

Woman climbs Rockies' 54 tallest peaks Only 5 others have attained lofty goal

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Nancy Hansen's quest to climb the 54 highest Canadian Rockies peaks almost ended in tragedy as she slid, unconscious, down a steep shaled slope to the edge of a cliff on Mount Goodsir South.

Reaching the Mount Goodsir peak a year ago had left Hansen three shy of her goal. A self-described "lists person," she made it her mission six years earlier to become the first woman to climb every Canadian mountain with an elevation 3,353 metres or higher above sea level.

On her descent some 200 metres below the Mount Goodsir summit, she tripped and plummeted over four rock ledges before her body ground to a halt in front of the cliff. Below the cliff was a 1,500-metre drop.

"I don't know if I was hit by a rock," said Hansen, 34, of Canmore. "I know I was unconscious as I fell, because I didn't try and stop myself and I knocked my partner (Colin Jones) off on the way down."

Though blood gushed from head gashes, Jones was able to revive her and the pair gingerly descended to the valley floor just before sunset.

But when Hansen stopped, she couldn't get up again. She had broken a bone in her neck and stretched ligaments in her lower back.

"We both stopped on the edge of a cliff. She was bleeding and unconscious," said Jones. "At first, I thought she was dead. We fell quite a way and there was blood everywhere. She was in a lot of pain, but she pulled herself together and I didn't have to help her very much on the way down."

Jones had to leave Hansen behind the next morning as he hiked 10 kilometres to their truck to call park wardens for help.

"She's amazing. She's a very strong woman, very motivated," Jones said.

Just more than one year later, on Sept. 1 of this year, Hansen crossed the last mountain off her to-do list.

She reached the summit of 3,616-metre Mount Forbes to cap the seven-year odyssey that began Sept. 17, 1994, at the 3,486-metre Mount Temple.

Only five other people, all men from Calgary, have completed the feat -- all taking more than twice as long.



CREDIT: Courtesy, Nancy Hansen

Colin Jones, Nancy Hansen's frequent climbing partner, near the summit of Mount Goodsir South shortly before they fell over four rock ledges in a near disastrous descent.



CREDIT: Doug Fulford for the Calgary Herald

Nancy Hansen, atop Mount Tusk, risked death in pursuit of her climbing goal.

Don Forest was the first to reach the milestone in 1979, followed by Rick Collier in 1996, Bill Corbett last year, and Forbes MacDonald and Roman Pachovsky this year.

"I did do it in a relatively fast time frame, but it wasn't because I wanted to do them fast, it was because when I put my mind to something, I want to do it right away," says Hansen, director of facilities and mountaineering for the Alpine Club of Canada.

"It's amazing that she did that in that timespan. I've done a lot of the peaks, but it's so much work that it's hard to keep going," says Jones, her frequent climbing partner.

Given a choice, Hansen turned back from a peak only when facing serious danger.

"She's quite the woman. She doesn't like turning around. If there's a way to the top, she'll find it," said Jones. "She's safe, but she pushes it, for sure."

On Mount Tsar in June 1998, 700 metres below its 3,424-metre summit and 11 hours of steep hiking and climbing from her truck, Hansen was faced with a dilemma when half of her four-person climbing team wanted to abort the climb. Rookie climber Jude Hall and Doug Fulford, Hansen's husband of six years, were both exhausted.

Hansen and Jones didn't want to repeat the 200-kilometre drive over rough logging roads and three hours of bushwhacking to reach the peak for another gruelling attempt later in the season. So Hansen cut the group's 50-metre climbing rope in two.

"Colin and I ended up getting back to our tents 21 hours after we started," says Hansen.

The number of "11,000ers" in the Canadian Rockies is hotly disputed among mountaineers. Depending on whether they recognize disputed summits as being a separate mountain or a shoulder of a higher peak, mountaineers believe there are 52 to 55 peaks that must be climbed before a person should be included in the 11,000-footers club.

In 1997, Hansen identified 54 peaks.

"I think the main reason I decided to do it was that it seemed like an achievable goal that would keep me challenged for many years, which it did," says Hansen. "Any fit individual can do this."

The goal was audacious for a woman who had just started climbing, but friends had little doubt in her ability to accomplish whatever she set her mind to.

"She's an amazingly understated but very competent woman," says Bob Sandford, a friend and the co-ordinator of Canadian celebrations for the United Nations International Year of Fresh Water.

Many of Hansen's climbs included long car rides over logging roads and multi-day hikes just to reach the base of remote mountains. Once there, more often than not, the weathered rock lived up to the Rockies' notorious reputation for unstable, brittle holds that shatter under a climber's weight.

Hansen climbed every peak with at least one partner, and often found herself apologizing for dragging them through snow and bad rock.

Many of the remote peaks could have been easily reached by bush plane, but Hansen decided to reach each peak the hard way. The arduous approaches furnished some of her most unforgettable experiences, including views of the Rockies seen by few human eyes.

Her favourite trip was to Mount Clemenceau and Mount Tusk with Fulford.

"We crossed seven glaciers and saw some incredible terrain," says Hansen. "The peaks were fun, but that trip was more about getting there and back."

Hansen was thrilled to be part of the only climbing party on the mountain on all but four trips. Two-and-a-half days from the nearest road and without a satellite phone, that independence threatened to turn her favourite trip into a nightmare. The couple almost lost their tent when a gust of wind blew it off a cliff ledge with all of their sleeping gear inside.

"Doug did a football tackle of it and just caught an inch of the tent chord to save it," said Hansen.

Hansen may never have started this history-making list if her family ties didn't draw her back from the happy life she had made in Townsville, a town in northeast Australia.

Born in Maple Ridge, B.C., Hansen grew up in Edmonton. After finishing high school, she wound up living in Townsville for seven years, where she worked on a seasonal fishing boat, picked up her Australian citizenship and finished a geology degree at James Cook University.

"I fulfilled my adrenalin goals over there by motorcycling," says Hansen. "I wouldn't have come back if my family didn't live in Canada."

With the Rockies list complete, Hansen is turning her attention to climbing every route listed in the original guidebook for 2,240-metre Yamnuska, the most popular peak in the chain.

As with the 11,000ers, only a handful of men have done it. And Hansen has already scaled 30 of the 34 routes.

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