



## AAC Publications

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### **Serra Peaks, East-West Traverse, and Various New Routes**

Canada, British Columbia, Coast Mountains, Waddington Range

**As the moon rose from behind a jagged ridgeline, the world exploded beyond the fading beam of my headlamp.** I struggled to comprehend the scale of the mountains in front of me. From down on the Tiedemann Glacier, the monolith of Mt. Waddington rose 2,000m above us. The moon reflected brightly off glacial seracs cascading down shattered black rock. On the other side of the valley, innumerable sharp granite spires protruded from broken icefalls, like nails hammered through wood. The days we'd spent swirling in the clouds above felt like a dream.

As dawn cracked like a yolk on the horizon, we made our way back up 800m of talus and bare ice to the Plummer Hut. We had left our previous camp at 6 p.m., perched on a high col between Serra 5 (3,579m) and Mt. Asperity (3,716m). We reached the hut at 6 a.m., and by early afternoon, after a long helicopter flight, we were at a beach bar in Campbell River. "Looks like you guys have been out hiking," the waitress said. I suppose you could say that.

A couple of weeks earlier, in mid-July, bad weather had taken hold after an exceptionally dry spring. Although Matteo Agnoloni, Sebastian Pelletti, and I were poised to launch into the Waddington Range, we had to wait patiently in Squamish to see if our opportunity would come. Finally, on July 31, we committed to what looked to be a good window of clear weather, which unfortunately (and not all that surprisingly) didn't quite pan out. We took the ferry to Vancouver Island, boarded a helicopter in Campbell River, and flew 150km north to the Plummer Hut, perched above the Tiedemann and Tellot glaciers.

Our goal was a "reverse traverse" of the Serra Peaks, from east to west (Serra 1 to 5), plus whatever peaks we could reach beyond. These spires have been traversed twice in the opposite direction (Croft-Foweraker-Serl, 1985, and Bunker-Haley, 2004) during traverses of the full Waddington Range. The conditions we found were far from ideal. Amid low visibility and light flurries, the Serra spires were in full mixed conditions, which made for really fun climbing, but much slower than anticipated.

From the Plummer Hut, we headed up the Tellot Glacier and camped in a white-out. On August 1, we started up the north face of Serra 1 (5.7 55°), simul-climbing from the 'schrund all the way to the summit. On Serra 2, we climbed a new route on the northeast aspect, which we called Nor'easter (230m, M5); it had a five-star iced-up chimney pitch leading directly to the summit. We descended from Serra 2 and camped. It was storming in the morning, so we stayed put and then climbed for just a few hours in the afternoon, summiting Serra 3 and camping just below the top.

Farther along the traverse, we faced the emotional stress of revisiting the scene of a rappelling accident during our attempt on the same traverse in 2022. While rappelling from Serra 4 and down the north side of Serra 5, Matteo and I triggered some rockfall and Matteo was hit in the thigh, suffering a deep laceration and partially severed quad muscle and tendon, leading to an extrication by Bella Coola SAR (see *Accidents in North American Climbing 2023*).

Thankfully, this year the rappels went smoothly: two raps off Serra 4, then some downclimbing on snow, and four more rappels down the Serra 4–5 Couloir. We then opened a new route up Serra 5 by a hidden couloir full of blue ice and a stellar mixed pitch that connected us to the existing routes on the upper north face, which were caked in wet snow. We called it Duck 'n' Cover Couloir (400m, AI3 M6, with 200m of new terrain at AI3 M5). Given the snowy, insecure nature of the climbing, we likely chose

a harder line than necessary, opting for steep terrain with better protection rather than low-angle slab.

It was cool to make the first ascent of Serra 5 coming from the east, a puzzle that had confounded climbers since the 1950s and '60s. The east face is unappealing, consisting of vertical and loose basalt. I surmise that the idea of rappelling down the north side and climbing ice back up was not a feasible option given the equipment and techniques of earlier eras. It is a simple solution with V-threads and modern ice equipment.

After a 20-hour day to climb Serra 4 and 5 in tough conditions, we found ourselves at the Serra 5–Asperity col around midnight on the third day of the traverse. The forecast was for two more days of seemingly good weather before another big storm. We tried to rationalize continuing to Asperity, Tiedemann, Combatant, and ultimately Waddington, but given our pace, it seemed all too likely we might end up descending from Waddington on the heavily crevassed Bravo Glacier in a vicious coastal storm. We decided to escape while we could.

The most accessible escape route was Carl's Couloir, which in good conditions would consist of downclimbing snow slopes for 1,400m. I was nervous to commit to an unfamiliar south-facing descent given the late-season conditions on the lower mountain, but the alternative was to reverse the traverse, which was certainly not appealing. After a full day of lounging in the sun, we started down in the evening to mitigate the threat of overhead hazards. My skepticism about the descent was well-founded, as we spent 12 hours rappelling chossy cliffs recently exposed from snowmelt, huge broken bergschrunds, and a 40° glacial tongue littered in debris that severely damaged our carabiners and belay devices in only two rappels. Finally, we reached the relative safety of the Tiedemann Glacier and then trudged back up to the Plummer Hut.

As with other ranges around the world, it may be time to rethink the climbing season in this part of the Coast Mountains. High-pressure systems in the traditional season of late July and August now bring warmer temperatures that exacerbate hazards. Many of the snow, ice, and glacier routes in the guidebook, as well as approaches to the rock spires, are becoming inaccessible, and descent options are deteriorating. Steve Swenson wasn't far off when he told me that the Waddington Range is "as hazardous as the Canadian Rockies." Yet with the right partners, motivation, and mentality, the experience and solitude of climbing in the range are hard to beat.

— Ethan Berman, Canada

## Images



Matteo Agnoloni and Seba Pelletti traversing the ridge between Serra 1 and Serra 2 on the first day of the traverse.



Ethan Berman descending toward the Serra 4-Serra 5 col in 2022 in front of the unclimbed east face of Serra 5.



Seba Pelletti leading the summit block of Serra 4.



Matteo Agnoloni and Seba Pelletti climbing ice up Duck 'n Cover Couloir (400m, M6 AI3 (200m of new terrain at AI3 M5)) on Serra 5. The trio rappelled north from the Serra 4-Serra 5 col and climbed ice and mixed up the north side of the mountain to avoid the horrendously loose and steep east face of Serra 5.



Matteo Agnoloni following the second pitch of Nor'easter on Serra 2. The route starts on the east face before traversing a ledge system to finish on the north face.



Descending toward the Tiedemann Glacier after completing the traverse.



Catching evening sun at the second bivy below the summit of Serra 3.



Ethan Berman climbing through the crux on the upper north face of Serra 5.



Ethan Berman leading up Duck 'n' Cover Couloir (climber's right) after rappelling down the Four-Five Couloir (the gully on climbers left). The previous year's accident occurred halfway down the Four-Five Couloir. The steep granite comprising the lower half of Serra 5's north face is unclimbed.



The five Serra spires from the north in winter. The east-to-west traverse (left to right) took three days, followed by an all-day rest at the Serra 5–Asperity Mountain col (far right) and an all-night descent to the south to reach the Tiedemann Glacier.

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