Bugaboo Spire, Northeast Ridge

As we have done for several years, Larry Sverdrup and I set out to do a new climb this July. Larry is quite an avid outdoorsman and his pet project for many years has been to climb as many as possible of the climbs in the book 50 Classic Climbs (which is affectionately, and nowadays rather accurately, known as 50 Crowded Climbs). Larry and I did our first 50CC climb together about 20 years ago (East Face of Mount Whitney, (5.4)); over the past two decades, he’s ticked off about 30 more, including routes on El Cap and Half Dome. My own pet project is tagging along whenever he does one that I have a chance of making it up without dying, which is a fairly tight filter. I’m at about 3 or 4 right now, and between his continued climbing and my continued aging, the number of remaining possibilities has become downright minuscule. The plan for this year was to follow up last year’s successful climb of Mount Sir Donald (5.2) with the Northeast Ridge of Bugaboo Spire (5.7) in the Selkirks of British Columbia.

A side note on climbing ratings. Technical roped climbing is graded on an open-ended scale that starts with 5.1 and currently tops out at 5.15 (the “5.” just means that it’s roped climbing). Nowadays, anything up to about 5.7 is considered “easy”, 5.8–5.10 is “moderate”, and 5.11 and up is “hard.” But these designations are somewhat relative; 5.7 or 5.8 is about the limit of what I can do, which means that in modern climbing terms, years of skill and practice have brought me to the upper ends of “easy.”

We met up at the Spokane, Washington airport in the evening after work, hopped in the rental car, and set out on the roughly 7-hour drive up to the small town of Parson, BC, which was, according to 50CC, the turnoff for the dirt road to the trailhead for our climb. About 1:00 am we pulled into a motel in Cranbrook, halfway to our destination, caught some sleep, then set out the next morning to go the rest of the way, arriving in Parson about noon.

According to the guidebook, a turnoff in Parson would lead south 20 miles on a dirt logging road, where we would meet up with Bugaboo Creek, then continue on more dirt road another 14 miles to the end of the road, where we would find a parking lot and trailhead. Parson is little more than a wide spot in Canada Highway 95 with a single turnoff heading off to the southwest, so that was pretty obvious. The turnoff quickly turned into well-compacted dirt, which we followed into the wilderness. Just as the odometer turned over to 20 miles, the road reached and began paralleling a creek, which was obviously Bugaboo Creek, and we headed up the valley alongside it. As we crept up on 14 miles, the valley opened out, providing a sweeping vista of a trio of snow-covered peaks, including a dark, forbiddingly steep-sided pyramid in the center, which we deduced must be Bugaboo Spire itself!

14 miles came and went. As we got up to about 16 miles, the logging road, which had been heading up the valley, took a wide, sweeping turn across the creek and valley floor and began angling up the left wall of the valley, but now heading AWAY from the peak. This elicited a bit of discussion with Larry as we drove: I was worried by the fact that we were obviously heading away from the peak, Larry was fairly sure that we were just circling around the hill that we were climbing up and would eventually turn back toward the peak we had seen. As we drove farther and farther up, the road became narrower, mudnier, and more rutted, until it was no wider than
the car. Even if we’d wanted to turn around, there was no room to do so, and we were now far beyond the supposed 14-mile mark with no parking lot or trailhead in sight.

Presently, we reached a wide, muddy spot that had been bulldozed out of the side of the mountain. As I drove into it, the wheels sank to the hubcaps; I could feel them slipping and catching in the muck and I made the executive decision as the driver to pull a U-turn without stopping until we were back on the narrow (but drier) single-track facing downhill. Larry was somewhat upset with me, arguing that we were “practically at the top.” Which was probably true, but at the top of what? I argued that this road couldn’t possibly be correct; if this was the road and this climb was really so popular, we’d have seen signs of more cars (like, stuck ones) along the way. We compromised by agreeing to go back down to the sweeping curve at the 14-mile mark and trying one of the unmarked turnoffs we’d seen that seemed to be heading in the right direction, back up the valley toward the dark pyramidal peak.

Once we got back to the turnoff we’d agreed on, we headed up it; this, like the last logging road, climbed steeply, but it was at least climbing in the right direction. After about 100 yards, the road was crossed by a berm and a ditch that had been dug at right angles across the road for drainage, which the rental Toyota Camry duly bottomed out on. Another 50 yards brought another berm/ditch combination and another bottoming-out; and again in another 50 yards. After about 7 or 8 of these, a pattern started to emerge, a pattern writ as large as the liability loss/damage coverage I had declined back in Spokane. We stopped.

Another small argument ensued. We agreed that the car couldn’t take much more of having its bottom gouged by the berms, and it was going to take only one well-placed rock to douse the Canadian wilderness in oil and/or gas and leave us high and dry. Not to mention that since it was becoming more and more clear that we were not on the well-traveled road to Bugaboo (we had in fact seen no sign of human life for a couple hours) we would be facing a 50- or 60-km hike back out to the main road. Furthermore, as we tried to figure out what to do, a few other small tidbits of information started knocking against my forebrain. First and foremost, according to pictures I’d seen, Bugaboo Spire was a fin of pale granite, but the peak we had seen was (a) dark, not pale, and (b) a distinct Matterhorn-like pyramid, rather than a fin. In fact, it sort of reminded me of Mount Sir Donald from the previous year. But I knew that Mount Sir Donald was at least 50 miles north of Bugaboo, so that couldn’t be. Unless….

We eventually decided that since arriving at Bugaboo Creek (which we’d only inferred was Bugaboo Creek, never having actually seen a sign) nothing had agreed with the description in 50CC, and there was nothing to do but to retrace our steps back out to the main road and seek further information from the locals. Which we did, taking somewhat over an hour to go back out the dirt logging roads (we were now 40 miles in).

Once out at the main road, we stopped in the local Forest Service office (which was one of maybe 3 buildings that constituted the town of Parson) and asked the ranger the route into the Bugaboo trailhead. “Well, you want to drive about a half hour south of here to Brisco,” she said, “then take the southward turnoff there…. So much for the accuracy of 50CC’s approach description. “So this turnoff in Parson isn’t the way?” I asked. “Well, not to Bugaboo,” she said.
“But if you follow it really far back, you eventually get a really good view of Mount Sir Donald!”

We fairly flew back down the road to Brisco (which we had passed on the way up), stopped at the Brisco general store to pick up a map of the local logging roads, then headed out on the road now clearly marked to Bugaboo Provincial Park. The map turned out to be very useful in resolving a few unmarked intersections; it is reproduced at the end. 45 kilometers later, we pulled into a clearing, obviously the trailhead, filled with cars and SUVs, all wrapped in sticks and chicken wire.

This we had been warned of. It seems the local breed of porcupines have developed a taste for fan belts, radiator hoses, and tire rubber, and anyone leaving a car overnight risks all three. Our doughty little rental Camry had survived berms, mudpits, and about 120 miles of potholes already; we weren’t about to sacrifice it to the rodents of British Columbia, so we gathered some loose wire and stones and swathed her up. We dubbed the trailhead ‘Fort Bugaboo.”

Fort Bugaboo.

Needless to say, our adventures in the Parson wilderness had put us a wee bit behind schedule. In fact, it was 5:00 pm by the time we shouldered our packs and headed up the trail. Fortunately, the days are long in late July in BC, and although we had 7 km and 700 m of elevation gain ahead of us, we still stood a good chance of getting to our destination before sundown.

The trail started out flat, then rose steeply, which is putting it a bit mildly; as one guidebook says, “this is the steepest grade I’ve ever seen in a regularly-maintained trail.” But it is well-maintained. In places, there are steps cut into the rock with cables installed for handrails; at one spot, two aluminum ladders lashed together provide the means for ascending a small cliff. Along the way, we passed two porcupines making their way back toward Fort Bugaboo, no doubt looking forward to a tasty snack later that evening.
Dusk found us in sight of the Kain Hut, a backcountry hut used as a base for hiking and climbing in the Bugaboo range. The hut is perched high on the flank of the valley, at the base of the bowl formed by the peaks of the Bugaboo range: Snowpatch Spire, Bugaboo Spire, Crescent Spire, and more.

Left: Bugaboo Glacier and the Hound’s Tooth. Right: The Kain hut at dusk.

Apologies for the darkness of the photos; it was about 8:00 by the time we got to the hut. Our destination was not there; it was the Applebee’s campground, a km or so up the trail and a few hundred feet higher in elevation. Applebee’s is a backcountry camping area located on a broad, flat saddle on the edge of the bowl formed by the Bugaboo group, overlooking the Bugaboo glacier. We pulled in just as the sun was setting, dropped our packs, and headed off to pump water. By the time we were done, it was 10:00 pm and full dark. So we’d made it to camp just in time; on the other hand, we hadn’t really gotten a good lock at the camp and its surroundings in the light.

(Note the deft use of foreshadowing in the previous sentence.)

As we lay in our bags, we discussed the plan for the climb on the morrow. Bugaboo Spire is, according to Larry’s guidebooks, famous for bad weather in the afternoon, and we were strongly recommended to be off the climb by 2:00 pm, when the afternoon thunderstorms roll in. But was that Pacific Time or Central Time? And do the thunderstorms observe Daylight Savings Time?
Although the forecast was for clear weather in the general area, the Bugaboos create their own weather locally, and we eventually decided that to have every hope of avoiding the possibility of storms, we would set our alarms for 3:00 a.m. to begin the hike across the bowl to the base of the climb.

When the alarm went off at 3:00, it felt like it had only been a few hours since we dropped off to sleep. This was probably because it had only been a few hours since we dropped off to sleep. We lay there for a few minutes in the dark; when it became clear that mental energy was not going to transport us to the base of the climb, we crawled out, pulled our packs on, switched on our headlamps, and started making our way across the moraines and snowfields to the northeast col, which loomed above us. As we walked, we talked about the day. If we were done by 2:00, said Larry, we might want to try the Beckey-Choiunard route on South Howser Tower, another nearby climb on Larry’s tick list. South Howser Tower is rated 5.8 — one grade higher than Bugaboo Spire — and, according to the guidebook, is typically done over two days with a bivouac halfway up. I was a wee bit skeptical that we’d knock it off in the afternoon, thinking that Bugaboo would likely be challenge enough.

By about 4:30 a.m. it was light enough to see without headlamps, and we presently climbed the snowfield to the base of the ridge, arriving just behind two other climbers who had come up from the Kain Hut. Although the guidebook had described the ascent to the ridge as a “scramble,” it appeared to be a fairly loose, vertical scramble, and we roped up for two pitches of 4th-class climbing up to the ridge. We then followed the ridge, bypassing a small snowfield and ascending a low-angle crack up through a band of dark rock to a ridge on the shoulder of the peak, where the climb proper began.
Left: The view from the col looking up the route. The crack running through the dark rock from the top of the snowfield is still part of the low-angle approach; the climb proper begins at the dark/light boundary above. Right: Robert decides it’s time to switch from hiking boots to rock shoes.

By this time it was about 6:30 a.m., and we had already climbed 4 roped pitches (albeit easy ones) before we even officially started the climb. The two climbers we’d met on the way up had gotten to the first rope-up before us, so we waited on the ledge as they started up the first pitch of the climb. As we waited, we saw 3 more climbers making their way up the ridge below us. It was looking like it would be a fairly social climb.

While perusing a topo of the climb, I’d noticed that most of the hardest climbing was on the odd-numbered pitches, and I generously allowed Larry the honor of taking the first lead (5.7). It certainly looked challenging; the first move off the deck required surmounting a small overhang (see below). Larry deftly bypassed the overhang on the left, then traversed back to the right and headed up the main crack system, following a set of cracks and flakes with good handholds, sharp edges, solid placements, and generally great climbing.
Larry got to the top of the pitch, tied off, then belayed me up as I strenuously followed his lead. There were plentiful holds, but a lot of liebacking (a move in which you push with your feet and pull with your hands to follow a vertical crack), and I was huffing and puffing by the time I pulled onto the ledge.

The next lead was mine. Rated 5.6, it followed a set of vertical flakes jutting out from the wall. There were numerous holds, but required a lot of pinching of flakes sticking out, as opposed to sticking one’s hands into cracks. I got to the top of the pitch, put in protection, and belayed Larry up. When he got there, he said, “well, I saw a rappel station, so if we have to rap off, we can do it from here.” It still being only about 8:00 a.m., I thought that retreat wasn’t quite looming on the horizon, but it was good to know that we could if we needed to.

Actually, pretty much after every pitch, we had a little discussion about the weather, or lack thereof, or possibility thereforward, and the eventual need to rap off. Larry and I have a bit of a history of disparity in the rate at which we get concerned about bad weather; I tend to convince myself that the billowing blackness heading toward us is a mere wisp that will dissipate before it arrives, while Larry gets nervous if two water molecules in the sky get within hailing distance of one another in the same time zone. On our first trip to Mount Sir Donald, Larry kept up a constant chatter: “ooh, I don’t like the looks of this…that cloud looks iffy…I’m worried about how that one is growing…” to the point that I wanted to throttle him, at least until the lightning started hitting the ridge above us, at which point I grudgingly admitted he might have a point and we beat a hasty retreat. But on this climb, the sky was blue, the day was warm, and the clouds were light and fluffy.

Larry took the next pitch, a 5.7 diagonal traverse that bulged out above my belay station. At the top of the pitch, he belayed me up. (“We can rap from here if it starts to turn bad.”) The next
pitch was mine; it was described as a “classic 5.6 crack,” which involved more classic 5.6 liebacking (huff, puff). Larry sped up to join me, then we paused to take stock.

Larry was concerned about how long we were taking: it was about 10:30 a.m., and the magical 2:00 hour was less than 4 hours away. According to the topo, we’d done 4 pitches and had 4 more to do. But also according to the topo, the next 3 pitches were chimneys rated only 5.2, and could supposedly be “simul-climbed” (i.e., moving quickly with minimal protection). The last pitch appeared to have one 5.7 move at its end – another roof – and so we figured we could make up some time and be off the top by the witching hour, and decided to move on.

Larry took the first chimney pitch, which, for a 5.2 pitch, sure contained a lot of 5.4 and 5.5 moves. He then belayed me up. (“If we have to retreat, we can rappel from here.”) I then took over the lead for the second of the supposedly easy chimney pitches.
At this point, the chimney deepened to about 2 m deep. When faced with a deep chimney, the climber has two choices; you can go deeply into the chimney where you are assured of finding handholds and footholds and things to press against, but very little room to maneuver; or you can stick to the outside edges of the chimney where you have all the room you need but you’re gambling that there will be enough holds on the face to hang onto. Which there may not be. Now, whenever I do a long climb, it seems like there’s always a chimney like this, and inevitably, it seems, I get sucker into going deep, getting wedged in, and thrashing about like a man in a straightjacket. On this climb, we were wearing full daypacks with crampons and ice axes strapped to the outside of our pack (for the eventual glacier descent), creating that much more opportunity to catch and snag on things in tight spaces. Not wanting to break my streak of poor chimney-judgement, I went deep, and almost immediately found that I was wedged in, unable to even turn around. Eventually, I wriggled out of my pack, climbed up and out of the chimney, then hauled my pack up after me, put it back on, and continued. Tired from thrashing and a bit disgusted with my poor choice, I finished up the pitch, and belayed Larry up. As he clambered up to the ledge, he said “I thought you might want this” and handed me one of my crampons, which I’d managed to thrash off in the chimney without even noticing.

The second chimney pitch, after Robert’s lead.

At this point, it was a bit after 1:00 and Larry was in a state of high agitation. “We are NOT going to be off by 2:00!” he said. “We can still rappel off from here.” I pointed out that (a) the clouds around us had remained light and fluffy all morning and showed no sign of thickening, (b) we were supposedly only two pitches below the summit and the downclimb should go quickly, (c) I’ll be darned if I’m going to retreat in beautiful weather from the last pitch of a climb that I don’t want to have to hike/climb up to again! After a bit more discussion, he relented and we resolved to continue on, come what may.

Larry took up the lead and headed up the chimney again. This one was noticeably easier; as we approached the top of the fin, the angle began to lay back and there were more and more hand- and foot-holds out on the face, allowing one to stay out of the seductive chimney (“come on back! I promise I won’t do anything again! Don’t you believe me?”). I followed him up, took up
the lead, and set out with some trepidation for the final pitch, which looked easy enough, but I
knew that according to the topo, a 5.7 roof awaited at the top.

And so I climbed…and climbed…and eventually Larry called up “15 feet!”, which meant that I
was out of rope, just as I popped onto a small ledge below a vertical headwall. So something
wasn’t right about the route on the topo, because I had assuredly not encountered anything
remotely 5.7-ish. But the important thing was: if there was a 5.7 roof, now Larry, not me, would
get to lead it on his next pitch. As I belayed him up, I was joined on the ledge by the threesome.
They’d originally started out below us, but while we were climbing up the 5.6 and 5.7 regular
route, they were amusing themselves by doing 5.8 and 5.9 variations and passing us. We all
arrived at the top of pitch 8 together, which turned out to be propitious because they pointed out
how one traverses right around the headwall, scrambles up another 50’, pops over a small roof
(the greatly-blown-out-of-proportion 5.7 roof), and scrambles up the summit ridge. So we did,
Larry leading the 50’ technical part, then I ran out the rope along the ridge up to the north
summit, Larry following shortly behind.

![Left: Robert topping out. Right: Larry on the summit ridge.](image)

Once you’re up, you have to get down, and getting down from the northeast ridge on Bugaboo
Spire entails traversing the entire ridge and descending the southwest ridge — also called the
Kain Route (first ascended by Konrad Kain in 1916. This is a technical climb in its own right,
but when you’re descending, you can rappel any steep bits. The ridge of Bugaboo Spire has two
summits separated by a notch, and is basically a knife edge, broken up by spires and blocks that
must be scrambled over and around. At one point, the experienced threesome pointed out an
improbable traverse to get around one of the spires, in which you step across a 2000-foot dropoff
onto what appears to be a blank face; but when you get there, there’s an almost-hidden
underclinging that’s like a little handrail, allowing you to cross the chasm easily. It’s not at all
obvious from the start that it’s there, and I wondered who first had the idea of trying that
traverse.
The view along the ridge from the top of the climbing route. The two summits are visible along the skyline; the Gendarme is down the ridge to the left.

Left: most of the traverse is simul-climbing, and many parties simply solo the ridge. The dot of red is Robert’s helmet. Right: Approaching the point of the rappel down to the notch.

After a bit more traversing, we set up a rappel down to the notch between the summits. At the notch, the threesome told us they were going to climb back up to tick the south summit, and we could either follow them or traverse farther around to the descent. By this time, it was well after 2:00, and it was clear that no afternoon weather was rolling in, and Larry and I had fully switched roles; he was rarin’ to go for the south summit, I was totally exhausted and ready to continue down. But I could feel (or imagine) the contemptuous gaze of the threesome if I
wimped out, so I relented and Larry led a pitch up to the top again along a series of parallel cracks. I followed. It was not nearly as hard as I thought it would be, until I got about 2/3 of the way up, when the two cracks thinned and moved far, far apart, creating a blank stretch for about 8 vertical feet. I could see that I could probably make it up with a strenuous lieback at 5.8 or so, but by this late in the day I didn’t think I had that in me. And then just when all hope was lost, I saw that I could grab onto the most remarkable rock formation, which was brightly colored, about 11 mm in diameter, and could easily have been mistaken for the rope if one weren’t sure it was rock, and with two quick pulls on this remarkable formation, I was over the crux and on my way up to the summit.

