

# INTRODUCTION

The area covered by this guidebook extends from Yamnuska and CMC Valley on the eastern mountain front past the town of Canmore to just beyond the Banff Park boundary. This corridor contains the highest concentration of developed limestone cliffs in the Canadian Rockies. Sport climbing areas are described in a separate guidebook, *Sport Climbs in the Canadian Rockies* by John Martin and Jon Jones. The two guidebooks are intended to complement each other with a minimum of overlap although some sport climbs are included here to completely cover certain areas and to avoid confusion.

## Orientation

The map opposite shows the major climbing areas. Two highways run through the Bow Valley: the two-lane Highway 1A on the north side of the Bow River and the four-lane Trans-Canada Highway on the south side. A bridge across the river at Seebe near Yamnuska (Highway 1X) provides the only access between the roads until they converge at the town of Canmore. Most cliffs are reached from these highways or from Canmore. Areas such as Windtower, Rimwall and The Orphan are accessed from the Spray Lakes road, which leads south and east from Canmore to the Kananaskis Valley. The crags are described in clockwise sequence starting with Goat Mountain, Yamnuska and CMC Valley and moving up the south side of the Bow Valley almost to Banff and then back along the north side.

## Limitations of Guidebook Information

This is not a standard disclaimer but a sincere effort on the authors' part to explain the difficulties in collecting and presenting guidebook information. The hope is that readers will develop an appreciation for how this information may be misleading and how cautiously it should be interpreted. The authors have climbed many of the routes described in this guidebook and a huge effort has been made to present them in a clear and accurate way using written descriptions, topos and photographs. Readers, however, should consider the following true quotes. "I have trouble telling my left from my right" (Joe Josephson) and "I used to have a good memory, I think" (Chris Perry). There are bound to be errors in this guidebook and the information should be interpreted using common sense and good climbing judgement. Unfortunately, the latter comes from experience that, as we know, "comes from poor judgement," so be careful out there, many of these are serious climbs. Some of the routes we have not done ourselves and have had to rely on information from other people. We did consider compiling a graded list of worst contributors but instead settled on the acknowledgements (alphabetical order). Another serious factor is that things change. Bolts and pitons are added and removed and belay locations are changed (see notes on retrofitting below). Topos have been included in this guidebook to complement the written information but they should not be interpreted too rigidly. They have not been drawn to scale and are just as subject to error as written information. They should not be treated like road maps and if in doubt, climbers should rely more on the written material and of course, personal judgement.

## Acknowledgements

This guidebook is based on the original Bow Valley Rock, much of which was written by John

Martin. Some sections needed only minor revision and John's contribution is again acknowledged. Thanks are also due to Geoff Powter for writing the historical section. This difficult task of balancing accuracy and egos was accomplished with great diplomacy and his account is an excellent record of past contributions and the evolution of climbing styles. Many others have contributed to the production of this guidebook and their assistance is gratefully acknowledged. With apologies for any omissions, the authors sincerely thank the following:

Tim Auger, Barry Blanchard, Dion Bretzloff, Joe Buszowski, Roger Chayer, Greg Cornell, Dave Crosley, Steve DeMaio, Allan Derbyshire, Greg Dickie, Dave Dornian, Sean Dougherty, Michel Dufresne, Bob Enagonio, Jeff Everett, Ben Firth, Greg Fletcher, Peter Gatzsch, Andy Genereux, Pierre Giguere, Jon Jones, Urs Kallen, Dave Lavalley, Andy Lecuyer, Dave Marra, Jeff Marshall, Rich Marshall, Paul McSorley, Simon Parsons, Jon Popowich, Geoff Powter, Glen Reisenhofer, Ernst Saltzgeber, Mark Shaller, Larry Stanier, Grant Statham, Mark Whalen, Ken Wiley and Brian Wyvill.

