



AAC Publications

Ragged Range Exploration

Canada, Northwest Territories, Logan Mountains

Aerial overview of the upper south fork of the Fool's River in the Ragged Range, looking south. The 2019 team's base camp is marked (BC), with lower flanks of Die Eisspitze to the left. (A) Unnamed Peak, likely unclimbed. (B) Plymouth Peak, climbed by Howell Martyn and Harry Nance in 1952; this peak is frequently labeled Mt. Sidney Dobson on maps. (C) Peak 2,435m, climbed in 2019 by Twisting Couloir, visible above the glacier on the north face. Photo by Amy Pagacz

In early August, Katie Mills, Wojtek Pagacz, Nick Pappas, and I flew in to Nahanni National Park Reserve. Inspired by aerial video footage of spectacular and little-known spires, and funded in part by the 2019 Bob Wilson Grant through the Mazamas, we planned to spend two weeks exploring a small portion of the Ragged Range, just 8km south of the well-known Cirque of the Unclimbables. We had hoped to find similarly solid granite; however, our immediate surroundings were less inspiring, with discontinuous and loose rock lines.

Base camp was above the south fork of the Fool's River (and above the area's ferocious mosquitoes) at about 1,850m (61.974110N, 127.604607W). After a week of hiking in the rain and peering through foggy binoculars, morale was low. Wojtek and I made a plan to hike up into the westernmost cirque reachable from base camp to see if we could gain a ridge and press on toward Mt. Sidney Dobson, the most prominent and only named peak in the region. [Several different peaks of about 2,600m in this area have been given this same name; the mountain this group called Sidney Dobson South is most likely Plymouth Peak, climbed in 1952. See editor's note below.] We knew from the helicopter flight into the valley that the peak appeared crumbly, but we needed an objective.

A north-facing couloir snaked down from a high col, and lack of rockfall encouraged us. The next day, after waiting out an early morning shower, we armed ourselves with the full team's four ice tools (two axes and two technical tools), crampons, and a small alpine rack, and ascended a talus field and moraine to the glacier, which led into the cirque proper. By 11 a.m. we had easily passed the bergschrund, and Wojtek led off on ever-steepening glacier ice (up to 65°). Using both ice and rock pro, and with stretches of simul-climbing, we covered 270m in only three pitches.

At the col we first ventured up the ridge to the right, which we believed might continue toward Sidney Dobson. However, after about 125m on the sharp ridge, we decided it was too loose and rappelled back to the col. We then started up the peak that flanked the left side of our couloir, simul-climbing broken terrain (up to 5.7) up the northwest gully. After 100m we reached a broad summit at 2,435m, with a beautiful view extending to the Vampire Peaks and the Cirque of the Unclimbables. We descended steep, loose talus on the east face (which had not been visible from the cirque below), later wishing we had rappelled the couloir. Twisting Couloir (340m, AD AI3 5.7) would be an instant classic if located closer to a major roadway instead of a chopper ride from the end of the road at a defunct tungsten mine.

During our climb, Nick and Katie had been exploring peaks lower in the valley for free climbing potential. After waiting out bad weather, they attempted a peak they called the Chair but were forced to turn back after 800' of climbing up to 5.11, due to inadequate protection, dirt, and vegetation.

They then set sights on "The Sentinel," a commanding tower that guards the entrance to the valley below. Again, the cracks were filled with dirt and vegetation, and after circumnavigating the tower in

search of a line, they returned to base camp empty-handed.

With a major storm forecast for a couple of days out, they attempted the imposing Mt. Doom, a craggy glaciated peak towering over our camp at the top of the valley. [This peak was climbed from the same valley by the 1952 Yale expedition (see below); they named the mountain Die Eisspitze (ca 2,550m).] They were once again forced to turn back, characterizing the mountain as “literally a pile of stacked dinner plate choss.” As they descended, they decided to make a last-ditch attempt at a nearby summit (61.9702, -127.5893). Nick was able to scramble to the top at 2,201m, dubbing the line Consolation Prize (180m, 5.4).