From the south summit, we started down the Kain Route. First came three successive rappels past the famous Gendarme, a spire on the southwest ridge that provides the most challenging climbing for those on the way up. By this time, the threesome was far ahead of us, but another pair of climbers had caught up to us and we shared a rope for the three rappels.
Left: Larry descending toward the Gendarme (partly visible under his left leg). Middle: an oblique view; a climber has just completed the first rappel and is standing on the Gendarme. Right: Three rappels later, looking back up at the Gendarme.

After the rappels, we bade farewell to the two climbers who went soloing on down the ridge; Larry and I started simul-climbing, which is basically like soloing but with a rope between you so that if you happen to hit a tricky bit, you can still put in a piece of protection. It’s safer, but slower, and the sun descended in the sky as we made our way down and around the spires and blocks of the ridge. At one point, we encountered a dropoff; fortunately, others had, too, and there were rappel stations already set up. After two short rappels, we continued down the ridge, reaching the col right at 8:00 pm.

Beyond the col, we still had to descend the Bugaboo glacier, cross the bowl, and find our camp, which we could see across the bowl in the distance. But now the sun was setting fast, so we crossed the ridge to a point where the snow came almost up to the ridge, strapped on our crampons, and prepared to descend.

A funny thing about a landscape of snow and rock is that when looking from afar, one has absolutely no reference for sizes and angles. What had looked like a gentle snow slope from high up on the ridge turned into what looked like a cliff once we were standing at the top of it. I was petrified. Halfway down the slope, I could see the bergschlund — a great crevasse that split the slope all the way across. If you ever lost your footing, you’d be going about 100 miles an hour when you rocketed into the crevasse — or so it seemed. Larry, who has a lot of experience on snow and ice, explained how we’d do it. You plunge your ice axe into the snow up to the head; take two big steps down the hill, planting your feet; pull out the ice axe, plunge it in a few feet further down; and repeat. As a mitigating factor, we were following a fairly well-trodden path down the slope. Nevertheless, it was steep enough that even though you were standing over your feet, your butt was still resting against the snow slope. (My butt was therefore getting soaked and cold, but that was the least of my concerns; avoiding becoming Robert the Human Bobsled took center stage in my thoughts.)
Plunge, step, step, pull; plunge, step, step, pull; down we went. It was dark before we’d descended more than a few hundred feet, and we switched on our headlamps. Plunge, step, step, pull; plunge, step, step, pull. (“Step, step, kick-turn!”) Slowly we worked our way down. Once or twice my footholds broke away and I was left hanging onto the head of my ice axe until I could kick new steps into the slope. Once we’d passed the bergschrund, I breathed a bit easier, and the slope started to ease off. Presently, we found ourselves at the bottom.

By this time, of course, it was completely dark. We still had to cross the bowl, which from on high had looked fairly featureless, but now that we were down in it, it had morphed into a crazy mass of moraines and snowfields running every which way. Since we had only spent about 6 hours total at Applebee’s — all of which was in the dark — its compass heading was not entirely clear from our current position. However, there was a fairly clear set of tracks heading away from the col and across the bowl, presumably, toward the Applebee’s campground, so we set out along them. As we walked, we saw a faint pale curtain in the sky: the northern lights, off on the horizon. Because of the mixture of moraines, snowfields, and small lakes, we frequently lost the tracks on the snow when we had to cross a moraine, but we usually picked them up again — or ones like them — after the next snowfield.

But then came a fairly long moraine, and there were no obvious tracks on the other side. Some discussion ensued. Larry thought we were too high; I couldn’t offer anything better, and so we backtracked and descended, and picked up another set of tracks. This set ran for a while, then ended at a rising slope. I remembered that our camp was up on a bench; perhaps this slope ran up to the bench? Larry acquiesced, and we started picking our way up the slope through the boulders. As we climbed, it was looking more and more like our camp; there was the saddle where we got water, this would have been the way we’d started out in the morning; and thus it was exceedingly disappointing when we got to the top to find that there was absolutely nothing remotely familiar on top.

