

Canadian Rockies -11,000' plus
a series by Peter Rowlands
including articles by Orvel Miskiw
and Christine Grotefeld

This series of articles originally appeared in "The Chinook" - the newsletter of the Calgary Section of the Alpine Club of Canada and is reprinted courtesy of Peter Rowlands. Peter has been climbing throughout western Canada for the past 25 years and is currently residing in Calgary, Alberta. This series is being distributed in four logical parts. Part One (the first article) is an introduction to the topic. Part Two provides the "list" that fuels the topic. Part Three contains further ruminations by Orvel Miskiw. Part Four further expounds upon the topic and contains a summary article by Peter Rowlands with some thought provoking questions. Part Four also contains a follow - up to the subject by Christine Grotefeld.

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Why Do We Climb What We Climb?
Conclusion to a series about the highest peaks in the Canadian Rockies

by Peter Rowlands

In a couple of articles over the past few months I questioned whether the number of peaks in the Rockies exceeding 11,000'/3353m may be different than what has traditionally been assumed, based on inaccuracies in survey systems and the fact that as maps are being revised and updated, changes in elevations are starting to appear. While these changes have not been huge (so far, no changes of more than 100' have been recorded), the fact that most current NTS 1:50,000 maps claim an accuracy of no more than 20m/65' in elevation means that more changes may occur as the mountains are resurveyed and more accurate computer-generated maps are published.

The best examples of this are the changes to elevations in the Clemenceau region. Mt. Clemenceau is no longer shown as being over 12,000', and Tusk Peak has gained just enough height to put it over the magic 11,000' barrier. As shown on a previously printed list, there are 17 peaks that may or may not belong on the list of peaks over 11,000', meaning that the eventual number of peaks officially over 11,000'/3353m may be anywhere between 44 and 61.

If some or all of the peaks currently within the accepted margin of error turn out to be over 11,000' (as was the case with Tusk Peak), some intriguing situations could result. A couple of peaks (Mt. Murchison, Mt. Saskatchewan) are close enough to a road that access to them will pose little difficulty. Two others (Mt. Willingdon South, Queens Peak) are close enough to other 11,000' peaks that they could easily be done in combination with their higher neighbors. The other three,

however, would force an alpinist intent on "completing the list" to visit two areas not currently necessary. Infrequently climbed Cataract Peak would probably require a trip of two or three days for an ascent, while Mts. Freshfield and Barnard would force the climber to venture into a heavily glaciated region several days from the road; arguably more demanding to get to than most of the other 11,000' peaks, save those in the Clemenceau region.

A more interesting question to ask is not whether these peaks will end up being over 11,000', but rather why their current "lower" elevations seem to preclude many climbers from visiting them, while those same climbers (myself included) head off in a mad dash to tick peaks off "the list".

As an example, if Mt. Willingdon were not over 11,000', how many people do you think would make the long approach to climb what is essentially a huge scree pile? If Mt. Harrison turns out to be under 11,000', how many people will continue to make the long drive over rough roads to get to the base? As the lowest of the current 11,000'ers, Mt. Recondite could well end up being under the magic elevation. If removed from the list, I doubt that many climbers would still have the motivation to make an arduous approach to get to a dry loose rock pile, with no particular beauty or features to recommend it over scores of similar peaks much closer to the road.

On the other hand, how many of us ignore some fine areas and peaks because they do not exceed an arbitrary height of importance? As examples, consider a few peaks that with resurveying could end up being on "the list". Mt. Saskatchewan is only 36' below the 11,000' line, yet it sees only a handful of visitors in a given year. As far as I know, there are only two routes established up this beautiful peak which dominates much of the drive between Saskatchewan River Crossing and Parker's Ridge. The next time you are driving home from the Icefields, look up as you descend the long hill above the "Big Bend". In front of you will be the upper section of the impressive north face of Mt. Saskatchewan, as yet unclimbed and probably unattempted. Only a half-day from the highway, do you think that this peak will continue to be so ignored if it ends up being 36' higher and thus on "the list"? What does it say about how we choose what to climb if that 36' makes us decide whether or not Mt. Saskatchewan is a worthy objective?

Even when there was a hut at the edge of the Freshfields, the area was infrequently visited. Those who have been there or seen pictures of the area would agree that the big peaks of the region (Mt. Freshfield and Mt. Barnard) have few rivals in the range in terms of beauty, character and challenge. Even with these attributes, only a few climbers make the long approach to the area, and fewer yet get up the two dominant peaks of the region. Again, because these peaks are only a few meters below an arbitrary level of importance, the Freshfields are largely bypassed or ignored by local and visiting alpinists alike.

After seeing what happened to Tusk Peak (revised from 10,950' to 11,025'), there is a good chance that peaks such as Freshfield, Saskatchewan and Barnard may end up being over 11,000'. If this happens, the number of visitors to these peaks will undoubtedly increase. However, this begs the question; if these peaks would be worth climbing if they are over 11,000' why do we tend to ignore them because they are a few feet lower? Why spend the energy to pound back to Mt. Recondite when less effort would see us at the base of Mt. Saskatchewan or Murchison, or well on the way to the Freshfields? What makes Recondite a more worthy objective than Queens Peak.....they are only 20' apart in elevation, but that 20' just happens to lie across the 11,000' line.

