

# Nelson's Mountains

## 2. Goodwin Purcell

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The Purcell Range, named by Sir James Hector for Dr Goodwin Purcell, a teacher of medicine at Queens University in Cork and a patron of the Palliser expedition lies generally to the s and e of the main mass of the Interior Ranges of British Columbia. The Alpine terrain offering challenge to mountaineers extends in a generally n-s direction for approximately 100 miles, with a maximum width of about 30 miles. The major peaks lie to the w of the headwaters area of the north-flowing portion of the Columbia river. It is separated from the southern Selkirk Range to the w by the minor geologic trench occupied by the Beaver and Duncan rivers, and from the southern portions of the Rocky Mountains of Canada by the great structural Rocky Mountain Trench, a prominent feature of even the small-scale maps of western Canada. The area, in general, lies some 200 miles n of the panhandle of the State of Idaho.

The geologic structure of these mountains is exceedingly complex, with three major areas of coarse igneous uplift and various subsidiary groupings of mountains. Some of the peaks are of the Hammill Quartzite, a locally famous and durable formation, but for the most part they are of less competent constituents of the widespread Lardeau Formation. The northern groups, around the Spillimacheen river and its tributaries, are of generally incompetent formations which have been of some interest to the mining fraternity, but minimal to the mountaineering.

9 *Bugaboo Group from the N, Vowell glacier on the right* Photo: G. I. Bell



To the immediate s is probably the most famous present-day climbing area of Canada, the Bugaboo and Vowel Groups. Here is an igneous uplift with sheer faces rivalling portions of Yosemite valley, but with the benefit of significant present day Alpine glaciation. Though not containing the highest peaks in the Purcell Range, the Bugaboo Group receives more attention from mountaineers every year than the rest of the range put together, and perhaps rightly so.

Next s of the Bugaboos is a rather nondescript area of metamorphic rock leading to another granitic uplift situated just n of Horsethief Creek. This Starbird Ridge has been quite popular in recent years, and though offering faces of less extent than the Bugaboo Group, nevertheless reaches similar altitude, with its many peaks and pinnacles being capped with severe and interesting bouldering problems.

To the s of this group, and centred in the area between Toby and Horsethief Creeks, both tributaries to the extreme head-waters portion of the Columbia river, is an area of the Hammill Quartzite, the same formation which outcrops in the vicinity of Rogers Pass in the Selkirks, and offers such fine and durable climbing in that area. These are the highest peaks of the Purcells, reaching in excess of 3300 m and offering some 2000-ft faces, many of which have not even been studied, much less attempted.

The main portion of the range then follows the watershed between the Columbia river and Kootenay Lake generally southward from this area, the most notable feature being the Lake of the Hanging Glaciers, some five miles w of Farnham Peak, the highest in the range. This lake lies at an altitude of over 2000 m, is over two miles in length, studded with icebergs and marked at its southerly end by a calving glacier front almost 200 ft high. This timberline lake is one of the

10 *Lake of the Hanging Glaciers, Commander Mountain on the left* Photo B. F. Swan





11 *Snowpatch from the N, regular route to the left* Photo: G. Weber

truly magnificent beauty spots of all British Columbia. It is surrounded at its s end by a ridge crest, with many points exceeding 3000 m. Southward, the groups are diffuse and not frequently visited, though the divide peaks for the most part are in excess of 3000 m.

Marking the southernmost area of significant mountaineering challenge in the Purcell Range, is the Leaning Towers Group which lies some ten miles E of the middle portion of Kootenay Lake. This is a series of jagged granite pinnacles with precipitous southern and eastern faces, only slightly less so to the w, but generally easily approachable from the n. Only five mountaineering parties have been into this area.

Access to the Purcell Range is fairly good from the paved highway system in the Columbia and Kootenay valleys to the e, from which branch roads of varying degrees of quality lead up all the major tributaries from Dutch Creek on the s to Spillimacheen Creek at the n. At the head of Bugaboo Creek, there is an excellent Alpine lodge operated by Canadian Mountain Holidays from which guide service is available and supplies can be obtained. From this lodge, it is a half-day's hike to the Provincially maintained cabin at Boulder Camp, situated below Snowpatch, one of the more prominent of the Bugaboo peaks. The



12 *Bugaboo Spire and Snowpatch Spire from Bugaboo glacier* Photo:  
AC Collection—B. R. Goodfellow

Bugaboo Lodge is one of the leading centres for alpinism in Canada. There are no other facilities of comparable nature anywhere in the range and in all other cases the climber wishing supplies, or information, must obtain the same before leaving the main highway.

Access from the w to portions of the Purcell Range is fairly easy, but for the most part it is simply not done. Certain of the groups nearer Duncan Lake, the Four Squatters, the Macbeth Group, and the Leaning Towers, are best approached by lumber roads and trails in the tributaries flowing westward to the Duncan Lake and river, or the Kootenay Lake, but most of these peaks are not very popular, and largely for good reason.

With the advent of white explorers in the early nineteenth century, certain of the peaks were named, and in time the principal passes were crossed. Mining exploration started in the 1860s, and the first tourist-sportsmen began to appear in the 1880s as access to western Canada improved immensely with the opening of the Canadian Pacific Railway. From its crossing of the Columbia at Golden, quaint river-boats, of uncertain reliability, began to ply the Upper Columbia, lasting for a generation until superseded by branch rail lines.

The first mountaineering of real consequence was done by parties led by the famous Austrian guide Conrad Kain, who lived for many years near Lake Windermere outfitting and leading groups into all portions of the Purcell Range, as well as, of course, into various other parts of the mountains of western Canada. He participated in the ascents of almost all the major peaks of the range from 1914 until his death in 1934.

The mountaineering literature on the Purcell Range is far less than on any of the other major areas of Canadian mountaineering. The only definitive work is that of Dr J. Monroe Thorington, entitled *The Purcell Range of British Columbia*, and published by the American Alpine Club in 1946. Other volumes are tangentially of interest to mountaineers, that of Baillie-Grohman in 1900, that of Mrs St Maur in 1890, and that of Lees and Clutterbuck in 1888. However, the literature in various Alpine journals, particularly in the last generation, has become very substantial. Of this, of course the overwhelming bulk is pertinent to the Bugaboo-Vowel Area which continues to attract climbers in unfortunately increasing numbers. The American Alpine Club *Climber's Guide to the Interior Ranges of British Columbia* was most recently revised in 1971 and is definitive for access and other data of importance to visiting climbers. It is obtainable through the offices of either the AAC or the ACC.

