

A Welcome Refuge

By ACC member Meghan Ward of Kanata, Ontario

You can hardly see it, especially if you don't know where to look. Somewhere on the vast sea of snow ahead, somewhere where the ice meets rock, sits a refuge ready to welcome travellers weary from a long journey. While a hut can be hard to see from the distance, when you are finally able to distinguish rock from your potential home for the night, a strange emotion comes over you. This small building, able to withstand even the most destructive and deadly elements, feels so out of place. But this is home, for a night or two, and can become a part of the landscape and one's experiences in The Canadian Rockies.



Photo by Meghan Ward

We were fortunate that many people in our group worked at Num-Ti-Jah Lodge on Bow Lake when we embarked on our first-ever traverse of the Wapta Icefield, as the lake is one of the traditional starting points for the journey. On previous trips, we had made use of many huts built and maintained by The Alpine Club of Canada (ACC), especially Bow Hut and The Peter and Catharine Whyte (Peyto) Hut, as they were in close proximity to Bow

Lake. When we heard that one of our destination huts, Stanley Mitchell in Yoho, was full we aimed to finish our traverse at Sherbrooke Lake instead.

Combining our knowledge of summertime glacier-crossing, crevasse rescue training, avalanche safety, and navigation, our team of six began the journey on June 30th, 2007. Our first day, we left Bow Lake and hiked to the toe of the Bow Glacier where we roped up and began our journey on the ice. That day took us beneath the steep summit of St. Nicholas to the top of "Vulture Peak," and down towards R.J. Ritchie (Balfour) Hut. The snowpack was still quite substantial after such heavy snowfall in the winter season, and so we were met with very few problems navigating through crevassed sections. Still, as we descended the glacier, the sight of Balfour Hut brought on excitement and a sense of accomplishment. While our hike that day was not particularly difficult, the opportunity to rest for the next day's journey was a welcome opportunity. While these alpine huts are simple, they offer a great sense of luxury in the midst of terrain that can be very unforgiving at times.

Balfour Hut is located on a small area of smooth rock in a depression in the landscape. The hut provides particularly good views of Mount Balfour, which was our targeted summit for the next day. That night we ate a great dinner, looked at maps, drank tea, and went to bed early with hopes to re-energize for the 4AM start the next day.



ACC Collection

It was still dark when we woke up on July 1st, but the sun makes its presence known early at such a high elevation. By 4:30, a pink glow had lit up the clouds and we were well on our way to roping up for the journey ahead. The snow was crisp, and clinking equipment and crampons striking the ice were the only sounds pervading the silence of our group.

As the sun rose, we set our eyes on climbing Mount Balfour. At 10,735 feet, Balfour is a multifaceted peak, with incredible icefalls on its East face, and a definite sense of reward at the summit. Low clouds prevented us from seeing for the last 200 feet, but the climb created a sense of camaraderie within the group as we continued to navigate and travel by our own means and experience.

In good weather, we reached the Balfour Col and descended the glacier towards Scott Duncan Hut, climbing Lilliput Mountain (9,541 feet) along the way. Again, the hut was difficult to see from the distance, but when it finally came into view, it signified much more in the wilderness than it would have anywhere else. Step by step, we inched our way slowly towards the hut. But, the featureless sea of snow draping the glacier distorted our perception of depth and distance, and made our destination seem much closer than it was in reality. It is in these moments that you must strike a balance between the attentiveness required to ensure your group moves safely across the ice, and allowing your thoughts to drift to help pass the time. Just when we thought we might never arrive, we were standing in front of the hut at the base of Mount Daly.

We arrived at the hut fairly early that evening, which provided ample time for certain members of our group to explore around the area. Some decided to take photographs, read inside, or sleep. The easy-going nature of our group made for an enjoyable time together, free from the need to negotiate, which can often plague a larger hiking group. No matter how we spent our time that evening, we were bonded by the fact that each

one of us desired to be nowhere other than in that very spot, enjoying the incredible wilderness that surrounded us.



Photo by Meghan Ward

On July 2nd, our last day of the traverse, a few group members awoke very early to climb Mount Daly (10,342 feet), while the rest of us enjoyed the comfort of the hut for a few more hours. When they arrived back, we packed up, cleaned the hut, and started on the final leg of the traverse towards Sherbrooke Lake. After hiking for two full days on the glacier system, the first sight of trees was astonishing and served as a pleasant

reminder that we had reached tree-line again. Our group gradually descended towards Sherbrooke Lake, then followed the trail that leads to the West Louise parking lot. Having parked a car there before leaving from the other side of the Icefield in the days before, we were able to seat all 6 of us, with 6 full packs, and 6 sets of ice axes, crampons, harnesses, and other gear in the car for the ride back to our starting point. It was quite a sight, and the source of many laughs for the drive home.

After 40 kilometres of hiking, our group's sense of camaraderie was still present, and our sense of accomplishment was overwhelming. Our traverse was complete, and thanks to the ACC huts, we were spoiled with shelters that protected us from the elements, and helped us to explore our possibilities as backcountry travellers.