If Mt. Edith Cavell (currently listed as 11,033') ends up being under 11,000', would that make the East ridge or North face routes any less classic? Chances are you will say "no", but would you be willing to bet that if a downgrading occurs there will not a drop in the number of people climbing the peak? If Mt. Bryce Center is downgraded, how many of us would have the motivation or desire to make the complete Mt. Bryce traverse; I suspect that the vast majority of climbers on the

NE ridge would take the easier contour around the center peak rather than climbing it to complete the classic and more challenging route that maintains the true traverse on the way to the main peak.

Closer to the road, Mt. Cline is known for its steep bushwhacking approach. In all honesty, how many of us would continue to head up the approach valley if Cline was resurveyed and found to be just under 11,000'? Would this loss of official elevation make Cline a less worthy objective than it is now? The climbing and ambiance of the region would stay the same; the only thing that would change is our perception of the "value" of the peak. Should we need to re-examine our motivations for climbing what we climb? If our sole reason for choosing our goals is the completion of an arbitrary and somewhat uncertain list, are we depriving ourselves of more worthwhile and rewarding experiences on other "lesser" peaks.

These questions will likely remain theoretical only. We will probably never know with absolute certainty which peaks are over 11,000'. Like many others, I can at times plead guilty to focusing my energies on peaks based on their elevations rather than their other qualities. Someday I hope to get up Mt. Alexandra, yet unless Queens Peak turns out to be over 11,000', I probably will not make an attempt on Alexandra's companion, even though it is accessible from the same approach and base camp. However, the next time I am up to my knees in the swamp on the way to Recondite, I may well reconsider why I am there instead of already being at the bivy sight below the much more esthetic west ridge of Mt. Saskatchewan. I may still end up ticking off all the 11's, but by widening my vision I might just have more fun along the way. *Isn't that what it's really all about?*

More Comments on "The List"

afterthoughts on a series about the highest peaks in the Canadian Rockies

by Christine Grotefeld

(with suggestions from a friend, former member and current climber)

I have been very interested in reading Peter Rowlands and Orvel Miskiw's articles regarding the measurements of the elevation of peaks in the Rockies, especially those purportedly rising above 11,000' (when I first climbed in the Rockies, all the mountains looked and felt that high!). I soon realized, however, that the height of the mountain did not necessarily relate to the difficulty of the climb, although there was definitely more status attached to climbing above the mythical 11,000' level. In addition, on some trips there was a discussion as to what the true height of a particular mountain (which we were in the process of climbing) actually was. In accuracy of measuring techniques, both in the past and in the present, pose questions as to which and, therefore how many peaks belong in the fabled 11,000'+ category. Both authors have, as well, alluded to the larger philosophic question as to why the definition of this category and even its very existence should matter at all to the mountaineering community.

1. On showing these articles to a friend of mine (who is undoubtedly one of Calgary's more well known mountaineers), he suggested that it is important for climbers to be interested in categories of summits for several reasons, which he gives as the following:
2. A category that is sufficiently randomized along several variables (but not all) ensures the mountaineer of a diversity of climbing experiences: the Eleven Thousanders require that one perform ascents in a variety of locations, deal with a wide variety of terrain and topographies, and solve climbing problems that range from planning efficient approach routes to surmounting technical rock pitches with serious exposure. A well designed

category of peaks will ensure that the climber who ascends all, or even a good portion, of those summits will have demonstrated a broad panorama of physical, intellectual and performance skills.

3. Consequently, the mountaineer who masters a well designed category of peaks will have distinguished him/herself in the climbing community for competence, commitment and achievement. This is no small end given that mountain climbing is a relatively solitary and private sport, with very little active publicity for its successful participants.
4. As a result of these three points, a viable category can provide the keen mountaineer an appropriate sense of focus for his/her efforts, thus diminishing the problem of selection overload that some of us face when attempting to choose an objective from the hundreds (even thousands) of summits available in the Rockies.

I think both Peter and Orvel are right when they suggest that the composition of a category of summits does not matter much as long as it contains peaks of sufficient number and sufficient geographical and technical variety that they truly test and enhance a climber's abilities over a period of several years. The ACC, for example, used to employ a very loose category of three glaciated summits as the level of achievement required for a successful application to join the Main Club. When I first joined the ACC in Montreal, the challenge was to find equivalencies. Kevin O'Connell managed to get a winter ascent of the Gothics in the Adirondacks (4000') to count as one. By the time I climbed some "real mountains", however, the ACC no longer required these climbs as prerequisites to being a senior member. My friend believes that this "occurred when the ACC shifted from promoting mountaineering to promoting business activities and replaced this requirement of minimal climbing skill with being able simply to write a cheque." [The observation that the club is a business deserves an article of its own of course.]

