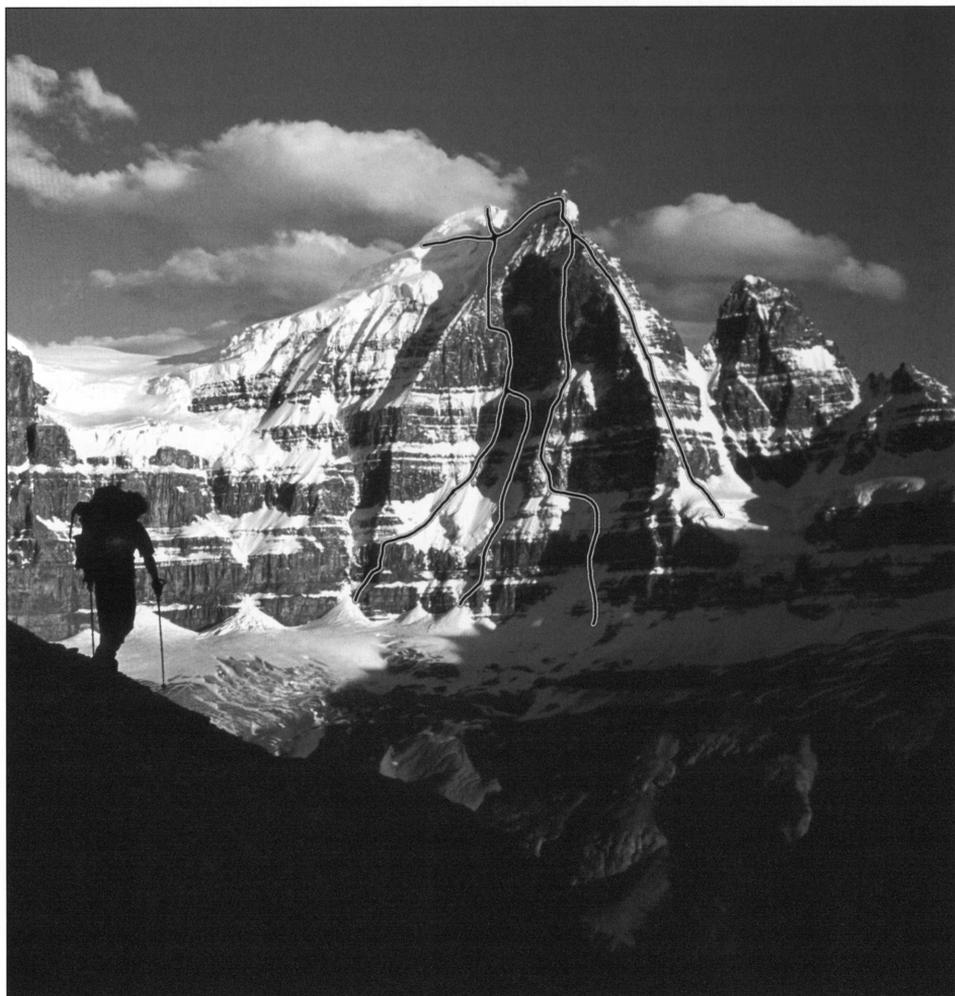


# NORTH TWIN REVISITED

*Pursuing the adventure attitude on Canada's greatest wall.*

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STEVE HOUSE



The great north wall of the Rockies. Routes from left to right: Jones-Lowe (1974), House-Prezelj variation (2004), and Blanchard-Cheesmond (1985) are on the north face; Abrons-Carman-Millikan (1965). The summit immediately above the face is Twins Tower; the snow summit to the left is North Twin itself. None of the north face routes have been repeated. *Steve House*



Prezelj starting the crux pitch on the second day. The steep headwall above and right has never been attempted. *Steve House*

Among North American alpinists, the north face of North Twin is as steeped in climbing mythology as the most famous faces in the world. Before last April, it had seen only two ascents, by two different routes, each of which is known in the collective consciousness as one of the greatest climbs of its era. In 1974 George Lowe and Chris Jones climbed the first route, a line that takes advantage of the most moderate ground on the face to gain a final steep pillar that leads to the top of the face. In 1985 David Cheesmond and Barry Blanchard climbed the proud north pillar of the same face. Both climbs were done in summer, and each took nearly a week. Neither has been repeated.

On April 4, 2004 Marko Prezelj, from Slovenia, and I skied up Wooley Creek, over Wooley Shoulder, down Habel Creek, and crossed a glacier to the base of the 4,500-foot north face. That day we bivvied at the base of the lowest rockband after fixing half a pitch. We carried food for five days and fuel for six. We had one synthetic sleeping bag, a 5'x8' tarp, and a shovel blade that fitted our ice tool shafts. Our rack was 13 nuts, 10

cams, 12 pitons, and 6 ice screws. Extra clothing consisted of a change of socks each and a synthetic belay (DAS) parka each. The leader would climb with a light pack and with leashless tools. The second would climb with a heavier pack, sometimes with the leader's pack hanging off his harness, and with leashed tools.

The initial rockband, though short, gave us a taste of what was to come. The first pitch offered steep and difficult drytooling in thin cracks, and necessitated some pulling on gear. The second pitch required a tension traverse from the belay and insecure mixed climbing on poorly adhered ice with hard-won rock gear for protection. A clear pattern soon developed for most of the 17 "hard" pitches: we didn't know if the pitch would go until we reached the end of the rack and/or the rope and built an anchor. This kept the adventure high, a feeling we both consider important to a successful outing—more important than whether we complete a route.

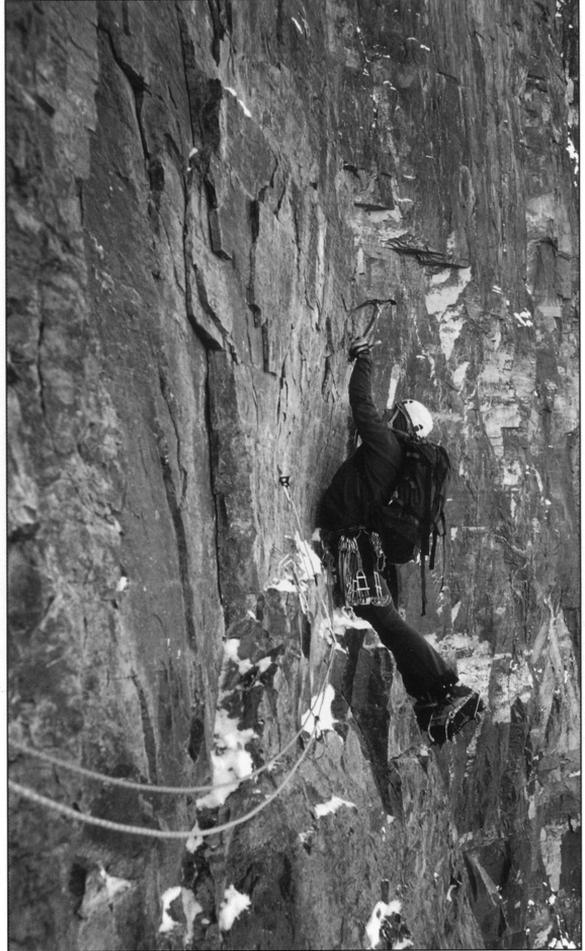
The end of the first full day on the face (April 5) saw us fixing a pitch halfway up the face

at the point where our new line joined the 1974 Jones-Lowe route. We bivvied comfortably on the highest snowband that traverses the face.

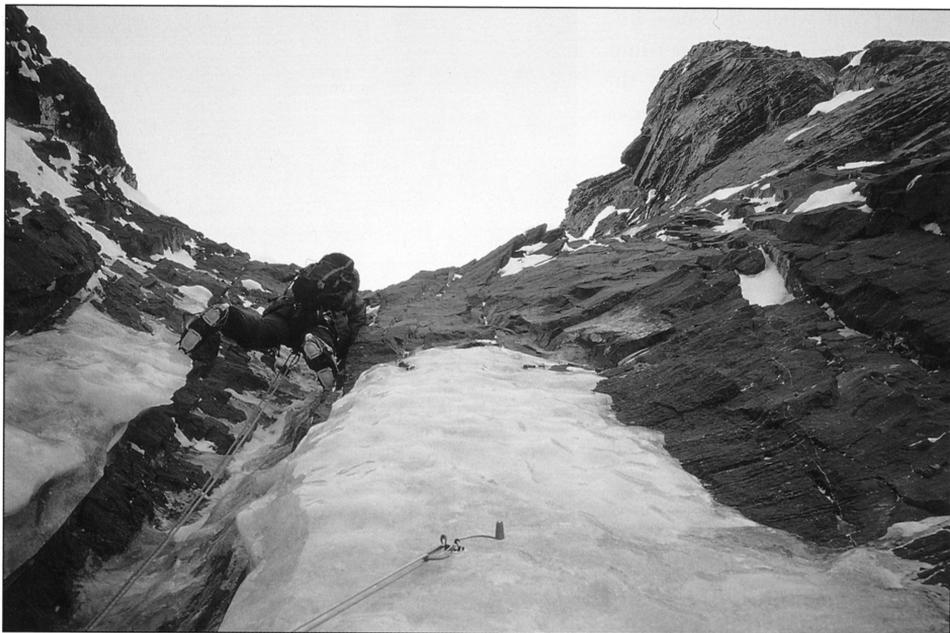
On April 6 we ascended the ropes we had fixed the evening before and Marko led the first block of the day, four pitches of steep rock climbing. Much of it was freeclimbed by drytooling, but there were sections of aid as well, including what we presumed to be the “thin A3/A4” pitch described by George Lowe and Chris Jones. After that long lead, I started my block, finishing my third pitch of the day at a thin crack in a steep headwall 30 minutes after sunset. I fixed the ropes there and descended to Marko’s belay. Being the size of one boot, it was the biggest stance we had seen since the morning. With some chopping we were able to enlarge the stance to approximately 12 inches by 20 inches, just big enough for three, sometimes four, butt-cheeks. We dug snow out of cracks and scooped it off of other small ledges, and hung in our harnesses to prepare food and water.

At this time I decided to change my damp socks. When replacing the outer shell of my left boot the loop on the back of the boot suddenly broke. We briefly saw the shell hovering in the light of our headlamps before it quietly disappeared down the face. After much cursing, and some discussion, Marko and I decided that it would be easier, quicker, and safer to continue to the top of the route and travel out by traversing the long, but non-technical, Columbia Icefields to the Athabasca Glacier and the Icefields Center.

It was an austere pair that finished their dinner of soup and dehydrated mashed potatoes and rigged their tarp overhead before squeezing onto the ledge. Our feet were on a backpack, and we pulled the sleeping bag over us and spent an uncomfortable night. Our repose was cut short at 5 a.m. when winds near the summit started to cause spindrift to dump on our ineffectively-rigged tarp and get into our sleeping bag. At approximately this point George Lowe and Chris Jones had “six pitons, some worthless nuts, and three ice screws” (*AAJ* 1975).



Steve House appreciating his modern tools one pitch before losing his plastic boot, day two. *Marko Prezelj*



Finishing up the headwall at the top of the exit gully, day three. *Steve House*

Unable to use the stove in the spindrift-shower, Marko and I started without food or water and ascended the fixed pitch. Marko then lead one traversing pitch towards the exit ice gully at the top of the face, which I followed with one normal boot-crampon combination and one inner boot lined with plastic bags and wrapped with athletic tape to protect it from abrasion. From the end of that pitch we made a very traversing rappel, during which one of the rope sheaths was badly damaged. From that stance a short, 20-foot lower brought Marko into the exit ice gully, which to our consternation, was completely devoid of ice. Marko led a long and difficult mixed pitch up patchy ice and steep crack systems on the right side of the vertical gully, which brought us to within half a ropelength of the end of the true difficulties.

One short steep bit of ice climbing put us on the summit ice slopes, which we climbed in ten 60-meter pitches to the North Twin-Twin Towers col. From here we were able to ascend toward the summit of North Twin and reach a suitable bivouac at 7 p.m. below the summit cornice. Being quite dehydrated from a long day without water, we cooked until 1 a.m., and then fell asleep for seven hours.

At 10 a.m. on the 8th, we continued over the summit of North Twin and onto the Columbia Icefields where we used a GPS to navigate our way in a complete whiteout to the Athabasca Glacier. After nine nearly continuous hours of walking, we reached the Icefields parkway. It took us well over an hour to thumb a ride 10 kilometers north to our waiting van. (We later calculated that with perfect navigation it would have been a 14-mile traverse.)

I never had any problems with my foot getting cold, and we returned to the highway with 1.5 gas canisters and no food. We carried off all of our gear and ropes. Our skis, poles, and skins remained in the Habel Creek drainage, but were retrieved by a pair of young climbers a week later, whom we paid for their efforts.



At the summit bivv, House prepares his inner boot for the long walk over the Columbia Icefields. *Marko Prezelj*

Marko and I found the ambiance on the face to be excellent, and its remoteness kept the sense of adventure high. Marko compared it to climbing in the Himalaya for its feeling of isolation. Our attitude was not evolutionary. We carried minimal, simple equipment in pursuit of adventure on this greatest of Canadian north walls. We expected to climb until we failed, and as occasionally happens, we didn't fail. Our attitude was old school, the quest for adventure, which is exactly what we found.

#### SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: Canadian Rockies

ASCENT: Second ascent of the Lowe-Jones route (5.10 A3) on the north face of North Twin, with a new variation (5.9, A2) to the first half. Steve House and Marko Prezelj. April 5-7, 2004.

\*Prezelj is pronounced "PREY-zell."

*Feature articles on North Twin routes can be found in American Alpine Journals with the following dates: Henry Abrons 1966, George Lowe 1975, David Cheesmond 1986, and Barry Blanchard's tribute to the Jones-Lowe Route in 2002. Abrons, who made the first ascent of the northwest ridge, wrote "So dark, sheer, and gloomy is the North Face of North Twin, like a bad dream, that I shall say very little about it." But he did make one prediction: the "awesome face ... must become one of the great face problems for the next generation."*