With the winter storm approaching, we decided to end our trip a few days early. The Ragged Range still offers much to be explored. Although the rock climbing was a far cry from what we had hoped, an early-season expedition might find stellar ice and mixed conditions on these prominent peaks, bypassing the difficulties of loose rock and discontinuous cracks that we encountered.

– Amy Pagacz, Canada

The Sidney Dobson Mystery: At least four peaks in the cluster of rugged mountains south of Glacier Lake, all around 2,600m in elevation, have been labeled Mt. Sidney Dobson by different maps and publications. Several of these were climbed in 1952 by an extraordinary expedition of Yale University students that spent two and a half months in the area, building a log raft to cross a lake and subsisting in part on game they shot and smoked. They climbed nine peaks, mostly first ascents. A great account is in the 1953 Canadian Alpine Journal.

Forcing their way up the Fool's River from Brintnell Creek, the Yale team climbed a peak now commonly called Sidney Dobson from near the head of the west fork of the Fool's Fiver, calling the mountain Plymouth Peak. The Yale team also climbed two mountains about 5km to the northeast, near the junction of the west and south forks of the river, calling them Marble Mountain and Snow Chute Peak; the Sidney Dobson label also has been applied to this group. In between, about 2km north of Plymouth Peak, is yet another frequently labeled Sidney Dobson that apparently is unclimbed.

The original Sidney Dobson may well be a peak at the northeast end of this group, visible from the Brintnell Creek area east of Glacier Lake and also climbed by the 1952 team, via the east ridge. This peak was surveyed by the 1937 Snyder expedition to the Logan Mountains and was labeled “Amphitheater Peak (Sidney Dobson)” in their report; Sydney Dobson was general manger of the Royal Bank of Canada in that era and possibly helped sponsor the Snyder expedition.

Which Sidney Dobson is highest and is it unclimbed? Map sources aren't clear, and the 2019 team could not tell which peak was highest from their vantage points. —Dougald MacDonald

Images



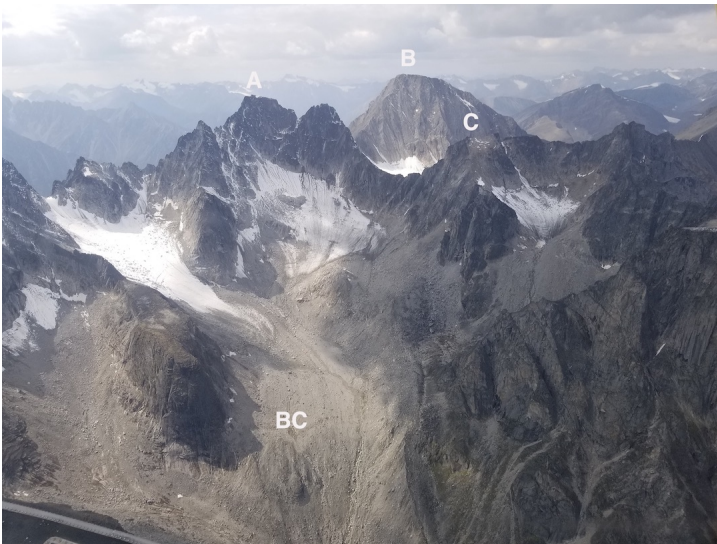
The valley of the South Fork of the Fool's River in the Ragged Range. The Sentinel (unclimbed) is center left.



Wojtek Pagacz on the final ice pitch of Twisting Couloir (AD, 340m, AI3, 5.7) in the Ragged Range of Canada's Northwest Territories.



Amy Pagacz on top of a small peak after climbing Twisting Couloir (350m, AD). The view is to the northwest, and the high peak behind Pagacz is one of several mountains labeled Mt. Sidney Dobson on various maps. This one is likely unclimbed.



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Photo-topo for Twisting Couloir (340m, AD AI3 5.7) on Peak 2,435m in the Ragged Range.

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