



AAC Publications

Mt. Waddington, Complete West Ridge

Canada, British Columbia, Coast Mountains, Pacific Ranges

"Hey, Simon, I'd like to go somewhere big like Waddington rather than go rock climbing on obscure spires." Well, I thought, that's raised the bar.

Ian Welsted and I were discussing climbing objectives for our Coast Mountains trip in the summer. "Well, if it's Waddington you're after, let's go for the complete west ridge," I suggested. "It's unclimbed and one of the biggest features in the range."

It may strike the reader as highly unlikely that in 2019 the central spine of this 4,019m mountain, the highest peak in the Coast Mountains, had not been climbed. But in the chase for more technical objectives across the range, it had indeed been overlooked. And there it was in the guidebook: Waddington's upper west ridge marching boldly across a double-page spread—a sharp, 1500m pinnacled crest rising up to a fine snow arête and the summit plateau. [The full ridgeline runs west-northwest.]

Don and Phyllis Munday's pioneering route up Waddington in 1928 climbed the lower 3.5km of the west ridge, to 3,300m, and then followed the natural line of weakness to the left (north) of the spine, up the Angel Glacier, to the northwest summit. It was a logical line and hugely committing for the time. Unfortunately the Mundays did not have the firepower to continue to the main summit, which had to wait until 1936 when Bill House and Fritz Wiessner summited via the southwest face. This bold and committing undertaking was the most difficult alpine route in North America at the time and comparable with the advances being made in the European Alps on the Eiger and Grandes Jorasses.

Our plan was to traverse Waddington starting from Fury Gap at its western end. We would follow the Munday route to the foot of the unclimbed Epaulette Ridge (the upper west ridge), climb this and continue on to bag the False Summit (3,980m), Northwest Summit (4,000m), and Main Summit Tower (4,019m) before descending the Bravo Glacier route. We would complete our 12km journey at the eastern extremity of the mountain at Rainy Knob.

Mike King dropped us off by helicopter at Fury Gap (2,500m) on August 3. We felt rather exposed to be in the heart of the Waddington Range with just light alpine packs, but the weather was excellent and without further ado we set off up the snow slopes toward Fireworks Peak, the first minor summit on the lower west ridge. The snow was knee-deep after days of storm and it was slow going, but Ian's famous trail-breaking power saved the day. We stopped to bivouac at two in the afternoon, a little past Herald Peak. It felt ridiculously early, but we were not going to make the start of the true west ridge that evening, so there was no point in pushing too hard.

The next day we traversed over the two Men At Arms summits and followed a spectacular corniced ridge over Bodyguard and Councillor peaks. The going continued to be tough in the deep snow, but we were hopeful that the upper ridge had been scoured by the wind and the snow consolidated in the sun. Once again we had a leisurely midafternoon bivouac near the start of the upper ridge.

On day three we were up and away before dawn, and sure enough conditions on the ridge were excellent, with fast climbing on hard snow and easy ice, following a ramp running below the south side of the crest. We moved together, with the occasional belayed pitch, until a hidden gully led onto

the previously untrodden Epaulette Glacier, which sits astride the central section of the ridge.

It had all gone so smoothly that we couldn't believe our luck, but we were soon confronted with the sting in the tail. As we left the glacier, the ensuing snow ridge narrowed to a knife-edge draped in delicate cornices. I traversed *à cheval* along the wafer-thin crest and belayed by excavating a deep hole in the snow. Our situation was precarious, but there was no option other than to continue across the steep and heavily loaded slope on the north side of the crest to gain the upper ramp toward the Northwest Peak.

Ian made a long and committing traverse, digging deep to find ice screw placements. I led next, finding snow too deep for screws, so I plowed a sideways trench for 30m until a blind 3m jump into a bergschrund brought us back into more reasonable terrain. That afternoon we tagged the False and Northwest summits before descending established terrain on a route called the Stroll to gain a campsite on the broad terrace below the main summit.

Day four was beautiful, but we were nearly turned back on the Summit Tower due to falling rime ice. As the sun moved behind the Tooth, the onslaught abated, and we enjoyed a succession of excellent mixed pitches up the icy central chimney. The weather was completely different from when I had climbed Waddington in a storm in 1997, but the climbing was similar, reminding me of home in Scotland. On the summit we took in the 360° panorama, looking north-south along the spine of the Coast Mountains and west to the Pacific Ocean, before making a series of abseils back to our bivouac tent.

