

THE SCOTTISH-CANADIAN COAST RANGE EXPEDITION, 1965

BY DEREK FABIAN

THE coast mountains of Western Canada have received increased attention in the last two decades, particularly since the appearance of Don Munday's book *The Unknown Mountain* in 1948. There have been several American and Canadian expeditions to the Waddington region, and to many of the equally complex mountain groups stretching for some 1000 miles northwards from Vancouver.

Occasionally immigrant English and Scots climbers have played their part in opening up this vast and dramatic terrain, still mostly untrodden, but hitherto there had been no expedition from Britain to visit the Coast Range.¹ Since my first trip into the region—to the Homathko Snowfield in 1955—I have held the opinion that British climbers seeking new and unexplored territory could find the Coast Range well worth their attention.

The mountains are protected from the intruder by dense barriers of rain forest, 'Coast Range bush'; a jungle of mixed conifer and deciduous growth matted with slide alder and devil's club, making the approaches to mountain and glacier something of a torture at the snail's pace of three to four miles per day. Add to this the notorious coastal weather and it is easy to credit the many fruitless trips made to Don Munday's 'mystery mountain', Mount Waddington, before it was finally conquered by an American party in 1936.² At 13,260 ft., Waddington stands highest in British Columbia.

The first British expedition to the Canadian Coast Range left from Glasgow, by air to Toronto, in July, 1965. Rootes Motors (Canada) generously supplied us with vehicles for the 3500 mile drive to Telegraph Creek, some 250 miles of track to the west of the Alaska Highway. Two hundred and fifty miles, that is, of thick choking dust; distinguishable from the equally thick dust of the Alaska 'Hiway' itself only by its reddish colour. A short hop by bush plane brought five of the expedition personnel from Telegraph Creek to Anuk Landing on the Stikine

¹ Wing-Commander Beauman and Sir Norman Watson were members of an expedition initiated by the latter which made a crossing of the Coast Range in 1934.

² The first ascent of the highest peak of Mount Waddington was made on July 21, 1936, by F. H. Wiessner and W. P. House. The lower North-west peak was ascended in 1928 by Mr. and Mrs. Don Munday and Mr. A. R. Munday.

river; where the party assembled, with two of us, travelling via Vancouver and Wrangell, Alaska, arriving by river boat with the freight.

We had chartered a giant Sikorsky helicopter from the Kennco Mining Co. (this country is only now starting to be opened up by far scattered mining operations) based at Anuk. Three days of frustration followed while the clouds cleared from the icy peaks towering above the river. When preparations for the expedition were first laid our clearest objective was to attempt Mount Ratz, 10,290 ft., the highest in the region and unclimbed. With plans to visit the Stikine well advanced we heard that Ratz had yielded in August, 1964, to an American party led by F. Beckey. This expedition also claimed Mussel Peak, 10,060 ft., but failed to push through a climb on Mount Burkett, 9800 ft. Beckey had organised the only previous mountaineering in the Stikine; an expedition in 1946 which climbed Kates Needle and the Devil's Thumb in the south of the ice-field.

Our objective switched to Mount Burkett, also in the south, but we aimed, too, for a second ascent of Ratz. The Sikorsky lifted us clear of the jungle of growth bordering the river; a heavy bulk of scientific gear (for ice measurements on the Flood glacier) and our limited time justified our cheating the bush on the fly-in, but we would need later to face up to the bush-whack out. We planned to catch the fortnightly up-river boat in four weeks' time.

With the Sikorsky we laid a cache of food and equipment on the lip of the ice-cap at about 6400 ft., and proceeded to establish base on moraines at the head of Flood glacier (2500 ft.). The still unsettled weather prevented the placing of a second cache intended near to Ratz, some twenty miles to the north.

The panorama from the base tent was dramatic, dominated by Kates Needle, with nearly 8000 ft. of ice plunging from its 10,000 ft. summit pinnacles to our feet. Behind camp ranged a wall of rock buttresses, terraced moraines and glistening ice-falls forming the edge of the ice-cap. The snow had begun to recede up the lower slopes, exposing, to our delight, a carpet of low green foliage and brightly coloured flowers in enormous variety.

Five of us made the route up buttress and glacier to the ice-field, leaving George Liddle (Glaswegian architect) and Norman Harthill (geologist, also Glaswegian and now at the Colorado School of Mines) at Base to make a start on the scientific work. Unfortunately Dr. Stan Paterson, our glaciologist, had been delayed in the Canadian Arctic—where he was engaged in glacial survey work for the Canadian Department of Mines and Technical Surveys—and had been unable to make the rendezvous for the fly-in. In his absence our glaciological programme had to be curtailed to preliminary and exploratory measurements only, supervised by Harthill.

The cache at the lip of the ice-field, nearly 4000 ft. above Base Camp, was easily located and we lost no time in erecting the three tiny tents in a snow bowl beside a shattered pile of granite blocks some 150 ft. high. This place was variously dubbed the snow-hole and Cache camp.

