled. The descent was arduous, taking longer than the climb itself.

When we returned to civilization, I hopped on the Internet to try and confirm a hunch. Indeed, in July 2017 a rare meteorological event had sent an aurora borealis streaming as far south as Vancouver. We unanimously agreed on a name for the mountain: Aurora Peak, climbed via the Northwest Passage.

**Summary:** First ascent of the north face of Aurora Peak: Northwest Passage (1,430m, VI 5.11- R A0). The team placed one bolt and pulled on it for the sole aid move of the climb. First ascent of the east face of Mt. Shangri-La by Yacht Rock (ca 600m, IV 5.9).

**About the Author:** Austin Siadak is a climber and photographer originally from Seattle, now based near steep walls and remote summits around the American West.



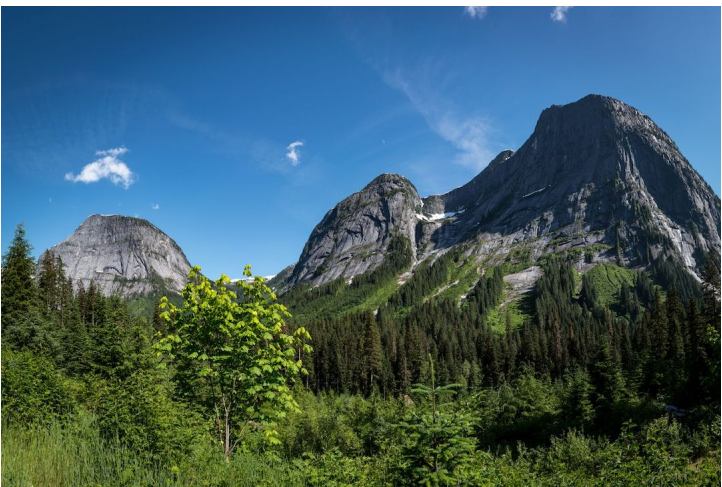
## Images



A 60km ride across Powell Lake is part of the approach to the Daniels Valley.



Hacking an approach trail in the Daniels Valley.



The south-side walls of the Daniels River Valley (left to right): Red Alert, Chico Flaco, and Super Unknown. Sacred Stone climbs the dark cleft on the right side of Super Unknown before moving to the right skyline. Chico Flaco awaits an ascent.





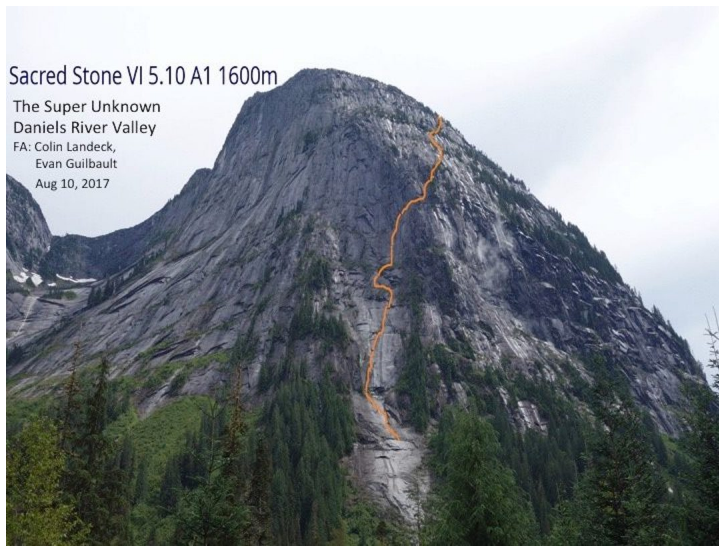
A mountain bike “rickshaw” was used to haul equipment 16 kilometers en route to Super Unknown.



Evan Guilbault returned to the Daniels after the first ascent to free the 10th pitch of Sacred Stone, an amazing 5.11b finger crack.



Travis Foster starts the 25th and final pitch of Jungle is Massive, a wet, challenging corner that took hours to aid on the ninth day of the climb.



The route line for Sacred Stone on the Super Unknown formation.



The Eldred and Daniels valleys are accessed from the isolated town of Powell River, BC. To the north, the "Big Wall Belt" extends for hundreds of miles. Map sources: NASA, Government of Canada.



Jungle is Massive (1,290m, VI 5.10 C2) on the Red Alert Wall.



Miranda Oakley climbing on Northwest Passage.



