



# The Bugaboo Spire

HONOURING THE SPIRIT OF CONRAD KAIN BY CLIMBING ONE OF NORTH AMERICA'S CLASSIC ALPINE ROUTES IN THE HEART OF THE PURCELL MOUNTAINS

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PHOTOS BY STEVE OGLE

**S**un pokes through clouds for the first time in three days, drying soggy gear laid on granite slabs or fluttering like flags on tent guy-lines at the Applebee Dome campsite. Climbers, some looking haggard from long days on granite walls and others fresh and anticipating adventures to come, cluster in small groups to talk weather and climbing routes. Among the Anglophone majority, I detect a United Nations of other languages—French, Spanish and German, plus some others I can't identify. Such is the international appeal of the Bugaboos. Last night we shuffled into the Conrad Kain Hut under darkness, then brewed up dinner to the sound of rain pattering on a metal roof. Above the well-scuffed wooden dining table is a simple tribute to Conrad Kain on a plaque that reads: "Guide—Philosopher—Friend."

**THE YEAR 2016** was an important one for Bugaboo Provincial Park. This stunning cathedral of granite spires and tumbling glaciers in the Purcell Mountains was first set aside in 1969 as Bugaboo Glacier Provincial Park and Bugaboo Alpine Recreation Area, then combined in 1995 to form the 13,646-hectare park we know today. However, long before the creation of a park, the region had garnered the attention of climbers from around the world drawn by exquisite cracks and fissures that seem to soar into the clouds.

The story of climbing in the Bugaboos began more than a century ago on August 29, 1916, when Conrad Kain, that understated yet visionary Austrian immigrant mountain guide, made the first ascent of Bugaboo Spire up the mountain's long aesthetic south ridge. The route's legendary "gendarme" crux pitch still challenges and stumps climbers today. Like many students of Canadian alpine history, I felt the pull of the Bugaboos on this auspicious centenary. I booked off a tight three-day window to climb Bugaboo Spire by the mountain's more challenging northeast ridge, with photographer Steve Ogle and his fellow Nelsonites Troy Swanson and Graeme Marshall, a high school teacher who founded the ATLAS program (Adventure, Tourism, Leadership and Safety) a decade ago at Nelson's LV Rogers ▶

Secondary School. Given its notoriously volatile weather, allowing just three days to get up any chunk of granite in the Bugaboos has similar odds to hitting the jackpot on a Las Vegas slot machine.

After a comfortable night at the Conrad Kain Hut, we woke lazily to the sound of more rain and wind rattling against the side of the quonset. Optimism is the mountaineer's only option, so we ate breakfast, repacked then hit the trail that ascends steeply up the wasteland of moraines leading to Applebee Dome. I slipped into a slow, steady pace and noticed life flourishing among the boulders and hard packed glacial till—brilliant purple moss campion, mountain harebells and other resilient alpine flora. An hour after leaving the hut, we pulled into the Applebee Dome climber's campsite, which resembled a sort of alpine refugee welcome centre. Tent real estate was in short supply. We hovered while a group of exiting climbers packed and vacated, then quickly moved in to occupy their site, while a trio of female climbers did yoga on a tabletop of granite overlooking the valley of Bugaboo Creek, an outdoor studio without rival.

Now sun fills the lower reaches of Crescent Spire and Applebee Dome so we decide to go for an afternoon climb, Graeme and I opting for an easy outing on Lion's Way, which meanders up the Crescent Towers. Troy and Steve head for something more ambitious—the classic McTech Arete on Crescent Spire. Six hours later we reconvene back at Applebee Dome campsite for supper and a nip of whiskey, our hands already nicked with scores of cuts from the crystalline granite. Foreboding dark clouds boil ominously around the mountaintops, obscuring Bugaboo Spire's summit, and that night wind tugs noisily at a nearby tent as I snatch stretches of restless sleep. We wake in the steely pre-dawn, to see Bugaboo Spire's summit still obscured by cloud, yet we cling to the favourable forecast. After a quick breakfast and a double-shot of coffee, we recheck gear, load daypacks and trudge up the moraine next to the campground, before plodding along a well-worn path in snow pink with algae that contours around an icebound lake. Several parties had left before us and I spot them as morning light floods the alpine, five black dots traversing the snowy cirque beneath Crescent Spire.

**IN 1910, KAIN** joined an exploration party hoping to investigate this set of



Above: The Conrad Kain hut (ACC); Sunrise on the Applebee camp, with the Bugaboo Glacier behind.

alluring Purcell spires that had been spotted from Rogers Pass in the Selkirks 100 kilometres to the north. He vowed to return, and in 1916 he did so. After a long approach from the Columbia Valley by horseback and foot with his longtime clients and friends Albert and Bess McCarthy, as well as John Vincent, they stood at the foot of Bugaboo Spire's south ridge. The surrounding granite giants must have astounded even Kain who had embraced the wilds of Canada's Western Cordillera where the potential for first ascents and exploration seemed limitless. He came to Canada in 1909, before Europe was besieged by the First World War, and that summer landed a job working at the Alpine Club of Canada's Lake O'Hara summer camp. It was a life-changer for Kain and he would go on to amass a towering resume of first ascents in the Columbia Mountains and Canadian Rockies. Among them an audacious route up Mount Louis, that dogtooth of limestone near Banff, which he executed casually one afternoon while out for a wildflower viewing day-hike (there are no shortage of stories of modern day climbers underestimating this climb and spending an unplanned night on Louis). His 1913 ascent of Mount Robson is legendary; after chopping steps in steep ice up the Kain Face and summit ridge, he arrived at the pinnacle of the Canadian Rockies, turned to his clients, Billy Foster and Albert MacCarthy, and announced: "Gentlemen, I can take you no further."

He continues to inspire.

"Most other guides of the day were just doing a job. They were good technicians," says Chic Scott, a pioneering ski mountaineer, author of *Pushing the Limits: The Story of Canadian Mountaineering*, among other books, and a dedicated chronicler of Canadian alpine history. "But Kain had a passion for the mountains and it came through in his style. It was always a bold style."

He was an alpinist of immense ingenuity, able to see a way forward where others saw only barriers, blessed with a brand of extreme optimism without which one would be just another individual or adventurer following paths forged long ago by others. He was also a skilled woodsman and outfitter, could shoot and dress a wild mountain goat or sheep, prepare a meal worthy of a Canadian Pacific Railway hotel kitchen, then spin tales around the campfire for hours while stoking a pipe that was his constant companion.

**STEVE, TROY, GRAEME** and I have to time to kill at the base of the northeast ridge, which wasn't climbed until 1958—42 years after Kain pushed his route up the mountain's opposite ridgeline. The morning feels unusually cold for late July so I hunker in the lee of a boulder. If I was a smoker I would stuff my pipe with tobacco and light up. Instead I eat chocolate and gaze down the north side of the spire at a brilliant alpine lake, a splash of turquoise among the barren geological ruins of glacial recession.

A decade earlier, I camped at this lake by Vowell Glacier and am astonished by the pace of glacial retreat—at least 200 or 300 metres of ice had disappeared in the years since my visit. We're fourth in line behind a backlog of three other climbing parties waiting to get on the route. Ten metres above us, a guided client grovels slowly up the first pitch, a scimitar crack that arced upwards to the first belay. We make small talk with three cheerful, 30-something Americans, as well as veteran mountain guide Lilla Molnar who also waits with a client. Two nights ago, we spoke with Molnar at the Conrad Kain Hut as she prepped for a long weekend of guiding work in the Bugaboos, a place that is close to her heart. Bugaboo Park was in danger of becoming of a victim of its own



Conrad Kain's bold style has inspired generations of mountaineers.



Graeme Marshall (leading), followed by Andrew Findlay and Troy Swanson en route to the base of the North East Ridge Route. The start of the real route is above the black lichen-covered rock above the snow patch.



A climber prepares to rappel off the “Gendarme”—the crux pillar blocking the Kain Route, which served the author’s descent.

popularity as well as sagging parks budgets that had seen provincial parks staff presence in this mountain park dwindle from a full-time park ranger to just a two-week tour of duty by an overtaxed ranger each summer. That’s why Molnar and her mountain guide partner Marc Piché converted concern into action and formed the Friends of Bugaboo Park.

“We started it in 2010 because of the lack of government funding,” Molnar says. Human waste was becoming a big problem in some of the more heavily used zones. So the organization raised funds and summoned volunteers to help install two outhouses in the alpine, at the Bugaboo-Snowpatch col and Pigeon-Howser col. Molnar and Piché have also organized the removal of old rappel slings littering some of the popular routes, installed fixed belay/rappel anchors with bolts drilled into the rock and have undertaken trail work on the busy alpine route between the Conrad Kain

Hut and Applebee Dome.

“Marc and I have spent a lot of time up here over the years so we felt we wanted to give something back to the Bugaboos,” Molnar says.

