



AAC Publications

Canadian Rockies 2020 Highlights

Canada, Canadian Rockies

Plantaris Pillar on Noseeum Mountain. Photo by Alik Berg

There is a renaissance in new route activity in the Canadian Rockies these days, with a wide cast of characters establishing routes in all of the climbing genres. Mixed multi-pitch cragging routes came thick and fast at the start of the winter, while rock and alpine ascents also featured heavily in an exciting period of exploration.

To begin with the most audacious, in early August, Brette Harrington and Tony McLane climbed a perilous route up one of the bigger walls in the heart of the range: The Hammer and the Dance (700m, 5.11 X) on Mt. Neptuak's sheer northeast face, was climbed over two days and required a portaledge. (See Harrington's report [here](#).) Though such grades are rarely climbed on the biggest faces, these routes do show the potential for this type of Rockies climbing in the future. Harrington later soloed the Toft route (475m, 5.8) on nearby Mt. Haddo.

In the same summer season, Alik Berg continued his spree of climbing the obvious rock faces above Canmore. On June 23, with Raphael Slawinski, he completed the northeast buttress of Miner's Peak (250m, 5.10b). The line has bolted belays on the first few pitches from previous attempts by others. That this rock directly above climber-filled Canmore remained undone for so long goes to show, yet again, the local potential. The third buttress of Mount Rundle yielded The Georgetown Wall (450m, 5.10a) with Kevin Rohn on July 2, an obvious natural line on the main east face.

Proceeding at a new route every two weeks, Berg climbed Plantaris Pillar on Noseeum Mountain (250m, 5.10, plus 350m of scrambling) with Maarten van Haeren on July 14; this ascends the right-hand of two prominent buttresses on the south side of the peak. He then climbed the east spur of Panorama Ridge's south peak (300m, 5.9) with Quentin Roberts on July 28; this is an obvious quartzite pillar in the Taylor Lake area that gains the south ridge about 700m south of the main summit. Truly inspiring was a two-day ascent of the main summit of the iconic Mt. Rundle with Kevin Rohn on August 12–13. The Perseids Ridge (1,000m, 5.10+) ripples above the Bow Valley and climbs all three tiers of the eighth buttress of Rundle. Finally for Berg on the rock climbing front, he climbed Corner Story (450m, 5.11-) with Dave Peabody on August 25, ascending the west face of Mt. Robertson's south tower and continuing to the main summit.

Other climbers besides Berg were not idle in the summer. Peabody and Angela Tse climbed the West Face, Right Corner of Elpoca Tower (5.9, 200m) in the Elbow Lake area. On August 5, van Haeren and Christian Schlumpf snagged the obvious buttress north of the northern terminus of the Crowfoot Glacier. The Siksika Buttress of Crowfoot Mountain (600m, 5.9) seems destined to become a classic. Earlier van Haeren had joined Berg on Noseeum Mountain and in July climbed the northwest ridge of Mt. Whympfer (900m, 8 pitches, 5.8) with Jasmin Fauteux, August 10 from Chickadee Valley, the latter not quite so classic.

Around Jasper, Francois Laplante and Sam Wall climbed Gut Feeling (335m, 5.10) on Roche Miette, far to the left of the route they had intended to climb, New Orleans is Sinking. Daisy Dukes (450m, 5.7), a route that will be repeated more often, was by Laplante and Jesse Milner on the northern edge of the lower flank of Mt. Kerkeslin. The rock is excellent and starts just to the left of an orange overhanging wall visible from the Goats and Glaciers parking area. In the Slate Range, the prolific Rob Schnell added a moderate finish to the left of the north ridge on Lychnis Mountain with Dr. Mark

Heard (an orthopedic surgeon to whom half the valley owes thanks).

Many locals wait for Rockies choss to freeze together before venturing onto new ground—once a good weather window hits in the fall, it is game on. On October 1 and 2, Ethan Berman and Uisdean Hawthorne climbed a new line up the biggest face on Yui-hai-has-kun (Mt. Robson): Running in the Shadows (VI, 2,000m, AI5 M6). In the same window, Berg and Quentin Roberts made the first ascent of the east face of Mt. Forbes (700m, M4 WI3), the tallest peak in Banff National Park and a day's walk from the highway (see report here.) Dylan Cunningham and the Rockies legend Jim Elzinga added to the collection of climbs on the northwest buttress of Cirrus Mountain during the same time. Right of Elzinga's original 1983 route, The Anna Smith Memorial Route (11 pitches, M5 AI3) adds a new variation to the route Cloud Nine.

By the end of October, the mixed and ice action was in full gear, but first a few mixed and ice ascents from the previous spring. In February 2020, Sarah Hueniken completed her dream of linking the three big routes in the Hydrophobia basin of the North Ghost area, amounting to one of the most impressive days of climbing ever seen in the range. Hueniken led every pitch of Cryophobia (6 pitches, M8 WI5+), Nophobia (5 pitches, M10-, WI3), and Hydrophobia (4 pitches, WI5+), though she wisely decided not to top out on Hydrophobia after an ice dam broke at the top of the climb. In early 2021, in a safer venue, she climbed every route in the Haffner Upper Cave in a day.

In the Waiparous Valley, between Caroline and Marion Falls, Seth Keena, Maia Schumacher, and Raphael Slawinski established Little Fluffy Clouds (155m, WI4 M7). Over three days, they established five pitches, four consisting of dry-tooling with a midway blob of ice and topping out on a dagger. In the Ya Ha Tinda area, near another Slawinski route, are three new single-pitch ice climbs: A Dream Come True (WI4, Banko-Crouch), which is 50m right of Nachtmahr; Consciousness (WI3, Bogdanovic-Peloquin), above Nachtmahr; and Dream Eater (WI4+, Bogdanovic-Peloquin), yet higher above Nachtmahr.

Also in the spring, Jon Jugenheimer and Dave Rone established six new routes in Icefall Brook. Dropped off by helicopter before the North American outbreak of COVID-19, they had a surreal return to civilization. While in this venue they climbed Covid Quarantine (110m, WI4) and Deep Throat (120m, WI5+), located on either side of Sun Pillar, just to the right of Fossen Falls on the Lyell Wall. Next, they traversed 600m to the far left of the Lyell Wall, placing running belay bolts to protect the loaded traverse. Here, Siege Tactics (160m, WI6+) required a rappel into a deep bowl, where, 200m up and right, three falls presented themselves. L'étonnement (110m, WI5) is the right-most and in a deep cleft, not visible until below it, while Deviation (100m, WI5+) is the left-most of the three. The center line remains unclimbed and, according to the climbers, it "looked good from afar but was far from good." Finally, on the far left end of the Mons Wall, Satiata (180m, WI6 M4R) is a thin ice line in a deep slot, followed by an M4I R pitch leading to a 5m roof and a perfect headwall of ice.

Back to autumn: First ascents at mixed, multi-pitch venues come in waves, depending on which seasons and locations form the most ice. In the fall of 2020, the Storm Headwall was surely the hot spot. In last year's season, Ball of Confusion (80m, M6 WI5+, Slawinski and Landon Thompson, February 2020) was attempted by four people. Sebastian Taborszky nabbed four new lines. With Niall Hamill, he climbed two steep pillars on the last pitch of Smith N Wesson (125m, WI6 A0), with a six-bolt aid section on the second pitch eventually freed at M6+ by Slawinski and onsighted by Stas Beskin. Next, Sleight of Hand (95m, WI4+R), 20m right of Shocking Alternative, was a thin-ice two-pitch route done by Jacob Dans and James Walter. Walter and Taborszky extended the Jon Walsh pitch Splitter Choss with a tension traverse to a new full-pitch WI5+ pitch to top out. Getting more adventurous, Cunningham, Peloquin, and Taborszky explored the upper Storm Headwall above The Shocking Alternative to climb Surprise Attack (70m, M6 WI3). They report a lot of ice on this second tier.

Also at the Storm Headwall, on October 28, Niall Hamill got in on the Fancy Feast (130m, WI6 M4) with Patrick Maguire, an all-icy version of his route from last year called The Sphynx. Above the usual

forest cut line approach to the Storm Headwall, Takeshi Tani and Toshiyuki Yamada climbed a bold smear clearly visible to all: Ichinen (130m, 3 pitches, WI5 R M4). Of particular note with the proliferation of Storm new routing was an edition of Grippled, the Canadian climbing magazine, featuring a mini-guide to the Headwall.

Some distance south, in the Highwood area, Berg, Slawinski, and van Haeren added two direct pitches to Kindergarden at (M5 WI4). A record of this start having been climbed previously has not been found.

The extraordinary pillars of Katana (245m, WI6+ X). Photo by Sebastian Taborszky
The end of October marked two significant attempts. Berg, along with Peter Hoang and Cunningham, attempted a very striking ice line on Goat Mountain, just left of Mt. Yamnuska and clearly visible from the Trans-Canada Highway. He backed off after encountering running water just a few body lengths from the top and therefore insists it not be counted as an FA. Starting on the rock route Manitou and finishing on Oreamnos, the line (410m, M5+ WI4) arguably awaits a complete ascent by the narrowest of margins. Less precise in their conventions, Cunningham, Kevin Rohn, and John Price climbed a gully on the east face of Boom Mountain to half height and named it Red Beard (420m, WI5 M5). In previous years, they had climbed two more of the main gullies on this reputedly unclimbed major face to half height without continuing to the summit—these lines undoubtedly do await complete ascents.

In December, images emerged from Katana (245m, WI6+ X, by Stas Beskin, Cunningham, and Taborszky) and clearly demonstrated the mastery of the medium by Beskin (who led and argued to downgrade the crux pillar), a frequent visitor to the range. On an east face above Margaret Lake, next to Hector Lake, the pure ice line featured two freestanding pillars and is a contender for most audacious ice line ever climbed in the range. At the back of Hector Lake, Marche ou Crève (135m, WI4, Taborszky-Walter–van Haeren) is to the right of the remote Orion Falls.

Further up the Icefields Parkway, Mt. Murchison was a center of activity. One hundred meters left of Cosmic Messenger, Slawinski and Juan Henriquez memorialized the passing of an icon from a much more popular sport than climbing with Hand of God (135m, M7 WI5), which is four pitches overall with bolted dry-tooling leading to an obvious dagger. On a lower band, Ferrethawk (160m, WI3+ M6, Taborszky-Walters) had been the site of a 20m whipper onto a micro-cam by a previous suitor. About 200m to the left of Murchison Falls, beginning on the ice climb Aboriginal Genocide, Continuum (230m, WI4+ M5+, by Jacob Dans, Rob Owens, and Mike Stuart) climbs a rightward slanting rock corner in three pitches to the Murchison top-out ledge.

Two new routes were established at the Stanley Headwall. Slawinski completed a project to the right of his God Delusion reputed to be the highest graded multi-pitch at the Headwall and the hardest new mixed route of the season. Clafoutis (150m, M9 WI5), with Gery Unterasinger on the send, climbs a striking hand crack on pitch two to some of the most exposed ice at the Headwall on the last pitch. Slawinski has an incredible history at the Headwall—it was reported that he has climbed every mixed and ice route there. That he might have missed a few minor pitches does not detract from his peerless efforts at the venue over the past 20 years. Also at the Stanley Headwall, Don't Stand So Close To Me (90m, M7+, Berg and Uisdean Hawthorne) is a pitch of steep dry-tooling to a thin ice pitch, located between An Ideal For Living and Ghost in the Machine.

At last year's favorite ice and mixed venue, the Protection Valley, Rory O'Donnell and Ryan Daniel Patterson climbed just to the left of Grab the Cupcakes to find High Hanging Fruit (305m, M6+ R WI4), which intersects with Cupcakes at the midway easy ground and then climbs out left to a waterfall pitch before finishing on bold face climbing to the rim. In the Kicking Horse Canyon, Slawinski and Hamill climbed Gasoline Alley (160M, M5+ WI4), ascending the buttress to the left of Asylum and topping out on a flow of ice that appears most years.

As this was written in mid-March, big new routes already had been done in 2021—there will be plenty more to report in next year's journal.

– Ian Welsted, Canada

Images



Maarten van Haeren on the Plantaris Pillar, Noseum Mountain.



Kevin Rohn on Perseids Ridge (1,000m, 5.10+), Mt. Rundle.



Uisdean Hawthorne following on Don't Stand So Close To Me (90m, M7+) on the Stanley Headwall.



The extraordinary pillars of Katana (245m, WI6+ X).



Cirrus Mountain showing (red) Elzinga-Patterson Route (1983), (gray) Cloud Nine, and (yellow) The Anna Smith Memorial Route, climbed in 2020.

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