

An Expedition in Our Own Backyard

By Else Bosman and Joe O'Brien

This trip was made possible with funding from the Neil Mackenzie Adventure Grant (NMAG) and the incredible support of our friends and the wider Varsity Outdoor Club community - we received the NMAG in 2019, but the trip was deferred until 2020.

Before starting, we would like to acknowledge that although we think of these places as close to our homes, they aren't really "our" backyard. Throughout this trip we moved on and through the traditional, ancestral, and unceded lands of the following nations: xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), səl̓íl̓wətaʔɬ (Tsleil-Waututh), Líl̓wat, St'at̓imc, Nlaka'pamux, Tsilhqot'in, Stó:lō, Stz'uminus, Nuxwsaʔaq (Nooksack), Kwantlen, Semiahmoo, sc̓əwaθən məsteyəxʷ (Tsawwassen), WSÁNEĆ, Katzie, Qayqayt . Knowing whose lands we live, work, and play on is only a small first step.

A rough timeline of events:

October 2018

After two and a half years of running, climbing, skiing, and generally adventuring together, we decided to apply for the NMAG and begin dreaming up trip ideas. Sitting in Else's kitchen, we started pitching some ideas back and forth. We talked about flying out to Scotland, or Colombia to meet up and adventure with our friend Jeff. Fresh from our first trail race (Frosty Mountain Ultra) we also talked heading out to the Rockies to do a 50 mile race or going up north for more distant coastal climbing. Eventually we decided that we wanted to focus the funding from the award all on adventure rather than travel and so an adventure in our own backyard was decided upon!

June 30, 2019

(Two weeks before leaving for the trip - From Joe's perspective)

As I cleared my handlebars I thought to myself *This isn't great*. Meeting ground for the first time, my left shoulder took most of the impact. Back in the air I tucked in a bit tighter and was immeasurably grateful for my helmet as it took the majority of the second hit. Sliding along the ground for the better part of five meters I came to rest about 30cm from a small boulder - thin silver linings.



Caption: somewhere between going over my handlebars and this moment we realized the trip would be postponed.

June 15, 2020

(Two weeks before leaving for the trip - again)

We exchange messages daily, waiting for updates on COVID numbers, whether non-essential travel will be allowed, and trying to wrap our heads around what we've signed up for (and how to package 24 days of dehydrated food). Over the last few months we made adjustments (again) to our trip plan to be self-propelled and completely self-sustained apart from one food drop to reduce the necessary contact with other people along the way. This means that we will leave with 12 days worth of food in our paniers as well as all the various accoutrement for running, scrambling and light alpine climbing. At best guess, each of our two-wheeled adventure mobiles weighed about 100lbs when we rolled out the door.

June 30 - July 5

Up the Sea to Sky (Vancouver to Lizzie Bay)

And we're off! Escorted by our personal videographer/honour guard Martin Cermak, we wove through Vancouver, over the Lionsgate, and off up the Sea to Sky. At Porteau Cove we bid Martin adieu and headed to the house of Megan Cramb's parents (in Furry Creek)

where we'd arranged to drop half our food as we'd planned to spend about five days heading from Mountain Lake Hut into the Skypilot group for some climbing before returning. As you might have guessed from the wishful tone of that last sentence, things didn't go as planned.

Most of the FSRs above Furry creek would be okay for driving up with a car but the slope, road surface, weight, and bikes that we had made this quite the affair. It had taken us about four hours to bike to Furry Creek and in the next four hours we only made it about another 8km. Else was still very excited to be finally on our way and mentioned to Joe that she would still be happy during the trip, "even if we get rained on for three weeks straight". She must have summoned the clouds with that line because minutes later it started to drizzle and then rain. We ended the day at a big landing on the logging road where we had plenty of room to set up camp. Some giant culverts were laying on the side of the road and provided a convenient way to store some of our paniers and packs out of the rain. There was a dry window during which we cooked dinner, but apart from that it didn't really stop raining that night, or the morning after.

In the morning we snoozed for a while and used the InReach to get weather reports from friends back home. The weather reports were disappointing, considerably more rain than had been predicted 24hrs prior. The trick with getting into the Skypilot group from Mountain Lake Hut after following the ridge over is to find one specific ramp that leads up onto the S ridge of Skypilot and connects into the standard W ridge. With a few hundred meters of visibility that looked like it decreased to a full whiteout at ridgetop elevations we decided it wasn't going to happen. Plus, by that time the roof of the tent started to leak on to our sleeping gear and we were not loving the idea of camping on snow in the alpine with a leaky tent.