**IT’S AN HOUR** of waiting in the shade and bracing wind before we can get on the route. Steve and I make one rope team, Graeme and Troy, the other. I coerce Steve into taking first lead, a sustained 5.8 finger crack and dihedral, suddenly aware that I haven’t climbed crack yet this year and my hands are cold and feeling useless. Steve dispatches the 40-metre pitch quickly and has to build a belay anchor awkwardly jockeying for space on a ledge next to the third climber in the party of three women ahead of us, still waiting for a signal from her partners above.

“On belay,” Steve calls out finally. I’m anxious to move and jump-start the circulation. At first I climb without grace,

fingers cold and wooden as I stuff them into cracks, occasionally stemming my feet on the opposing folds of granite to free my hands and rub them together. They have thawed by the time I rejoin Steve at the first belay.

I grab the gear rack and set off on pitch two, which starts up a series of overlapping fins, fantastic formations that remind me of organ pipes. At intervals, I stuff cams and nuts into fissures for protection then continue moving, starting to feel the rhythm of granite crack climbing. After a few pitches the bottleneck of climbers eases as we spread out on the ridge.

At pitch five, I wait with Graeme while Steve shoots photos from above of Troy climbing a fist sized crack with nothing but air between him and the Vowell Glacier far below. I talk to Graeme about his outdoor program, and how much it means to him to give students outdoor experiences.

“I think it’s a really good way of connecting young people to the outdoors

and why it’s important to protect wild places,” he explains.

There is indeed something about spending time in wild places that strips away the clutter of day-to-day life and nourishes the soul. Kain would have known this as well as anyone; he embodied that freedom of the hills that lures people away from city comforts to the simplicity and rawness of the mountains.

The clouds eventually lift above Bugaboo Spire’s summit but the wind gusts and the air remains cold, less than 10°C. So I climb in my puffy jacket, now with a hole in the forearm from which escapes puffs of down thanks to the rough granite that has also shredded my knuckles. There’s good reason Bugaboo’s northeast ridge made the grade of the perennially classic alpinist’s tick list authored by Steve Roper and Allen Steck, *Fifty Classic Climbs of North America*. Each pitch offers something unique, none graded more than 5.8 but always exposed and airy



with stomach tingling views down the mountains east and west faces, and the rock is reassuringly solid where, as Kain wrote after climbing Bugaboo, “difficulties are welcome and met with a smile.”

We reach the top of the technical pitches, just as a couple approaches from below, a pair of climbers we had seen tackling the ridge late in the morning, but who had caught up to us as we lingered for photographs.

“Do you mind if I take your photo?” Steve calls out when they come within earshot, his photographer’s eye recognizing a beautiful frame with the pair’s bright red and orange jackets contrasted against the horizon of peaks to the north.

“I’d rather you didn’t,” comes a short perfunctory reply from the male half of the partnership, a slight drawl betraying his origins from south of the border.

They cruise past us without a word or a smile, their grumpiness at odds with the uplifting surroundings. Perhaps he travelled from the U.S. all the way to the Bugaboos expecting naively to have a classic, internationally renowned route like the northeast ridge all to himself, and was disappointed by the traffic.

I wasn’t born with diplomatic skills, so decide to let this odd negative encounter slip away into the wind. We carry on now un-rope following the exquisite summit ridge, at times using the knife edge as a handrail and at others walking carefully hands free on course granite slabs no wider than a sidewalk and perched in the sky.

A few high fives and a drink of water counts as our summit celebration. My face feels weather-beaten by the incessant wind, and my throat parched, a reminder that I never drink enough water in the mountains. One rappel brings us

to the famous gendarme pitch. Kain’s optimism was driven by a faith that he would not only get his clients to the top but he would find a way down. It is the cruel irony of climbing that you haven’t truly summited until you have returned to camp safely.

On the way up Kain would have skirted the handhold-less slab that skirts the prominent gendarme in his hobnail boots, trailing a hemp rope attached to his clients. We have a our rubber soled climbing shoes, as grippy as a gecko’s feet, light climbing harnesses and supple modern climbing rope. After a brief search, we find two shiny bolts connected by metal chain, the rappel anchor that will enable us to easily bypass the gendarme on descent. I thread the rope through the anchor then toss it, the colourful spiral of cord spooling into the void. I clip in with my belay device, check the locking carabineer, step out gingerly, then push off dangling free above 1,000 metres of soaring Bugaboos granite.

I pause, mid-rappel, to take it all in, and far below spot the quilt of colourful tents at Applebee Dome, where we’ll truly celebrate later tonight to honour the enduring spirit of Kain and one of the great mountains that moved him. 🦎



For more about adventures in the East Kootenays:

KootenayRockies.com

For Conrad Kain Hut bookings:

alpineclubofcanada.ca