Special thanks are due to Kelly McLeod for his excellent topos, on which some of ours are based; to Trevor Jones, Marc Piche and Brian Spear for their encouragement and belief that one day the project would be finished; to Jack Firth, Gloria Folden and Trevor Jones for agreeing to climb obscure routes that they otherwise would have avoided; to Raphael Slawinski for having climbed almost everything and remembering the details; and to everyone at Rocky Mountain Books for their patience and assistance and for dealing with the numerous frustrated enquiries. To the climbing world in general, you all owe us a beer! This has been a protracted, thankless, grossly underpaid mega-project for more than three years. At last we can go climbing wherever we choose, without cameras, notes, pens and old topos. We'll miss meeting new people, the many pub discussions and the staff at Rocky Mountain Books but next time it's someone else's turn!

## The Climbing

All the climbs in this guidebook are on limestone that varies considerably in quality. Although there are pitches of superb gray rock on many climbs, there are almost always loose sections that require skill and care to climb safely. Routefinding can also be problematic and in some cases the rock is compact and good natural protection is difficult or impossible to arrange. Nonetheless, many of the climbs offer a unique and rewarding experience for those who take the trouble to adapt and develop the necessary skills. The thrill of cliffs like Yamnuska comes from dealing with the steep and the tenuous—so don't curse it, just figure it out.

Most rock climbers begin on sport climbs and the transition to multi-pitch gear routes on big crags is one that should be made very cautiously. There are many skills besides technical ability that need to be developed. As noted below, gear placement is best learned on more user-friendly rock such as Lake Louise quartzite or Squamish granite. A recent article in Climbing magazine suggested that regardless of technical ability on sport climbs, begin climbing traditional routes at the 5.6/5.7 level. Also, don't let technical ability allow you to climb off-route into dangerous situations. A 5.8 traditional climb may be an undergraded 5.9 or even 5.10a but it will not be 5.10c or harder! If things get overly difficult reread the guidebook (hopefully it's correct) and perhaps you should have stepped left around a rib or switched to another crack line? In-place gear with a sling on it is often off-route, otherwise there would not be a sling! There are a number of excellent, multi-pitch sport climbs in the guidebook area that are useful in making this transition. Also, the longer semi-sport routes on Kid Goat are well worth doing and have a technical difficulty in the 5.6 to 5.8 range. They are good climbs to do before attempting serious routes like the Northeast Face of Ha Ling Peak, which at 5.6 continues to attract woefully inexperienced parties. A climb such as Forbidden Corner on Yamnuska really is only 5.8 but it is very exposed, run-out in places, has difficult routefinding, and is guaranteed to scare the hell

out of you. It's a great route and you can probably do the moves easily but climb it when you are sure of your abilities.

## Weather

The weather and climbing season in the Bow Corridor are impossible to define. The chinook phenomenon can change winter temperatures from  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$  to  $+15^{\circ}\text{C}$  in a few hours and skiing days become potential climbing days. During some summers, however, there may be only a few good weeks or even days on the bigger, north-facing cliffs. From early May until late September it is usually possible to find a suitable crag as there is such a good range of climbs to choose from. Yamnuska has the longest climbing season owing to its position at the eastern edge of the mountain front and its south-facing aspect. It is often sitting in the only pocket of decent weather while clouds hang in the valley farther west. Major climbs have been done on the face in all months of the year although rarely in December and January. Yamnuska may actually be too hot in mid summer but Ha Ling Peak and its north-facing neighbours can provide the necessary shade. Thunderstorms can be a serious problem during the summer months on Yamnuska and the higher cliffs and a check of the weather forecast is recommended.

## Regulations/Registration

Except for a few climbs inside the Banff National Park boundary, none of the climbing areas is subject to regulation and no registration is required. There is a voluntary registration box at Yamnuska but it is not checked on a regular basis and serves only to locate climbers in an emergency. There are regulations concerning the development of bolted climbs at new areas in Kananaskis Country and these are explained in the Sport Climbs guidebook.