In any case, the category of 11,000'+ has served admirably to fulfill and promote the four points that my friend mentioned and which are listed above; consequently, it matters very little, if at all, whether or not such and such a peak (or peaks) is slightly over or under 11,000' as long as the climbing community agrees (generally) on the boundaries of the category. What is perhaps more important is defining groups of peaks, the ascents of which pose reasonable expectations for ability, commitment, and active years of climbing for the capable amateur. My climbing compatriot has proposed the following categories:

I. The High Rockies (25)

To make matters simple, while still retaining diversity as a challenge, he suggests that this group be comprised of all summits in the original guidebooks (The Rocky Mountains: North & South) listed as exceeding 11,300': Joffre, Victoria S, Hungabee, Goodsirs N & S, Temple, Assiniboine, Robson, Brazeau, Clemenceau, Alberta, Stutfield West, Twins Tower, N Twin, S Twin, Kitchener, King Edward, Columbia, Snowdome, Athabasca, Bryce SW, Lyells 1, 2 & 3, and Forbes. This list clearly provides a variety of challenges from easy (Temple) to very demanding (Alberta), of geographical locations (Joffre in the south; Robson in the north), and of seasonal approaches (Assiniboine and Hungabee are best climbed in summer, for example, while Brazeau, Forbes and the Icefields peaks are conveniently ascended, at least in part, on skis).

II. Classic Rockies Summits (50)

In addition to the peaks in category I, this group would also include those summits listed in the two original guidebooks as falling between 11,000' and 11,299': Deltaform, Lefroy, King George, Sir Douglas, Victoria N, Hector, Willingdon, Huber, Harrison, Recondite, Lyells 4 & 5, Alexandra, Cline, Bryce Centre, Andromeda, Stutfield E, Wooley, Diadem, Tsar, Fryatt, Edith Cavell, Resplendent, Helmet and Whitehorn. Once again there is a variety of challenges (Willingdon to Whitehorn), geography (Harrison to Helmet), and season of ascent (Deltaform and Fryatt in summer, Hector and Alexandra in winter). As well, given good weather and a healthy constitution, the amateur mountaineer can probably

ascend this second set of summits easily in a second period of ten years. Note: in order to balance the entries in these two categories, my friend has performed a bit of reasonable jiggling. The two summits of Andromeda have been collapsed into one ascent, and Lunette has been omitted since it is really simply a spur of Assiniboine and not a separate peak. This group, then, is nearly identical to what has considered in the past to be the definitive list of 11,000'+ peaks.

III. The Eleven-Thousanders -- Almost for Sure (58)

This category is composed of all the peaks in group II, plus at least 85% of those peaks that might actually be 11,000' tall, but may have had their elevations seriously under estimated by earlier and erroneous surveys. My climbing associate suggest the height of 11,932' as the cutoff point because it permits a 68' cushion and has a delightful symmetry to it when converted to metric: 3333m. The peaks that join this group are Murchison, Crown, Cataract, Barnard, Freshfield, Queens, Saskatchewan and Tusk (admittedly a possible candidate for admission to category II, but something of a latecomer in terms of assessment). Murchison is technical, while Cataract is not, Tusk is to the north, while Crown is to the south (sort of); Barnard and Freshfield can be skied close to their summits while Saskatchewan must be climbed in the summer. These additional eight summits can be climbed fairly easily over a period of five years.

IV. The Eleven-Thousanders -- For Sure (82)

To reduce the possibility of measurement error from 15% in category III to zero, included within this next category are all summits over 3300m (or 10,824'). The additional 24 peaks beyond those listed in the last group are as follows: Mike, Eon, Ball, Allen, Biddle, Vaux, Willingdon S, St. Bride, Mummery N & S, Bulyea, Walker, Rostrum, Oppy, Amery, Stewart, Cromwell, Sunwapta, Poboktan W, Warren, Scott N, Simon, Geike and Chown. Peter's suggestion of including Catacombs has been rejected since it is listed as being 10,800'. A 200' measurement error is unlikely. As well, he has omitted unnamed and unlisted peaks: to include all points listed as over 3300m would expand the category beyond the capabilities of human achievement. However, it would seem possible, despite the diversity and dispersion of these twenty four summits, for the amateur mountaineer who wished to devote his/her life to climbing in the Rockies to accomplish these ascents in an additional ten years. Thus it is conceivable for all eighty two of these summits to be surmounted in a climbing life span of thirty five years (say from twenty to fifty five, if one does not get diverted by other, more trivial, interests, such as love affairs or children.)

My friend says he knows of at least twenty people who have achieved distinction by climbing all the summits in category I (or having climbed twenty five or more summits from category II); only two who have climbed all the summits listed in category II; and one who has climbed sixty of the summits in category IV.

I believe, of course, that summit elevation is only one of many ways that one might fix the boundaries of a summitting category. One could, for example, define a significant group by listing those peaks whose ascent requires an elevation gain of at least 5000 vertical feet, even though their summits might not exceed even 9500'. Or one could build a category by listing all the named peaks on the Continental Divide, from the US border to Mt. Robson. Or one could simply climb all the peaks whose names start with G, or all the peaks named after women. But these are speculations for a subsequent essay and not this one.