

Nature Vancouver Summer Camp at Monica Meadows

30 July – 6 August 2006

by Kitty Castle, Marian and John Coope, Viire Daniels, Ian McAskill, Margaret Ostrowski and Jane Srivastava. Compiled by Marian Coope

This was the second camp at Monica Meadows in the West Kootenays, the first having been in 1995. We had three different route options from Vancouver: all involved a full day's drive, and the distance helped to build up our expectations for the camp. Bill Kinkaid had produced much appreciated travel logs for the routes, giving points of interest and changes of geoclimatic zones. The weather was hot and we found plenty of fire crews milling about at The Drifters, in Meadow Creek, about 34 km north of Kaslo where many of us were spending the night before the camp started. Luckily our camp was not affected by any forest fires.

Our camp was in the Purcell Mountains east of Duncan Lake, a little north and west of Jumbo Pass. The trailhead and landing area for the helicopter were 40 km up the gravel Glacier Creek road. Getting there was the first adventure: it was necessary to cross various waterbars—drainage ditches cutting across the road—and some cars with low clearance had to be forcibly persuaded (pushed) to venture over. Near the top, the tailgate of our 3-ton supply truck got hung up in a small creek. Driver Nigel Peck organized us to unload all the heavy gas cylinders and some food coolers; we tossed stones into the creek to help the wheels get a grip and finally pushed the truck out of the creek.

Up at the staging area at 5,900 ft, Ian McAskill organized us to stake and place rolls of chicken wire around groups of cars to deter any munching on tires and fluid hoses by porcupines. Of the loading of the camp gear, he writes, "Once at the trailhead, the helicopter swooped in and the MASH 4077 operation moved into high gear. The airlifts began. Under David Foreman's tutelage, I learned how to swamp. My reward was to be lifted in on the final helicopter run. Exciting as my first helicopter ride was, I admit I had purist pangs that I really ought to have hiked in."

Most of the group, which numbered 43 campers plus two cooks, did hike in—up a pleasant trail over a ridge to reach Monica Meadows and our campsite at 7,150 ft (2,180 m). The meadows lay in an upper valley with spectacular views of mountain peaks and glaciers all around—on one hike, Donald Burton counted over twenty glaciers within sight! To the west, and across the deep valley of the north fork of Glacier Creek, were Mts. Macduff, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, enclosing the Macbeth Icefield. Our immediate meadows, however, were bounded on the west by a low open ridge, and to the northwest there were other meadows over more distant ridges. On the north and east, the meadows were bounded by mountains of the Purcell Divide. Mt. Monica (10,000 ft), immediately south of Starbird Pass, was to our northwest, and the serrated ridge of "Egyptian Peaks"¹ connected it to Jumbo

Pass. These peaks formed the high (~9,000 ft), rocky north and east walls of our meadows. Mt. Amén-Ra dominated the foreground on the east, while the wall of Mt Isis peeped over its south ridge. The view out from our valley to the south, across the main Glacier Creek valley, was dominated by the Horseshoe Glacier in the Truce Group. Everywhere we turned, the sights were overwhelming.

There is always an urgency to get the cook and dining tents up as soon as possible and this was done in brilliant sunshine. But the urgency soon became frantic as the sky turned black, and rain, then hail and snow set in. Margaret Ostrowski recounts: “It was snowing while we were loading supplies into the big tents, while we were putting up our own tents, during dinner, and while going off to bed that night. Others looked at my steaming hot water bottle with envy. But it was just a test of stamina that unseasoned campers like Chris (Holmes) and me were required to pass, and we did. We rose cheerily the next morning to sunshine, blue sky and at least a three-course breakfast fit to feed hungry foresters.” Our week had cool days on the whole, and several cold nights at freezing level or below, with the great advantage of there being very few mosquitoes. But it also meant the water line came close to freezing up overnight. The moon was almost full and quite beautiful towards the end of camp but there was not much stargazing because of the cold evenings.

Monica Meadows is an extensive park-like area, dotted with larches and other conifers, and carpeted with wildflowers, prominent among them many-hued paintbrush. The land rises gradually with many tucks and folds, and small lakes abound at every level. Where their outflows spilled over the hillside in little cascades we found the most brilliant wildflowers: pink *Mimulus*, yellow *Senecio*, white valerian, and paintbrush of many hues. The meadows were beautiful but fragile: we set the main tents in the more grassy areas, and took special care to disperse our own tents as much as possible in the less fragile treed areas around the meadows. We pegged out snow fencing along the main pathway and in the dining tent, and placed coco matting between the dining and cook tents, and in the cook tent itself. Our efforts were rewarded at the end of the week: there was very little evidence indeed of our stay.

At least three levels of hikes were planned every day. Perhaps the most rewarding for its participants was the hike a group did to the Starbird Glacier, behind the north headwall, high above Monica Meadows. Viire Daniels writes, “From the meadows area, you could not actually see the glacier or snowfield, only a small patch of white on the rim of what appeared to be an unclimbable stone wall. The hike came about from a visit paid to the camp late one afternoon by the local Forestry officer who was ‘checking us out’—that is, making sure we weren’t destroying the landscape with our camp. He told Ed Beynon and Hazel Kirkwood, members of the West Kootenay Naturalists and the Kootenay Mountaineering Club, and guests at our camp, about the feasibility of this hike and the approach up a rock slide between the walls. Several of us set out the next morning to tackle the climb. We soldiered on past tarns visited earlier, flowering meadows and rock ridges. Soon we were climbing

over boulder fields and scree that moved about under our feet. Ed is very knowledgeable about hiking in rock fields and gave us invaluable advice on how to move in these areas without sending lethal flying objects down to our companions below. It took us 2½ hours and an elevation gain of approximately 2,000 feet to reach the rock mountain rim at about 9,000 ft. What a surprise to see the huge snowfield before us! After testing the surface, we ventured out on the snow and gained a high point to see several glaciers, including Glacier Dome to the east, and other landmarks in the next valley over from Mount Monica. The wind at the rim was brutally cold and blustery but out on the glacier itself we had sunshine and pleasant temperatures. Starbird was a huge ‘high’ for us all. Few of us had ever attained such a goal before in such a beautiful wilderness setting.”