Caption: The brief dry period when we made dinner

It felt like we were flushed off the mountain that morning. Streams were forming in the tire tracks on the logging road and we were in the middle of it, spraying the water behind our

bikes. We arrived back at the Cramb family to pick up our food less than 24 hours after we left them. Completely soaked, we recuperated on their covered patio (with hot coffee!) looking out over a grey and rainy Salish Sea. Just after noon, with bikes reloaded, and clad in rain gear and underwear, we finished the trek to the Mamquam River campground after a stop at Canadian Tire for a tarp.

That evening, as our wet belongings hung to dry under our tarp (do things dry while it's still raining?), we did a bit of re-planning, and decided to make the best of the next few days and to prolong our trip up the S2S with more stops for trail running. Still wanting to get into the Skypilot area, we intended to bike to the Sea to Summit trail and head up into the alpine from there. Reaching the base of the trail at the Sea to Sky Gondola though we found out it was closed due to COVID and ended up spending a lovely day running the mountain bike trails to Alice Lake and back instead.

The next morning, we packed up and had breakfast under the tarp before setting out on the Sea to Sky trail. The S2S trail is a gravel track between Wedgemount lake trailhead and Squamish, intended for non-motorized recreation (*n.b. For those who are smart and want to have a leisurely trip, start at the Whistler side and coast downhill to Squamish*). The trail starts in earnest from the end of the Paradise Valley Road, climbs up the Checkamus canyon, follows the highway parallel to Brandywine falls and eventually winds its way to Whistler. Traveling in the “uphill” directions, we had to push our bikes on some steep gravel sections, but it was nowhere near as bad as the logging roads behind Fury Creek. While the trail was beautiful (and looked quite enjoyable with lighter bikes), our appreciation for the terrain was tempered a bit by the continual wind and rain. By the end of the day we were pretty moist and in need of a good camping spot (and warmth!). Calcheck did not have any suitable camping spots left for us so we ended up at the Riverside Resort Campground for the night. Dehydrated risotto with extra parmesan never tasted so good.

The following day we set out running on the trails above Whistler, at the recommendation of the campground host we went out to a mountain bike trail called ‘Comfortably numb’ which Else quipped was a perfect descriptor of her butt after four days on the bike. On the 20km loop we enjoyed our first day of good weather (read: we didn’t get rained on). After shuffling our way back to camp in the early afternoon, we realized the days of rain and riding through the dirt was starting to show on our bikes so we opted to head to the Whistler village and find a bike wash station to get all the dirt out of our chains and disk brakes.

Although it had only been five days, we were already getting pretty comfortable with being kind of grimy and living in the dirt. Whistler village was a sharp reminder that most folks like to bathe regularly and look fancy. Booming music came from the village plaza, people were dressed to impress (or like Mad Max characters in mountain biking armour) and restaurants had long line-ups to allow entry. It felt like we did not really belong in this weird dystopian street image (something about the clash of MTB body armour and fancy fashion felt very YA-novel-esque), especially since the months prior to the trip we have been isolating at home and have been avoiding any sort of crowd. On the way back to the campground we stopped at Purebread bakery to score our dessert of the day (okay, population centers have their benefits).

The next morning we awoke to real, honest-to-goodness sunshine! Eager to make the most of it, we shoveled down breakfast and hit the road north under sun and cool temps. Finally we remembered why we brought all that sunscreen! In Pemberton we stopped in a park to

meet our friend Ariane Oro, who was working on an organic farm in the area, for lunch. It was the first protracted conversation either of us had had with anyone other than each other for days! Lounging in the grass under a warm July sun while the last little bits of dampness left our clothes made it really hard to want to hop back on the bikes, but in the interest of getting to camp with enough time to wash clothes, bodies, and dishes, we remounted our faithful steeds and set off towards Lizzie Bay.

July 6-10

The Lizzie Area

We woke up and had a couple hours to have breakfast (double coffee!) and faff with gear before Swantje Moehle and Kelsey Miller arrived. In short order though, they arrived with the food drop we'd need after our time up in the Lizzie area and we all set off up to the cabin. Our original plan had involved a ridgeline traverse around the whole area, but looking at the weather reports and the sting of Skypilot fresh in our minds we decided to "base camp" out of the cabin and do day trips from there - a good thing too as after our two days of sun, frequent rain and low visibility persisted on and off for the next five days.

We'd planned the trip so that most of our biking would be done on the weekends when other people were out and then our time in the mountains would be during the week, reducing potential conflict running into people. This paid dividends throughout, but especially here as the four of us enjoyed having Lizzie to ourselves the whole time. We arrived at the cabin just as a spattering of rain began again and busied ourselves with dinner (Kelsey and Swantje had brought us a bag of kale salad as an appy!) followed by tea and warm sleeping bags.

Our first full day in the area we awoke to a light rain and low vis, but determined to make the best of it we headed out to scramble Arrowhead Peak. What's generally a pretty straightforward scramble in good conditions felt a bit more adventurous with the comparatively "early" season conditions we found - lots of snow and wet rock with the best scrambling routes still buried. We meandered up the mountain connecting what features we could make out in the clouds and eventually ran out of uphill. The gps confirmed we were probably on top of the peak so we snagged a photo and descended. The next day held a remarkably similar, if longer and slightly more challenging, adventure up Long Peak. Though we climbed it in a loop, walking the ridge from end to end, so we're quite sure we summited - we're just not sure exactly when it happened.



Caption: We made it (probably)

On our final full day in the Lizzie area the same weather persisted - for those counting this was the tenth day of our trip and the eighth that was rainy - so knowing that this was likely the nicest spot we'd be in until we got to Hope we decided to take our first rest day. Kelsey went out to get soaked on Anemone Peak, and Swantje shared a day in the cabin by the wood stove. It's tough to say what the best part of the day was - eating, endless tea, games, or warm sponge baths on the porch watching the rain come down.

July 10-15

Over the Duffey

The following morning, day 11 of the trip, we packed up all our stuff, set the traps for the mice we attracted by being in the hut, and hiked back to the car. A whole load of food and the ensuing faff was waiting for us. Over the course of an hour and a half we emptied all our trash, restocked food, hemmed and hawed over various things, stuffed our panniers back up to the brim and we were ready to go around 4pm. We set off biking the 15 km on the Lilloet FSR before reaching the bottom of the Duffey. With no particular spot in mind to stop for camp and our bikes once again pushing 100lbs we started climbing the switchbacks up to Joffre.

Else died a little. Joe, who had installed a drivetrain with gear ratios that bordered on mountain bike territory, was quite okay to just keep on moving slowly. Else on the other hand, was having trouble keeping momentum on the uphills. About a kilometer into the climb

one of the screws that held her rack up came undone and she had to disassemble all the carefully packed gear to fix it. After about 1.5 hours of grinding we had to stop biking for the day. We set up camp in the woods between a pullout and runaway lane - a place we soon figured out was full of mosquitos. It is a known fact of the universe that every trip where considerable distance is covered on a bike has at least one "camp misery" this proved, without a doubt, to be ours.

The next day, the grades were not as steep and the climb did not feel like torture so we made it to the high point just past Joffre Lakes trailhead on time for second breakfast. After that point the Duffey is a glorious winding downhill, past peaks and along Duffey lake. There was ample time to check out the beautiful scenery on our way to Cottonwood recreation site where we found a nice spot along the Cayoosh river for the night. In anticipation of heading up to the Seton area the following day, we repacked all our gear for camping and scrambling and kept the biking kit and additional food separate for stashing. The next morning, we biked about three kilometers up the Downton Creek FSR and found a nice hidden spot to lock our bikes and hang out extra gear. As we continued up toward Holly Lake, the sky in front of us grew dark and cold downdrafts blew out of the mountains within 10 minutes of the storm first appearing cold pelting rain was on us once again. Unlike the coast though, the squall passed in as many minutes leaving a dusting of snow on the rocky peaks. A few more squalls passed as we continued to the lake so we pitched the tent as quick as we could and not long thereafter the sky let loose heavy hail and snow. We hang out in the tent for the next 4 hours to shelter from the weather, playing some card games and listening to podcasts. At 8 pm when we were starting to get pretty hungry, things cleared up and we were able to cook some dinner.



