

THE PEDAL PADDLE SCRAMBLE

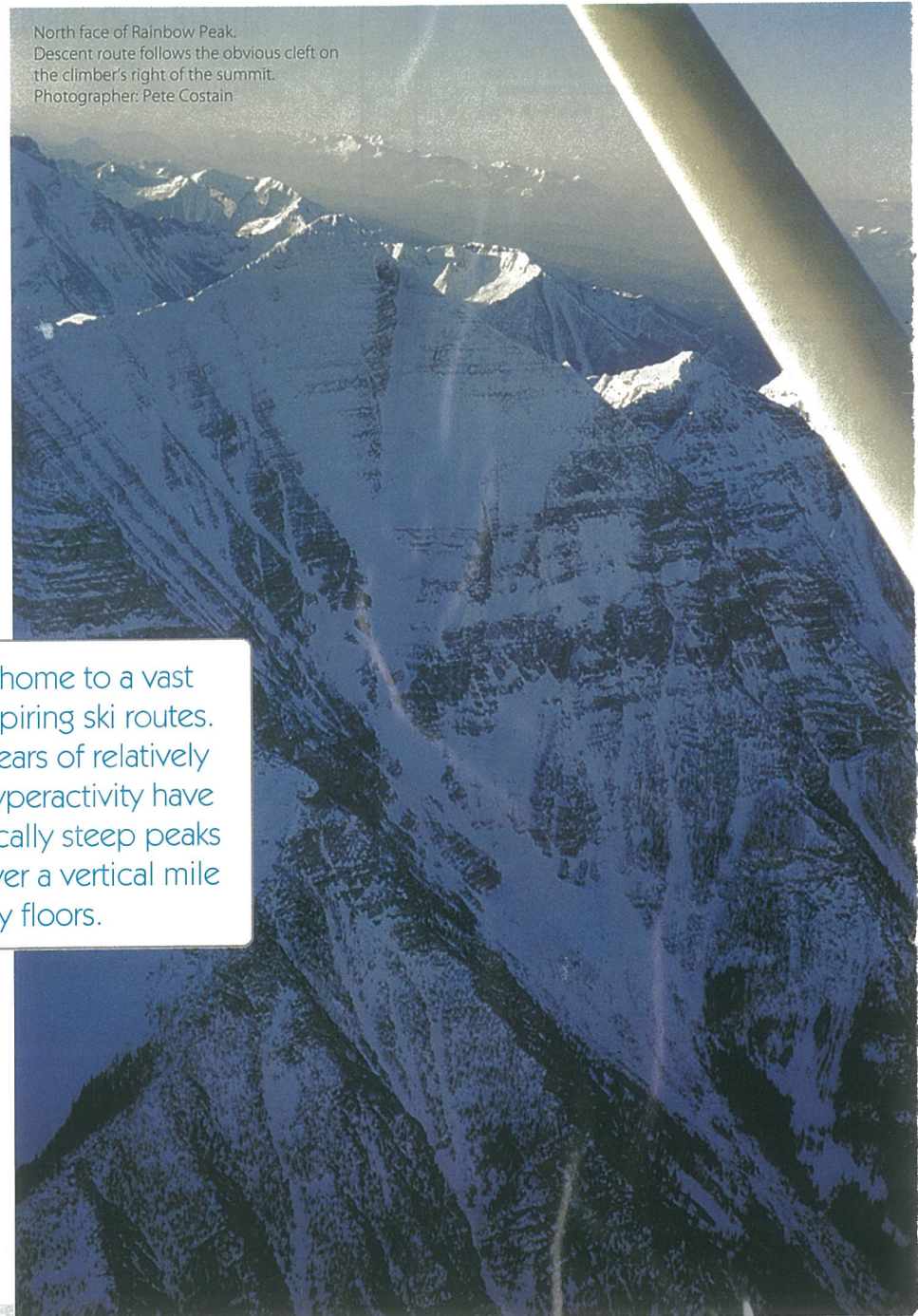
Bagging Rainbow Peak by Whatever Means Necessary

by Pete Costain

Montana's Flathead Valley is home to almost fifteen golf courses, and I'm proud to say that, in spite of being a longtime resident, I've only played one of them once, several years ago. I've never been a big fan of the sport. As an enthusiast of wild and woolly locales, I just can't appreciate an activity that takes place on manicured grass, especially when that grass lies such a short distance from the untrammled wilderness of Glacier National Park. For some time, though, my wife has been in possession of a set of vintage golf clubs with matching caddy, which were kindly passed down to us by her now deceased grandmother, Lulu. Neither one of us golf, and we'd been feeling somewhat guilty about having relegated the gift to the nether regions of our garage, that is, until this spring, when Lulu's caddy found its way deep into Glacier Park itself.

Glacier Park is home to a vast array of awe-inspiring ski routes. Thousands of years of relatively recent glacial hyperactivity have created dramatically steep peaks that plummet over a vertical mile to valley floors. However, because of the combination of notoriously fickle weather, lack of road access, and horribly thick valley vegetation, many of these beautiful routes have remained forever unskied.

To help remedy this sorry state of affairs, I recently enlisted a pilot friend of mine to embark on a route-scoping flight. Needless to say, many lifetimes of lines revealed themselves, but several leapt to the forefront of my imagination. One of these was Rainbow Peak, with which I became obsessed. The north side of Rainbow Peak contains a narrow couloir that etches its way through an otherwise rocky wall, eventually opening up into a steep snowy shelf that squeezes back into a crux at the confluence of the north and west faces. Beyond that, the runout zone continues into the forest and down to the shores of Bowman



North face of Rainbow Peak. Descent route follows the obvious cleft on the climber's right of the summit. Photographer: Pete Costain

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Lake, 5,800 vertical feet below the summit. In the summer, climbers occasionally ascend this side of the peak on rock and ice, but park rangers claimed it had never been attempted as a ski descent.

Several safety and logistical concerns needed to be addressed before we could attempt to ski Rainbow Peak. Snow conditions had to be optimal, given the tremendous exposure throughout the route, and my friend Reid and I had to decide how we'd access the base. We were aiming for the first sunny day following a cold northwesterly weather pattern, and the first week of May turned out to be the magic weather window. To

in pre-dawn light, as a curious ranger shook his head in disbelief. It took an hour and a half to crank out the six miles to the lake, but when our paddles hit the shimmering water, the morning's grunt faded with each concentric ripple. As we traveled down the long, narrow lake, the surroundings loomed larger with every stroke. To the left was jagged Numa Ridge, straight ahead in the distance we could see Chapman Peak, and off to our right towered our chosen ascent, the steep, windblasted west face of Rainbow Peak.



The author does his best to cover his impression before crossing Bowman Lake. Photographer: Reid Sabin

avoid miles of trail-less dense forest, we would need a canoe to access the start of the climb. This presented its own problem, however, since the six-mile dirt road that climbs to Bowman Lake wasn't scheduled to open for two weeks.

For this reason I ended up dragging a canoe around Whitefish. A neighbor of mine watched with undying interest while I tested various portaging contraptions, some of which worked better than others. In the end, though, it was a boat trailer fashioned from Lulu's golf-club caddy that proved to be the most reliable form of transport. I'm sure Lulu never anticipated being part of an alpine climb, but her feisty spirit would definitely have approved. To finalize things, the bow of the canoe was lashed to the rack of a mountain bike with a meter of perlon cord, resulting in a highly functional flexible hitch.

For once, local forecasters hit the mark; there wasn't a cloud in the sky as our convoy pedaled away from the Polebridge ranger station

We began our climb up the snowless drainage between Rainbow and Square Peaks, fortunately finding a well-worn game trail through the thick underbrush. Surprisingly, the snowline didn't appear until we had reached about five thousand feet, a testament to the year's warm but wet winter. Contouring across the open basin below the west face of Rainbow gave us an opportunity to note which lines were continuous and which cliffed out, in case we had to resort to skiing this west side, which appeared to roll convexly out of view from the summit. Three thousand feet below the peak we donned crampons, and the real climbing began. Following some weird mixed rock, ice, and snow routefinding, we kicked straight up the fall line to the summit ridge, stopping occasionally to save cramping calf muscles. We reached the actual summit at about 4:30 under sunny, nearly windless skies. During our much-needed summit break we discussed how nasty

Dropping in.
Rider: Pete Costain
Photographer: Reid Sabin



the ski down our climbing route would be if we couldn't negotiate the north face. The wall of sunbaked sastrugi, ice, crust, and chicken heads we had ascended didn't seem like a very pleasant downhill reward.

Hop turning two hundred feet down the northwest ridge brought us to the notch that led into our chosen route. Anchoring an axe deep in the rime, I peered into the shaded void and im-

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mediately knew our descent would be possible. The overhang was manageable, and the entire line

down to the crux was visible, with Bowman Lake shining over a vertical mile below us. We decided to try and cut the cornice off in small blocks to create a safe entrance and test the snow quality. Watching chunks of snow bounce thousands of feet through con-

solidated powder nearly brought tears to our eyes, and in minutes we had reduced the cornice to a small, vertical pitch.

In return for my having towed the canoe, Reid allowed me first tracks. Dropping in on my board, I cut hard into a heelside test turn and felt nothing but the type of soft, dense powder that loves to hang out in places that never see the sun. My sluff quickly disappeared down the right-hand side of the off-camber couloir. Rock fins encroached from the left side, resulting in a route that varied in width from ten to thirty feet. Estimating the slope angle to be close to 50°, I knew that to outrun my sluff I'd have to motor. Once committed, I burned over a thousand vertical feet before the roar behind me sent me arcing left onto a wide shelf at the bottom of the couloir. A cloud of churning snow blew past, echoing off the rock walls. Shaking with adrenaline, I traversed below the couloir to wait for Reid on his alpine gear. After watching several major sluffs, I heard a joyful whoop, and his figure sped into view, blowing a fat cloud of springtime powder.

Out of the shade now, and on a steep sidelit pitch of variable snow, we made our way down to



Photographer: Reid Sabin

the crux, nearly three thousand feet below the summit. The narrow funnel turned out to be more negotiable than we had guessed. With a combination of sideslipping and jump turns we made our way between rocks and over a series of crusty runnels. Below that we were back in good old corn snow, which we milked until the bitter end, about a thousand feet above the lake. Deliriously happy at having accomplished our objective, we blindly ignored the bushwhacking reality that lay between us and our canoe. The mossy rocks and tangled deadfall seemed endless, but in less than an hour we were back on shore, loading up our vessel.

During the hour and a half that it took us to return to our bikes, a world-class nature show unfolded around the lake. We saw an eagle tending to its young in a giant treetop nest, listened to loons calling, watched ducks skim the lake surface, and got bitten by the first mosquitoes of the year. Exhausted, we opted to stash the boat and Lulu's caddy in the woods and to retrieve them when the road opened. Unencumbered, the bikes flew through the dark as if possessed, and we reveled in the priceless sensations of a day well spent.

