

Wilderness Hiking

EDZIZA

B.C.'s Bizarre Volcanic Park

BY WARREN WILSON

We were huddled against the wind where snow lay in white patches on the soft green of the alpine meadows, cooking breakfast. We were in Mount Edziza Wilderness Park in north-western British Columbia—cold, wet, and a twelve-day hike from our nearest contact with civilization, a float plane.

While discussing our plans, we stuffed our hot breakfast quickly into our cold bodies before it gelled to the plates. We intended to traverse country little visited by humans in historical times, hiking the long north-south axis of the brilliantly coloured Spectrum Range then climbing onto Mount Edziza's high, bizarre plateau. As we washed up in a frigid creek, a golden eagle glided by. It seemed a good omen.

That first day offered us a 1900-metre pass. We balanced on the wet and treacherous boulders, slipped on the loose scree, and finally toed up the snow fields to the saddle. This felt good: the big, tough country straining our legs and making us breathe deeply of the chill air. Reaching the pass, we walked directly under the bellies of the clouds. The dark, cold moisture driven by a howling wind numbed our faces as Bruce led us on, grinning at the sheer physical effort.

These northern B.C. mountains are good grizzly country, and the big bears are often nearby. The broad footsteps of a grizzly, perhaps made nervous by the sound of our DeHavilland landing the night before, preceded us out of the valley.

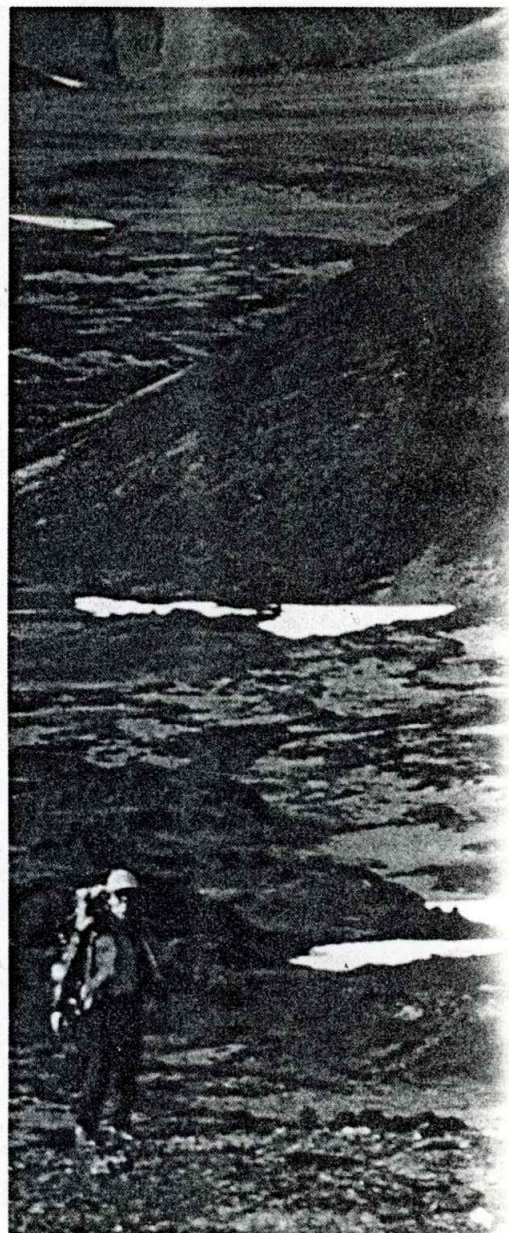
The four of us had hungered for a taste of raw wilderness, but on this first day I began wondering if we had bitten off more than just a taste. We finally camped in the rain on the barren moonscape of the plateau, exposed, exhilarated, but too exhausted to continue.

The following days brought more of the same. The rain continued, and we hiked slowly under the weight of our packs up and down the mountains and valleys, tiring quickly. Although none of us enjoyed the steady drizzle, the clouds were generally high enough for us to recognize the landforms on our maps. One of the dangers of hiking here is that the weather can easily immobilize hikers for days on end, turning a relaxing getaway into a brutally impossible march to make a distant rendezvous. I chafed a bit as my body wearied, but the spectacular scenery and abundant wildlife never ceased to fascinate me.

