

Kokanee Glacier Park

EDWARD L. DENNIS

UNTIL the Spokane Mountaineers of Spokane, Washington, held their 1937 summer outing in Kokanee Glacier Park,¹ about 20 miles N. of Nelson, British Columbia, this interesting region had not been visited in more than a decade by an organized mountaineering party.

During an eight-day outing in August, members of the outing party of twenty-five persons, representing six outdoor clubs, made ascents of twelve of the principal peaks of the area, ranging in elevation from 8300 to 9200 ft. Four of these peaks are unnamed. Although it is certain that at least the higher ones had been climbed before, records of previous ascents were found only on Mt. Cond (9200 ft.), the highest point in Kokanee Park.

Extremely rugged, and revealing much evidence of the presence of tremendous glaciers in bygone ages, the Kokanee region is one of unusual beauty and interest, and offers a real challenge to the mountaineer who seeks new routes to conquer, and rock climbs of first class caliber.

The descriptive prospectus sent to members of the party before the outing said in part: "In an extremely rugged sub-alpine area of 100 square miles this Canadian park contains more than 100 glaciers, twenty of which are of considerable size. Central and most distinctive feature is the Kokanee Glacier, some five square miles of moving ice covering the entire side of a mountain valley along the N. E. side of the Kokanee Range. This ice cap is of immense depth. The park contains 125 alpine lakes and ponds, and fifty-six peaks above 8000 ft. The Kokanee Range runs almost through the center of the park, and, as the park occupies the highest terrain in a large territory, it affords many superb views over adjacent country."

There are two highway approaches to the Kokanee area. One, from the city of Nelson, takes in about 12 miles along the shore of

¹ The mountains of this park belong to the Southern Selkirks, Interior Ranges of B. C. Map reference: Kokanee Glacier Park (1:31, 680), Dept. of Mines, 1925.

Kootenay Lake, then 10 miles directly northward on a steep but reasonably good mountain road to a terminus at the site of the old Molly Gibson mill just inside the park's southern boundary. The other route is W. from the town of Kaslo, well up Kootenay Lake, which borders the entire park on the E., then S. on a water grade to the Joker millsite almost in the center of the park. The latter route is the easier in grade and enables one to ride well into the park, but it offers less attractive camp sites than the southern entrance, and one must climb 1300 ft. out of Joker basin before undertaking the actual ascent of any peak.

Entering via the Molly Gibson millsite, the Spokane party packed in and up 3 miles to a base camp at the southern tip of Kokanee Lake, largest in the park; elevation 6437 ft. Subsequent exploration convinced us that this was the best campsite in the park, and one from which Kokanee Glacier and the higher peaks are readily accessible. It is on a good trail, the only N.-S. trail through the park.

Camp at Kokanee Lake is virtually at timberline, as 7000 ft. is about the upper limit of trees in this area. While the Kokanee region is notoriously stormy, and our mid-August visit coincided with almost the first good weather of the summer, both days and nights were clear, with little wind. Days were warm—but the nights! Bitter cold came down every evening within ten minutes after sunset, and the nights at Kokanee Lake were the coldest ever experienced by the Spokane club on any summer expedition.

Like most mountains, the Kokanee peaks, as a rule, can be climbed by relatively easy routes and most of the climbing done to date has been by such routes. Most of the peaks, however, present one or more faces that will challenge the best of rock climbers, and certain approaches to a few of the higher peaks by way of the glaciers offer objective difficulties in the way of steep ice slopes and large crevasses. Climbing of all degrees of difficulty can be had. New routes remain to be made on virtually every peak. The mountaineering possibilities of the area have scarcely been touched.

The principal glaciers lie on the N. E. slopes of the peaks which nourish them. Several of the larger glaciers are "living" icefields, but most of the park's glaciers are rather small, and are "dead"; that is, the present glacial ice is a remnant of a once large glacier.

No downhill movement occurs, and no new glacier building is taking place.

Just W. of the head of Kokanee Lake is a splendid opportunity to study the rocky bed which had been exposed in comparatively recent times by the melting away of a once-large glacier. Only a small dead glacier now remains, at the upper end of a spectacular slope of deeply scored and polished granite. At one time this glacier was fully a mile long and stretched clear down into Kokanee Pass, just N. of the lake.

Because of past glacial action, virtually all travel above timberline is over and among tremendous granite boulders, which cover the steep hillsides for miles in indescribable confusion. Above these boulder fields, as one approaches the summits, ascent is usually by way of chimneys or steep couloirs. There is considerable danger here from falling or sliding stones. Along the W. side of the great massif which nourishes the Kokanee Glacier, the rock is rotten and loose.

Properly speaking, the central section of the Kokanee Range, containing several of the highest peaks in the park and along the whole length of which lies the Kokanee Glacier, is not a series of separated peaks, but a bulky massif. The named summits rise to points only a few hundred feet above its bulk, and above the upper rim of the icecap.

Our first two excursions from the Kokanee Lake camp to the glacier and these summits took us through Keyhole Pass, a narrow and distinctive notch in the rocky rampart just N. of Esmeralda Peak. From our camp, the route was almost straight uphill, climbing steeply and traveling always over and between and under the previously mentioned gigantic boulders. Scarcely a mile in distance, this climb took more than two hours.

As we neared the notch in the rim, the climbers found themselves in a steep couloir full of loose rock. With a large party (14), it was necessary to keep well closed up and move with caution to avoid dislodging rocks which might strike the rearmost climbers. Once in Keyhole Pass, it was necessary only to surmount a tremendous snowdrift, and before us lay a great expanse of the glacier, and off to the S. E. the summit of Mt. Cond, which we were not able to see from camp.

A short rock climb, offering no difficulties, took us to the summit of Esmeralda (9150 ft.), a feat of utmost simplicity once the arduous ascent to the pass was completed. The W. face of this peak, however, presents a stern challenge to climbers who like their rocks steep and tough. The half mile of glacier between Esmeralda and Cond presented no difficulties, as it is not steep. Crevasses were numerous, but quite narrow. As this sector of the glacier seems to lie in a smooth-bottomed bowl, it is unlikely that dangerous crevasses ever develop.

Mt. Cond (9200 ft.) shares with Kane Peak in the Sawtooth ridge the distinction of being the park's highest point. From the glacier we approached along the crest of a huge snowdrift, and found the short rock scramble to the top very easy. This was on the peak's N. side.

In a cairn were a few poorly preserved records of previous climbs, in a tin cup. Most of them dated back twelve or fifteen years to the days when the Kokanee Mountaineering Club of Nelson was active in the region, and had its headquarters at the Slocan Chief mine cabin below the N. W. tongue of Kokanee Glacier. The Spokane party built the cairn higher and placed the old records, with a record of our climb, in one of the club's official register boxes, which was duly installed with fitting ceremony. It is, to date, the only club register our club has placed in Canada.

Again we crossed the glacier, more than a mile this time, with no difficulties although one steep slope was traversed. Here we reached our most interesting climb of the day, the Giants Kneecap (9134 ft.). Entirely surrounded by the glacier, this summit is a fairly small pyramid of granite, thrusting some 400 ft. above the ice to a sharp point. After some reconnaissance, we tackled its western face, which proved to be an easy climb on a series of ledges, of sound rock and ample width for any but the most timid. Near the top a small overhang offers some slight difficulty. On any other side, this rock upthrust offers a climb of considerable difficulty.

Still gaining altitude, we continued from the Kneecap almost due W. toward the upper rim of the glacier. Here on the rocky wall which edges the ice, a small point, easily climbed, rises to an elevation of 9128 ft., and while unnamed, may fairly be counted as a summit. From this point we returned to Keyhole Pass, went

down the couloir with great caution, and thence over the boulders to camp. As an indication of the conditions encountered, our day's jaunt had covered about 6 miles, including 2 over the boulder fields and nearly 3 on the glacier. We had visited four summits, and taken time out for three lunches and considerable picture taking. Elapsed time away from camp was 11 hours.

Our most arduous and most interesting trip was to Haystack and Kokanee Peaks near the end of our stay. A near accident and a return to camp hours after dark by half of the party were included in the day's events. Out of camp at the lake, our route was S. E. around the point of the sharp ridge running down from Esmeralda, then diagonally uphill over the inevitable boulder fields toward the saddle between the two peaks above named, which is some 800 ft. lower than the summits. Through the saddle we could see the sun glistening on Haystack Glacier.

Before reaching the saddle, and swayed against his own judgment by opinions of his party, the leader turned directly uphill toward a notch in the rim just below the summit of Kokanee Peak. The climbers soon found themselves in a narrow, deep couloir, with a great amount of loose rock underfoot. The going became extremely steep, necessitating much care to prevent rolling rocks. On cliffs at either side were balanced great blocks of loose granite. So intangible did their perch seem that the climbers were almost afraid to shout, lest it bring down one of the balanced giants.

Haystack Peak (9038 ft.), taking its name from the abrupt rock hump on its summit, offered us a fairly steep glacier with several large crevasses, and a short rock climb of moderate difficulty to the highest point. We came up the glacier on the N. E. slope, and up a chimney in the N. face of the rock, swinging around to the W. side of the hump for the final climb over a series of ledges. From the top we could see the city of Nelson, much of Kootenay Lake, and Mt. Assiniboine.

Glissading down to the saddle, we divided forces, half of the party electing to return to camp, the others going on to Kokanee Peak, the only one in the group around camp as yet unclimbed by our party. The ascent to the 9000-ft. summit, approaching the final climb from the E. was scarcely more than an uphill hike from the saddle, with a little steep glacier work just below the final rock pitch. It was in the descent that the party got into trouble.

As a return via the saddle to the S. was a roundabout route, the party of five elected to go straight down the W. face of Kokanee Peak on the rock. They dropped several hundred feet in altitude with no difficulty, working on broad ledges. Then all avenues of descent ran into a sheer cliff, below which it was impossible to judge the feasibility of the route. Due to unsoundness of the rock, the leader refused, wisely, to consider roping down the sheer bit. The party climbed clear back to the summit and turned N. along the rim of the glacier.

Two attempts were made to come down into the Kokanee Lake valley through notches in the rim similar to Keyhole pass. Both failed, because the descents were beyond the ability of even this well-schooled party. Finally it was decided to cross the glacier, going around Mt. Cond to the E. and thence across familiar ice to Keyhole Pass and down to camp.

Just S. of Mt. Cond this attempt was blocked by a maze of huge crevasses. After crossing and recrossing several dangerous spots, this route was judged impossible if safety was to be regarded. The weary quintet now had to go clear back to the saddle between Kokanee and Haystack, which they had previously scorned in search for a shorter route. Part of the arduous descent over the boulder field, and all of the floundering return through the thick brush of lower levels, were made in the dark. Cold, weary and hungry, the ambitious five reached camp at 10 P.M., after 16 hours of absence, greatly relieving the worries of those who had returned earlier from Haystack Peak, and who were beginning to envision their comrades in dire dangers on the glacier.

Other climbs by the Spokane party included the Battleship (8500 ft.), a sharp summit sticking above the ice at the northern end of Kokanee Glacier; and—W. and S. W. of Kokanee Lake—Outlook Peak (8500 ft.), Sunset Peak (8535 ft.), and three unnamed peaks (8500, 8400 and 8400 ft.). These climbs were full of interest, affording some fine views of Glory basin and more distant country. The actual climbs were only moderately strenuous, and the only objective difficulties were short pitches of rock work near the summits.

One climbing party found some rather strenuous rock climbing by going N. through Kokanee Pass, then turning E. and climbing right up the side of the valley to the rim above Kokanee Glacier.

Some difficult chimneys were found in the upper stretches, nothing, however, that an average rock climber could not negotiate.

Aside from rugged scenery and varied climbing possibilities, the Kokanee area has much to offer the outdoor lover. The numerous lakes and streams are gems of alpine beauty. Small game is abundant and remarkably tame. That amusing and friendly little inhabitant of the high rock slides, the cony, rock rabbit or pika, was present in thousands wherever we went, and his shrill call of "yeep, yeep," could be heard day and night. Marmots were also plentiful and a few mountain beaver were seen. Numerous large and beautifully colored squirrels shared our campsite, and within four days were eating out of our hands. Ptarmigan were encountered on nearly every excursion, and one old hen calmly settled down right in the midst of our base camp.

Bear, both brown and grizzly, and deer are reported plentiful in the area, but our activities, being all at 6500 ft. and above, were too high for their summer range in this vicinity, and none were seen. Tracks of woodland caribou were seen on a snowfield, but we never glimpsed the animals. Although our visit was too late in the season for the best mass displays of mountain flowers, botanists in the party identified 120 species of flowering plants above the 6000-ft. elevation, and about thirty varieties of birds.

In conclusion a few words about the personnel of our party may be of interest. The party as a whole owed a great debt of gratitude to H. M. Whimster of Nelson, a member of the Alpine Club of Canada for more than 25 years. "Brownie" as he was nicknamed before the outing ended, did a great deal of work on the Canadian end of the job of getting advance data on the area and in lining up supplies. Without his efforts, we should have been unable to obtain adequate pack-horse service to take our outfit from the end of road to the base campsite.

Not only did Mr. Whimster help personally with the packing, but he led the first excursion to the Kokanee Glacier, being the only member of the party familiar with the terrain. On the day we broke camp, all members of the outing stopped at his home on Kootenay Lake for a swim and for what was certainly the most wonderful luncheon ever enjoyed by any bunch of crag-rats returning out of the high country to civilization.

Joining our group of relatively inexperienced Spokane climbers were John and Aletta Lehmann of the Everett branch, Mountaineers, Inc. (Seattle); keen appetites were well cared for by Mr. and Mrs. Ross H. Palmer of the Spokane Club, who have handled the commissary on every summer outing held by the group; while the writer of this article was general chairman of the outing.

Besides the host club in Spokane, and those represented by the Whimsters and Lehmanns, the party included members of the Klahhane Club, Port Angeles, Wash.; Trails Club of Portland, Ore.; and the Selkirk Ski Club of Spokane.

A final word must be said in tribute to Canadian hospitality, which is certainly tops among the much-vaunted far western brands, and to the assistance given by the Nelson Board of Trade. This body gave the Spokane group much help in planning details of the outing and in avoiding any delays incident to two crossings of a foreign border by our sizable party and considerable equipment. Kokanee Park is one of two localities where our club has held summer outings that we are all agreed we want to visit again.