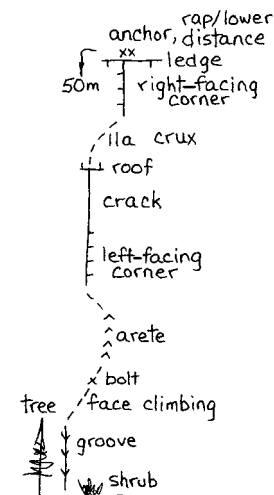
## Topos

The symbol "x" is used to denote a fixed piton or bolt. When most of the fixed gear is bolts, the symbol "x" is used for bolts and "fp" for fixed pitons. When most of the fixed gear is pitons, the symbol "x" is used for pitons and "x" with a circle around it is used for bolts. In the latter situation, the convention used is marked on the topo.

The standard topo symbols for inside corners (arrows pointing down) and outside corners (arrows pointing up) are easily confused and wherever possible inside corners are marked as left-facing or right-facing. Outside corners are normally marked "edge," "arete," "rib" or "ridge."

## The Rock

Nearly all the climbs lie on two great cliff-forming formations: the Eldon (Yamnuska, CMC Valley and Goat Mountain) and the Palliser (Windtower through to Mount Rundle on the south side of the valley). A few crags of Livingstone Formation limestone have also been developed. For the most part, the type of limestone appears to have only a limited influence on rock quality and at their best each offers superb climbing on impeccable rock while at their worst each is terrible. The biggest single factor in determining rock quality seems to be orientation. Cliffs that face south or east are more weathered by meltwater and often have



rough, textured gray rock that gives the best climbing. Yellow rock is steeper, less weathered and often loose. All the major climbing cliffs on the south side of the Bow Valley are Palliser Formation limestone. Interestingly, this formation appears to have three major bands, the lower of which is generally very loose, but the upper two are much better. This is particularly pronounced on Canmore Wall but is also evident on Ship's Prow, Second Sister and to a lesser extent on Ha Ling Peak. In some cases, development has been delayed as would-be first ascensionists were turned back by the sometimes appalling lower band. The highest of the three bands on Ship's Prow and Canmore Wall, for example, has some amazingly good rock. The Rocky Mountains were formed by the folding and faulting of sedimentary rocks as continental plates collided and this too plays a complex role. On Yamnuska, made of Eldon Formation limestone, the character of the climbing appears to have been influenced by the displacement of the cliff by the McConnell Fault. As the cliff was pushed over younger rocks and bent upward in the middle, a series of vertical cracks opened up, like a fan. The cliff certainly has more vertical crack lines than any other and this contributes to its unique character. The orientation of bedding planes is sometimes a factor. The down-sloping strata on the south side of Grotto Mountain, for example, produce cliffs with sloping holds and short overhanging walls where the rock has fractured away. For detailed geological information, readers are referred to Ben Gadd's book *Handbook of the Canadian Rockies* and its bibliography.

## RECOMMENDED EQUIPMENT

**Helmets:** Helmets are not commonly worn on sport climbs as the loose rock has been cleaned away and the protection is reliable and closely spaced. The use of helmets on traditional climbs, however, is strongly recommended. Generally, the climbs have received little cleaning and given the nature of the local rock, the protection provided by a helmet is essential. Rockfall is obviously a concern when parties are above but may also occur because of snowmelt, wind or animal movement. Another good reason for using a helmet on traditional climbs is to minimize the risk of head injury owing to a fall. Since the protection is more widely spaced, less reliable and often to one side, falls are much longer than on sport climbs and may involve long pendulums. In some cases, rockfall is also a concern on the approach trail, for example, below the Northeast Face route on Ha Ling Peak and below Grillmair Chimneys on Yamnuska. In both cases, the trail passes unseen below the climbs and climber-generated rockfall poses a significant risk. We wear helmets at both these locations and many others!

**Ropes:** Most climbs have been established so that the pitches are 50 m or less and this rope length is sufficient unless the description shows otherwise. It is strongly recommended that two ropes be used on long, multi-pitch climbs. This lessens rope-drag on complex pitches but more importantly, it allows retreat owing to storms, time constraints, accidents, etc. It is virtually impossible to retreat from many climbs using a single rope as the rock is often too blank to set intermediate anchors. Although it is often not realized, the seriousness of a route is dramatically increased if only one rope is taken.

