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Northern Lights: Three New Routes in the Vampire Peaks

Canada, Northwest Territories, Logan Mountains

Under starry skies at what will be the first bivy of many in northwestern Canada, it becomes apparent that the vampire lore surrounding our destination is not entirely fictitious, as swarms of bloodthirsty mosquitoes, freshly hatched out of the spring snowmelt, lay siege to our warm-blooded bodies at the Watson Lake Recreation Centre. By morning our ragtag crew—Chileans Pato Diaz, Hernan Rodriguez, and Michael Pedreros and I—look like we've been in a pub brawl at one of the many truck stops that dot the Stewart–Cassiar Highway, the last leg of the long drive from California to the Yukon.

Warren LaFave, the legendary floatplane pilot, seems unfazed by the clouds of kamikaze insects bombarding us, suggesting that we douse ourselves in “Yukon perfume,” or mosquito repellent, for some respite. With a firm shake of the head, he tells me, “There’s no way we’re flying into that little lake today.” A handful of granite fingers cradle Vampire Lake in their palm, and the thought of landing his 1959 Beaver floatplane on the turquoise pond seems to worry the veteran pilot, in turn fraying our already anemic nerves. *Have we bitten off more than we can chew?*

A couple of days later, conditions and bravado align, and our intestines wrestle with other internal organs as Warren threads the yellow Beaver through a narrow notch in the lower valley, finally coming to a peaceful halt on the lakeshore below Mt. Dracula (a.k.a. the Sundial, ca 2,550m). The sound of the plane’s engine dissipates, and our humble position in a very wild place becomes reality. We snap some photographs and observe the stunning formations around us before the sky pulls curtain call and we begin to hump loads under a veil of drizzle.

We had read trip reports from the famed Cirque of the Unclimbables detailing poor souls returning home waterlogged and empty-handed after a month in Fairy Meadows attempting the Lotus Flower Tower. We’ve chosen an alternative zone of walls, the Vampire Peaks, about 20km to the northwest of the Cirque. Now, our 3,500km pilgrimage from California has us writhing for endorphins, and despite marginal weather, we get to work right away, pushing our ropes up the lower slabs on Dracula’s east face, positioning ourselves for an eventual weather window, which, if we are lucky, will see us climb our main objective, the Yellow Diamond feature. [This prominent formation on Dracula’s east face also has been called the Right Talon. It is well to the left of the Phoenix, the ca 800m northeast prow of the massif, which has seen two completed routes and several partial ascents.]

On August 11, the diamond headwall glows tangerine in the evening sun and our eyes track imaginary movement up the face, which looms gloriously above our bivy at La Gran Terraza, around six pitches above the valley floor. The next day we launch for the summit, switching leads up a singular crack system, pushing and pulling on barnacle-shaped nodules that provide incredible friction wherever the fissure slams shut. A textbook hand crack splits the ridge to the summit, and by afternoon we are trying to absorb the immensity of this range from the top. Our new route is called Viaje Boreal (650m, 5.11+). [Dracula/Sundial was first climbed in 1968 by the south ridge (Geoff Spedding and Archibald Simpson). The only other recorded ascent was in 2012 by Jeff Achey, Jeremy Collins, Pat Goodman, and James Q Martin, after completing the first free ascent of the Phoenix wall.]

As my eyelids sink into an involuntary state of post-climb slumber, a spray of green fluorescence jolts me into consciousness. Mt. Dracula has transformed into the valley lighthouse, with a wide ray of light emanating from its summit; the light focuses into a consolidated beam that twists and spirals

from one horizon to the other. The unbelievable show of light continues for another hour before we collapse into a state of elated rest, grasping with the fortune of climbing our main objective and witnessing the aurora borealis within one week of arriving.

We take stock of our gear during stormy days in base camp: The sharp teeth of the Dracula's large-grain granite have chewed through the sheaths of our ropes, leaving us with 40m lengths for the remainder of the trip. We climb three pitches (up to 5.11+) up a striking formation we call Tail Feather Ridge, and then manage to climb a new line on the shorter Bela Lugosi wall of Mt. Dracula, south of the Yellow Diamond. This route is called Flow Latino (350m, 5.11-) and is to the right of the only other route on the face, Ramshackle Affair (330m, 5.11+ A0, Goebel-Goodman-Martin, 2015).

We decide to shift our camp up and onto a large glacial plain in the next valley to the southwest, where a large granite molar seems to call us from afar. We glass a direct line up a gorgeous white pillar in the center of the south face of Dawn Mist Mountain (a.k.a. Moraine Hill, 2,694m), to the left of Fighting Till Dawn (460m, 5.11- R, Goebel-Goodman-Martin, 2015) and a line attempted the previous year by two of the same climbers (AAJ 2017).

The mountain lives up to its namesake, forcing us to creep slowly up the first steep pitches at dawn on August 20, blindfolded by thick clouds of uncertainty. A southerly breeze eventually reveals our position on the dead-vertical pillar, with colorful ridgelines and wrinkled glaciers unraveling around us. The pillar ultimately relinquishes its grip, and the seemingly endless sunset of these northern latitudes allows us to tiptoe across the summit ridge in eternal golden light: Natural Mystic (430m, 5.12-).

We descend the low-angle east ridge before collapsing back in our tent. Green hues bounce off the fractured glacial ice as the northern lights once again grace us with their presence. This place is truly spectacular, and has given us much more than we expected.

— **Seba Pelletti, Australia**

Images



Seba Pelletti, Hernan Rodriguez, and Michael Pedreros on the summit of Mt. Dracula.



Michael Pedreros leading the first pitch off the Gran Terraza bivy on the Yellow Diamond of Mt. Dracula.



Seba Pelletti leading pitch eight of Viaje Boreal (650m, 5.11+) on the Yellow Diamond of Mt. Dracula.



The line of Viaje Boreal (650m, 5.11+) on the Yellow Diamond wall, east face of Mt. Dracula.



Above the top-out on Flow Latino, the second route up the Bela Lugosi Wall on Mt. Dracula.



The line of Viaje Boreal (650m, 5.11+) on the Yellow Diamond wall, east face of Mt. Dracula.



Looking at the Bela Lugosi Wall, with the line of Flow Latino (350m, 5.11-). The new route is to the right of Ramshackle Affair (330m, 5.11+ A0, Goebel-Goodman-Martin, 2015).



The line of Natural Mystic (430m, 5.12-) on the central pillar of the south face of Mt. Dawn Mist. Fighting Till Dawn (460m, 5.11- R, Goebel-Goodman-Martin, 2015) is to the right.



The central pillar of the "Tail Feather Ridge," showing the line of the 2022 attempt.

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