Caption: Duffey summit stoke

The following morning, we woke up to a clear blue sky and the remnants of the hail and snow from the previous day around the tent. Holly's lake is surrounded by gorgeous looking peaks which were now covered with a light dusting of snow on their shaded faces. From camp we headed west into alpine meadows, up a permanent snowfield and to a fairly easily accessed col on the sunny ridge. On gaining the col we realized that while the E side was sunny and dry, the shaded W side of the ridge held snow and ice from the previous day's storm. This made for engaging scrambling and lent a wild and remote feeling to the place we were in as we traversed peaks and scrambled along ridges for most of the day under bluebird skies. Early in the day, atop Linus mountain we agreed that it really felt like we'd "made it" in terms of the trip as a whole. Some two weeks in, we were scrambling alpine ridges at ~2500m, hundreds of kilometers from home - and we'd gotten here under our own power!

The next day we gained another ridge nearby where we left off the day before. The plan was to follow the ridge up to mount Seton, the highest mountain in that area. After a couple of hours of following the terrain above beautiful alpine meadows, we found the last surviving cornice guarding the way forward - it would need to be cut and without ropes there was not going to be any remotely safe way to get around it. We decided to turn around and made a big loop back to camp which took us through all of the meadows we'd been admiring from above. Throughout the afternoon we'd seen more and more signs of bad weather incoming, so rather than getting soaked again, we decided to leave the next morning, a day earlier than planned. Still full of energy as camp neared, Joe decided to try and scramble one more peak while Else took the opportunity for a chill afternoon at camp

July 15-19

Lillooet to Hope

Quite practiced by now, we broke camp quickly the next morning and started the hike back down to where we'd left our bikes near the base of the FSR. Our bikes and food looked untouched when we arrived at our stash spot. We took an hour to eat lunch, repack our things out of the backpacks and into the paniers and hit the road by 1pm. After a few short climbs we made a long, fast, and fun descent into Lillooet. Just outside of Lillooet, and in a pretty big contrast to what we'd seen on the Sea to Sky, signs with "keep out", "absolutely no stopping", "no visitors allowed" started to pop up. All campgrounds or public services were closed so we figured to just keep going until we found a suitable camp spot somewhere in the Fraser Canyon. After all, it was a stellar day with clear sunny skies and only about 2:30pm. At this point we had about a liter of water between the two of us, but figured we'd fill up at a creek that was running down towards the Fraser which we'd be paralleling. After a few more hours of biking through the increasingly dry and arid canyon we still hadn't found any water. By about 6 pm we were incredibly thirsty, but close to what (based on the map) seemed like a large stream of water - fed by a lake. Just as we reached the stream, a motorcyclist who was coming from the other direction stopped to check if we were doing all right. We learned this man's name was Pete, Pete who is the manager of our local nordic area at Cypress Mountain. He offered us some company, a liter of his own water, and plenty of stories of his bike packing and motorcycle adventures. He even gifted us two molten chocolate bars which he gracefully planted in Else's mountaineering boot which was airing

out on top of the stuff on the back of the bike (Hmmm the aroma). Needless to say, Pete really gave us a bit of a morale boost and the break we needed near the end of a long day.

After bidding Pete farewell, we cycled about an hour further during the cooler part of the day, eventually stopping at the McGillvary Pass FSR for the night. We found a very welcome stream about 1km up the road from our camp – though filling up almost cost us a Nalgene bottle – the lid separated from the bottle during the fill-up and Joe graciously sacrificed his dry shoes running into the stream to salvage the bottle. That night we slept among the sage bushes under a clear sky with the sound of crickets.

As non-water activity people we did not know that the wind usually blows upstream of a river/canyon. Our route had us following the Fraser downstream through the entire canyon. The next day, as the canyon narrowed we battled 30-40km/hr headwinds and relentlessly rolling hills as we headed towards Hope. With no mountain outings along the way we tried to keep morale high with gas station ice creams (though we were really craving fruit). One more dusty camp just past Boston Bar where logging trucks woke us around 3:30am and once more a heinous day of headwinds and hills saw us to Hope. This was, without a shred of a doubt the least pleasant 2.5 days of the entire trip.

Rolling into Hope on the afternoon of the July 17th we were relieved to be done with the canyon and looking forward to our primo camp spot in the backyard of the house that Kelsey's partner Lawrence was living in while wildfire fighting that summer. That evening Kelsey prepared a lovely meal of homemade pizzas with a ton of fresh ingredients to celebrate that we made it all the way to Hope. The following day we took our second rest day, which included more ice-cream, lunch, a second lunch, and a nap in the grass.

July 19-21

The final push

After almost three weeks, we were starting to feel like it was time to turn our wheels towards home, but the thing was that we'd been carrying this dang climbing gear all around the Lower Mainland but had yet to use it. Originally, we were going to make the best use of it in the Skypilot group, but that never happened. So here we were, about a one and a half day ride from home, and still looking for a reason to have carried this all that way. We decided to pop up into the Nesakwatch area, climb something easy and then head home. To make all the distances and elevation gain work out though we'd need to be much quicker, so saved by Kelsey's offer to bring a bag of stuff back to Vancouver with her, we stripped our bikes down to the bare essentials - goodbye down jackets, goodbye rainfly, shells, stove, pots, extra food, etc. In the end we had the climbing gear, a bit of food, and just enough kit to spend two more nights out.

On July 19 (trip day 20) we shot out of hope just before 8am and made great time to Chilliwack, flying along the giant shoulder on the trans canada. Biking with what felt like an ultra-light bike (still a heavy load for bike touring standards) was amazing! Rested legs, no head wind... it felt like we were flying along the highway. Once we reached Chilliwack, we turned onto the Chilliwack Lake road which despite appearing fairly flat, gains about 500m over 30 km. Once on the Nesakwatch FSR, we gained another 450m over a 7km (nothing

deceptive about that) before setting up camp just below the trailhead for the Nesakwatch area.

The next day we woke up early and set out with our day packs to the foot of the North Nesakwatch spire, our objective of the day. The hike to the basin below the climb is direct, gaining about 1000m in 2km at its steepest (for reference, the Grouse Grind gains about 850m in 3km). The North ridge of the North Nesakwatch spire is purported to be a low-5th class climb which we thought would be right up our alley. After crossing a snow field and a bit of scrambling we made our way ledges to the ridgecrest. We worked our way along the ridge, roping up where we felt it was needed, until we found ourselves about one pitch below the summit. With half a rack and climbing in our boots, we couldn't figure out a good way to top out. After a long but unsuccessful search for an easier route to the summit we decided that it wasn't going to go for us right then with a comfortable enough margin for error (based on further research after returning home it seems many struggle to find a "low-5th" finish to this particular route). Figuring we should try not to break our necks on the last day of our amazing trip, we made our way back down with only one obligatory stuck rope - a proper day of alpine climbing.



Caption: Joe not stoked on bailing

Once at the base we hiked back to our bikes, grabbed our gear and chased the sunset on the Chilliwack lake road which was still seemingly level but whose magical downhill benefits we reaped. We rode peloton-style to try and beat the last light to the Tamihi Rapids Campsite, arriving under the last dusty rays of light to round out a 14hr day of hiking,

scrambling, climbing, and biking. We had (cold) dinner with crackers, parmesan cheese, instant hummus, and some instant cheesecake for dessert (it is a poor existence without a stove when you've mostly packed dehydrated food).

The last morning of the trip we rose to mist and the golden rays of first light over the river. But, knowing there was about 130 km between home and where we were, we didn't linger long. It turned out to be one of the hottest days of the year but our strategy of cool down stops for coffee and ice-cream proved a winner. After we cycled past the Burns Bog bike path in Surrey, it started to really feel like the home stretch as we were back on familiar ground. We split up about a kilometer from our respective homes in the late afternoon. We guess in the end not all adventures make one late for dinner.

Conclusion

In the end, we biked, hiked, scrambled, ran, and climbed our way around the southern tip of the coast mountains, covering some 950 km and 21,000m of elevation over 22 days with two rest days. It was an epic adventure that led us to see our "backyard" in all new ways! The trip we did was one of the many permutations we'd planned, shifting and changing in response to personal, geological, and global changes in circumstance along the way. The trip, and maybe in some ways this trip report, is the culmination of a planning, training, replanning, and adventuring process that spanned nearly two years. We're grateful for everyone who helped make this possible, including: Martin Cermak, Liz & Dave Cramb, Megan Cramb, Kelsey Miller, Swantje Moehle, Birgit Rogalla, Jeff Taylor, "Cypress" Pete, **and most of all - Margaret, Angus, and Neil Mackenzie, without whom we wouldn't have been inspired to dream this big.**



Caption: Looking back at the ridge we'd scrambled earlier that day (Seton area)