Next morning was a 'white out'. Enveloped in cloud, it was impossible to focus the line of demarcation between snow and mist. Thinking ourselves in for another bad weather spell, we stumbled around camp, explored the blocks of granite—after sending one or two perilously near to the tents we called a taboo on scrambling on that side—and fixed skins to the skis. Appreciable distances have to be covered between peaks at the ice-field level, which varies between 5000 and 7000 ft. with complex glaciation. We had flown skis in for these traverses, for it is spring in Alaska in July and the snow is appropriately deep and soft.

Little known to us, the weather forecasters were telling of an anti-cyclone just then coming to rest over the Alaska Panhandle and 'there to stay for a while'. In fact this high pressure system remained more or less stationary through to the middle of August, bringing us a welcome departure from the infamous weather conditions of the area. At midday we climbed the shattered rocks for perhaps the fifth or sixth time, but excitedly for the cloud was now thinning and visibly lifting. Slowly the ice-field unfolded below and around us; the complexity and beauty of the mountains compared well with Andean splendour. Glaciers run out to sea level with the peaks of mixed ice and rock (both igneous and sedimentary, nearly always loose and badly shattered) rising generally to around 9000 and 10,000 ft. This one region covers some 1000 square miles with equally complicated groups lying immediately to the north, east and south. To the west is the Pacific with a myriad of islands all with mountains and bush. Only a few major peaks, and some of the lesser peaks in their immediate vicinity, have been scaled.

A brief period later the five of us were trudging, on skis and roped, for the col five miles due west and on the north flank of Mount Burkett. After hours of toil in the tremendous afternoon heat, we examined from this vantage, almost exactly on the Alaska-British Columbia border, the North-east ridge of the mountain: corniced and decidedly likely to avalanche in the heat of the day. Back at Cache camp we prepared for a bivouac and reconnaissance on the 'spur' at the foot of Burkett's South-east ridge.

David Wessel (American, architect and noted Rockies climber) and I climbed the spur in the evening light, but its link to the mountain proper was impassable; and the South-east ridge showed itself as badly broken and unpromising. John Denton (Cambridge engineer) and Ken Bryan (Glasgow, notable but otherwise indefinable) tried a direct line up the East face, but were forced to retreat when the slope began to soften by mid-morning. Meanwhile Eddie Thompson (lecturer in music,

Glasgow), Wessel and I made a non-spectacular ascent of the mountain north of the col from Burkett, 'Tent Peak'.

We withdrew to Cache camp and then to Base and the bottles of Dawson's Special. Reassembled with Liddle and Harthill, we planned out phase two of the climbing programme. One party—Wessel, Denton and myself—were to do the long ski traverse in order to try an ascent of Ratz, limited by what food and fuel we could carry. The Mussel, Noel, Ratz group lies twenty miles and two long glaciers to the north. The remaining four were to make a determined attack on the East face and South-east ridge of Burkett. This was a tough proposition, but almost certainly our best chance of the peak; should it not go, then Denton and I had thoughts of a midnight start (old and tried Coast Range strategy) to freeze in the avalanche risk of the North-east ridge. Plans were sealed with more Dawson's Special.

From Cache camp the Ratz party commenced the long toil northwards; while the four for Burkett set off for another uncomfortable bivouac on the Spur. This party next day made a long, difficult but successful ascent of Burkett's East face, winning the South-east ridge only a few hundred feet below the summit. Leaving their skis at the foot of the face they were able to crampon across the lower snow bridges until they reached the avalanche runnels of the upper section. These troughs alternated with rock and ice outcrops, until they finally reached the southerly rock ridge and the summit at 6.0 p.m.

The summit block gave room for only one rope of two at a time and they quickly began the descent. The light was beginning to fail when they regained their skis and one ski was lost, slithering away down the icy slope; the second night at the bivouac was even more cold and uncomfortable. Our excellent weather while in the Stikine was broken by only one period, a day and a half, of cloud and storm. This broke that second night at the bivouac, and the following day was hazardous for the Burkett party as they tried to reach Cache camp, threading their way among the many crevasses by compass. After miserable hours of search, at the lip of the ice-field, they abandoned their thoughts of comfort in the tents of the snow bowl, and built an igloo. Would the storm last the night, or a whole week?

The clouds parted briefly, in the dwindling light an hour later, but just long enough for them to glimpse Cache camp—only 200 yds. away.

The same storm confined the Ratz party to their tent on the South-east shoulder, and ate into their climbing time. Beckey's party had ascended by the East ridge, and we were trying the South-east. When the weather cleared Denton and I climbed to a point some 1500 ft. short of the summit, but our time and determination ran out. The ridge is formed mainly of badly broken granite, but is probably a feasible route for a strong rock party. Meanwhile Wessel, who gave us support to the foot

of the rock (where a rope of two had a maximum chance in our limited time), crossed the col to the east of Ratz and made a solo ascent of a minor peak we called 'Pulpit'.

To allow a margin of one day's food, should the weather break again, we set off the next day for the return trip to Cache camp. But the superb weather held; on rejoining the others, and after listening to their tale of Burkett, we had a pleasant day—unburdened with heavy packs—for a ski ascent of a minor hump from which a spectacular view of the Devil's Thumb left us with respect and admiration for Beckey's remarkable 'double' in 1946, unaided by helicopter. The terrain between Kates Needle and the Thumb is extremely rugged. Meanwhile, Bryan and Harthill climbed a massive complex of rock and snow to the south of us, on the lip of the ice-cap, and named it 'Talisker'.

