

CIRQUETRY

*Trundles from God and other tales of Speed and Freedom in the
Cirque of the Unclimbables, Yukon Territory*

JONATHAN COPP



Tim O'Neill celebrating the first free ascent of Club International on Bustle Tower. Jonathan Copp

The Beaver roared, its circa 1957 pistons pounding as we looped skyward within a mountain cirque, trying to gain enough altitude to slide through a notch. Warren was on the headset barking to his co-pilot, “Whataya think? Got enough height? That glacial air is going to suck us right down once we pass the keyhole.” One problem: I was the co-pilot. Staring out at the notch, I could scarcely see space enough between the menacing cloud mass and the serrated ridge for our burly little craft to fly. “Crap, I don’t know!” Warren took us for a few more doughnuts around the cirque and then lined up to thread the needle. We were just skimming the bottom of the threatening cloud as ice and rain began to pelt us. “Ehhhaa, it’s been a shit June, really a shit June. Feckin’ rain every day.”

I turned to look at Timmy O’Neill, Brooke Andrews, and John Abel, all of whom were piqued by the aerobatics and concerned with the weather report. Fact is, we hadn’t expected anything less. It was the Cirque of the Unclimbables after all, darn close to the Arctic Circle, and wetter than many a rainforest. We had come to explore the cirque’s legendary walls and spires. As the float plane finally carved into Glacier Lake Basin, the Nahani River meandering into the distance like loose mercury, the high alpine Cirque of the Unclimbables winked at us through its bellowing cloak of cloud. We were psyched.

Fairy Meadows is the perfect name for the base camp where we finally dropped our gear and supplies. Marmots whistled their cheer. Gigantic, streaked boulders played architecture, while phantasmagoric cloud bundles wafted up valley to engulf our group and the wildflowers in sparkling dew and rain. But as the first weeks passed, our psyche began to turn inward with the acknowledgment of the hideous weather. Our first few attempts at the Lotus Flower Tower were wet, bracing jaunts onto one of the world’s most sublime alpine spires. One day Brooke, Timmy, John, and I, fueled by a sucker hole of blue sky, went for the Lotus. I led the first few



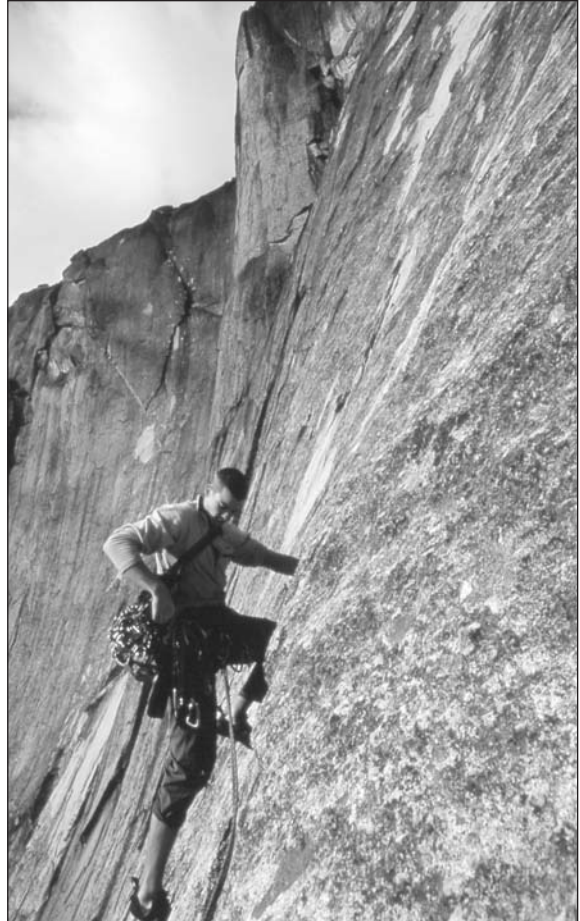
Josh Wharton on the first free ascent of the Original Route on Mt. Proboscis, which was also the first one-day ascent of the face. *J. Copp*



Josh Wharton cleaning pitch 10 of Pecking Order on Parrot Beak Peak. *Jonathan Copp*

itches in full raingear, snowmelt running down my sleeves and soaking me through. That day, by the time we were 400 feet up, snow had begun to fall. Brooke and John decided to rap. Timmy and I, because we figured it would be more fun to climb into the storm than to descend and go back to our nylon cells, kept going. But after several hundred feet, numb hands and slick rock drove us off. A few others had joined us in Fairy Meadows by then. Playing hackysac in the mud with the Welsh folk and drinking some corn with James and Francesca Garret, we were passing the days well.

As happens in life, when things get good, time flies (and so do the mosquitoes). When the sky finally cleared on July 18, we were running. Timmy and John, along with a handful of other teams, were gunning for the Lotus. Brooke and I, having made a few stunted goes at the classic tower already and not wanting to get in queue, headed for Bustle Tower, a chiseled 2,000-foot spire in the heart of the Cirque. Our goal: climb it and have fun. I usually climb with a sort of triage mentality. Free climbing is the ideal, speed the necessity, and survival mandatory. From this I find free climbing faster than aid climbing, thus enabling speed, which in turn puts us in less danger from a hungry storm, hanging serac, or falling rock. Brooke and I were well on our way up a route called Club International (V or VI 5.10 A2). To me it looked like the best possibility for the first free route on the tower. But as we buckled into the belay atop pitch four, a line of left-trending splitter cracks drew us out of the route's corner system and onto the headwall's face. The next four or five pitches held an amazing array of features, from perfect hands to a crux finger crack, into a wet groove, and through a wild off-width ear that culminated in an overhanging juggy roof. A few hundred feet above the roof we converged with Club International. From here moderate climbing led to the ridge and on to the summit. By now it was one in the morning yet still light enough to climb. Our goal—to climb it and to have fun—was, at least to Brooke, beginning to mutate, especially with the increasingly cold belays and approaching darkness.



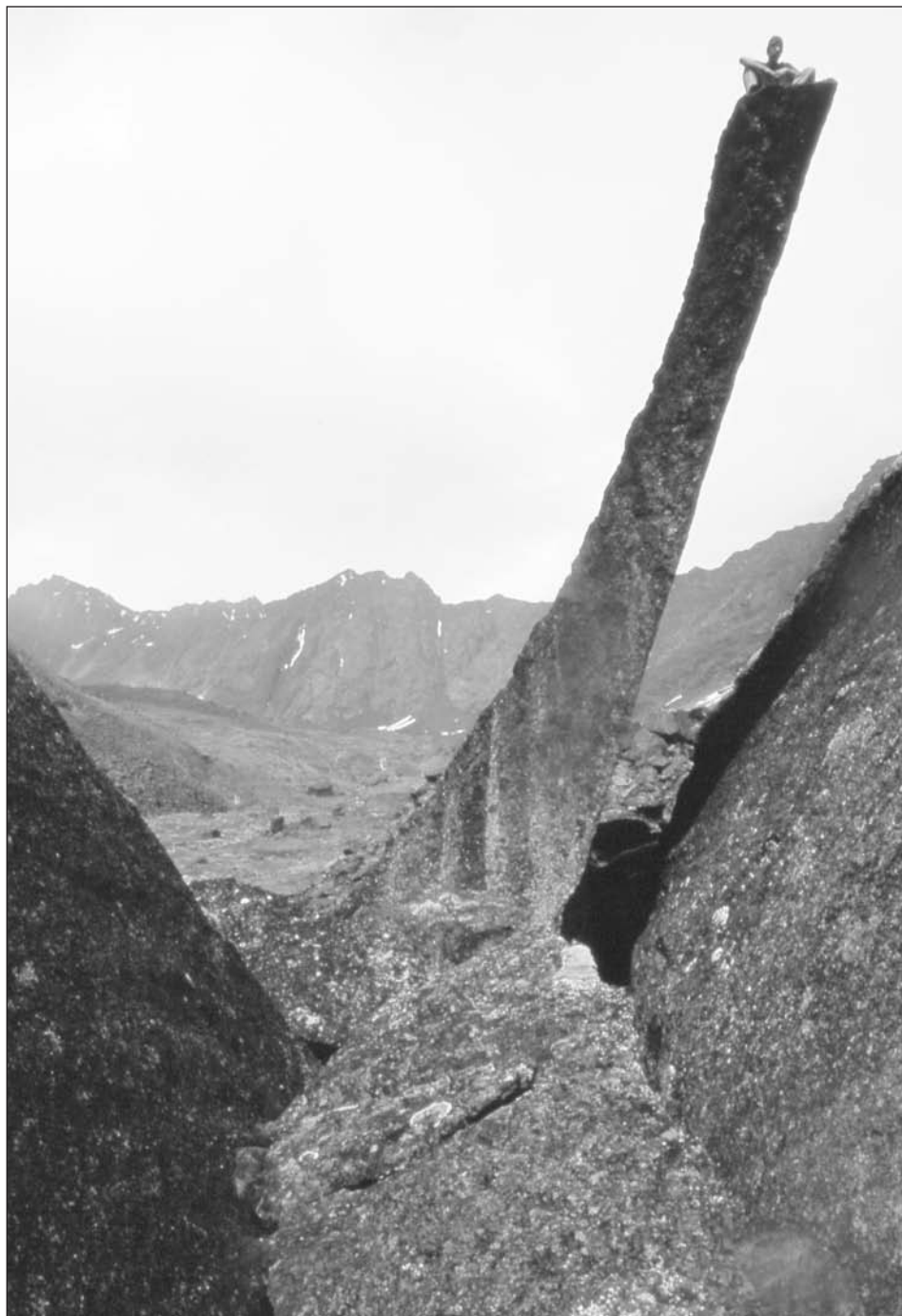
Josh Wharton midway up the first ascent of Pecking Order on Parrot Beak Peak. *Jonathan Copp*

Within a day and a half, the weather still holding, Timmy O'Neill and I were at this exact same belay. Having free climbed all of the aid on Club International to arrive in the upper dihedrals by the afternoon, Timmy and I were jazzed and movin'. We were doing handstands on the summit by 5 p.m. Club International went amazingly smoothly, the crux being a delicate 5.11b face traverse out of the main corner system and into a splitter finger crack. Brooke and my "major variation" that bends out on the left side of the wall is called Don't Get Piggy, 5.12a.

As Timmy and I ambled into Fairy Meadows, I spotted that look in Brooke's eyes. She was ready for another one. The question was, "was I?" The weather was still holding, and a lotus petal was perched on her lips. By 8 p.m. the following day we stood at the base of the Lotus Flower Tower. It was dry from bottom to top, and nobody's eyes but ours were on it. We made the bivy ledge by midnight and slept for the few hours of darkness that had finally found these northern territories. We woke to a pink flamingo band of clouds marching our way. "Damn, is the weather window closing? Let's go." Lotus's famous headwall is as lovely and as stately as can be imagined. Sections of delicate face climbing connect splitter crack systems. By 2 p.m. we were on the summit eating snow until our mouths went numb and realizing we were just in time.



Josh Wharton stopping the clock atop the first free ascent of the Original Route on Mt. Proboscis (shown on the right), which was also the first one-day ascent of the face. *Jonathan Copp (2)*



Chris Hampston on a pillar in Fairy Meadows, heart of the Cirque of the Climbables. *Jonathan Copp*



Top: The Lotus Flower Tower is on the left; Parrot Beak Peak is on the right, with Pecking Order shown.
Below: Josh Wharton sitting on Pins and Needles in base camp, Fairy Meadows. *Jonathan Copp*

After three weeks in the Cirque, it was finally time to wish farewell to Timmy, Brooke, and John. We had all summited the Lotus and a few other dreamy peaks and, well, I wanted to stay for more. Ha! No, I had really planned to stay a bit longer and climb with my friend Josh Wharton. But saying goodbye is always difficult—especially because I was left completely alone (but only for a day) within this majestic cirque, sharing the place only with those ancient goateed beasts chipping their hoof-marked trails into the snow and ice and earth.

I had another two weeks though—to sit in the tent and fester, I thought. But when the new recruits arrived, Chris Hampston, Kevin Cochran, and Josh Wharton, they brought with them renewed energy and optimism. After humping beastly loads up into Fairy Meadows, Josh and I set our sights on Parrot Beak Peak, one of the largest and least explored walls within the cirque. I believe there was only one aid route on it, and that had been climbed just once! The line we were scoping took a meandering course up the center of the wall—delicate features, but all there.

One day, after one too many Scrabble tournaments, one less cloud floated in the boiling skies, so Josh and I made for Parrot. Our plan was to work out the first few pitches of the route, because they looked thin and might require a bolt or two, or some spice work. Once we were actually on the wall, though, perfect edges and thin features appeared in the bullet granite. Within a few hours we were 600 feet up the wall without having placed a single pin or bolt. We hadn't planned on continuing, but it wasn't raining or snowing yet, so in a handful of hours more we were 2,000 feet up, and I was drilling the first bolt, for a belay. Josh was down below shivering and I had a T-shirt on my head for a beanie: unprepared is an understatement. The next gust of wind held a few raindrops and, without any shell layers, we were outta there, but enthralled with how the route was going and looking forward to our next attempt.

Another morning of mediocre weather, after many days of bad weather, left Josh and me wondering if we shouldn't climb the Lotus. We figured we wouldn't need much if we climbed it fast enough, and maybe we could beat the looming afternoon showers. Four and a half hours after beginning, we were standing on top of the Lotus Flower Tower, grins as big as the mountains. We simul-climbed most of the route, hootin' and hollering to each other along the way. "Josh, don't miss the splitter hand crack through the roof!" "Jonny, these knobs are insane!" It was great making it back to camp for lunch and the drumming of rain on the taut nylon.

From the very first day Josh arrived, a main goal in the back of our minds was to free climb the original route on Mt. Proboscis in a day. The route had never been completely freed (although almost by Feagin and Blanchard), and the wall had never been climbed in a day, as far as we knew. The challenge was enticing, especially after kicking steps up What Notch and gazing out at the golden face. We made a few attempts at it, getting as far as the top of the icy notch before the next storm cycle rolled in.

When the second true weather window of my trip opened, Josh and I were in position for Parrot Beak Peak. Back up on that wild face with two ropes and no jumars, our progress was smooth, and we knew where to go, until we didn't. A few run-out face sections connected cracks and corners, and the final headwall plastered us into a left-facing corner running with snowmelt. Having freed everything up to there, we grappled with numb hands up the final four hundred feet of wet rock, trying to hang on for an all-free route. And we did, barely. By late afternoon we had made the top, navigating the bulbous snow features to find the true summit. We named the route "Pecking Order," 2,800 feet, V+ 5.11R. Two ropes, two bolts, two friends, one day. The highlight of the route came unexpectedly as I rapped off the summit headwall.



Sore fingertips and clear heads in the Cirque of the Unclimbables. Top: Josh Wharton after freeing the Original Route on Proboscis. Below: Josh and Jonathan in Fairy Meadows. Proboscis on the left. Lotus and Bustle on the right, *J. Copp*

Touching down on a nice ledge 180 feet off the anchor, I felt a queer vibration. Lifting my feet to peer down the wall, I noticed the ledge was actually a forty-foot-tall pillar, barely seated on this overhanging face. A rush of excitement and terror ran through me as I began work on this trundle from God. The towering flake would have been a nightmare to rappel past, so I had to, really! The monolith creaked as I wedged my knee behind it, and human-sized shards dropped from behind its middle. I glanced up at Josh, who was staring down wide-eyed from the summit, and felt a hesitation—almost a feeling that gravity could implode or seismic chaos could result from such a feature falling through space. But I couldn't stop now. When it finally gave, it fell like a man shot, headfirst until it was parallel with earth below. Then it released to drop into a deafening silence. It's that silence that I remember most, before the cacophonous explosion. People at base camp thought it was thunder, though the skies were clear.

We were giggling, but that goal in the back of our minds (Proboscis) was still there, buzzing away like a pesky mosquito. As the weather window was holding, we would give it a go. After one day of rest, we woke early and climbed from Fairy Meadows up and over What Notch and into the Proboscis cirque. By nine a.m. we were starting the first pitch of the legendary 1963 route, first climbed by the all-star team of Layton Kor, Jim McCarthy, and Royal Robbins. After only a few wet sections, we were into the meat of the climbing (two ropes, one liter of water, and no jumars). A splitter finger and hand crack soared for pitches up a streaked face. We grabbed knobs and edges when the crack pinched down. The crux fell into Josh's lead, and we both hung on for the on-sight. Hats off to Josh, because it was spicy. After simul-climbing a long section and piecing together the final pitches, we stood on the catwalk summit at 5:30 in the afternoon. The Original Route—VI 5.12R. With sore fingertips and clear heads, we savored the silence of the place and the silencing of that buzz in our minds. The Snickers weren't bad either.

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS:

AREA: Cirque of the Unclimbables, Logan Mountains, Northwest Territory, Canada

NEW ROUTES: Parrot Beak Peak: Pecking Order (2,800 feet, V+ 5.11), Jonathan Copp and Josh Wharton. First free route on the wall. One day. Bustle Tower: Don't Get Piggy variation to Club International (2,000 feet, V+ 5.12a), Brooke Andrews and Jonathan Copp.

FIRST FREE ASCENTS: Proboscis: Original Route (VI 5.12R, 8.5 hours), Jonathan Copp and Josh Wharton. Bustle Tower: Club International (2,000 feet, V+ 5.11, approx. 10 hours), Jonathan Copp and Tim O'Neill.

SPEED ASCENT: Lotus Flower Tower (2000+ feet, V 5.10), 4.5 hours. Jonathan Copp and Josh Wharton.

All routes climbed in late July and early August, 2001.