
Up on the Ice

An adventurous journey to the Wapta Icefields for the completion of the Duke of Edinburgh Gold Level Award

Katelyn Bauer - Report written: November, 2015



Introduction

From the 9th to the 16th of August, 2015 I took part in a six-day expedition through the Canadian Rockies with Yamnuska Mountain Adventures. There were 12 people on the trip in total, including two guides. Everyone had their own reasons for pursuing the trip, and getting to know my fellow trekkers was definitely one of the highlights.

We traversed through the Wapta Icefields — located on the continental divide, between Banff National Park in Alberta, and Yoho National Park in British Columbia. The days consisted of skills development, and application through glacier crossings, and sumitting of four peaks over the six days.

In the sections below, I will list our equipment taken, our meals consumed over the six days, and give a detailed description of our daily activities.



Our Location

As previously mentioned, our expedition took us to the Wapta Icefields, located between Alberta and British Columbia. The Icefields themselves are made up of four glaciers: Bow Glacier, Peyto Glacier, Vulture Glacier and Yoho Glacier. Our expedition started close to the edge of the Bow Glacier, and took us across its width to the Peyto Glacier. We did not cover any of the Vulture or Yoho Glaciers during our expedition.

The course is based out of Bow Hut on the Wapta Icefields just north of Lake Louise. The peaks range from 2900 meters to 3200 meters in height and are of just the right difficulty for instruction. The extensive glaciers are ideal for gaining experience in both safe travel among crevasses and in whiteout navigation when the weather turns bad.

The Team

Our team for the week consisted of 10 'guests' and two wonderful guides who were in charge of the expedition. Besides myself, there were two other young women, and seven men on the trip. Our guides names were Geoff and Mike — both professional guides based out of British Columbia. The other trekkers names, ages and reasons for coming on the trip were varied. There was a father-daughter team completing the course in preparation for a bit summit they were planning. There was also a father-son team who were doing it to learn more about the outdoors. Then there were five other young people, each at some phase in their higher education (either just about to start first-year university), part-way finished, or just having graduated a few months before.

Day by Day:

Pre-Departure: Saturday, August 8



I've finished going over my equipment for what is probably the fifth or sixth time. Today has been a combination of excitement and panic — wondering what I've gotten myself into. Am I strong enough physically? mentally? Will I be able to complete the expedition? Will I slow the group down? Will I be able to push through when I am sore and exhausted? Despite all of these worries, excitement prevails. I can't wait to experience that feeling — standing on the top of the world and knowing I've pushed my limits and done something I'd previously thought was impossible. Off to bed. Can't wait for tomorrow!



View of the mountains in Canmore (looking in both directions) at sunrise. Just grabbing breakfast before heading to the Yamnuska head office for departure.

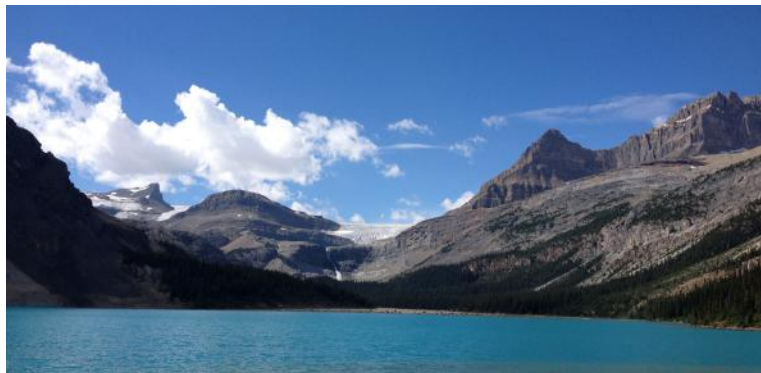
Day 1: Sunday, August 9

- 8:30 Meet group and gear check at Yamnuska head office
Discuss objectives, safety and standards
- 9:30 Leave for Bow Lake (departure point)
- 11:00 Arrive at Bow Lake; begin hike up to Bow Hut (accommodation for first two nights)
- 15:30 Arrival at Bow Hut (elevation 2600m)

The climb: 7km distance and 500m elevation gain

- stopped twice for water/ food
- mixed terrain, crossed several rivers
- rained heavily during last 1/3 of climb, turned into snow during last 20 minutes

After arrival at the Hut (Bow Hut) we discovered that the equipment room was locked - and we did not have the correct combination. Because of this lack of access to the crampons, harnesses, ropes etc. and the stormy conditions, it was decided we would stay in the hut for the rest of the night. Early start planned for tomorrow.



