

my alberta

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No one ascends or attempts Mount Alberta expecting superlative climbing. Present-day climbers are well aware that the approach is arduous, the weather foul, and the rock dangerously loose. Yet, like the north face of the Eiger, Mount Alberta continues to attract ambitious mountaineers who regard the challenge of a difficult route simply too great to resist.

— Steve Roper and Allan Steck;
*Fifty Classic Climbs
of North America*

MOUNT ALBERTA has long had the reputation of being the most difficult mountain to climb in the Canadian Rockies. A Japanese-Swiss team made the first ascent of the peak in 1925 — more than a decade after the first ascent of Mount Robson. This long delay was not due to the fact that nobody knew about Mount Alberta; its appearance in the frontispiece of Palmer and Thorington's 1921 guide to climbs of the Canadian Rockies was a blatant challenge to the climbing community, saying, in effect, "There it is, and it hasn't been climbed!" Many leading climbers of the day vied for the second ascent of Alberta, but it didn't happen until 1948. By the mid-1970s, fewer than 10 teams had stood on Alberta's elusive summit, and its reputation as the ogre of the Canadian Rockies was firmly established.

Even today, years can pass between successful ascents. Indeed, there was little surprise in the Canadian Rockies climbing community when the painstakingly organized and much-ballyhooed joint expedition of the Japanese Alpine Club and The Alpine Club of Canada failed to put anyone on Alberta's summit in 2000 to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the historic first ascent; as Alan Kane said: "Conditions were wintry and nobody got up it on the joint Japanese-Canadian attempt. It doesn't matter how well organized an attempt might be, Mother Nature has the last word in climbing big Rockies peaks."

Located on the northern edge of the Columbia Icefield, Alberta rises to 3619 m (and is the sixth-highest summit in the Canadian Rockies). The technical crux of the easiest route is the Japanese Couloir: 400 m of fifth-class rock at altitudes above

3200 m (longer and 2 km higher than the biggest route on Yamnuska). In most summers, Alberta's summit is virtually impregnable because the mountain remains hidden in clouds, or the Japanese Couloir is cloaked in ice, snow and half-frozen waterfalls. And even when the Japanese Couloir is dry and the weather cooperates, success on Alberta is far from certain. The long approach from the Icefields Parkway probably defeats more attempts than does the roped climbing; further, the *Japanese Route* is unusually complex, and, apart from the Japanese Couloir, the rock is unbelievably shattered, making movement tedious and hazardous. Although there are far more technically demanding routes in the Canadian Rockies, no other "normal route" is so heavily defended.

Only in very hot, dry summers does the Japanese Couloir come into condition. The summer of 1998 certainly qualified — it was the hottest on record in Canada — and in late July of that year, news that Mount Alberta was ripe for the picking rippled through the Rockies climbing community. I had recently moved to Canmore and had been doing a lot of climbing that summer, so I eagerly rose to the bait, thinking, *How hard can a 5.6 route first climbed three quarters of a century ago be?* I teamed up with Rodger Debeyer, and off we went to see what all the fuss was about. Little did we know that climbing 5.6 would prove to be the least of our worries!

Right off the bat, we lost several hours taking unplanned sightseeing trips before we got over Woolley Shoulder, and we eventually ran out of gas at the base of Alberta's south ridge — far below the yellow cliff band, where we had planned to bivouac. At first light the next morning, we wallowed up the kitty-litter-like rock on Alberta's southeast face (a terribly dispiriting way to start a long, mysterious climb), and then whiled away most of the morning looking for the way through these formidable cliffs to the black summit crest above.

Finally, we located the terrifyingly exposed traverse that is the key to the yellow cliff band, but we were then faced with another equally vexing problem: finding the Japanese Couloir. When they are in your face, the towering black cliffs that protect the summit ridge all look pretty much the same. We probed one likely-looking spot; after climbing two 5.8 pitches,

however, it was obvious that we were off route again and we rapped off. By the time we located the Japanese Couloir, it was past noon and we were psychologically fried — more than ready to give up the fight.

Mount Alberta had humbled us, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized that we had completed an excellent reconnaissance of this awesome mountain, and before long I was itching for a rematch. For one thing, I was sure that I could get from the car to the Japanese Couloir without wasting a single step. Equally important, I had learned that the primary mountaineering skill needed for success on Mount Alberta is being able to move quickly, safely and for a long time over scrappy, almost-technical alpine terrain. So during the four summers that passed while I waited for Mount Alberta to again come into condition, I spent a lot of time climbing long alpine ridges; the problems they pose — loose rock, routefinding puzzles and long (10- to 14-hour) days — make them perfect training ground for Alberta.

