



AAC Publications

Elkhorn Mountain, East Ridge, Bull Elk

Canada, British Columbia, Vancouver Island, Elk River Mountain Range

Elkhorn Mountain (2,194m)—located in the Elk River Mountain Range of Strathcona Provincial Park—is the second-highest peak on Vancouver Island and has a reputation for being loose and chossy. This is especially true of the northwest and west aspects of the mountain. But, as I found out with my partner Mike Ford, the east face is a whole other story.

The east face has seen a handful of climbs over the years, the first of which was Al Harrison's impressive solo effort from 1975, climbing out of the East Glacier somewhere west of the east ridge. Harrison called the route 5.5, but he is a reputed sandbagger. In 1985, Tim Rippel soloed the first ascent of the northeast face (400m, 5.7), east of the east ridge. Sometime in the 1980s, the legendary Greg Foweraker attempted to climb the full east ridge but didn't get far due to weather and a less than keen partner.

In 1993, Philip Stone and Greg Shea established Into the Sadistic (500m, 5.10b), which started on the East Glacier between Harrison's route and the east ridge and ended at the upper east ridge, without summiting. In 2016, Stone returned with Ryan Van Horne and Hunter Lee to try to finish what Foweraker had started; they climbed about ten pitches left of the east ridge proper before pulling the plug at a steep notch and rappelling down Into the Sadistic. In spite of strong suitors, the full east ridge (the longest and most prominent line on that side of the mountain) awaited a complete ascent.

On August 5, at 6:30 a.m., Mike Ford and I started following Al Harrison's footsteps, bushwhacking up the Cervus Creek jungle for five hours before finally popping out into the alpine and getting our first real view of the full east ridge. It looked huge, complex, intimidating, and probably devoid of water. We loaded our packs with 4.5 liters and started climbing around 12:30 p.m.

We began at the toe of the east ridge, approximately 400m below and climber's right of the East Glacier. The first six pitches of our climb followed a huge right-facing dihedral on beautiful compact stone, with difficulties up to 5.9. The next few hundred meters of climbing flowed easily, slowly getting steeper, more exposed, and aesthetic on good stone. Midway up the ridge we found a steep headwall with a variety of crack features. We climbed the leftmost, finding the terrain steep, positive, and a bit heady. There was 500m of air under me as I pulled what turned out to be the crux pitch (5.10).

The climbing continued to be fun and engaging for the rest of the day, mostly falling in the 5.8 to 5.9 range. We stopped climbing as the sun was leaving the sky around 9:15 p.m., laid out our little foam butt pads and light sleeping bags on a small vegetated ledge, and fell asleep.

We woke with the sunrise, heated the rest of our water for yerba mate, and watched the sun come up as we sipped. The climbing on the upper 300–400m of the ridge was excellent. We linked tower to tower via chockstone steps, exposed and exciting downclimbs, and steep, enjoyable climbing with difficulties up to 5.9 on the ridge proper. We joined the Harrison Route a few pitches from the top and continued to the central summit. After topping out, we walked over to the main summit, arriving at 10:15 a.m. We started down the infamously steep Elkhorn Trail and were soon back to the road, our car, and the cold beers we had hidden in Cervus Creek.

This is the third time I have climbed Elkhorn, each time by a different route. The first was the Kings-Elkhorn Traverse, a beautiful mixed alpine outing. The second was a new route on the east face with Ryan Van Horne, in June 2019, which we called Horny Elk (500m, 5.7; see topo photo). Mike and I named our route up the full east ridge Bull Elk (900m, 5.10), because it is the largest and most impressive feature on the mountain. I'd estimate that about 75 to 80 percent of our route climbed new terrain. It was one of the best summer alpine missions I have been on in a while.

– Max Fisher, Canada

Images



Max Fisher climbing 5.8/5.9 terrain around pitch 21, high on Bull Elk (900m, 5.10), the first ascent of the full east ridge of Elkhorn Mountain.



Max Fisher soloing 5.7 terrain near the top of the east face of Elkhorn Mountain (2,194m) during the first ascent of Horny Elk in June 2019.

[Catwalk 5.8 600m](#) [Horny Elk 5.7 550m](#) [Harrison Route 5.5 875m](#) [Into the Sadistic 5.10 500m](#) [Bull Elk 5.10 900m](#)

[Rippel Coullor 5.7 400m](#)



The east face of Elkhorn Mountain (2,194m) in the Elk River Mountain Range of Strathcona Provincial Park on Vancouver Island. Bull Elk (900m, 5.10) is in black. See notes on the photo for other route names and details.

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