Meals:

Lunch - Bagel w/ cream cheese, arugula, red pepper, cucumber

Crudités

Energy Bars (x 2)

Dinner - Tomato Soup

Shepherds Pie

Three Berry Crumble



My goodies for the week.

Reflections on the day:

My feet are sore (and a little blistery because they got wet during the river crossings). Otherwise, I am feeling tired, but given the weather, and with all of our gear - I am surprised I do not have more aches and pains (especially my back).

Everyone in the group is really nice. There is one father-son team, and a father-daughter team. All the others are young people either just starting or just finishing university.

Tomorrow is supposed to be a very “technical” day. I am excited to see how it is!

Day 2: Monday, August 10

6:30 Wake Up

7:00 Breakfast

7:45 Crampon instruction

8:00 Departure for Bow Glacier

Much instruction on know tying (prussic and safety ropes), crampon technique and crevice avoidance

14:00 Summit Mt. Olive (3,126m) — total time on mountain around 1 1/2 hours

17:00 Arrival back at Bow Hut

The climb: 10 km distance and 700m elevation gain

- stopped twice for food, five times for water
- mixed terrain: rock to glacier, ice, snow on ice, scree, straight rock

Meals:

Breakfast - Pancakes w/ leftover Shepherds Pie

Lunch - Bunwich w/ veggie patty, cheese and red pepper hummus

Dinner - Lentil Curry w/ rice

Skills learned/ worked on:

- Crampon technique (walking on ice up/ down)
- Managing loose rock

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- Navigating cravasses on glaciers
 - Knots and hitches
 - Roping for glacier travel

Reflections on the day:

Today was one heck of a day. I'm not sure my feet have ever been so sore (especially on our descent). On the other side, my legs are surprisingly functional. Today was a trying day mentally. It's surprisingly disconcerting to talk on ice — something you'd normally slip all over and especially at such a steep pitch. Just once we had gotten comfortable walking and traversing the glacier, I was put in the lead. Which was an exciting and scary experience. After about 10 minutes, I had my first encounter with a crevasse — in that I fell partly in. I think that experience really made clear the danger of what we were doing, and all the more fascinating as the science of mountaineering has been so perfected. A further challenge was summiting Mt. Olive. Although I had climbed a mountain before, I never remember being hit with vertigo so badly. There were so many times I wanted to stop, and so many times I was afraid to fall. I kept on going through, and made it to the top. I think what this experience has taught me is that anything is possible — you just have to take things one step at a time, and do whatever it takes to stay focused even if its keeping your ryes to the ground and focusing on your breathing.

The way down was quite scary in its own right — we wee talking on some very steep ice, which meant again, focusing on the task at hand and not letting your mind run wild. In retrospect I am so, so proud of what I accomplished today. I walked on a glacier, I led an expedition and I summited a mountain.

Day 3: Tuesday, August 11

- 6:30 Wake Up
- 7:00 Breakfast and pack up
- 8:00 Depart for Peyto Hut
- 9:45 Summit the Onion
 - total time on mountain around 1 1/2 hours
 - compass and navigational instruction
- 13:00 Arrival at Mt. Thompson
 - Wind lip (lunch) — total time around 3 hrs.
 - Cravasse instruction
- 17:00 Arrival at Peyto Hut (2500m)

The climb: 10km and 400m elevation gain

- stopped twice for food
- ice slush, water

Meals:

Breakfast - Granola

Lunch - Bagel w/ veggie patty, cheese and red pepper hummus

Dinner - Shepherds Pie

Cookies

Skills learned / worked on:

- Map and compass navigation, re-sectioning
- Ice screw placement and ice anchors
- Cravasse descure:
 - tractor pull
 - transferring the load (from rescuer to ice screw anchor)
 - drop loop

Reflections on the day:

I'm not sure my feet and quads have ever been in as much pain as they were this morning. It was a pretty painful beginning - especially given all of this extra weight in our packs. I really enjoyed the instructional aspect of today — especially the crevasse rescue techniques. Today was rather challenging in that there was no much new material and also that my right food crampon kept on falling off.

I also experienced m first moment of “true enjoyment” — not thinking about the weight, my equipment or the technique. It was a beautiful thing.

Day 4: Wednesday, August 12

5:00 Wake Up/breakfast

6:00 Departure for Mt. Habel

9:45 Summit Mt. Havel (3000m)

Total time on mountain around 5 hrs.

11:00 Lunch

11:30 Snow anchor skills

15:00 Cravasse rescue practise

16:00 Arrival back at Peyto Hut

The climb: 13km and 500m election gain

- stopped three times for food
- ice and snow

Meals:

Breakfast - Shepherds Pie

Lunch - Tortilla w/ cheese and veggie meat

Dinner - Chilli w/ rice

Skills learned / worked on:

- T-slot (snow anchor)
- Four person rescue system
 - transferring the load
 - ice anchor

Reflections on the day:

Today was a really great day. Even though I didn't sleep very well, and we had an early start, I think this was my favourite day of snow and glacier travel. Starting so early in the morning meant we were able to travel over frozen surfaces instead of slushy snow and ice. Summiting an other mountain was also a very cool experience (especially because the glacier came up so high on the mountain). An other highlight of the day was repelling into a real crevasse during our practise session today. It was a very cool experience. I'm slowly feeling more confident in my alpine travel/backpacking abilities. It's an awesome realization.

Day 5: Thursday, August 13

6:00 Wake Up/breakfast

7:00 Departure

9:30 Arrival at Mt. Thompson

Wind lip — skills training

15:00 Summit Mt. Thompson

17:30 Arrival at Bow Hut

The climb: 11km and 400m elevation gain

- stopped twice for food
- ice, snow, rock and scree (on Mt. Thompson)

Meals:

Breakfast - Chilli

Lunch - Tortilla w/ cheese and veggie meat

Dinner - Mediterranean Pasta

Chocolate almonds

Skills learned / worked on:

- Multi-Pitch (ice) climbing w/ crampons
- Ice step — chopping steps
- Abalakov anchor (V-thread)
- Flat-footing ("French footing")
- Front pointing

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- Ice climbing — vertical technique
 - Belaying

Reflections on the day:

Today was a struggle. I woke up feeling stuffed up and very weak — very unsure as to how I would manage. I was incredibly cold for the majority of the day, and didn't have much energy. I really enjoyed the extensive skills training session as it was super cool, and less physically strenuous.

On our ascent to Mt. Thompson, I had to turn around half way to the top. I knew my limit, and because we still had to cross the Bow Glacier on our way back to Bow Hut, I had to conserve some energy. Tonight I was very tired, but proud of what I've accomplished. We will have a short skills training session tomorrow, and then the hike back down to Bow Lake.

Day 6: Friday, August 14

- 6:00 Wake up/breakfast
- 8:00 Self rescue training
- 10:00 Pack up and departure for Bow Lake
- 13:00 Arrival at Bow Lake (one hour ahead of schedule)
- 16:00 Departure for Canmore
- 17:15 Arrival at Yamnuska head office
- 17:30 Departure for Calgary (and flight home!)

The climb:

Meals:

Breakfast - Pancakes

Lunch - Tortilla w/ cheese and veggie meat

Skills learned/worked on:

- Self rescue and self belay

Reflections on the day:

Today was bittersweet. It was our last day out on the glacier which, although I really wasn't feeling well yesterday (or today for that matter), I was sad to leave. I've just started to feel comfortable up on the ice.

Right after breakfast we started a skills training exercise with self-rescue and repelling off of the deck on Bow Hut. The self-rescue procedure is quite technical and complex, and involves almost all of the knots we've been practising over the last few days. In that sense though it was really cool to up everything together. Although I found it very challenging, after about an hour of practising, I got the hang of it, and could self-rescue as just about one of the fastest in our group!