The summer of 2003 was hellish in western Canada: rain was non-existent, temperatures soared, and forest fires ravaged the mountain parks and the B.C. Interior. In Canmore the air was more polluted than Mexico City's for most of the summer. Although I agreed wholeheartedly when friends complained about the foul air, around mid-July I began to think, *If this keeps up, it could be the year to try Mount Alberta again.* And then it happened: in early August, Doug Nelson and I read on Joe MacKay's Web site www.mountainguide.com/updates/icefields.html that an American team had climbed the Japanese Couloir — the door was open!

Doug has been my regular climbing partner for years; in 2003 we had already done the long traverse from Nakiska to Lac des Arcs (via mounts Lorette and McGillivray) as well as several substantial rock routes: the upper half of *Sisyphus Summits*; *Kabl Wall* on Yamnuska; and *Bass Buttress* on Castle Mountain via the direct start. We were a strong team, and the mountain was ready. While we waited for our schedules and the weather to come together, I reflected on how lucky I was to be getting another shot at Alberta in such a relatively short time; it also occurred to me that at 58, this might well be my last opportunity to bag this famous prize.



At 8 a.m. on August 16, Doug and I staggered away from the Icefields Parkway under packs weighing more than 22 kg and waded across the Sunwapta River. Ten hours later we dumped our burdens at a bivy site high on Alberta's south ridge, immediately below the southernmost end of the yellow rock band. Struggling over Woolley Shoulder (1250 m higher than the highway), losing 400 m down to the flats below Alberta, and then gaining another 500 m up Alberta's rotten southeast face is the entry price for an attempt on the *Japanese Route*; it was, in retrospect, the biggest obstacle we faced. Our only deviation from the description in Sean Dougherty's book *Selected Alpine Climbs in the Canadian Rockies* was that we didn't go all the way to the south ridge, as Rodger and I had done in 1998. Instead, Doug and I climbed scree and snow slopes below the left edge of the glacier on Alberta's east flank, and then traversed beneath steep cliffs that end the right edge of the huge, loose scree bowl on the southeast face.

This put us onto that awful face about halfway up to the yellow band; even so, it took a good hour of hard scrabbling for us to reach the bivy site, which was well situated and spacious and had a terrific view of Alberta's black summit crest towering high above the yellow band. Our only problem was water: all that we could find nearby was very dirty ice. Melted, this yielded a grey-green slurry that Doug assured me was safe to drink (and we did, with no ill effects), but to describe it as

unappetizing is a colossal understatement!

The contrast between our summit day and my prior attempt could not have been greater. Carrying only light day packs and using the knowledge gained from my 1998 reconnaissance, we moved swiftly through the yellow band and onto the steep black cliffs above. Starting about 100 m left (south) of the rappel line, we scrambled easily up and right, joining the rappel line at the second belay station, where we started pitching it out. All the belay stations were fixed and obvious, and the route we followed was surprisingly easy (5.1–5.4, with a few 5.6 moves on the next-to-last pitch). On many pitches, we placed no protection between belay stances (on the entire route, we used only three small to medium cams and a few small wires), and after the first few pitches, I felt foolish for having brought rock shoes in anticipation of technical difficulties that never materialized (the shoes stayed in my pack). There was a bit of snow near the top of the gully, but it was not a problem (indeed, the clean water we got from the seep at its base was most welcome); the rest of the route was totally dry. The rock on the route we climbed was also surprisingly solid. Unfortunately, loose debris that is easily dislodged by rope drag is everywhere, which makes climbing beneath another party extremely hazardous.

Having seen another party (Danny, Brent and Jason) below us when we topped out on the yellow cliff band, Doug and I took extra care to minimize such rockfall;



Doug Nelson on Alberta's rotten southeast face

despite our best efforts, however, huge chunks sailed into the abyss on every pitch (the trio wisely turned back after enduring a few of these salvos). Being first, our only concern was natural rockfall, which — fortunately — was never a serious issue (only one minor barrage low on the route).