Whenever we crested a ridge or entered a new valley, the first sound to greet us was the warning whistle of the hoary marmot. This big rodent will grow until it is almost a metre long and weighs twenty meaty kilograms. That alone would account for the 'harvest' of many of them. The Tahltan Indians snared them here for centuries. Even worse—from the marmot's point of view—they used the marmot skin as a currency standard. The animal can hardly have learned to trust human beings.

However, these furry critters have a varied vocabulary. The peep their sentries identify us with is one thing; the panic that marks their whistle when they see another predator is another. I suspect that they reserve special panic for the grizzly because of the way the big bear hunts. Marmots live in colonies. Each one digs a burrow near some neighbours where it wraps a little nest of grass for the long winter's hibernation. Grizzlies take marmots by simply digging them up with 15 cm claws. We came across many areas where four or five homes in a colony had been excavated by a hungry bear.

I blame our eventual misfortune on the



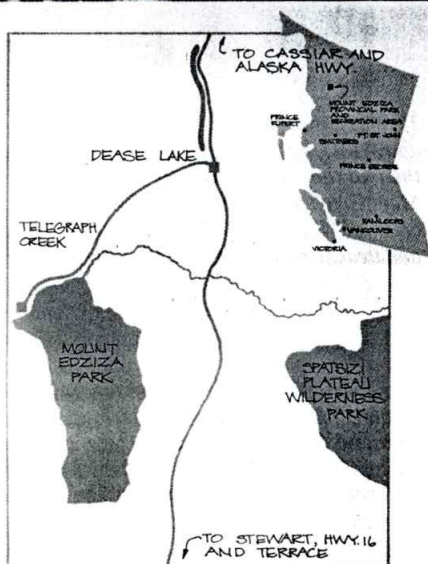
maps. The hundred-foot contour lines on them swirled and gathered in thick concentration, and seemed to provide only a passing resemblance to the landforms. Sitting around a breakfast of oatmeal sweetened with raisins, we disputed paths. Ian had been told of a route that would take us low along a valley; Bruce suggested we follow a high contour; Vern felt we could probably hike right up and over the mountain.

We battled to a consensus while packing up: we would walk high along the mountain and climb over it at the earliest opportunity.

But as we gained altitude, the temperature dropped and the rain gave way first to hail and then to a blinding blizzard. Finally, we hunkered down under a tarp to wait out the weather, eating trail mix with cold and clumsy fingers and staring unhappily at a deep gorge that terminated our route.



W. WILSON



Abandoning our plan to go higher, we were forced down the extremely steep, treacherous side of the ravine. We tried to stay at the edge, above where it dropped 70 metres to a creek rushing its heavy load of sediment off the mountain. As we made our way along the lip, we realized it had recently avalanched below us. The trees were loose at their roots, the rocks loose in the soil, the brush wet and slippery. With our hearts in our throats for a long hour, a fatal mistake waiting under each footstep, we made our way down to timberline and beyond.

After crossing the gorge low, we climbed again, pushing our way uphill through extremely dense brush, slipping, twisting, catching our packs, falling, cursing and getting even wetter. I found myself battling my own frustration and fatigue as much as the environment. Each step seemed like it must be my last, and eventually we were all stop-

Coffee Crater, 515 m high, is one of more than 30 satellite cones on Mt. Edziza's flanks.

ping every ten or twelve steps, our palms pressed against our knees to support our exhausted upper bodies.

Four hours later we reached the top of the far side of the gorge not 200 metres from where we had begun our descent. We paused at a momentary break in the rain to pitch a tarp, build a fire and dry out. As the fire caught we realized we were standing on that strange, frozen, sandy mud introduced to us by Vern under the odd but descriptive sobriquet, "tit action." At first it seemed quite stable, but if we moved our feet slightly a few times, it began to swallow them. We sank rock after rock into it, standing by the fire on the uppermost one until it too slid beneath the surface.