After our skills training, we finished packing up our gear, and cleaned Bow Hut pretty much from top to bottom. We left for Bow Lake at around 11am, and began our steep descent. The entire way down the clouds were looking ominous — making us (me especially) nervous for parts of our journey (especially the boulder crossing). Luckily we managed to make it over the trickiest bit before it started to pour. And oh man did it pour. We had been warned to put our rain gear at the top of our packs, and as soon as we made it over the boulder crossing we all scrambled to put it on. From there, it was a literal race to the bottom. We were practically running the entire second half — which was challenging to say the least. I suppose we didn't need to travel as fast as we did, but all of us were tired, cold, and simply ready to use a real toilet, drink a warm drink, and sit inside of a warm building once again. We somehow arrived at Bow Lake an hour ahead of schedule, where our guides took advantage of a short pause in the rain to give us each a certificate of completion and a summary book of all the technical knowledge we learned. We then sat down and waited, and waited, and waited some more. It turns out that someone had written down the time of our return wrong on the Yamnuska schedule, and no shuttle van was sent to pick us up! An hour and a half behind schedule one arrived — dropping us off at the Yamnuska head office. From there, one of my fellow trekkers gave me a ride to the shuttle stop (which I just made), and from there I was off to the airport. Due our delayed departure from Bow Lake, I had been very unsure as to whether I would make my flight back to Victoria. Luckily, with some sprinting across the Calgary airport — I made it to my gate just as they were about to shut the doors. I was so exhausted from the the last few days of trekking, the rain-running-hiking, and the stress of wondering if I was going to make my plane or not that I slept the entire flight back. What a crazy day!

Conclusion:

It's been a little while now since I got back and started the process of putting together all of my notes from the trip. In a way I can't believe that just a few weeks ago I was up on a glacier, in the middle of a National Park, summiting multiple mountains over the span of just a few days. It's incredible how being in nature can feel almost like a parallel universe. Everything is different, and yet, everything is of course the same. I also can't quite believe that these little legs that carry me around this city-life to which I've become so accustomed, carried me up thousands of feet into the air, and allowed me to summit several peaks.

Similar to air travel, I feel like hiking really helps put me into a different frame of mind, and in a strange way, helps to teach me many life lessons — not the least of which is that you can accomplish almost anything you set your mind to. A mountain may seem like an insurmountable challenge, but if you put one foot in front of each other — even taking the smallest steps imaginable, you'll eventually make it to the top. There will be obstacles along the way. There will be crevasses covered with heavy snow drifts which will swallow you if

you aren't careful — or roped in properly to the rest of your team. There will be large boulders that you'll have to carefully plot your course around. There will also be incredibly dramatic overhangs and ledges that you'll often have to scramble over in order to make it to the top. If you just keep putting one foot in front of the other however, you'll make it to the summit.

This course gave me so many skills — both tangible and intangible. I learned the mechanics of glacier travel, how to walk with crampons on, how to navigate, how to tie a proper repertoire of knots, things to be aware of on the ice, how to self rescue, and other wilderness skills. I also learned so much about myself and what I am capable of. Parts of this trip were hard — really hard. I think I ached more, and had more foot and leg cramps than I have ever experienced in my life. This being said, I persevered, and I finished what I set out to accomplish, and that is an amazing feeling.

I definitely still have a lot to learn in terms of mountaineering and my ice travel skills and I would like to go out with a group at least once more in order to solidify my knowledge. This being said, I can't wait to get out into the mountains again!

Equipment List:

Personal Equipment

- Mountaineering Boots
- Multiday pack (60–75 litres)
- Daypack (30-40 litres)
- Sleeping bag
- Water bottle
- Sunglasses
- Sunscreen,
- SPF lip balm
- Camera
- Compass
- Headlamp (with fresh batteries)
- Ear plugs
- Toiletries
- Trekking pole
- Music player and lightweight reading material
- Blister kit

First aid items (bandaids, mole skin, duct tape, scissors, gauze, tylenol, antibiotic cream)

Clothing

Long underwear top and bottoms

Socks (x 3)

Light synthetic shirt

Softshell pants and jacket

Midweight synthetic or down jacket

Waterproof hardshell jacket with hood

Waterproof hardshell pants w/ full side zip

Gaiters

Waterproof mountaineering or ice climbing gloves (x 2)

Touque

Sun hat/baseball hat

Running shoes or sandals

Technical gear provided by Yamnuska:

Crampons

Mountaineering ice axe

Climbing harness

Climbing helmet

Ice screw

Prussic cord (x 2), slings (x 3), carabiners (x 5) (each)

Group gear provided by Yamnuska:

Ropes

First-aid kit (carried by each guide)

Photos