**Gear:** The local limestone does not take gear well and considerable experience is necessary to adequately protect many of the climbs. This is best obtained elsewhere at locations such as Lake Louise with its excellent quartzite, or granite areas like Squamish near Vancouver. A large armoury of protection devices is recommended and on the less frequented climbs, a piton hammer with a thin pick is extremely useful for cleaning placements.

**Pitons:** Pitons were used extensively to establish most of the older climbs and many were

not left in place. Nowadays, they are often not required as protection devices have improved considerably and cleaning has provided better gear placements. Some cliffs, however, have inherently compact rock and pitons are necessary to supplement natural protection. If pitons are required, this is noted either in the individual route description or the introduction to the climbing area. In some cases the authors can only guess at the usefulness of pitons and in cases of doubt, a small selection should be carried. The vintage of a climb and its location are often useful guides. Pitons greatly facilitate retreat and many local climbers always carry them on the longer, less popular climbs. Only small piton sizes are required and a selection of the following is recommended: knifeblades (Bugaboos) in various lengths, thin Lost Arrows, thin Z-section pitons (Lepers) and small angles (to 3/4 inch). A hammer with a long pick is useful for cleaning gear placements.

## FIXED PROTECTION

**Pitons:** In-place pitons should always be viewed with caution. Although they can have considerable holding power, pitons are far less reliable than bolts. Inexperienced climbers tend to equate the two and this has contributed to a number of serious accidents. For example, two climbers were killed on the Northeast Face route on Ha Ling Peak when the leader fell and the second was belayed to a single piton rather than a nearby bolted station. Both had been regarded as equivalent. To the unwary, fixed pitons give a false sense of security and good back-up gear should always be placed whenever possible. In particular, blade pitons placed in vertical cracks often have limited holding power and the length of the blade is normally unknown (the heads of 1 inch and 3 inch Bugaboo blades are virtually identical). A piton hammer and a fair degree of experience are necessary to assess the holding power of pitons and in the absence of either, a piton should be regarded only as a supplement to properly placed gear. Pitons loosen significantly over the years because of freeze/thaw action or corrosion and the authors have rappelled from perfectly good pitons that a few years later could be removed by hand! In the past, many climbers carried piton hammers and in-place pitons could be tested and reset and consequently were more reliable. The removal of in-place pitons, however, is strongly discouraged as they indicate the correct route (usually!) and are certainly better than nothing.

**Bolts:** A number of different types of bolts may be encountered on the local rock. Top of the list are 3/8 inch Hilti bolts, which have been widely used since the early 1990s and have been extensively tested on sport climbs. Their embedment length is normally around 6 cm (2.5 inch) or more and they are very strong and reliable. Self-drilling 5/16 inch expansion bolts are common on many of the older climbs and are still used in some situations owing to their light weight and rapid placement. They have hexagonal retaining bolts or allen cap screws and the hangers are frequently made of aluminum. The older, square-cut hangers have small carabiner holes (1/2 inch) but the larger, angled ones fit most sizes. Both the hangers and the retaining bolts have high breaking loads (about 4000 pounds) and overall the system is very reliable when well-placed in good rock. There are no known failures locally of these bolts but some are now quite old and may be weakened by corrosion. Interestingly, the alkaline environment in limestone seems to inhibit corrosion and the old cap screws or retaining bolts can often be removed and replaced (small vice-grip useful). Occasionally, 1/4 inch compression bolts are encountered (sheet steel hanger secured by a nut). These have poor holding power, as do the rivets and Stubai bolts found on old aid routes like Yellow Edge and CMC Wall.

