

A Frosty Pigeon

Two climbers take a wild winter stab at a Bugaboo classic

Story by Sean Isaac
Photos by Marc Piché

SACRED CEREMONY.



Monolithic spires, jumbled glaciers, golden granite. “The Bugs” entice climbers from all over the world to ascend its classic alpine rock. While the summer climbing season is short, with tight weather windows making it even shorter, when that big high pressure moves in over central BC, experienced alpinists and recreational climbers alike clamber to stand on a sun-soaked Bugaboo summit.

by its northeast ridge (1985); and South Howser Tower by the Becky-Chouinard route (1981).

I always found it interesting that Pigeon Spire had not seen a winter ascent. During the snow-free summer months Pigeon sees constant traffic up its classic west ridge. A 5.4 scramble, this is the most popular route to the summit of a major Bugaboo tower. However, in winter this ridge has thwarted all attempts. Double

STRUGGLING WITH FROZEN DIGITS, I START TO CLIMB, TORQUING TOOLS AND SCRATCHING CRAMPONS UP STEEP CORNERS PACKED WITH WHITE POWDER. REACHING MARC’S BELAY COINCIDES WITH THE ONSET OF HOT ACHES AFFECTIONATELY KNOWN TO ICE CLIMBERS AS THE “SCREAMING BARFIES.”

Winter is a different game. The crowds of July and August are replaced with a cold quietness punctuated by the roar of Bell 212s whisking heli-skiers to some of the best powder terrain on the planet. What is a relatively simple access road to Bugaboo Provincial Park in the summer is cut off by a deep snowpack. This remoteness, combined with harsh winter conditions, deters most climbers from exploring the Bugaboos after the first autumn snowflakes fly; however, a few motivated masochists have challenged these Purcell towers in the dark winter months. In fact, only five winter ascents of major Bugaboo routes have been recorded, none repeated: Snowpatch Spire has been climbed by both the regular Snowpatch route as well as the Kraus-McCarthy route (1975 and 1999 respectively); Bugaboo Spire

cornices, unsupportable rime and sketchy snow slabs hovering over smooth rock slabs turn this benign romp into an alpine nightmare. My climbing partner, Marc Piché, who is the assistant manager of the Canadian Mountain Holidays’ (CMH) Bugaboo Lodge and co-author of the guidebook *Bugaboo Rock*, had attempted a winter ascent of Pigeon Spire many years ago. He was also shut down. Our plan this time was to try the north face, a route originally climbed in July 1948 by the prolific Fred Becky and partners Joe Hieb and Ralph Widrig. This forgotten route was most likely unrepeated as it climbs an unappealing wet gully in summer. We hoped it might offer quality mixed climbing once it was frozen solid in winter.

(cont.)



Photo: Doug LePage



March 2006: Marc and I fly via helicopter to the Bugaboo Provincial Park boundary on the west side of the range. We ski over the Pigeon-Howser Col and down the Vowell Glacier to the base of our proposed objective. As we take turns mimicking gophers, we craft a deluxe snow condo complete with his and his matching ice beds. The next morning the thermometer reads -30 C, making it hard to shed our toasty goose down cocoon. As veteran ice climbers,

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we pride ourselves on getting smarter with age. We both have a “-15 C clause”, which informally states we do not climb when the mercury drops below this magic number. Of course, rules are meant to be broken, so we suit up to face the arctic cold front. Just as I am about to squirm out of the cave, I grab my helmet only to have the super-chilled plastic spontaneously crack. The entire portion the chinstrap attaches to snaps off like a potato chip. Fifteen centimetres of bailing wire and 15 minutes of cursing has my lid patched up enough to make it functional.

I belay Marc from the entrance of the snow cave while he crosses

the bergshrund and gains the gully. By the time he stretches our 60-metre ropes up the first pitch, I am a belay popsicle. Struggling with frozen digits, I start to climb, torquing tools and scratching crampons up steep corners packed with white powder. Reaching Marc’s belay coincides with the onset of hot aches affectionately known to ice climbers as the “screaming barfies.”

After regaining my composure, I begin delicately chipping up the

next lead, which consists primarily of a thin veneer of water ice. When the ice runs out, steep rock offers strenuous drytooling in frozen, turf-choked cracks. As I fight to stay glued to the wall, Marc loses his own battle down at the belay, as my climbing pummels him with snow mushrooms. The next two pitches of steep snow goes quickly, but the pace screeches to a crawl as Marc gets down and dirty with a tight squeeze chimney. A blank section above the slot stumps him, but cowboy trickery finally solves the problem when he manages to lasso a boulder from 10 metres away.

More snow grovelling gains the west ridge one rope length below

the top. The 5.4 crux section of the normal west ridge route is almost unrecognizable under 10 centimetres of unconsolidated rime. We reach the summit at 5 p.m. with eight pitches of mixed climbing behind us, just as the last heli-skiers buzz back to the lodge. With a little more than an hour to dark, we ceremoniously shake hands then commence rappelling back down the way we came. The lights go out as we pull the ropes through the last anchor and dive back into our humble snow hole.

The next morning greets us with a whiteout, so we decide to descend to the fleshpots of the valley. We skin back up to the Pigeon-Howser Col in a blustery gale then rip the hides off in preparation to make a mess of the best run I have ever skied—that is if you can call it skiing when you kick-turn and snowplow with 25 kilograms on

your back while wearing soft climbing boots. Fifteen hundred vertical metres of wobbly survival skiing down the Bugaboo Glacier delivers us to the warm comfort of the luxurious CMH Bugaboo Lodge. I can’t think of a better way to end a fine winter adventure in my own backyard.

Sean Isaac is a writer, photographer, professional climber and guide based out of Canmore, Alberta. He and Marc Piché are board members of the newly formed “Friends of Bugaboo Park” whose mission is to act as stewards of the park to maintain the natural and recreational integrity of the Bugaboos.

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