

Rain, Wind and the Claggart - Billy Budd Traverse: GMC 2005

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They probably hadn't expected us to be smiling, and maybe we weren't, but that's how we remember it. GMC participants Johnny Hammill and the two of us, and guide and GMC organizer extraordinaire Brad Harrison were approaching camp after completing the Claggart Peak - Mount Billy Bud traverse during a day of driving rain and snow and Edie Shackleton and Cam Roe had walked out to meet us with warm drinks and umbrellas. Our mini-epic on the last day of the first week of the 2005 GMC in the Moby Dick Range capped a memorable week of excellent climbing, great food and new friendships.

The 2005 GMC was located in the Battle Range of the Selkirk Mountains. Set on the shores of Houston Lake at the foot of Houston Glacier, the camp provided excellent access to the Melville Group and peaks such as Moby Dick, Proteus, Fafnir, Typee, Forecastle, Escalade, Claggart and Billy Bud.

The week started with three days of good weather. After an introductory/refresher day for some, everyone was out climbing by day two. A rest day due to poor weather on day four was a welcome break for many but everyone was still kept busy in camp learning knots and crevasse rescue techniques. The weather on day five started out mixed but cleared to yield beautiful blue skies.

We had planned to attempt the Claggart - Billy Bud traverse on both days four and five but did not leave camp on day four and turned back early morning on day five due to the questionable weather. Early in the week, teams had climbed the lower section of Claggart to start the traverse via a route with exposed slab climbing. Our team on day five decided against the route given the potential for wet rock and difficult down-climbing if the weather were to take a turn for the worse. Instead, we spent a pleasant day practicing steep snow travel and crevasse rescue techniques, and receiving photography pointers.

On the sixth and final climbing day of the camp we awoke to blue skies and were feeling quite optimistic about our chances to complete the traverse. After another excellent breakfast to start the day, everyone gathered outside the meal tent to split into groups, anticipating a great last day's climbing. Three rope teams headed for the traverse, a trip that, for everyone who had done it, was a highlight given the route and views. After a shallow but cold Houston Glacier-fed river crossing, our team split from the other two and headed up the moraine. Our goal was to begin the traverse by climbing the lower section of Claggart Peak via the north-facing couloir. This route was first climbed during the 1999 GMC but had not been attempted during the 2005 GMC due to unusually low snow levels. Perhaps we should have recognized a ptarmigan's "attack" part way up the moraine as an omen but we braved the unusually aggressive bird's advances and continued on.

On short rope we kicked steps up the steep narrow couloir. Looking down through our legs we could see the camp below and over our shoulders across the

valley, the panorama of Typee, Forecastle, the three peaks of the Moby Dick massif, Proteus and Houston Pass. The couloir narrowed near the top and we carefully climbed over a thinly snow-covered section, each of us wary of kicking rocks on to any members of our rope team below. At the top of the couloir where the snow ended we made ourselves secure on a ledge as Brad got set to climb out of the couloir. He located an old piece of protection and then climbed through the exposed moves to a nice ledge of grass and moss. He belayed us up and then we packed the rope and continued, watching for any sign of the other groups and keeping an eye on the black clouds in the distance to the west. In contrast, looking east beyond the steep north slope of Claggart and the Houston Creek drainage far below, the blue skies provided outstanding views of the Westfall Group. Just below the summit of Claggart we roped up and after again considering the dark clouds but hearing no thunder and seeing no lightning, decided to press on.

On top of Claggart Peak, Cari recorded all of our names in the register as light rain and sleet began. We were all pleased to have made it by the original couloir route. The views already obscured, we headed down off the south side of Claggart towards Mount Billy Budd, scrambling carefully on short rope over the now wet rock. From here we were committed to going the distance - bring on the weather!

We reached the start of the long west ridge to Billy Budd and took shelter inside a large crack where we grabbed a quick bite to eat. As we started along the ridge we were pleased we had put on all our rain gear as the weather hit us with full force. The valley far below was not visible but through the clouds we could still see the enormous cornices that seemed to just barely cling to the ridge. It was awe inspiring to contemplate the sight and sound of these potentially crashing to the valley below during later weeks of the GMC.

By the time we reached the summit of Billy Budd it was snowing and hailing and the winds were very strong. Thirty seconds to peer into the cloud and mist to try and see the camp in the valley below and we had to start down. We carefully made our way over the muddy slippery rock, the descent to the small col taking far longer than it had seemed to take earlier in the week on the climb to the summit of Billy Budd under dry conditions. On that ascent, a group had seen a mountain goat, but even the goat knew not to be out in this weather and so was no where to be seen.

At the col Brad belayed us as we downclimbed to the start of fixed ropes set earlier in the week, through what became fondly known during the week as the "dustbowl". It was absolutely balmy for the three of us - once we were out of the wind we had only the rain to contend with. The same could not be said for Brad - he patiently lowered us while standing in the howling wind and rain. Once we were secure he quickly joined us and we downclimbed through the rest of the mud bowl and then hurried across the steep snow slopes to avoid potential rock fall. After Johnny stowed the very heavy water-logged rope away in his pack and we all poured and wrung the water out of our gloves and mittens we headed across the alpine ridge to the top of Houston Pass.

As had been the case for almost all of the camp participants throughout the week, the day ended with a treat. Whether climbing Billy Budd, Proteus, Escalade or Fafnir, tales of glissading down from Houston Pass had featured heavily in dinner time stories. At the bottom we trudged off the glacier, passing an ice cave that had been growing over the week as a river slowly melted Houston Glacier from below.

As we neared the camp we smiled as we reflected on what an outstanding day we had had - the weather only adding to the experience. Or we might have been smiling because this day justified in our minds now and forever more every expensive shopping trip we would make for good quality gear. That said, the hot drinks and umbrellas brought out to us as we approached camp were very welcome. The stove inside the drying tent was on and we stripped our wet clothes and retired to our tents to finally eat lunch and warm up. We ended that last evening in camp warm with full bellies, great guitar playing and a seemingly endless stream of jokes and stories.

We awoke the next morning to blue skies and freshly snow-dusted mountains. Unfortunately it was the day to fly out and as everyone waited their turn for the helicopter, people said their goodbyes and snapped photos. Week one of the 2005 GMC was over but the memories will remain for many years to come.

