



## AAC Publications

---

### **Mt. Macdonald, West Face, Ski Descent**

Canada, British Columbia, Selkirk Mountains

**The Trans-Canada Highway passes directly underneath Mt. Macdonald (2,883m), just east of Rogers Pass, and my neck is always cranked from looking up as I drive past, hitting the rumble strips as my truck and mind swerve off the beaten path. I can't recall a time I haven't been in total awe of this area.**

My first-ever ski mountaineering experience was in Rogers Pass with Andrew McNab in 2008. We toured up an area called NRC, the impressive looking lines on the west shoulder of Mt. Macdonald. We then climbed the Vent Shaft to the summit of Avalanche Peak (2,861m), skied down the east face of Avalanche, toured back around to the north side, and then climbed up the south shoulder of Mt. Macdonald. We finished the day by skiing into the Banana Couloir as a direct shot to the Trans-Canada, skiing right underneath Macdonald's west face. Tired and oblivious, I kept my head down and linked turns to the valley. I doubt I would have even noticed the west face as a potential ski line at that point in my career.

I was 26, and it had been about a year since I left the Canadian alpine ski team. Although I had skied my whole life, something about that day opened my eyes. It was my first year in the TRU (Thompson Rivers University) Adventure Guide program, and I was hungry to become a ski guide and highly motivated to ski all the lines newly catching my eye. Over the next five years, I worked to become an ACMG ski guide.

My mountain skills were evolving, from skiing around red and blue gates to learning about snow crystals, rope handling, and all that comes with ski mountaineering. While these skills evolved, so did my vision for new lines. Much of my time was spent skiing around Rogers Pass, where it's hard to ignore Mt. Macdonald—it's a prominent peak seen from all over Glacier National Park. I had climbed the mountain in the summer many years ago and remember looking down a rocky gully, trying to imagine it with snow.

Winters rolled around. Intrigued and curious, I started flirting with the idea of attempting the west face. Could it be skied? What conditions would be favorable? What style? Partners? Gear? These are all questions that go into imagining the unknown line. Year after year, I would study the mountain and take photos from different positions on the pass. Each season, that line always seemed to escape from reality.

On February 20, at about 5:30 p.m., I texted McNab about ski plans for the following day. Of course, he was still out skiing, on his way back to his truck. Andrew is one of the most motivated skiers in the area. Retired from ski mountaineering racing, he has since become an established ACMG ski guide and good friend. The first photo I texted to him was a picture of the south face of Macdonald with a line drawn up it, which would be the route we would take to climb to the summit. The second was of the west face, also with a yellow line drawn down a potential ski descent. I had just finished three days of guiding in the pass, and I finally felt like conditions were lined up. He responded quickly: "Sure, that could be fun. Bring some ropes."

A large cliff band midway down splits this line into two skiing pitches. It was hard to judge the exact relief of the cliff, but we knew it would most likely involve multiple rappels. We decided on two 70-meter 7.7mm half ropes, a rack of nuts, pins, and one axe each. I'd pick up Andrew at 6:30 the next

morning. We drove to the pass and headed to the Hermit parking area to take one last look at the line. We then drove to the NRC parking lot and checked to see if the Rogers Pass permitted areas were open that day. They were! It was the fourth day of high pressure, and there were tracks of all sorts in the pass.

We drafted up a track that took us to the col below NRC. Here, we transitioned to downhill skiing, took a few good turns, and traversed over to the bottom of Macdonald's south face. We managed to skin up the lower portion of the south face before it choked up and forced us into climbing. We arrived on the summit after an easy boot pack and short sections of rock scrambles. This was a new winter summit for me. It was glorious, with a beautiful perspective on Rogers Pass.

We harnessed up and transitioned to ski mode. Skiing right off the summit and rolling into the unknown was pretty exciting: A small section of rocky ski steps led us into the snow-covered guts of the line. This was probably the steepest section, at around 45° for 200m.

Approaching the first rappel, we took calculated turns to a good stance and found a fridge-size rock horn to sling for an anchor, then confidently rappelled into the unknown. At this point, we were only going down. The second anchor in the cliff band took a bit of cleaning and searching for a solid crack. We eventually placed some nuts and rappelled again. Now on a shelf above the steepest part of the cliff, we pondered if it would be one or two more rope lengths to get us off. We quested a bit and found a solid nut and pin anchor. Directing the rope off the fall line, we were able to rappel onto the next snow slope.

At this point, the skiers in us were psyched! We coiled the ropes and dropped into great skiing on a beautifully slanted ramp. Taking it to the valley bottom with few stops, we arrived at the creek crossing for high fives and quick texts to friends, telling them we were safe. Our descent had been around 1,600m.

Skinning back along the Trans-Canada, we glowed from our euphoric day. Much like that first day in Rogers Pass with Andrew, I felt fully satisfied and dreaming of what's next.

— Christina "Lusti" Lustenberger, Canada

## Images



Christina Lustenberger on rappel while making the first ski descent of the west face of Mount Macdonald.



Andrew McNab at the final rappel during the first ski descent of the west face of Mt. Macdonald.





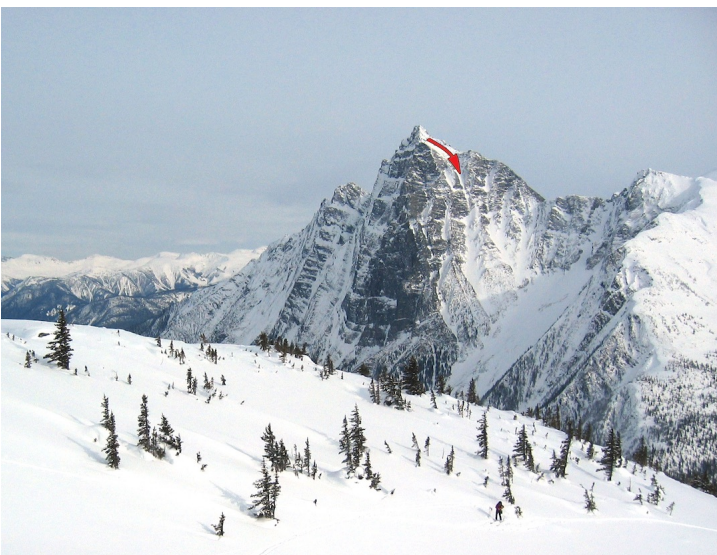
Christina Lustenberger climbing the south face to the summit of Mt. Macdonald.



Andrew McNab skiing the hanging face above the cliffs on the west face of Mt. Macdonald.



Christina Lustenberger during the first ski descent of the west face of Mount Macdonald.



The west face ski descent on Mt. Macdonald. The skiers approached the route by the south face (hidden). After descending the steep west face, they continued down and left for a total descent of 1,600 meters.

Article Details

Author	Christina Lustenberger
Publication	AAJ
Volume	63
Issue	95
Page	108
Copyright Date	2021
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions