

Monarch Mountain, Southwest Face, and Other Ascents

Canada, British Columbia, Coast Mountains

Climbs And Expeditions

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On July 28, Micha Rinn from Germany and I flew by helicopter to the col between Monarch Mountain and Page Mountain at the head of the Empire Way Glacier, deep in the Coast Mountains. Our objective was the pronounced spur that runs up the center of the unclimbed 1,250m southwest face of Monarch Mountain (3,555m). It was a line that prompted awe and excitement in equal measure—a veritable Walker Spur leading directly to the summit of the peak.

How a Scottish-German climbing team came to know about one of the finest unclimbed features in western Canada requires some explanation. My fascination with Monarch, the second-highest massif in the Coast Mountains, began 20 years ago when Dave Hesleden and I traversed the Serra Group after making the first ascent of the southeast ridge of Asperity Mountain in the Waddington Range. (The route referred to in the [AAJ report](#) as the south ridge later came to be called the southeast ridge. It faces more or less south-southeast.) As we tussled with the jagged crest of the Serras, reputedly the most difficult summits in the range, Monarch stood out like a sentinel 70 miles to the north. With a prominence of 2,925m, there is no higher peak until you reach Mt. Fairweather, a thousand miles up the spine of the coastal range. I was smitten by Monarch's dominance and resolved to climb it.

The Coast Mountains had got under my skin, and I made two further trips to the Waddington massif, a couple to the Pantheon Spires, and one to the difficult-to-access Mt. Gilbert to the south. During this time I became friendly with Don Serl, who had made five visits to Monarch, culminating in the [first ascent of the stupendous pinnaced north ridge](#) in July 2000 with Bruce Fairley and Bill Durlfer. This was the fourth route on the mountain, and it seemed unlikely that Monarch would yield any further major lines. [Monarch was first climbed in 1936, by the east ridge, by Hans Fuhrer and Henry S. Hall Jr.]

In April 2007, mountain photographer John Scurlock set off from Seattle in his home-built airplane bound for the Monarch Icefield. During a circumnavigation of the mountain, he

photographed the rarely seen southwest face with its compelling central spur. John published his photos on the internet, where Don and I saw them. We considered making an attempt on the stunning feature, but our expedition failed to materialize. Don later made other plans without me, but these also fell by the wayside. Other teams considered the route, but nobody made a serious attempt. Later, Don retired from climbing and one of the unclimbed jewels of the Coast Mountains lay almost forgotten and untouched.

My interest in Monarch was rekindled when Micha and I made the first ascent of the Diamond Ridge, a 1,600m new route on the south side of the Grandes Jorasses in July 2016. It was a logical and proud line, never very difficult but long and committing. We were looking for a similar objective for 2017, and when I suggested Monarch, Micha jumped at the opportunity.

We had a couple of days of bad weather after we landed on the glacier, but on July 30 we warmed up by climbing Peak 2,625m from the north and then descending the south ridge to the col separating the Empire Way Glacier from the Monarch Icefield. There was a calm on top, and we presume the peak had been ascended by the rocky south ridge from the col. On August 1 we climbed the Broda-Dudra route on the west face of Monarch, a substantial climb on rock, mixed, and snow. This was the second route climbed on the mountain, in 1953, and had only seen a handful of repeats. It provided an interesting and somewhat demanding mountaineering route (D) and would be our descent route if we were successful on the southwest spur.

After a reconnaissance, we started up the southwest face at 6 a.m. on August 4. Our ascent was delayed by high winds and low cloud, and for the first time on the trip the air was full of smoke and ash from the forest fires raging that summer in British Columbia. We convinced ourselves there was no harm in just "having a look." After an initial loose pitch, the rock improved and we committed ourselves to the ascent. We had seen from the west face that the lower half of the spur is comprised of a series of very steep towers, so, rather than follow the crest, we climbed a more direct line to its left before bivouacking at the foot of the impressive upper spur at half-height on the face.

The climbing had become gradually more difficult during the first day and was particularly challenging on day two as we climbed the crest of the upper spur. Unlike the Waddington Range, which is mainly comprised of excellent granite, Monarch's rock is a metamorphosed volcanic variety. Although this was very solid in the upper half of the route, the rock was compact with few protection possibilities, and rather alarmingly the holds sloped downwards. We had numerous long runouts, and at times were worried whether the route would go, but fortunately we were always able to find a climbable line.

At the top of the upper pillar the ridge provided easier climbing and we were able to simul-climb for about 200m. We bivouacked for a second time 70m below the summit ridge. Our ledge was cramped and exposed, and it was cold in our thin sleeping bags, but it was one of the finest bivouacs I've ever enjoyed. Below us lay 1,200m of challenging alpine ground, and all we had to do the following morning was to climb a couple of mixed pitches to gain the summit ridge. We were on the summit early on August 6, enjoying a surreal view of the tops of the surrounding peaks rising above a layer of light gray smoke. The descent of the west face went smoothly, and we arrived back at our tent late that afternoon.



We called our 1,250m-high route Game of Thrones and graded it ED2 5.10a. As expected, it was similar in difficulty and scale to the Walker Spur on the Grandes Jorasses, but more serious. We would not have been able to descend from above half-height because the compact nature of the rock would have quickly exhausted our rack. The cracks were not well defined, which meant that most of the secure placements were small cams; opportunities for good nut placements and slings around spikes were few and far between.

After a day's rest lounging around at base camp we made the first ascent of the Sugarloaf (2,620m) on August 8. This is the highest peak on the pinnaced ridge running south from Peak 2,625m, which we had climbed earlier in the trip. Although not technically difficult, this proved to be almost a climb too far, as we soon realized that we were still very tired after our Monarch ascent. We also underestimated the length of our route, which traversed over six summits. Most of it was easy climbing, but the penultimate summit had an overhanging abseil. We left the rope in place so we could return and continued ropeless to the summit of the Sugarloaf. We flew out two days later as the weather began to turn.

— Simon Richardson, Scotland

Photos and Topos

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