We evacuated Cache camp, sending our heavier equipment and the scientific gear by Hillier, that helicopter species which is a mixture of primitive motor bike and bubble car; the weather was now even more perfect, and the Hillier pilot, keeping our scheduled rendezvous to the minute, brought his machine droning in from a minute glistening speck on the horizon to become an exciting, if incongruous, contraption at our feet.

Down to Base Camp, where the continuing good weather seemed to rob us of long-sought rest days. We were, naturally, not ungrateful.

The fine-looking summit tower of Dominion Peak was found by Wessel, Denton and me to be disappointingly rotten, with no shortage of shattered rock to build a cairn. Bryan and Harthill made a lightning ascent (its second) of Kates Needle, which, though eight miles away, towered so impressively above our base. They halted only for a snow-cave bivouac just below the razor ice-ridge to the north of the summit, having approached from the Flood glacier by a 4000 ft. ice and rock buttress. This same buttress provided the route for Denton, Thompson and myself to a dramatically-coloured evening bivouac; from which the less spectacular, though virgin, Mount Gilroy (9400 ft.) gave us a most enjoyable finale, testing us only on its last few hundred feet with steep ice.

There followed a strenuous back-pack down the Flood, abandoning our skis at the last snow-covering; and then a nightmare tussle with some really grim bush, reinforced now by swollen rivers and providing a booby trap of wasps, which so severely stung Eddie Thompson that his eyes became totally closed and we led him, by hand and by faith, through the jungle of undergrowth. We were unexpectedly benighted in the bush, and struggled in the morning through to where one last river ford brought us to the gravel bars of the main Stikine; only to learn that the river boat had chugged up-river in the night.

Help was at hand from our mining friends at Anuk Landing. We were

so near now that smoke from our fire brought a Hillier in to investigate. An expensive lift across the Stikine river by helicopter to Anuk, where we were welcomed—royally, by remote mining camp standards—and a relatively cheap flight by bush plane to Telegraph Creek put us, with startling suddenness, within 3500 miles of dust and diesel from Toronto.

FLORA AND FAUNA OF THE REGION

BY DAVID WESSEL

The expedition could not boast of a trained naturalist among its members. However, some of us were familiar with more southerly coastal British Columbia and were interested in natural history. In general the flora and fauna of the Stikine area appeared to us to be typical of the entire Canadian Range. Diminution of species and lowering of timber-line appeared likely, though we could not verify them as compared with regions further south. Systematic identifications were not made because expedition plans had not contemplated our climbing to be anywhere near regions with substantial vegetation, and no one even brought along a 'flower book'.

Lush vegetation within moments of our base camp was a delightful surprise. The flanks of the Flood glacier, from about 2000 to 5000 ft. altitude, were covered with verdure wherever retreating snow exposed the earth. In our period of unusually sunny warmth, the vegetation must have flourished with exceptional speed—or so it seemed to us. Timber-line occurred at about 4000 ft., and the firs, hemlocks and junipers which constituted the conifers, grew in scattered, low growing groups. Alder and other large shrubs concentrated along the cascading streams. A large variety of shrubs and flowers blanketed the slopes, their rich colours contrasting with the stark beauty of the ice and rock world.

In general, the species lower down grew lush and great, while those above were spare and dwarfed in stem and flower. Among those species recognised lower down were false hellebore, columbine, lupin, cinquefoil, marsh marigold, forget-me-not, bluebell, Indian paintbrush, saxifrage, monkey flower, fireweed (willow herb) and anemones, while higher up were gentian, alpine forget-me-not, moss campion, mountain heath and alpine buttercup. Grasses and lichens completed the range. One isolated tiny plant with a purple rosette (saxifrage?) clung to a crevice in the rock beside Cache camp. The highest plants observed were tiny mats dotting rocky slabs on the shoulder of Mount Ratz, where freedom from snow cover must be limited to one or two months a year.

The Stikine valley contained a dense forest of fir, spruce, alder, birch, devil's club, huckleberry. It was a particularly maddening sample of British Columbia bush.

The presence of wild life was abundantly evident. Tracks of moose, wolf and bear were seen in the Stikine valley (one paw print in moist sand was ten inches wide!). In the Flood glacier region mountain goats and marmots were seen, along with numerous small birds. Especially charming to us were humming birds, who even flew inside the tents at Base Camp.

Ptarmigan and wolverine left their sign near Base Camp. Of particular interest was the huge pile of faeces of a great bear, and his tracks which paralleled our route for miles toward Dominion Peak, marching up the snow slope and crossing small crevasses. We conjectured that he was a very large grizzly or possibly an Alaskan brown bear. Goat tracks across the upper Baird glacier near Mount Ratz puzzled us, for they were several miles from the nearest rocks and much further from any edible vegetation.

The Flood glacier base camp would be a fine place, I think, from which to make a thorough study of coastal mountain ecology.