**Retrofitting and new routes:** With the proliferation of sport climbing and its closely spaced,

bomb-proof protection, there is a trend to transfer these expectations to all rock climbs. Routes that have been climbed safely for years by competent parties may be labelled as “dangerous” and said to need “fixing-up” by the addition of bolts. What is not appreciated in this thinking is that rock climbing is a continuum from sport climbs that focus on pure technical difficulty, to big, multi-pitch routes that encompass a whole range of skills. To equip all rock climbs to sport climbing standards is to deny that these other styles of climbing exist. The reason bolts were not used on the older climbs was that they were considered to be “cheating,” a way of bringing a climb down to your own level or, to quote Reinhold Messner, like “carrying your courage in your rucksack.” These values, however, impeded development, kept the best rock out of bounds, and denied us all the pure technical focus of sport climbing. The general consensus now is that all types of climbing have their place but none should interfere or encroach on the others.

Having said the above, it is now generally agreed that retrofitting of older climbs is sometimes justified. The addition of bolts to belays is widely accepted and the time-consuming placement of pitons and gear is considered a waste of good climbing time. In some instances the belay has been moved during retrofitting and this has caused confusion. Examples are the first station on Gollum Grooves, which is now 10 m higher, and the belay below the long roof on the Northeast Face route on Ha Ling Peak where it is now necessary to move up and right instead of left to find the easiest break through the roofs. Obviously, it is preferable to keep the location the same although bolts sometimes allow better ledges to be used. This is up to the judgement of the retrofitters and hopefully changes can be recorded in the web-site information. In-place pitons are unreliable, especially as piton hammers are now not commonly carried. The practise of testing and resetting pitons also ultimately damages the pitons and the placements. A recent trend has been to replace key pitons with bolts and this is gaining acceptance. Normally, it is felt the first ascent party should be consulted and extra bolts should not be added that change the character of the climb. This latter point, however, is debatable since on areas such as Kid Goat climbs have sometimes been rerouted and much better use made of the rock. Overall, it is a matter of personal judgement and the authors do not presume to give guidelines. Any recommendations made in the text regarding the addition of bolts to certain climbs is made at the suggestion of the first ascent party. The addition of new routes is another area for personal interpretation. Generally, anything goes—it’s your route with your name on it! However, the use of bolts next to perfectly good gear placements is widely condemned, as is the addition of climbs that detract from existing ones—for example, bolt-protected routes next to run-out classics. Climbers will always do as they please though and no attempt is intended here to interfere with the evolutionary process.

## Related Guidebooks

The following guidebooks are written for the local area and contain material that may be of interest. Also, rather than repeating information in this guide on camping, enjoying or avoiding the wildlife, ticks, etc., readers are referred to these other sources.

Sport Climbs in the Canadian Rockies by John Martin and Jon Jones.

Ghost Rock by Joe Josephson, Chris Perry and Andy Genereux.

Scrambles in the Canadian Rockies by Alan Kane.

Selected Alpine Climbs in the Canadian Rockies by Sean Dougherty.

Kananaskis Country Trail Guide by Gillean Daffern, Vol. 1 and 2.

Handbook of the Canadian Rockies by Ben Gadd.

## Website information

A website has been established by Rocky Mountain Books to collect and publish new route information and updated material. The address is [rmbooks.com](http://rmbooks.com). The site has an Outdoors Forum where comments and information may be placed by anyone, and Guide Updates where material collected from all sources is edited and organized as a supplement to the guidebook. Material may be submitted either via the Outdoors Forum or to the authors directly (c/o Rocky Mountain Books). Information will be posted promptly and with your cooperation we can keep the book current and make compilation of the next edition much easier. Updated material is available for Ghost Rock at the same site and for Sport Climbs at the TABVAR link by [strongholdclimbing.com](http://strongholdclimbing.com). Material is also being collected via the Outdoors Forum for Banff Rock, a guidebook covering the Banff to Lake Louise area including Castle Mountain. Raphael Slawinski has agreed to be a joint (or sole?) editor of the next Bow Valley Rock and condolences, material and encouragement may be provided via the site or Rocky Mountain Books.