The structure and texture of the stuff we

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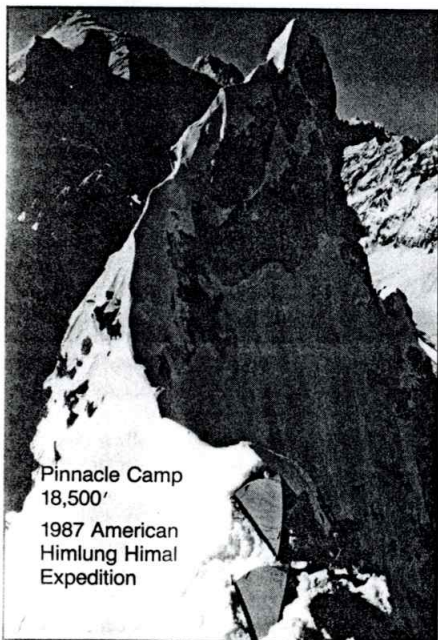
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EXPLORE

hiked on was wonderfully varied. We stepped on Volkswagon-sized boulders that rocked underfoot, along mountainsides of loose scree, on soft deep moss, across quicksand so quick it would snatch a rock out from under our feet before we could step off it, on mud, in snow, along creekbeds, through fields of brilliant flowers, through swamps, and on cinders, sand, lava, and, marvelously, obsidian.

Obsidian, a form of lava that cooled too quickly to crystallize, is hard, black, volcanic glass that was prized by the native people for its ability to take an extremely keen edge through the technique of pressure flaking. It sharpens better, I have been told, than surgical steel.

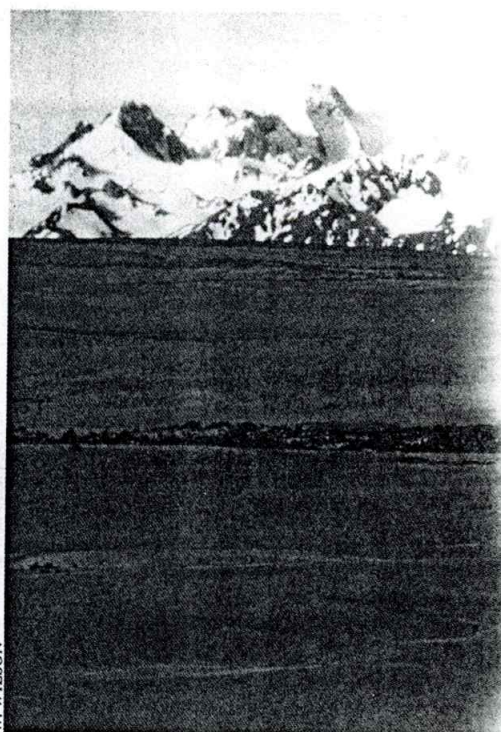
Looking across a wide plateau under the grey belly of the clouds, it was hard for me to credit the fact that every single piece of broken obsidian gleaming from among the larger boulders was an artifact. However, the Tahltans came up onto this plateau in family groups every summer to work the stuff, chipping out a variety of knives, scrapers and points for a trade that stretched all across the northwest of North America. In my mind the immensity of the plateau translated into an aeon of summers spent by small groups working the hard rock.

We halted momentarily on the plateau, unsure of which direction to take through the thick fog. The dark cloud lifted briefly, though, and we were able to take two quick compass bearings before it dropped again. We followed a third bearing across the trackless, colourless, rock-strewn plateau. It brought home to us again the warning we had before venturing here: Mount Edziza is no place for the inexperienced or ill-prepared.

Raspberry Pass cuts across Mount Edziza Park at about the midpoint. It is a lovely, green, fertile valley that has provided foot access across these mountains for millennia. In 1866, it was part of the route chosen by the Collins Overland Telegraph Company to string a cable from New York to Europe via Siberia. Beat to the punch by the transatlantic cable, they abandoned the project in 1867. We were delighted to discover the cable and the cedar post that had held it, surprisingly intact after one hundred twenty years. We shook our heads in silent respect for the men who came into this country in those days.

At Raspberry Pass the weather broke. With the clearing of the clouds our horizons grew and our spirits lightened. Crossing the next plateau, I was delighted by a sense of living among the gods in their mountain fastness. The massive Boundary Range spread across the west, soaring through the mist, crowned by glaciers and flagged by clouds.