Other climbs were less formidable, yet Jane Srivastava reports: “How impossible it looked to climb the southernmost peak (8,200 ft) of the southwest ridge of Mt. Amen-Ra,² but after two fast groups ran up it at the beginning of the week most of us got there by the end, thanks to patient and careful hike leaders Phil Edgell and Hugh Hamilton.” We recorded our names in the cairn where we found the names of Phil Edgell and his son Andrew, Gurli Nielsen and Nigel Peck’s parents in the record of the 1995 camp. In the 11-year interval hardly any other names had been added.

Margaret Ostrowski relates: “Others of us chose to watch those energetic ones with binoculars as they ‘summitted’. And there were still others of us who chose to take a dip in the icy waters of the several alpine lakes that were referred to (thanks to Bill Kinkaid) as Kidney (Sandpiper), Halibut, Football, and Rocky. On blue sunny days, they looked very enticing but a few seconds in the water would result in a loud gasp from even the hardiest of us.” Margaret was in a position to know. Kitty reports her as “leaving camp on the Saturday morning with her colourful air mattress tucked under her arm heading for the Lake District, to be seen later floating right out in the middle of a very cool alpine lake.”

When not climbing mountains, we were birding and botanizing, as testified by the lists that follow, but also observing signs of animal life such as the plant cuttings that the pikas had carefully laid out to dry on rocks, and once dried, to use in their burrows over the winter. We saw no bears, but there was some old scat on a trail within the camp and much more evidence on our hike up the ridge to the cairn. There we found a flattened grassy “day bed” on a ridge with a spectacular view and lots of fresh grizzly scat.

The colours that surrounded us were a delight—from the reds, oranges, pinks, greens, purples and yellows of the meadow flowers to the grey and green rock of the mountain boulders, the pink alga on the snow patches, the blue of the sky and the amber moon at night. Our resident artist Jenny Hards was not painting the colours, however, but sketching the hikers, the mountains, and the trails.

This year, we had a new cook, Jane Taylor from Prince George, who, with her helper Kathy MacDonald, provided us with outstanding meals. Ian McAskill, a first-time VNHS camper, expressed his feelings in this way: “Camping out, I have always thought, should be austere—simple, basic and unadorned—limited by what one could carry on one’s back. Chairs, tables, a large cook tent, an even larger dining hall tent: this was all new to me in an outdoor camp. And that was not even the half of it! Jugs of fresh milk were provided every day, and on party night, gourmet bread and wine, cheese, olives and oysters. I admit harbouring a preconception that it was all a bit over the top. My previous experience with camp food had been limited to porridge, dehydrated beans and soups, and the odd tin of salmon or tuna for a special treat. Well, that wasn’t Jane’s idea. Experienced in cooking for roughnecks on the oilrigs, she and Kathy prepared delicious meals—in quantity! I will spare the details except to say I heard some campers half-complaining that there was too much food and too much choice. Personally, I liked the choice and, once I learned to regulate my intake, I was able to overcome the feeling of having eaten too much. In spite of some strenuous day hikes, no weight was shed on this trip.” And apart from the food, Jane and Kathy were endless sources of good cheer. Never at VNHS camps has there been so much laughter from the cook tent! We enjoyed their company as well as their food.

There were no campfires this year because of the dry summer, but one evening we had a fine singsong led by Lee Finch and Daryl Sturdy, with contributions from Hugh Hamilton and Marian Coope. A day or two later, we broke camp. Kitty noted that, when taking down the big tents, this was the second year we had lifted the entire cook tent up and over cook tables and stoves leaving the cooking area undisturbed for a little while longer.

We give many thanks to those who worked so hard to organize and run the camp: Kitty Castle, Chair of the Camp Committee; Hugh Hamilton, Camp Manager; Bill Kinkaid, Trip Organizer; and Nigel Peck, Driver and Equipment Manager. It certainly lived up to all our expectations.

The report is the work of all the contributors, who are not acknowledged individually except when recounting their own experiences.

Note¹ The peaks, Mts. Aten, Osiris, Atmu, Amen-Ra, Storus, Isis, Thoth and Anubis, were named after ancient Egyptian gods because, on their east side, across Jumbo Creek, they face Mt. Karnak. Thus the ancient centre of the temples of the gods faces the gods themselves.

Note² The 1995 party referred to this point as “No-name Peak”. We tended to call it “the Cairn” or “Isis Ridge” or “the Bump”. Perhaps it should be “Isis View”, as one looks directly east to the “breathtakingly sheer quartzite” west wall of Mount Isis, so described by the first climbers to look down it from above. Only the upper part of this wall is visible from the main meadows.

Reference

Wagner, Curt. 1974. In the Shadow of Karnak. *Canadian Alpine Journal* 57:34.