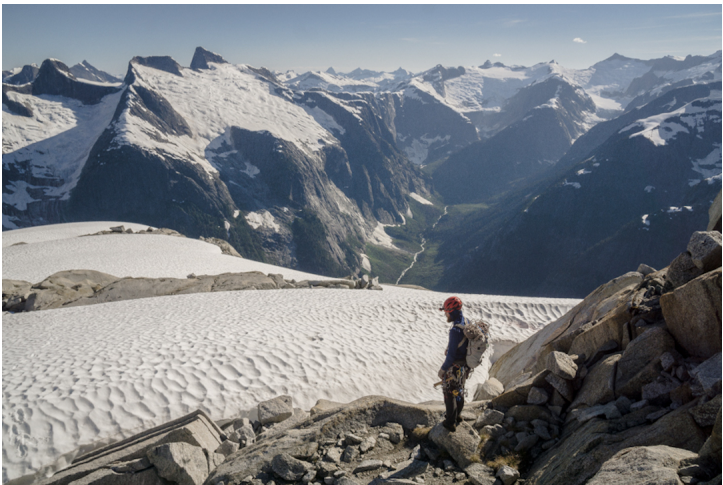
Chris Kalman exploring new ground in the "Dark Valley."



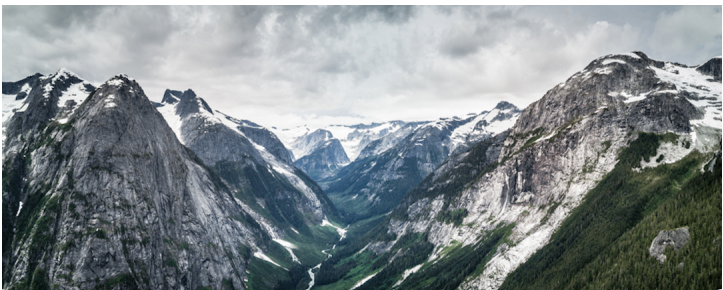
Miranda Oakley and Chris Kalman settle in for their second night on the wall during the first ascent of Northwest Passage.



Chris Kalman forges up a vegetated wide crack, 800 meters up the Northwest Passage.



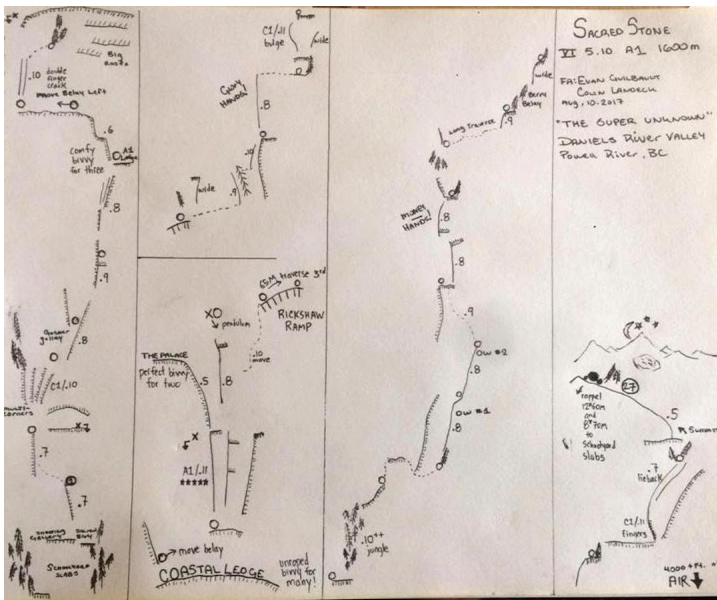
View from above the "Dark Valley" in British Columbia.



The beautiful "Dark Valley." The Northwest Passage climbs Aurora Peak (front left) by the low apron leading to the right shoulder, then up the ridge to the summit. Mt. Shangri-La (front right) was climbed by the clean swath of stone cutting through the jungle on the right, then straight up to the summit.



Travis Foster takes in the view from the top of the Red Alert Wall in the Daniels River Valley after the first ascent. The wall in back, Super Unknown, was climbed just a few weeks later.



Topo for Sacred Stone on the Super Unknown formation in the Daniels River Valley of British Columbia.

## Article Details

Author	Chris Kalman, Travis Foster, Evan Guilbault, and Austin Siadak
Publication	AAJ
Volume	60
Issue	92
Page	82
Copyright Date	2018
Article Type	Feature article