Another conference. Larry was all for climbing over the hill to the south, sure that our campsite was there. I was not so sure, which I hinted by stating “we’re lost.” By this time it was after midnight, and I pointed out that in four more hours it would be light. How about if we just hunker down and try to get a bit of sleep? We didn’t have our bags, but we both were wearing warm clothes, and the night was fairly warm (well, warm for a glacier at 9000’ in Canada, anyhow). Larry predicted that once we stopped moving, we’d be freezing cold in about an hour, but sure, that sounded as good as anything.

And of course he was totally wrong: it only took 45 minutes before we were freezing. My pants had not fully dried from the descent of the glacier, and by 1:00 am my teeth were chattering and I was wide awake. But to what a show! The northern lights had rolled in and the entire sky was on fire. Billows of light flickered across the heavens. We lay there watching the show, and then when we could no longer stand it (and my shivering threatened to destabilize the slope), we arose, pulled on our packs, and headed for the hill that Larry had identified as our next likely prospect. Naturally, it, too, revealed nothing resembling a campsite, so we started traversing along the slope, picking our way through boulders and talus. But it became clear that we were still nowhere near the campsite and might easily completely miss it stumbling around in the semi-dark. So we found another slightly sheltered spot on the slope and curled up for another
half-hearted nap while the sky blazed above. By this time, we were thinking that a GPS would be a very good toy to have along on such occasions, but we subsequently learned from another climber that the solar activity that was giving us such a beautiful light show had also wiped out GPS reception; we might not have been the only climbers stumbling around that night.

My pants had finished drying on the last hike, so I slept a bit longer this time before the cold woke me up. It was about 3:00 a.m., and Larry, too, was stirring. We sat for a while, wiggling toes and muscles, and scanning the bowl. We were fairly convinced that we had gone too high, but that gave us a good shot of seeing our camp somewhere down below us, if there was anything to see. Although it was still about an hour away from light, we figured that there was a good chance of seeing something that might give us a clue, and sure enough, the God of Weak Bladders looked down and smiled upon us; a headlamp flicked on in the far distance as some anonymous but blessed soul got up to go to the bathroom. Instantly, we were calibrated.

Applebee’s camp was a few hundred feet lower, and about half a mile away, and we started picking our way down and across the slope. Before long, the silhouettes of tents and hanging packs loomed in the gathering dawn. We found our own, pulled out our bivvy sacks and bags, and collapsed, 26 hours after setting out for the climb. The last thing I remember saying was, “I don’t think we’re going to squeeze in South Howser Tower,” and was asleep before I heard Larry’s answer.

Left: the glacier descent from the southwest col. Our path started at the highest tongue of snow, then angles down to the right, eventually disappearing behind the black pillar in the foreground.

Right: Bugaboo Spire in the morning. The Northeast Ridge climbing route is the right skyline; the Kain Route descent is the left skyline. The Gendarme is barely visible on the skyline just below the south (left) summit.

We awoke about 8:00 a.m. later that morning, not having slept that much, but the sun was hot and the other campers were stirring. Slowly we packed up, pulled on our backpacks, and started making our way back down the valley. Whether from the climb itself, the glacier descent, or the night of wandering up and down moraines, my quadriceps were totally trashed, and while I could
easily walk uphill, I discovered that I could barely keep my balance walking downhill. Unfortunately, we had about 3000 feet of elevation to lose, and I spent the next several hours taking baby steps down the mountain. But eventually, we got back to the car. The chicken wire and stones had successfully kept the porcupines at bay, and we loaded up and headed out for a well-deserved meal and rest.

July, 2004

Text and pictures by Robert J. Lang and Larry Sverdrup.

Below: A very not-to-scale map of the turnoff near Brisco and road to Bugaboo. The Brisco General Store at the turnoff gives them away. It’s useful, so buy something from them when you go by as a thank-you.
DISTANCES IN KM

Store to Junction 9.0
Junc. to Cartwright 12.9
Cartwright to Dunbar 6.1
Dunbar to Twin 1.9
Junc. to Topaz
Topaz, Cleland, Jade turnoff
Junc. to Botts 6.9
Botts to Twin 7.2

PLEASE
WATCH FOR LOGGING TRUCKS ON THE ROAD

MAP compliments of
Brisco General Store
Brisco, BC