This area provided a visual treat. Before us on the south-facing slopes we saw a riot



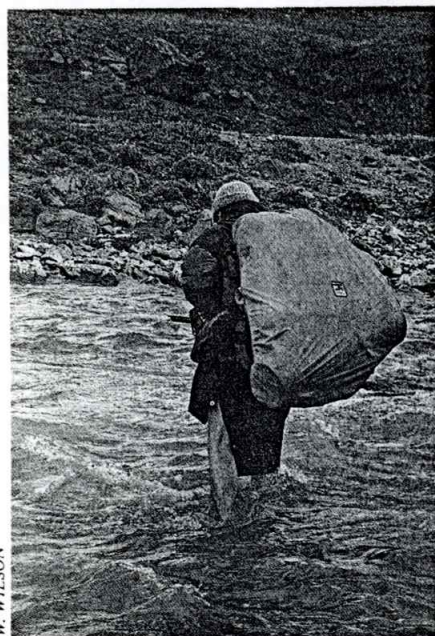
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Top: The massive Boundary Range rises above Mt. Edziza's 1,700-m plateau. Between the two the ground drops a kilometre to the Mess Creek Valley. Above right: fording a creek of "liquid ice." Above left: Difficult and treacherous hiking in the Spectrum Range.

of colour: the ochre, rust, maroon and cinnamon shades of the mountain faces, the light and dark greens of the alpine and sub-alpine areas. Turning around to look at the north-facing slopes, we saw nothing but the contrast of black and white, the bleakness of snow and rock.



That night in camp we were watched by a herd of goats from their sanctum 250 metres above us and across the valley—their movements and ours apparently mutually interesting. In the morning we saw two caribou carrying massive racks that dwarfed the rest of their bodies.

Finally, we reached a saddle from which we looked down upon the Edziza Plateau. Before us on a flowing desert stood perfectly symmetrical cinder cones surrounding an immense glacier that enfolded the jagged peak of Edziza. Looking at the stony landscape, we could readily understand the

Tahltan translation for Edziza, "cinders." We made our way down onto the plain, the deep pumice pulling on our calves like beach sand, and walked across the dusty, surreal landscape for hours before camping at a 1600-metre-high oasis below the glacier. It sat above us like an ice cube on a table, the cold air flowing down its sides and across our campsite like a liquid.

It was four million years ago that Mount Edziza began spewing its basaltic lava onto the surface of the earth, filling the valleys and covering the mountains around it to a depth of a kilometre and a half. Relatively recently, more than thirty smaller cinder cones have formed on her flanks, pouring forth a thick abrasive lava that has covered the surface with grotesque shapes. Now, a mere few hundred years after the last eruption, walking among those shapes was like moving in a gothic nightmare landscape with misshapen gargoyles peering at us from among the rocks.

We spent our last four days on the plateau. Above us always was Mount Edziza and her icefield, melting in colourful streams of life across the desert sand—streams in which float rocks: pumice, blown so light from the maw of the volcano that it swirls down the creeks, forming in eddies like autumn leaves.

On our last day we climbed Eve Cone and descended into the crater. The cinders were loose and insubstantial, the earth itself booming like a dull drum under our feet. I stood on the lip of the crater, looking out across the mountains we had visited, and felt a moment of sadness and nostalgia as I contemplated departing from their magical grandeur and their physical challenge.

These mountains dwarf us with their vastness. It is always difficult to judge how far away objects are because they are all immense, and there is nothing human to measure them by. A promontory which seems only a kilometre away will take hours to reach, and the lip of a plateau will hang 100 metres above us for the same length of time as we push upwards in gasps.

The mountains also dwarf us in time. These are young mountains by their own accounting, vigorous and powerful and changing. On one day alone I heard two avalanches, and we see the creeks, possessed of terrible force, eating through the earth, rolling boulders. We crossed one that had cut down vertically through 60 metres of canyon wall and was washing millions of tons of rock along its course like grounds from a coffee cup. The creeks rush, the rain falls, the mountains crumble, the glaciers melt, the wind puffs, and howls and sometimes ceases altogether, the caribou feed, the goats and grizzlies and marmots and ptarmigan live with the rhythm of the seasons, and we hike through, driven by our calendar and commitments, and can just taste eternity. E



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