At the top of the couloir, we encountered Alberta's final line (literally) of defense: the long, narrow summit ridge. Although there was some amazing exposure on this ridge, and a few delicate moves were required here and there, we were both quite familiar with this type of terrain, and it took us only one and a half hours to get to the summit — exactly six hours from when we had left the bivy. After playing a couple of rounds of “name that distant mountain”, snapping pictures as we posed with the Japanese umbrella that was jammed into the summit cairn, and eating lunch, we headed down.

Despite the fact that the rap stations are all fixed, our descent was only one hour shorter than the trip up; I can easily see how it could take longer to get down than up. We made quite good time (completing the eight raps in just under two and a half hours) due to a useful tip I had gleaned from Nancy Hansen's slide show in Canmore in the winter of 2002 (she climbed this route in much more difficult conditions in 2001). Instead of tossing the ropes and having the first person down straighten out the mess (the usual method), the first person down carried the ropes lap-coiled on runners clipped to his or her harness. Nancy said that she and her partner wasted a lot of time chasing and untangling ropes before they discovered this trick, which worked beautifully for us. One final rap through the yellow cliff band, and we were back at our bivy — 11 hours and 20 minutes from when we had left that morning.

That night, as I snuggled into my



top: Doug Nelson on the summit ridge. bottom: Details of the Japanese Couloir

sleeping bag, I smugly noted to Doug that we had really nailed this notorious route, and then drifted off to sleep, dreaming of telemark skiing on huge white snowfields. But the game at hand wasn't quite over. The next day, on the other side of Woolley Shoulder, I stepped on a rock that shifted unexpectedly, sending me ass over tea-kettle. As I sat on a boulder, massaging my battered shoulder, gulping down Advils and wondering if I would be able to get back to the highway under my own steam, Alberta whispered to me, *Now, what was that you were saying about "nailing the route"?* Believe me; this route isn't over until you're sitting in the car!

Postscript

Increasing summer temperatures, perhaps associated with climate change, are transforming the character of many climbing routes in the Canadian Rockies. One famous example is the glacier approach to the Kain Face on Mount Robson, which is now extremely hazardous, making that route a far more serious endeavour than it was in 1990. On the other hand, warmer summer temperatures are making Mount Alberta easier: the Japanese Couloir has been in prime condition twice in the last five years, which is an unusually short interval compared to in the past, when a serious mountaineer might spend an entire

career in the Canadian Rockies without seeing Mount Alberta in the "gift" conditions I enjoyed in 1998 and 2003. If this warming trend continues, these conditions will become normal and this infamous route will see a lot more traffic.

However, anyone who decides to charge off to conquer Mount Alberta the next time it comes into condition should be aware that this is not a mountain to be taken lightly even in the best conditions. In particular, you should carefully assess the rockfall hazard in the Japanese Couloir before you move into it. If there is already a party on the route, you would be wise to choose another line or to come back another day. And even if you are first on the route, you should pause if temperatures dropped below zero overnight; when the sun, which rises already high and hot above Mount Cromwell, hits the due-east-facing Japanese Couloir, all hell will break loose! There aren't a lot of good hiding places in that gully, so unless you want an experience like Omaha Beach on D-Day, you'd best wait for things to settle down. Also, take a good look at the ridge above the Japanese Couloir from the hut – cornices form above that gully in the winter. If they are still there, you should choose another objective, since cornices come down at unpredictable times, with devastating consequences if you are in the way.

Other parties that did the Japanese Couloir in 2003 told me that they climbed quite a few 5.6 to 5.8 pitches, and they advised me that it would be foolhardy to carry only the skimpy rack that Doug and I used. I fully agree. As on any big limestone face, it's easy to take a wrong turn and to be suddenly faced with unexpectedly hard climbing. And don't expect the summit ridge to be the cakewalk that it was for us: as Larry Stanier, who guided the route in 1995, told me, "We had a few hundred metres of pretty interesting double-cornice travel!" The bottom line is that anyone intending to do this route should be prepared to objectively evaluate existing conditions and should not expect it to be as benign as Doug and I found it. Regardless of whether Mount Alberta becomes more accessible because of global warming, it will always be a big, dangerous mountain.

I thank Larry Stanier for very helpful comments, most of which I have used without specific attribution in the postscript. As usual, I continue to feed gratefully on the enthusiasm of Lucille Doucette and Tibor Bodi for tales of my mountain adventures.