Before the trip, my friend Don Serl had warned that descending the Bravo Glacier might be the crux of the whole route. We awoke at 3 a.m. and set off down steep *névé* slopes through the dawn to gain the Bravo Headwall. How things had changed in the last 22 years! Instead of deep snow flutings it was now a broken rocky slope, and we carefully abseiled down toward the Bravo Glacier icefall.

We soon became lost in a maze of huge crevasses and serac walls. After an hour we reached an impasse, trying three different routes without success. We were resigned to re-exploring the first option when Ian spotted some old footsteps in the distance on the glacier below. This gave us the incentive to force a way through, and soon we were following a trail of wands left by an American team several weeks before. They had been unable to find a way up to the Bravo Headwall, but their tracks saved our day.

We reached Rainy Knob at 11 a.m., not ready to break the spell by calling for a pickup. We lounged on a huge flat slab of granite, drinking coffee and taking in the magnificence of the surroundings, enjoying the deep glow that comes when you achieve something that you set out to do. Eventually we reached for the radio, and within minutes we heard the throb of the helicopter.

The complete west ridge of Waddington could have been climbed decades ago. I don't think it makes sense to provide an overall grade for this 12km traverse. Don gives the summit tower and the route we descended TD- in *The Waddington Guide*, his comprehensive guidebook to the range, published in 2003. Our climb was clearly more involved than that but pretty much ungradable on any alpine scale.

– Simon Richardson, Scotland

Images



Ian Welsted on the sharp crest of the upper west ridge of Mt. Waddington after exiting the Epaulette Glacier.



Ian Welsted approaching the Northwest Summit of Mt. Waddington during his and Simon Richardson's climb of the complete west ridge in August 2019.

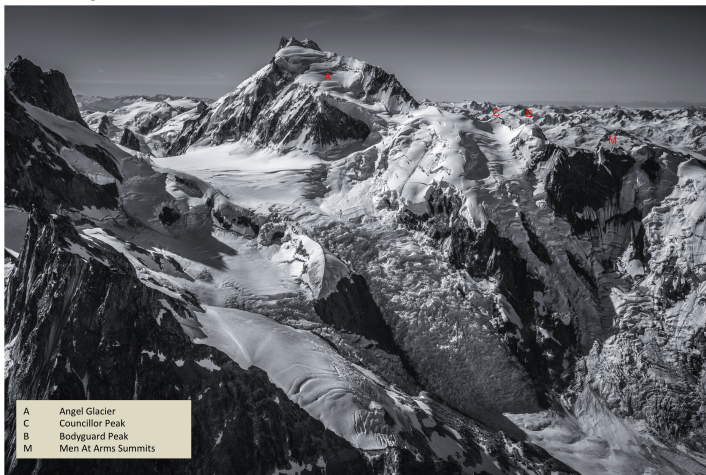


Simon Richardson climbing Mt. Waddington's Summit Tower during the first ascent of the complete west ridge in August 2019.



The upper west ridge of Mt. Waddington, which Simon Richardson and Ian Welsted climbed in August 2019. The Angel Glacier is in shadow to the left, and the Epaulette Glacier is at center. The cluster of summit towers rises at the top of the ridgeline. The two descended the Bravo Glacier on the far side.

Mount Waddington
West Ridge



Mt. Waddington from the northwest, with the west ridge on the right skyline and the massive icefall of the Scimitar Glacier flowing down to the right. Simon Richardson and Ian Welsted started their traverse of the mountain at Fury Gap, off-picture to the right, then passed over (M) Men at Arms, (B) Bodyguard Peak, and (C) Councilor Peak. Above this, they traversed the south side (hidden) of the sharp Epaulette Ridge, crossed the Epaulette Glacier (also hidden), and finished with Waddington's summit towers (from right to left): False Summit, Northwest Summit, and the Summit Tower. They descended by the Bravo Glacier, hidden behind the left skyline



Mt. Waddington as seen from Mt. Tiedemann. The upper west ridge is the right skyline crest. During their 2019 climb of the complete west ridge, Simon Richardson and Ian Welsted traversed the entire Waddington skyline from right to left. The summit points from right to left are the Northwest Summit, False Summit (hidden), Main Summit Tower, and the Tooth.



Mt. Waddington's upper west ridge. Ian Welsted and Simon Richardson followed the hanging ramp on the right side of the jagged crest en route to making the first complete ascent of the west ridge in August.

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