

Cirque of the Unclimbables 2006



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Challenge Fund

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Trip Summary

Our trip to the Cirque of the Unclimbables was an amazing experience in an incredible location. There were numerous high and low points, but overall it was a great expedition. To begin with the lows: the rain. No amount of reading old trip reports that reported bad weather could possibly prepare us for the maddening unpredictability nor the sheer volume of water that fell into the cirque while we were residents of Fairy Meadows. We were living there for a total of 19 days, and during that time we were treated to a grand total of three days without any rain.

Apart from the weather, the only other disappointing aspect of our trip was the amount of grass and mud we often found overflowing from the otherwise stunning cracks we wished to climb. While we were able to persevere through these setbacks and actually do a fair bit of climbing, we were unable to successfully establish a new route as we had planned.

The high points of the trip were many, however, and we did attempt to establish two new routes, which, although unsuccessful, were enjoyable learning experiences for both of us. We also were able to do a one-day ascent of the classic Lotus Flower Tower (V, 5.10), as well as an almost full ascent of the “soon to be classic” Club International (V, 5.11). Below are descriptions of our experiences and suggestions for future parties on all of our climbs.

Southeast face of Bustle Tower: Our original goal in heading to the cirque was a first ascent on this face. However, as we stood beneath Bustle Tower gazing upwards through binoculars, we quickly realized why the face has a paucity of climbs on it. There are very few vertical cracks, and those that do exist are discontinuous. As a result we soon abandoned hope of a first ascent here and looked elsewhere.

East face of Middle Huey Spire (FFA attempt): Although this face is little more than 1,000 feet tall (relatively small compared to many surrounding peaks), it is one of the proudest and most intimidating in the cirque, with an enormous roof system at two-thirds height and a steep headwall split by several clean cracks above. Additionally, the central east face has yet to see a free ascent; it hosts only one 1977 aid route at 5.9 A3. Our inspection with binoculars led us to believe that the roofs could be freed, either via a very steep and wild pitch pulling out the upper junction of the obvious step or by a hand traverse heading out the left-facing corner of the rightmost roof.

Our free attempt began by following the obvious weakness in the center of the lower face past several old bolted anchors at obvious stances. The climbing was a mix of thought-provoking face sequences interspersed with very loose and grassy cracks, neither of which offered much protection. If forced to give a rating for the three pitches that we climbed, it would be about 5.10 R with loose 5.8 X. Nevertheless, the climbing was fairly enjoyable, and it deposited us below a long, diagonaling crack, which eventually led to another series of cracks farther up the wall. Unfortunately, however stunning the crack was, it was choked with all manner of grass and weed, and was virtually unclimbable. Having not come equipped with an extensive gardening arsenal, we were forced to rappel, but resolved to return on the next clear day. As is the theme of the cirque, however, clear days became nonexistent, and we were also quite hesitant to reattempt the spicy first pitches under constant threat of rain. Thus we never got in a second attempt, and the proud east face of Middle Huey will have to wait for another party. The line up the center of the face will be spectacular once cleaned, and would definitely be worth the effort to do so.

The east face of Middle Huey Spire showing our attempted route.



Southeast face of East Huey Spire: We decided to check out this smaller formation during a day of marginal weather. There are currently no routes up the main face, and much to our disappointment we quickly found out why. The slabs on the lower east face are perpetually wet, offer no protection, and were quite terrifying to attempt. It may be possible to access the upper face via a series of discontinuous grassy ledges, but this may end up being just as exciting as the slab approach.

Club International (V, 5.11): We attempted this route during a cloudy but temporarily dry morning. As far as we were able to discern, it had not seen an ascent since last summer, and few ascents before that. The position on this route is amazing, and the climbing in places is spectacular; it will be a classic route once it cleans up a bit. The “drippy roof” indicated on the topo was more of a muddy waterfall, though, and was fully aided. It is a great route, at least from what we saw of the first two-thirds, before the rain eventually forced us down. As of August 2006, there was a short bit of rope coiled at the belay below the big “drippy roof” that can be used to fix the pitch for descent. It is not in great shape, but will be sufficient to pull you into the belay under the roof. Before relying on this rope, it would be prudent to check if it’s there with binoculars (it is about 25 feet below the small darkened roof that is just down and left of the obvious huge, blocky roof that is two-thirds of the way up the face).

One of the better pitches of Club International



The Lotus Flower Tower (V, 5.10): We couldn’t resist jugging the fixed lines our friends had laboriously installed on the first wet pitches and then climbing this beautiful tower. It’s definitely the cleanest rock in the cirque, and the headwall is even more breathtaking than we had imagined.

The spectacular headwall of the Lotus Flower Tower



Riders of the Storm (first four pitches, 5.11+): A short hike from camp and four clean pitches makes this a must-do for a short weather window. Pitch 3 was one of the best of the trip.

Additional Comments

Transportation:

Flying into/out of the cirque with Warren LaFave at Kluane Airways is definitely the way to go. He brings in fresh goodies to his climber clients, and will shuttle loads around in his helicopter for no charge. However, if you are planning on splitting the cost of a float plane out of the cirque with another party, make sure you inform him well in advance, as he is a bit stubborn about refunds.

Driving to the Yukon may not be the most appealing way to access the cirque, but it is definitely the cheapest, and the drive is quite scenic. Just bring a spare tire for the last 150 miles of dirt road to Finlayson Lake.

The Hike:

This part of the trip is not very fun, even on the way down. It is very easy to get lost as well. Be especially careful in the boulder field; many of the rocks, even the large ones, are loose. Since we had no reliable directions for this hike, I will provide a summary here: If heading down from the cirque, keep to the loose boulder field below Mt. Harrison Smith and descend almost to its base. Do not head into the trees, even

though you may think it looks easier. If you do, you will soon find you yourself thrashing through fields of man-eating alders. Once you near the bottom of the boulder field, follow very faint cairned trails left (east) toward the river. Cross the river on an obvious marked log, and follow the trail on the other side to Glacier Lake. Allow four hours to be safe; it is very easy to lose the trail between the boulder field and the river crossing.

Other:

If you are planning on hiking up from Glacier Lake and are trying to save weight, there is a lot of white gas stored in the bear boxes in Fairy Meadows. Check with Warren at Kluane Airways (he puts it there) before planning to use it, but there is enough fuel there to do a lot of cooking. There are also several good single-pitch routes around Fairy Meadows and at the base of East Huey that are worth checking out. There is a topo for all of them (which includes bouldering) in one of the bear boxes.

“The Penguin,” a one-pitch sport route in Fairy Meadows

