



AAC Publications

Rugged Mountain, Thunderbird

Canada, British Columbia, Vancouver Island, Haihte Range

The southwest face of Rugged Mountain in the Haihte Range of Vancouver Island. (The photo was taken in a dry February.) The route line for Ahren Rankin, Garner Bergeron, and James Rode's Thunderbird (ca 800m, 22 pitches, 5.10 A1) is in red; the Johnson-Newman Route (1600', 5.8) is in green; and the original Southwest Face Route (2,200', 5.6) is in yellow. Photo by Ahren Rankin

Near the west coast of Vancouver Island, an incredible series of rocky peaks, surrounded by some of the more impressive glacier features remaining on the island, rises precipitously above the small town of Zeballos. The Haihte Range is crowned by the aptly named Rugged Mountain (6,151'), whose south face drops dramatically for nearly 4,000'. Heavy logging in the mid-1980s brought road access nearly to the base of the wall, and the only two existing routes—the Southwest Face Route (2,200', 5.6, Briggs-Berryman, 1987) and the Johnson-Newman Route (1,600', 5.8, 1989)—were established at that time.

James Rode and I were in the area in July 2017 with Garner Begeron, intent on climbing a new route linking steep features and slabs on the left side of the wall, far from the existing lines. After 400' of approach slabs, we roped up as golden morning light bathed the upper face. For five pitches (all 5.7 or under), we ascended a leftward-trending series of cracks and corners to a spacious ledge. We traversed 150' to the right to reach a 4th-class ramp, then back left to rejoin the main line, then climbed one more 5.5 pitch to the base of the vertical headwall that cuts across the entire length of the wall. We had decided to establish the route with bolted anchors and rings for rappelling and protection bolts where absolutely necessary, so we spent the rest of the day rappelling and drilling.

We came back the next weekend and worked on the approach trail, greatly improving it. The next weekend we climbed back to our high point and continued upward. The stellar looking corner pitch we had seen cutting through the headwall was quite moderate (5.8), ending on a large ledge. The exposure above was incredible, but the climbing remained moderate. Four more pitches (5.7, 5.6, 5.6, 4th-class) led to a huge, heather-covered ledge. Down to climber's left, we found a spacious flat ledge with a miraculous rivulet of water pouring out of the rock even late in the summer. We bivvied here, watching the sun set into the Pacific Ocean. We climbed another two pitches in the morning to reach the apparent crux of the route, then headed down again.

It wasn't until August 2019 that we finally returned to finish our route. We climbed the 13 pitches to the bivy in leisurely fashion, enjoying the fruits of our labor from two years earlier. In the morning we made quick work of our last two established pitches, and after a quick break Garner headed up into the amazing set of features that had drawn us to this face years ago. James led next, dispatching an awkwardly leaning corner and drilling a few bolts. Next, I drilled a four-bolt ladder past a steep, unprotectable flake, then stepped right and continued up, drilling a few more bolts, to reach a large alcove where I belayed. The lads followed the pitch, calling it easy 5.10.

We swapped leads for another four pitches of steep chimneys and huge rock fins, finally reaching the top of the wall by headlamp. In the pitch black, we weren't sure where we were in relation to the summit above us, so we engineered three passable spots on sloping ledges and tried to sleep. I woke several times in the most contorted shapes imaginable. It was one of the best nights of my life.

We named our route Thunderbird (ca 800m, 22 pitches, 5.10 A1) after the mythological creature celebrated by various northwestern First Nations, often adorning the tops of totem poles on

Vancouver Island.

– Ahren Rankin, Canada

Images



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James Rode climbing the stellar fifth pitch of Thunderbird (ca 800m, 22 pitches, 5.10 A1) on the southwest face of Rugged Mountain in the Haihte Range of Vancouver Island.



Garner Bergeron climbing the exposed 17th pitch of Thunderbird (ca 800m, 22 pitches, 5.10 A1) on the southwest face of Rugged Mountain in the Haihte Range of Vancouver Island.



James Rode belaying Garner Bergeron to the top of a rock fin on the 20th pitch of Thunderbird (ca 800m, 22 pitches, 5.10 A1) on the southwest face of Rugged Mountain in the Haihte Range of Vancouver Island.

Article Details

Author	Ahren Rankin
Publication	AAJ
Volume	62
Issue	94
Page	163
Copyright Date	2020
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions