

A Life in the Wild

The Story of Mountain Explorer John Baldwin



Summit Series 2019

By Chic Scott

Main Icefields of the Coast Mountains



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Cover photo: John on unnamed summit near Mt Ratz on the Stikine Icefield, 2012
Photo Linda Bily

Title page: John skiing below Mt Grenville, Homathko Icefield, 2014.
Photo Linda Bily

Back cover: Inset: John, December, 2009; Background photo: John silhouetted against the evening sky above a tarn on Coliseum Mountain.
Photo Linda Bily

Introduction

John Baldwin has spent his life in a quest to experience and know the west coast wilderness. Since his teenage years he has explored the rugged Coast Mountain Range, making perhaps 100 multi-week, long-distance forays across the icefields and along the ridges of what is one of the last true wilderness areas on earth. He has climbed approximately 700 mountains, many of them first ascents, traversed dozens of icefields, travelled along granite crests high above the forests and inlets and spent several hundred days and nights hunkered down in a tent sitting out storms. John is a great mountaineer, shunning the easy path and forging his own way through some of the roughest geography on the planet. He is a mountaineer and explorer of the first order.



Author Chic Scott and John Baldwin, September 2019.
Photo Linda Bily

John is also a researcher, photographer and writer of excellence and has made the land that he loves accessible to tens of thousands of people. His guidebook, *Exploring the Coast Mountains on Skis* has sold approximately 20,000 copies and together with his topographic route maps for ski touring has opened the door to wilderness travel on skis for several generations of adventurers. His two coffee table books, *Mountains of the Coast* and *Soul of Wilderness* have shown us the incredible beauty to be found in the mountains north of Vancouver all the way to Alaska. John's wonderful photography and eloquent writing urges us to honour and preserve this unspoiled land.

On top of all that, John is simply a very nice man: polite, considerate, intelligent and friendly. Over the years he has drawn about him a group of skilled mountaineers who respect his leadership and eagerly participate in his adventures. John has become the embodiment of the West Coast ethic of simple and environmentally responsible exploration and has become an icon for mountaineers around the continent. John Baldwin is a worthy Patron of the 2019 Mountain Guides Ball.

For me it has been a great honour to research and write this book about a very unique Canadian. I hope that John's example will inspire many other young mountaineers to follow their dreams and immerse themselves in the beauty of our natural world.

—Chic Scott
Banff, Alberta

Chapter One *An Idyllic Childhood*



John Baldwin grew up on the edge of the wild. The family home in Burnaby, a suburb of Vancouver, fronted onto Deer Lake and was surrounded by woods. Large windows in the home revealed a local mini-wilderness, a place that John would always call home. John remembered “It was a great place to be a kid. The lake was about a mile long and surrounded by forest and bush. It was a little oasis in greater Vancouver.”



John Frederick Baldwin was born in Vancouver on November 6, 1957. His father William (Bill) Baldwin was a doctor and his mother Ruth Jackson was an occupational therapist. The pair had met earlier in Montreal where Bill was in medical school. John’s father specialized in obstetrics and after they were married the couple settled in Burnaby.

When property became available on the south side of Deer Lake, Bill and Ruth bought it. Not long afterwards John was born and in 1959 John’s sister Susan arrived. In 1965 Bill and Ruth commissioned their friend, famed architect Arthur Erickson, to design a new home on their lakeside property. The modern post and beam house was set next to the lake and was designed with big windows to bring the peace and tranquility of the lake into the house, instilling a connection with nature for anyone inside.

Above left: The Baldwin house about 1985.

Above Right: John and his sister Susan with their mother Ruth, 1961.

Left: John and his sister Susan with their father Bill, 1962.

John remembers these early childhood years as idyllic. They lived on a quiet, dead-end street and there were lots of kids in the neighbourhood. The children ran wild in the forest all summer, built rafts and swam in the lake. In the winter John walked to Buckingham Elementary School where he was a good student.

John's mom and dad loved the outdoors too and the family often went car camping to out-of-the-way places like Long Beach or Haida Gwaii stopping at beaches and rivers to play. Long Beach at that time (about 1962) was still hard to get to, and required driving across Vancouver Island on rough gravel roads. "My father loved to explore... That's where I got this love of exploring. You would never know what you would find. He would drive down these dead end roads.... There was this feeling of exploration and curiosity."

John joined the Cub Scouts when he was about eight years old and the boys and their leaders would go camping and make lean-tos. He went on his first trip into the alpine about this time, a hike up Mount Seymour. "I was enthralled going into the alpine. It was magical."

As John progressed through Scouts, he and his friends would go on regular snowshoeing trips to Mount Seymour in Vancouver's snowy North Shore mountains. "I always loved the transition from the dark, rainy streets of Vancouver to the enormous snow banks and huge trees buried in the snow. It was like entering a different world."

In grade seven he read *Banner in the Sky*, a novel by James Ramsey Ullman about a young climber's quest to reach an untrodden summit. "Somehow I knew, reading that book, that I wanted to spend time in the mountains." A thoughtful aunt sent him books on the wilderness, which he devoured.

When he reached high school John went to St. Georges, a private school for boys located in Vancouver. John liked school, particularly science and math, and did well. But his favourite course was geography where John loved making maps. In one class the students learned all about British Columbia, and the different regions and wild expanses of the province fascinated him. And always on the northern horizon were the mountains above the city. "You looked up at the mountains from Vancouver and you wondered what's up there. What's behind there?"

In grade 10 John met Hans Fenz, a French



teacher at St. Georges. Originally from Italy, Hans was an experienced mountaineer having climbed and skied in the European Alps. Fenz began to take a group of students with him on ski trips in the winter. John's first trip with Mr. Fenz was in 1972 to Diamond Head, a beautiful alpine area north of Vancouver, on the edge of Garibaldi Park. This was John's first trip on skis and travelling on skinny cross-country skis was difficult. The climb up followed a snow-covered jeep road for several hours. When they reached the alpine they skied along the undulating Paul Ridge to Elfin Lakes. Here they stopped at Elfin Lakes Lodge and enjoyed a bowl of soup. John was mesmerized by the ski along the ridge with views of Mount Garibaldi and

John headed off on one of his early overnight trips with the Boy Scouts. His dog Oscar is seeing him off.



Above: Carson Hornor, John and Hans Fenz (left to right) on the summit of Mt Baker, 1974.
Photo Hans Fenz

Right: John and Carson Hornor on arrival in San Francisco 1974.]

Below: John on a hike to Hannegan Pass near Mt Baker, 1974.
Photo Carson Hornor



Mamquam Mountain. This was a different world and it enthralled him.

In the early '70s with his friend and classmate, Carson Hornor, John ventured off into the mountains on the weekends. Carson was older than John, had a driver's license and could borrow his parents' car. The pair would go on overnight hiking trips to places like Black Tusk Meadows, Singing Pass and Tenquille Lake. At that time many of the highways that we take for granted now did not exist. Roads to Whistler and Pemberton had only been built in the '60s and there was no highway past Duffey Lake and no Coquihalla Highway either. Logging roads were just starting to push up deep coastal valleys like the Ashlu and Lillooet Rivers. New opportunities for backcountry adventure were opening up and it was an exciting time to be getting into mountain exploration.

On several occasions Mr. Fenz had taken his young friends to attempt Mount Baker (3286 m), located in the United States just east of Bellingham, Washington. This spectacular volcano, visible all across the lower mainland, was a big undertaking. The group had been unsuccessful on their first attempts but in July of 1974 they tried again and Mr. Fenz, Carson Hornor and John reached the top. It was John's first big summit, and a worthy one at that.

Carson's family had moved to San Francisco during the winter of 1973-74 so during the next summer, after they graduated from high school, Carson and John hopped on their bicycles and rode the 1,700 kilometres to Carson's new home.

During his final year at St. Georges, John had been debating where to go to university. He knew that he wanted to study engineering, but he couldn't decide where. Two alumni of St. Georges, who were now studying at the University of British Columbia (UBC) came on a recruiting trip to St. Georges and talked glowingly of the Varsity Outdoor Club (VOC), a student-led group that organized trips to the mountains. John was sold on the idea. "There was no question at all of where I would go to university when I realized that I could go to UBC and there would be this outdoor club and I could do all these trips."

So in the autumn of 1974, at 16 years of age, John enrolled at the University of British Columbia where the Varsity Outdoor Club would change his life.

Chapter Two

The Varsity Outdoor Club

Formed in 1917, the Varsity Outdoor Club is a unique institution. Led by students, with little in the way of bureaucratic oversight, the club offers young people a refreshing and exciting way to have fun and get to know the mountains. Over the last one hundred years the club has fostered many of the great mountaineers of Coast Mountain fame — Karl Ricker, Dick Culbert, Tim Auger, Alice Purdey, Glenn Woodsworth and many others.

John Baldwin enrolled in a five-year Civil Engineering program at UBC in the autumn of 1974 and before classes had even begun he visited the clubroom of the VOC in the basement of the Student Union Building. Within a few days he was on a club trip to climb Mount Currie near Pemberton.

John recalled, “We got up high and were running out of time, but still we went on to the top. Then we decided to take a short cut down, but it wasn’t a short cut at all so we spent the night out, huddled under a bunch of slide alder.”

“The VOC was all young kids and not very formal. Things just happened. Some of the trips were pretty disorganized but everyone was young and enthusiastic and that is how we learned.”

Many of the famous old guard at the VOC like Dick Culbert and Tim Auger had moved on but there was a new crowd who were full of energy: Steve Ludwig, Graham Underhill, Anders Ourom, Wayne Nagata, Rob Boyce and Helen Sovdat. And it was with these young men and women that John would become a mountaineer. During their apprenticeship they learned from some of the older students—Chris McNeil, Peter Jordan, Bruce Fairley, Grant McCormick and Tom and Diane Volkers.

At Christmas/New Year 1974-75 John joined a VOC group that travelled to the Stanley Mitchell Hut in the Little Yoho Valley of the Rockies. For the excursion John purchased a pair of army surplus wool pants and with his mother’s assistance



John on his first trip across the Garibaldi Neve, 1975.
Photo Carson Hornor

made nylon overpants and overmitts. John found wearing leather boots and travelling on cross-country skis challenging and unstable but John loved being in the mountains—and he was hard to stop. “I would go down the hill until I got going too fast and I would crash. Then I would get up and do it again.” The trip was a great success and John and some of the group reached the summit of the President, the highest peak in the region.

The Varsity Outdoor Club soon became the centre of John’s life. Every Wednesday at lunch time they would have a slide show—and some of the shows were amazing. At the annual club banquet, in 1977, John Clarke, who was becoming a West Coast legend, came and gave a slide show about

John on a summit in Kokanee Glacier Provincial Park, 1977.





Newspaper clipping about John's Fall off Hudson Bay Mountain, 1977. The article estimated the fall at 500 ft, which was later measured to be closer to 500 m.

some of his long trips to remote areas of the Coast Mountains. After the show, Baldwin was "just dying to go and see these places."

Every weekend John and his VOC friends were out in the mountains—to Whistler, Diamond Head and Garibaldi Lake doing classic excursions like the Garibaldi Neve Traverse and the Spearhead Traverse.

In April, during exam time, the VOC organized an annual ski trip to the Burton Hut near the Sphinx Glacier in Garibaldi Park. Everyone would come to the rustic hut during breaks in their exam schedule and explore the mountains at the east end of Garibaldi Lake. It was a great opportunity for people of all abilities to ski together and was a great learning opportunity for John.

In 1975-76 John returned to the Rockies, visiting

View of the east face of Hudson Bay Mountain. When the cornice broke John fell down one of the gullies on the left. Photo Linda Bily



the Bow Hut on the Wapta Icefield and summiting St. Nicholas Peak, Mount Gordon and Mount Rhondda. The next year with his VOC friends John visited Kokanee Glacier Park, near Nelson, and in 1977-78 John skied from Sunshine Village ski resort to Mount Assiniboine Park. It was bitterly cold (minus 45 C) but John and his companions climbed the rocky headwall to the Hind Hut and summited Mount Sturdee. John recalled that on this trip he was the coldest he has ever been in the mountains.

According to Steve Ludwig, who met John about 1976, "John is fiercely intelligent." Although John was enrolled in a very difficult program, and despite his passion for the mountains, he did very well. John would spend Friday evenings packing for the weekend trip, then Saturdays and Sundays were spent out in the mountains. He was exhausted when he returned home on Sunday night so he never studied on the weekends. He crammed all of his course work from Mondays to Thursdays. When asked about this he replied, "I always pay attention in class. The instructor always tells you what will be on the test."

In 1977 John had a brush with death when he fell almost 500 metres from the summit ridge of Hudson's Bay Mountain near Smithers.

Leading the way and breaking trail, John was at least 10 metres back from the edge when the cornice broke taking him in a huge avalanche of snow down the mountain. John was incredibly lucky to survive. He had a banged up knee and internal bruising to his kidneys but no broken bones.

In 1978 with Wayne Nagata and Steve Grant, John made two long summer trips to Tweedsmuir Park and the headwaters of the Falls River. Both of these trips were approached from the Chilcotin Plateau west of Williams Lake. These were his first taste of really remote places. The next summer with Peter Jordan, Chris McNeil and Neil Humphries John visited the Mount Waddington area. After climbing Mount Hickson (3171 m) and Mount Combatant (3762 m) they walked out via Nirvana



Pass. This two-week trip was an eye opener for John and he now knew what he wanted to do with his life.

“Everywhere you go you look around and say ‘I have to go there, and there, and there.’ And then you go to all these places. And you look at maps and you wonder what’s over here and what’s over there.”

In the late ‘70s things were changing in the Coast Mountains. Logging roads had been built beyond Pemberton up the Lillooet River to Meager Creek. Some of these new logging roads enabled climbers

Above: Chris McNeil on the Scimitar Glacier in the Waddington Range, 1979. Photo John Baldwin

Right: John on the east peak of Castle Towers Mountain. This was one of the trips John made at Sphinx Camp in 1978. Photo Richard Wiedemann





John skiing, 1978.
Photo Richard Wiedemann

and skiers to reach remote areas that had taken previous parties days of bushwhacking to reach. At the same time new 1:50,000 topographic maps had just come out revealing so much more than the old 1:250,000 maps.

In June 1979 John went on a four-day ski trip into the Manatee Range northwest of Pemberton, at the head of Meager Creek, using the new logging

roads for access. When John gazed at his new map, the whole north end of it was blue with glaciers. This, he learned, was the Lillooet Icefield.

“I remember looking at the map and thinking, what’s a glacier like, that is four kilometres wide. I just couldn’t imagine it.”

So John decided to find out and the next year began a new phase in his life.



West Coast kayaking

Because of his fall on Hudson’s Bay Mountain John was experiencing knee trouble in 1979. So in July of that year, with Leon Kolankiewicz and Deanna Rempel, he went on a four-week kayak trip, travelling 800 km up the Inside Passage from Kelsey Bay to Prince Rupert. At the time kayaking on the coast was in its infancy and often they had to figure things out by themselves. Their route took them along the edge of the Coast Mountains and John was enthralled. Although the mountains have always been his main passion he has continued to do trips on the ocean for many years.

Chapter Three

A World of Snow and Ice

“I was just bitten by this bug and wanted to see more and more of the Coast Mountains.”

Few people are aware of the great mountain wilderness that stretches for 1,500 kilometres north from Vancouver all the way to Alaska—a pristine world of giant peaks and immense icefields, penetrated by deep fjords from the Pacific Ocean. This mountain range, called the Coast Mountains, is the first in a series of ranges that stretches eastward across British Columbia to the Rockies in Alberta. One of the most heavily glaciated sub-polar ranges on Earth, the Coast Mountains see little traffic due to the tough terrain and difficulty of access. What little climbing and skiing activity that does take place is concentrated in the southern third of the mountains in what is known formally as the Pacific Ranges. There are only four roads that traverse this wilderness. Until the advent of the float plane and the helicopter in the late 1950s and ‘60s, access was almost impossible.

John wrote, “To this day, the Coast Mountains remain a sleeping beauty shrouded by rain and mist. In many areas only the major rivers have names and in the more remote sections the goats living high in the mountains are likely not yet aware that the white man has come to North America.”

It was into this rugged wilderness that John ventured in the spring of 1980 on an expedition that would change his life. John had graduated with his engineering degree in the spring of 1979 but he had opted to stay on at UBC and do a master’s degree. Here, in the Varsity Outdoor Club, John had found a group of friends who showed the same passion for wilderness adventures.

In April 1980, John set off with six of these friends, Steve Ludwig, Helen Sovdat, Graham Underhill, Wayne Nagata, Steve Grant and Joan Avis on his first big expedition. Over a period of three weeks they traversed the Lillooet Icefield, covering a distance of about 160 kilometres and climbing 20 peaks along the way.

Despite numerous glaciers and large icefields ideally suited to skiing, very few long traverses had been completed in the Coast Mountains prior to



1980. John recalled years later that he had seen a slide show in Vancouver, in the mid 1970s, given by Chic Scott, on the lengthy ski traverses that had been done in the Rocky and Columbia Mountains and had wondered if the same sort of long distance ski excursions could not be done in the Coast Mountains.

John had also read Hans Gmoser’s account of his attempt to ski from Jasper to Lake Louise in 1960. Hans’s eloquent writing was a great inspiration and John’s favourite quote was, “A man should have wings to carry them where their dreams go, but sometimes a pair of skis makes a good substitute.”

By now John and his friends were skiing on Telemark skis with steel edges and loose-heel cable bindings. After his early adventures with flimsy cross-country skis, John had switched briefly in the mid-seventies to ski mountaineering equipment. But at the time this equipment was very heavy and eventually the lighter and more popular Telemark gear won out. “If you were trying to go somewhere, the Telemark gear was so nice.”

On April 21, using a ski plane, they placed two food caches along the route, each with seven days food. Then to reach the remote start of their trip, John and his friends were dropped off on the snow covered gravel flats below the Tchaikazan Glacier. Their goal was the Manatee Glacier and Meager Creek, 160 kilometres to the south across a labyrinth of snow and ice. It was a committing trip as they had no communication device of any sort. (The only radios at the time weighed 5 kilograms

John on the Lillooet Icefield, 1980.
Photo Graham Underhill



The group soaking in the Meager Creek hot springs at the end of the Lillooet Icefield traverse, 1980. Steve Ludwig, Helen Sovdat, Steve Grant, Joan Avis, Wayne Nagata, Graham Underhill (left to right).

and were not very reliable.) And the only escape routes were almost as long as the main route.

Their first camp was at the edge of timberline but the rest of the trip was high in the alpine and almost continually on glaciers. Helen Sovdat wrote, "These wide expanses of icefield... offered easy travelling... our world became one of snow, ice and rock. For twenty days our world existed only in shades of blue and white."

After travelling for a few days they would set up a base camp from which they could search out ski runs and make ascents.

The highest peak they climbed was Monmouth Mountain (3182 m) and along the way they climbed 19 other peaks. The weather was superb with only four storm-bound days.

On one summit Steve Grant wrote: "It was exhilarating to stand atop a peak, surveying the

sea of mountains. It was hard to imagine travelling to the horizon through the jagged maze of icy pinnacles, but we knew that hidden between them were glaciers on which we could traverse like ants on immense white expressways."

It was the first time that any of them had spent three weeks up high in the mountains and at the end of their trip, as they slowly descended to the valley, Helen was very nearly overpowered by the fragrant smell of the alpine fir trees. "We had become so accustomed to not smelling anything that the trees created a real rush on our senses."

Reaching the valley, the group went to Meager Creek Hot Springs where they soaked in the natural pools and enjoyed the great satisfaction that comes after weeks of hard effort.

This traverse was just the first of many for John. He remembered, "At the same time that I was planning the Lillooet trip I was looking at maps and thinking if we can do this, then we can do this, this and this."

The following year, 1981, John and several friends travelled to Bella Coola, intent on traversing the large icefields running south to Knight Inlet. But it rained every day for a week while they

waited, so eventually they packed up and drove to Yosemite Valley to climb in the sunshine on the granite cliffs.

In 1982 John returned to Bella Coola and this time the weather was better. John and his team planned to traverse the Monarch and Ha-iltzuk Icefields, a tour that was even a longer than the Lillooet traverse—220 kilometres from Ape Lake along the crest of the large icefields running south to Knight Inlet.

On April 19, John and his team, Brian Sheffield, Graham Underhill, Steve Ludwig and Helen Sovdat left Vancouver, resplendent in blossoming trees, and drove to Bella Coola. John and Graham then made three airdrops, each with food for seven days, at strategic intervals along the route. To complete the traverse they planned to be out for up to 30 days. Then they flew by helicopter to frozen Ape Lake at 1372 m. “We were on our own – a long way from Knight Inlet. Would the weather hold?”

Unfortunately it was a hard trip with extended periods of poor weather. They were confined to their tents for four of the days and travelled in poor visibility on another half dozen days. The route finding by map and compass into the wind and mist was difficult and nerve racking but they took their time and made it safely.

Helen Sovdat remembered, “John loved the route finding. He was our mastermind. He was our visionary. He would spend every night looking at the map. I would be reading my book but John would be looking at the map and making notes on the back of the map. He would just stare at the map.”

Despite the difficult conditions, optimism and good spirits ran high. Helen remembered, “They all loved to break trail and go first. There was always a fight to be up front.” And the pain and hard work of these traverses must not be forgotten—the frozen boots in the morning and the aching shoulders under heavy packs during the day. But the hardship just made the trip more worthwhile.

On day 15 the group climbed Mount Silverthorne (2895 m), the highest peak in the area. On this day the skies cleared for them and their view north over the route that they had struggled through and east to Mount Waddington was a great reward. Graham Underhill wrote, “The unanticipated triumph on Silverthorne gave us a much needed



injection of spirit and energy after the gruelling days of snow and wind.”

During the last week of the traverse the weather continued to alternate between storms and clear periods but they managed to keep moving even when visibility was marginal. Near the end of their trip they reached the top of Klinaklini Peak (2622 m), a mountain they had been heading for during the long weeks of hard work and sweat. Underhill wrote, “Once on the summit of Klinaklini we had achieved our goal. We had endured a seemingly hostile environment and yet come out with unforgettable memories of phenomenal powder skiing and good climbing.”

John on the second ascent of Silverthorne Mountain, 1982.
Photo Graham Underhill



Above: Brian Sheffield and John on the summit of Klinaklini Pk, Klinaklini Glacier behind, 1982. Photo Graham Underhill
 Right: John skiing below Mt Munday, 1983. Photo Brian Finnie



After this traverse John was just getting into his stride and during the long winter months he would pore over maps. One of the lines that caught his attention was the entire length of the divide between the Klinaklini and Homathko Rivers. For him it was a natural and beautiful ski line that formed a spectacular route through the heart of the Pantheon, Waddington and Whitemantle Ranges—some of the most rugged terrain in the entire Coast Mountains.

These long ski traverses were almost entirely on glaciers so after John had come up with a potential traverse route from the maps, Glenn Woodworth would help him study the air photographs to decide if the route was feasible and identify heavily crevassed areas to avoid. Glenn also shared his wealth of knowledge about the Coast Mountains and his “go for it” attitude.

So in 1983, starting from near Middle Lake on the edge of the Chilcotin Plateau, he and three companions, Brian Finnie, Chris McNeil and Brian Sheffield set out. After skiing to Nirvana Pass, they continued south to the Scimitar Glacier, climbed the 1,000 metre high Fury Gap past Mount Waddington, skied down the Franklin Glacier, through the Whitemantle Range and beyond to Loughborough Inlet. It was a fantastic trip blessed



with good weather and, over a period of three weeks, the group covered 200 kilometres, ascended 15,000 metres and climbed 14 peaks. One of the highlights was a ski ascent of Mount Munday. Now known as the Waddington Divide Traverse, this was to become one of the most challenging and outstanding ski traverses in the Coast Mountains.

For the rest of the decade there was at least one big ski traverse each year for John. Many of these long distance ski excursions were with Helen Sovdat and Steve Ludwig, strong mountaineers who both went on to become professional guides. Helen recently recalled, “We were a tight group of friends. Every year we knew we were going somewhere but John always came up with the idea.”

Steve Ludwig commented that these were primarily John’s trips and it could be difficult if you were a strong minded person.

“It’s the John Baldwin tour so you do it John’s way. This was understood by everyone.”

In 1986 they skied a 20-day horseshoe traverse around the Talchako River near Bella Coola that started in Tweedsmuir Park, crossed the Monarch Icefield and finished by skiing through the spectacular spires on the east side of the Nusatsum River.



Above: View of the Homathko Icefield from the summit of Mt Grenville, 1985.

Left: John on Klinaklini Peak.
Photo Graham Underhill

“If one word was used to describe these mountains it would be ‘wet’. Their toes literally sit in the ocean and like the barnacles in the surf below they are constantly lashed with moisture from the sea. This moisture gives the range an incredible richness, sustaining large icefields in close proximity to lush rainforests.”

—John Baldwin



Steve Ludwig and Helen Sovdat packing up camp on the Monarch Icefield, underneath Princess Mountain, 1986.

In 1987 they spent 16 days skiing from the Upper Pemberton Valley across the Lillooet and Homathko Icefields to the Homathko River. After the trip they realized that all the trips they had done over the last eight years could be joined to form a longer route connecting all the major icefields in the Pacific Ranges from Vancouver to Bella Coola. Approximately 700 kilometres long, they named it “The Haute Route—Coast Range Style.” They completed the last leg of this route in

1993 when they crossed the Waddington Range by skiing across the Franklin Glacier area from the Homathko River to the Klinaklini River.

John would continue to do lengthy ski excursions for almost 40 years (he is still doing them today). For John they are a way to immerse himself in this magic wilderness and revel in its amazing beauty. As John likes to say, “It’s so beautiful someone has to go look at it.”



Junker Lake log tow

This is on Junker Lake on their 1986 Monarch spring trip. The ice had melted away from its north shore and John and his companions looked longingly at the easy travel across the lake, trying to figure out a way to avoid the extra hours involved in bushwhacking around the lake. They found this log and managed to use it to tip toe their way out onto the ice. Then they got on their skis and started off. But it occurred to Steve, “What happens when we get to the other side?” So he towed the log across the lake. In the end they didn’t need it.

John Baldwin the Climber

Although known as a ski mountaineer John has had a good career as a climber making ascents of technical alpine routes like Mount Tantalus and the north face of Mount Shuksan. For several years John climbed regularly at Squamish and made an ascent of the Grand Wall on the Stawamus Chief in 1980. In 1980 on a two-week trip in the Selkirks, John and Jean Heineman climbed the icy north face of Beaver Mountain and in 1983 they made several technical ascents while on a three-week trip to the remote Mount Gilbert area of the Coast Mountains.

During the summer of 1981 John climbed Mount Waddington with Steve Ludwig, Helen Sovdat, Wayne Nagata, Jean Heineman and Ron Collins. The highest summit in the Coast Mountains, Mount Waddington (4019 m) rises head and shoulders above the surrounding peaks. There is no easy way up Waddington and an ascent is a feather in the cap of any mountaineer. The group spent three weeks traversing through the Waddington Range and climbing peaks along the way. On the Upper Tellot Glacier they climbed three of the Serra Peaks, Mount Dentiform and the Tellot Spires. Then they descended to the Tiedemann Glacier and from here ascended the Bravo Glacier to the base of the summit spire of Mount Waddington. Conditions were good as they worked their way 11 pitches up the main summit tower. Throughout the climb it was John who led the way. According to Sovdat, "John was a very good climber. He was the best of the group."



Above: Jean Heineman straddling the ridge on the first ascent of an unnamed spire southwest of Mt Gilbert, 1983.

Inset: John rock climbing in Yosemite Valley, California 1981.

Left: Jean Heineman nears the top of the NW peak of Mt Waddington, 1981. While waiting for another party to climb the main summit, they made an ascent of the lower Northwest Summit of Mt Waddington.

It was a glorious summer day and from the top of Waddington John could see the great glaciers radiating in all directions from the peak. But he could make out only a few familiar peaks on the horizon, and the great sea of mountains was largely unfamiliar "...it was clear that my apprenticeship in the Coast Mountains had only begun."

Exploring the Coast Mountains on Skis

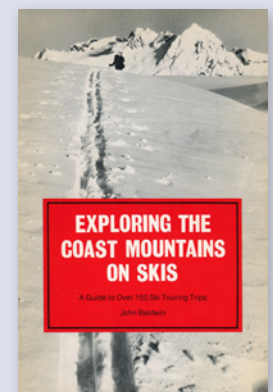
In this day of copious amounts of information about ski and climbing routes, both on the web and in guidebooks, it is hard to remember that there was a time when it was almost impossible to find information on where to go in the mountains and how to get there, particularly in the Coast Mountains of British Columbia. In 1965 Dick Culbert had published *A Climber's Guide to the Coast Ranges of British Columbia* and in 1974 he had published his *Alpine Guide to Southwestern B.C.*, but these were both mountaineering guidebooks. After using them for many years John began to feel that there should be a book just about ski trips.


Recognizing this need and sensing an opportunity, John decided to write a guidebook on ski mountaineering on the west coast of British Columbia. Although it was a thin book at first, it covered the area from Mount Baker in

Washington State north to the mountains near Bella Coola.

While researching the book John spent many hours in the map library at UBC. He wrote the text of the book by hand then his sister, who was a good typist, typed it on a typewriter. His mother, who had studied cartography, drew the maps. John took on the role of publishing the book. First it had to be typeset, then halftones had to be made for all the photographs. He got quotes from printers and finally in 1983 John's new book, *Exploring the Coast Mountains on Skis*, was finished. John had 3,000 copies printed, quite a bold undertaking and financed the whole venture himself.

The reception for John's book was excellent. It opened the eyes of skiers to the great potential for ski adventure in the Coast Mountains and has become a classic over the years.



A black and white photograph showing a person balancing on a sharp, rocky peak. The person is in a horizontal, handstand-like position. The background is a vast, mountainous landscape with snow-covered peaks and a layer of clouds or mist below. The overall scene is dramatic and emphasizes the height and isolation of the mountain environment.

*"We had such a good time together.
It was so easy. We were like brothers.
We literally wanted to do the same thing."
—John Baldwin*

Chapter Four *Adventures With John Clarke*

John Baldwin balances on the summit of Klite Peak on the Tahumming Traverse, 1986. Photo John Clarke

In June 1982 John Baldwin gave a presentation at the monthly meeting of the Vancouver section of The Alpine Club of Canada (ACC) about his recent traverse of the Monarch and Ha-iltzuk Icefields and his ascent of Mount Silverthrone. In the audience was Phyllis Munday, the grand lady of west coast mountaineering. During the 1920s, '30s and '40s, Phyllis and her husband Don had pioneered exploration of the Coast Mountains and had made the first ascent of Mount Silverthrone in 1936. John had made the second ascent of the mountain in 1982, 46 years later. Phyllis was captivated by John's slides and after the show the pair had an opportunity to talk and compare experiences. It was a special moment in John's life.

Mrs. Munday, who was 87 years old at the time, had been brought to the presentation by her younger friend, John Clarke. Clarke was already becoming a legend of the coast mountains, noted for his long distance, solo excursions through wilderness regions. Baldwin and Clarke had an

opportunity to talk after the show and the pair realized that they had much in common and should do a trip together. But it would be two years before they actually set off into the mountains together.

In 1981 John had graduated with a Master of Science (MSc) from UBC and the next year began working for HA Simons, a consulting firm located in downtown Vancouver. John soon realized that the corporate world was not for him and was lucky enough to find employment as a research engineer for Professor Stan Hutton at UBC, working on ship vibrations. This job was much more to his liking and lasted for three years. Although it was a full-time job, John's boss was very understanding and always gave him time off to do his wilderness trips.

In 1982 John had married Jean Heineman, an ardent skier and climber. Together they had done many mountain trips, including climbing Mount Waddington in 1981 and would do many more. Unfortunately the marriage was to last only two years before the pair went their separate ways.

Finally, in 1984, John Baldwin got out in the mountains with John Clarke. Born in Ireland in 1945, Clarke was 13 years older than Baldwin. In 1958, at the age of 13, Clarke had moved with his parents to Canada. As a high school student he had developed an interest in maps and exploration and by the late 1960s he was making forays into the Coast Mountains. By the early '80s he was already a legend on the coast, well known for his long solitary ventures into the mountains. Although Clarke and Baldwin were many years apart in age they were kindred spirits in their love for the wilderness. In fact they both lived for their next foray into the wilds.

Their first trip together was a big one—a ski traverse around the Machmell River, which took them across the western side of the Ha-iltzuk Icefield.

The traverse covered 180 kilometres, reached the top of 25 peaks and took 29 days. During the traverse they were tent-bound for 11 days by bad weather and 3.3 metres of snow fell on the men. Despite this the pair got along well. John Baldwin recently recalled, “We had such a good time together. It was so easy. We were like brothers. We literally wanted to do the same thing.”

Clarke was completely at home in the mountains and Baldwin was the same. “We were both just doing what we wanted to do. We could spend hours looking at the maps and talking about trips.” Sitting on the top of a peak they would pass the time by identifying all the mountains on the horizon.

Over the next dozen years Baldwin and Clarke would climb hundreds of mountains together and do 14 great adventures. Most of these trips were about 100 kilometres in length and involved about 10,000 m of elevation gain.

- 1984 Machmell Horseshoe ski traverse 29 days 25 peaks
- 1984 Orford River Horseshoe 15 days 10 peaks
- 1985 Homathko Icefield ski traverse 21 days 9 peaks



John Clarke on an unnamed summit above South Bentinck Arm, 1990.

- 1985 Kingcome Inlet to Knight Inlet 13 days 15 peaks
- 1985 Klite Divide 9 days 5 peaks
- 1986 Tahumming Horseshoe 16 days 15 peaks
- 1986 Whitemantle Range and Beyond 19 days 11 peaks
- 1987 Whitemantle Range Crossover 13 days 8 peaks
- 1988 Kakweiken Divide 19 days 14 peaks
- 1989 Slim Creek to Toba Inlet ski traverse 26 days 17 peaks
- 1989 Burke Channel to Rivers Inlet 15 days 15 peaks
- 1990 South Bentinck Arm to Kwatna River 9 days 9 peaks
- 1991 Exstew River 11 days 4 peaks
- 1996 Cumsack Divide 7 days 1 peak

John Baldwin (left) and John Clarke (right) after four days tent-bound in a storm on their first trip together, 1984.





John Clarke packing up camp on the Ha-iltzuk Icefield, 1984.

Although two of these adventures were ski traverses across icefields, most of their trips together were to the Pacific side of the Coast Mountains, where the edges of the large icefields mingle with the long fingers of ocean that penetrate deep into the mountains. Here is found some of the most spectacular scenery in the range and the mountains rise dramatically from the sea.

Many of the trips that Clarke and Baldwin took together were similar. They would begin by climbing about 2,000 vertical metres from the ocean to the height of land.

Then they would slowly make their way along the granite ridge crests in a huge semi circle around an entire river drainage to eventually descend back to the sea again. These trips are super rugged and can only be done in summer.

Using a float plane, Baldwin and Clarke would

airdrop several food and fuel caches along the way. Then they would be dropped off at some remote logging camp along the coast and the adventure would begin. John Baldwin wrote:

“We make the strenuous climb up to the alpine from sea level by struggling up the steep sides of the U-shaped valleys. This is always a long, sweaty day during which we are burdened with heavy, cumbersome packs, and there is often no place to camp and no water en route. But when we reach the alpine it is like entering an altogether different world. Views of the surrounding landscape are spectacular. Sweeping up from the sea are the smooth curves of dark green wooded slopes, broken here and there by waterfalls and soaring slabs of rock. And all around huge uplifts of snow-covered mountains tower above the deep valleys.”

“It is the peak of summer, and for the next two or three weeks we travel along narrow ridge crests on bare rock, heather and seasonal snow. We cross glaciers and icefalls, and walk along narrow goat trails that lead past clumps of ancient stunted trees. Our camps are perched high on the peaks amidst flowering heather and slabs of rock, and the evening sun paints warm shades of pink on the surrounding snowfields and icefalls.”

And all around them is unknown country much of it never experienced by humans before.

John Baldwin described these trips in a Canadian Alpine Journal article:

“Initially, these high coastal divides were just convenient routes to travel to reach unclimbed summits in an otherwise very rugged mountain wilderness. However, Baldwin and Clarke soon began to realize that these skyline traverses were aesthetic lines to be valued in their own right—much like an attractive buttress or striking ridge—but that instead of being a feature on a single mountain, they were a feature of the range as a whole. They are a unique bit of geography not found elsewhere in the Coast Mountains, and seldom found in other mountain ranges.”

“At slide shows John Clarke used to tell everyone that you could walk down most of these ridges with your hands in your pockets. Well, that is sort of like



saying that every peak John climbed is third class because he didn't use a rope! It is true that long sections are easy walking on snow, heather or slabs of smooth rock, but the real truth is that you will need an ice axe in your hand the entire trip. This is general mountaineering, not backpacking. These

John Clarke at a quick snack break in the rain, 1988.

John Clarke above the head of Toba Inlet, at the start of the Tahumming Traverse, 1986.





Goats on the ridges above the Tahumming River, 1986.

trips traverse through rugged country, and it is not surprising that they all have a few tough spots.”

The Tahumming Traverse, which is typical of all the routes, was described by Liz Scremin: “It was spectacular country that carried us into the very heart of the Coast Mountains, but it was also the most demanding traverse we had ever done.

The route is stitched together through rugged and remote terrain, on rock and ice, above 1,800 metres much of the time.

It is essentially fourth class mountaineering with a large overnight pack on your back, as hardly a day goes by without some technical bit. The glacier travel involves going into at least one icefall and the ridge scrambles include a number of airy gaps. It’s all very exhilarating and keeps you on your toes! The views were amazing in all directions with dramatic drops into the Tahumming Valley, granite monoliths on the horizon and glacial basins at your feet.”

On these adventures Clarke and Baldwin often talked about the wonderful places they were experiencing and how they could save them from the ravages of industrial exploitation. Educating kids was a theme that often came up. John Clarke went on to start the Witness Project, a joint effort with Chief Bill Williams of the Squamish First Nation and photographer Nancy Bleck, where they took groups camping and exploring threatened old growth forest. Later, John and friend Lisa Baile started the Wilderness Education Project, which allowed Clarke to share his passion and knowledge of wilderness with many British Columbians of all ages. John Baldwin went on to write guidebooks and picture books that would introduce tens of thousands of individuals to the splendour of the Coast Mountains and create an army of supporters who would love and defend the area.

John Clarke died January 23, 2003. He was 57 years old. Baldwin wrote an obituary for his friend in that year’s Canadian Alpine Journal.

“John had an incredible passion for the Coast Mountains and their wilderness, a passion that I had the privilege of sharing and that was the highlight of both our lives. Over the years, I never met anyone who was more at home in

the mountains. I will never forget the way John would say, 'Oh wow!' every time he reached a summit and looked out at the sea of surrounding peaks to old friends such as Manatee, Peak 9535, Peak 8715, Peak 8659 or Mount Stanton. He was always excited and interested in whatever was happening. Even in the most miserable conditions — such as wet bush, or picking raisins out of the snow after a disastrous airdrop — John's light-heartedness shone through. The closest I recall John ever coming to complaining was, 'Are we having fun yet?'"

"John touched many people in many ways. He was a son, a brother, a friend, a husband and a father. He was an explorer and an educator. To me he was a friend."

"He was best man at my wedding, and I was at his — the two of us in suits instead of our usual climbing garb of old shirts and long underwear.



John Baldwin making lunch on the Kakweiken Traverse, 1988.
Photo John Clarke

But friend is not an adequate word to describe the bond you develop when you climb with someone for half your life. What is it called when you climb mountain after mountain together, walk until you both can't walk any more, spend hundreds of nights together in a small tent, share the rain and the snowstorms, see the sunrise and the sunsets together, and bask in the silence and magic of an entire range of mountains together?"

Airdrops

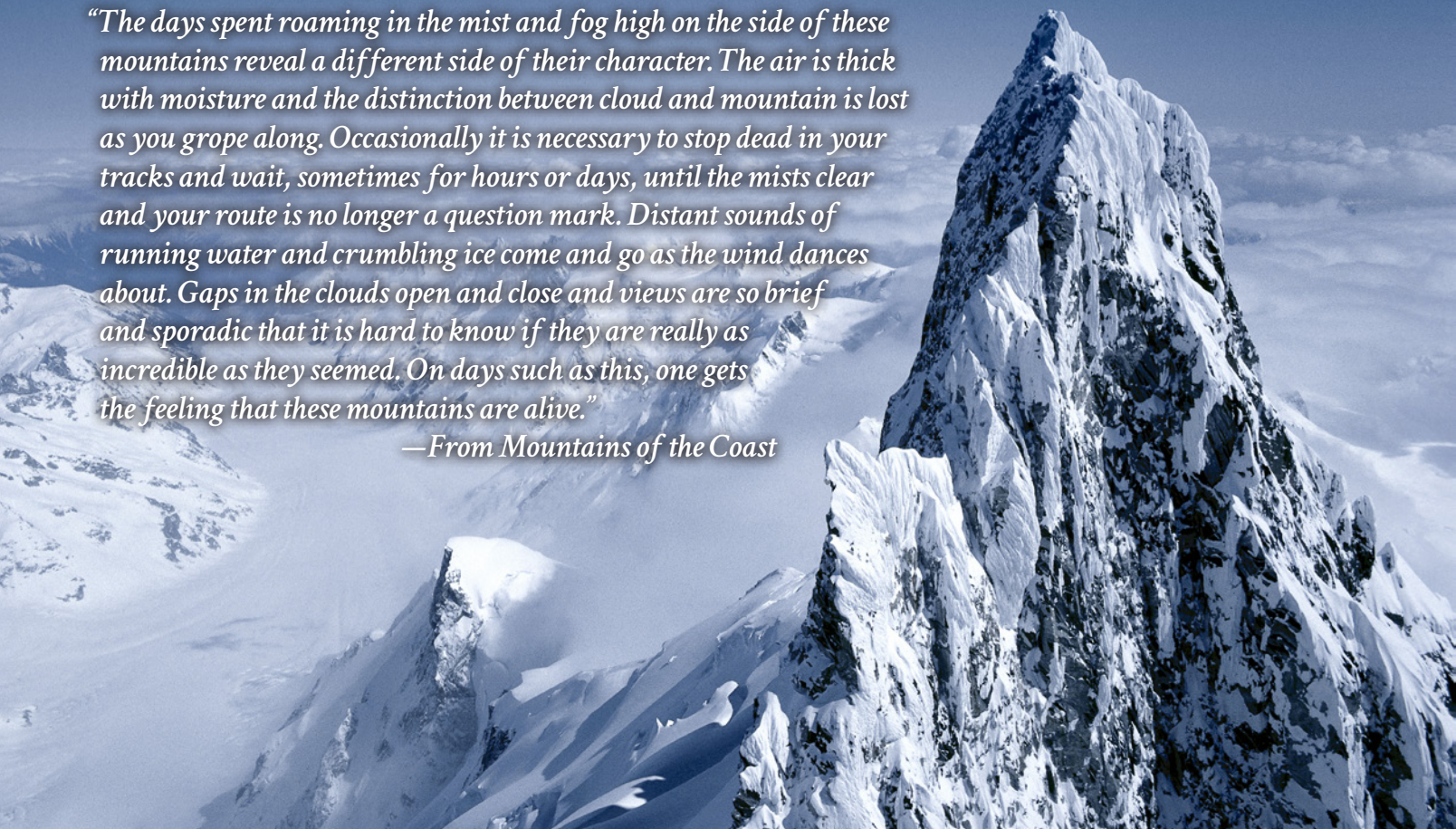
"John Clarke and I used floatplanes to airdrop food caches along our intended route. The plane had a hatch in the floor behind the back seat and we would literally throw our food out the hatch. The idea was that the pilot would circle in and fly slowly over a snow covered ridge. The food was packed in well-taped cardboard boxes and if all went well the boxes would only drop 30 metres and hit the snow at 80 kilometres an hour. We did several dozen of these drops over the years and we rarely lost any food. A few times though, a nervous pilot or bad conditions would force us to throw the boxes out from hundreds of metres in the air and we wound up trying to scrape raisins, oatmeal and pasta out of the snow."

"Our worst airdrop in years — the boxes broke open on impact and the ravens had begun scavenging our food by the time we got there." Whitemantle Range, 1986



“The days spent roaming in the mist and fog high on the side of these mountains reveal a different side of their character. The air is thick with moisture and the distinction between cloud and mountain is lost as you grope along. Occasionally it is necessary to stop dead in your tracks and wait, sometimes for hours or days, until the mists clear and your route is no longer a question mark. Distant sounds of running water and crumbling ice come and go as the wind dances about. Gaps in the clouds open and close and views are so brief and sporadic that it is hard to know if they are really as incredible as they seemed. On days such as this, one gets the feeling that these mountains are alive.”

—From Mountains of the Coast



Chapter Five *The Mountains of the Coast*

The main summit of Mt Waddington (4019 m) as seen from the Northwest Peak, 1996.

After his many adventures with John Clarke, John Baldwin continued to do epic wilderness excursions with other friends, eventually completing almost 100 multi-week excursions into wilderness areas.

During these years John was employed as a research engineer at UBC. His boss was Dr. Michael Isaacson, whose specialty was ocean waves and their effect on breakwaters and harbours. John did mathematical modelling and wrote journal articles and reports for Dr. Isaacson.

It was a great job as John was hired for eight months, from September to April, then had four months off to play.

Dr. Isaacson was a good boss and UBC was a very pleasant place to work—at lunch time John could go swimming or walk on the beach. But, although

he really enjoyed his work, the mountains were his real passion.

In 1989 John married for a second time. Eda Kadar, like John was born in the Lower Mainland and they shared a love of the outdoors. Eda worked for the Water Safety Branch of the Red Cross. A son Steven was born in 1990 and a daughter Rachel in 1992. John and Eda bought a house in Kitsilano and lived the family life.

The kids grew up near the ocean and learned to love the outdoors. When the children were small, John and Eda took them on canoe trips to easily accessible places around Georgia Strait and the Gulf Islands. As they grew older there was lots of hiking and cross-country skiing in their lives and they progressed to longer alpine hikes and learned how to backcountry ski. Consequently both Steven and Rachel have become avid cross-country and backcountry skiers and have done the Garibaldi Neve Traverse and the Spearhead Traverse. Both Stephen and Rachel now live in Vancouver.

John's sister Susan died in 1991 from cancer. She was only 32 years old and left behind two small children. It was a very sad time for John.

Exploring the Coast Mountains on Skis, Second Edition

In 1994 a totally revised edition of *Exploring the Coast Mountains on Skis* was published. By this time publishing was completely different than it had been in 1983. A friend scanned the original book and converted it to a text file. John imported this into a word processing program and began editing. Photos could be inserted easily but it was still a big job that involved much rewriting and took a year to complete. This second edition also sold well.

Traverses with Boggys

During the 1990s John continued to make ski traverses. His companions on these trips were his old friends Steve Ludwig and Helen Sovdat, as well as Helen's brother Stan Sovdat and Gord Ferguson. As they had completed many of the big traverses they now turned their focus to specific areas and skiing peaks. To accomplish this they came up with the idea of using kids' crazy carpets as a lightweight toboggan that they could drag behind them. This



Above: Gord Ferguson towing his "bogy" across the Cataract Glacier in the Waddington Range, 1995. The route had come from the col in the upper left of the photo.

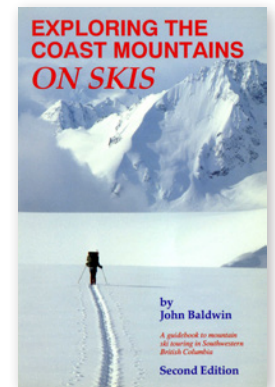
Bottom left: John with pack in 1991. Photo Helen Sovdat

way they could bring up to 14 days worth of food with them and they could roll up the toboggans and carry them when the terrain was not suitable for a sled. This often meant crushing loads for the first day or two until they got to the snow line but it meant that they could complete these trips without air support. Stan Sovdat remembered that on one trip his pack weighed 43 kilograms at the start.

Their first "bogy trip" (as the toboggans came to be known) was in 1991 to the Monarch Icefield. "Steve and I loved tinkering with gear and came up with different designs," John recalled. "On this trip we used lightweight plexiglass for the boggys. These proved to be brittle and barely survived the trip. Later versions were made with kids' crazy carpets and years later we are still using the same design. I posted it on my website and it has been used by dozens of others as well. There is an art to skiing downhill with a bogy and it made for many comical moments on our trips. Not having a food cache means more flexibility for weather and side trips along the route."

Several of their bogy trips were to the Waddington Range. In 1992 they traversed the Waddington and Franklin Glaciers on the south side of Mount Waddington. John had read about a ski traverse around Denali (Mount McKinley) by American Galen Rowell and friends in the early eighties and had been inspired by the idea. In 1995 he translated it into a circum-ski around Waddington, a very rugged and spectacular trip. It must be remembered that at this time before SPOT beacons and other similar devices there was little chance of a quick rescue should there be an accident. The emergency plan was to ski to the nearest logging camp, which could be four or five days away.

One of the most amazing trips was an ascent and





Helen Sovdat descending onto the Monarch Icefield with a heavy load, after a three-day approach via Ape Lake, 1991.

Gord Ferguson and Stan Sovdat are excited to poke their heads out of the tent in the morning and see clear skies above the Waddington Glacier, 1996.

ski descent of the Northwest Summit of Mount Waddington in 1996. The idea that you could actually ski this peak was remarkably bold. John had spotted possible routes on his previous trips and felt that they might work. The key to their route was a snow gully from the Upper Dais Glacier that ascended to the northwest ridge of the mountain and the Angel Glacier behind. After kicking steps in the 40-degree snow gully for about 500 metres they reached the crest. But

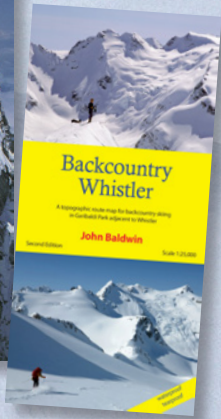
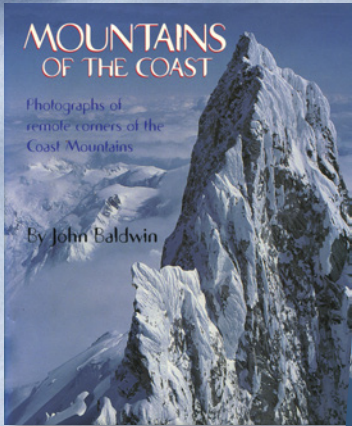
the way ahead to reach the Angel Glacier was blocked by a large bergschrund. As the group hemmed and hawed and debated the merits of pulling out the rope and rappelling the gap, John just pointed his skis over a narrow spot and jumped the bergschrund, landing in soft snow on the Angel Glacier. “Problem solved,” he called up to his friends above. From here they skied to within 50 metres of the top, then kicked steps up the last narrow snow arête to the summit.

There were more big trips with boggys in the ‘90s—a crossing of the Ha-iltzuk Icefield in 1994, the Whitemantle Range in 1997 and the Pantheon Range in 1998.

Backcountry Whistler

1999 was a big year in John’s life. In the winter the first edition of his ski touring map “Backcountry Whistler” was published. “I had seen Murray Toft’s maps and thought, “This is fantastic. This is what we need—a detailed topographic map with ski routes marked on it.” The first edition had its challenges. John had to purchase the base maps from the British Columbia government for \$2,400. Mapping software was very expensive so he had to enlist the help of a friend who had Auto CAD. John loved maps and planning routes and it was a dream to combine these and actually make a real map.





Mountains of the Coast

Then in the fall he published a new book: *Mountains of the Coast, Photographs of Remote Corners of the Coast Mountains*. This book is a tribute to the mountains that John loves so well—a combination of reminiscences of adventures and lyrical descriptions of the places that he has visited and is filled with John’s stunning photographs. A book that he had thought about for many years, his dream was to share the photos and stories of these incredible mountains—beautiful places that are rarely visited and few people even know about. The book was published by Harbour Publishing and received a Bill Duthie Booksellers Choice award as one of the three best books published in B.C. in 1999.

In one review Bruce Serafin wrote: “His pictures amaze me. A friend noted that the sensation they induce is usually thought to have disappeared by the mid-19th century: an awareness of the philosophical sublime.” In another review, David Leach wrote: “What Baldwin delivers...is a matter-of-fact account of these hikes and ski trips backed by mesmerizing photographs that emphasize the abstract beauty of the landscape over any near-death narrative. Mountain porn? This is mountain erotica at its classiest.”

John confided that he disliked writing when he was in high school so it is surprising to him that he would, in the end, choose to express himself through books. He credits his years of writing at UBC for helping to get him over this. But John has been a photographer since day one and all of the images featured in this book are his.

At the end of 1999, John and his wife Eda separated.

View south into the Whitemantle Range from the summit of Mt Finality on the Franklin Glacier complex below Mt Waddington, 1992. Note the small skier and camp.

Steve Ludwig on the summit of Snowside Mountain, 1991.





“It is exhilarating to lay down the first set of ski tracks in a vast wilderness, as if painting on an empty white canvas. Our tracks are an expression of joy written on a temporary canvas that will soon be washed clean with the next snowfall. But backcountry skiing is not just about the exciting downhill—it is also about the tranquility of moving gracefully through the mountain wilderness.”

—Soul of Wilderness

Chapter Six *Soul of Wilderness*

Dave Williams skiing off a spectacular viewpoint near Mt Ogilvie on the Juneau Icefield, 1999.

North to Alaska

Around 2000 John realized that he had not done anything in the northern Coast Mountains and the St. Elias Range and decided he wanted to see this region. John wrote in his journal, “In the late 1970s, when it first occurred to me that you could ski across the big icefields of the Coast Mountains, I remember digging out dozens of maps and imagining all the trips that might be possible. The icefields of the Alaska Panhandle were the most obvious and the enormous icefield west of the Stikine River was so big it even stood out on a road map of B.C. At the time I was too busy exploring icefields in the southern Coast Mountains. So it was the fulfilment of a lifelong dream to visit the icefields of the northern Coast Mountains in the Alaska Panhandle.”

His first trip north was to the Juneau Icefield in 1999 with Dave Williams and Matthias Jakob. Starting at sea level at the snout of the Taku Glacier, John was blown away by the scale of everything. The Taku Glacier was almost 60 kilometres long.

The annual snowfall on the main Juneau Icefield exceeds 30 metres, building glaciers that are 1,400 metres thick and feeding 38 outflowing glaciers. John and his friends spent three weeks skiing north across the icefield to Skagway. “It was a spectacular trip. I loved the wide expanses and the fairy tale spires rising out of the ice.”

His next trip north was to the Stikine Icefield in 2002 with Steve Ludwig and Stan Sovdat. This is the largest icefield in the Coast Mountains and was equally inspiring to John as the Juneau Icefield.

“It’s wild, tough country but I loved every minute of it. The weather can be absolutely unrelenting.”

During these years a major change had been occurring in John’s life. John was a single man again and had connected with a mountain lover by

the name of Linda Bily. John and Linda had known each other for several years and had often been on day trips together and when they started dating in 2002 they hit it off immediately. In Linda's words, "It was like falling into a pillow. We were so comfortable together." John recalled, "Linda is the love of my life. It is very special that we can do all these trips together. We have literally spent thousands of days together in the mountains."

Linda Bily was born in Dawson Creek and grew up in Calgary. Like John she earned a bachelor's degree in civil engineering (from the University of Calgary) then in 1994 moved to Vancouver where she received a master's degree in environmental engineering from UBC. Here she met John through the Varsity Outdoor Club crowd.

Their first real trip together was a two-week kayak trip to Haida Gwaii in 2002. Linda has a passionate love of the wilderness that matches John's so they soon became a couple.

Trips to the North continued after John met Linda. She too loved the region and was only too



happy to share more adventures with him in Alaska and the Yukon. And she is strong and can endure the rigours of these trips. In 2003 they went to the St. Elias Range, where they skied across the icefields at the head of Glacier Bay. And then in 2004 they spent three weeks skiing through the Mount Logan area on the Kennedy, Hubbard and Kaskawulsh Glaciers, including a ski ascent of

John and Linda captured this selfie in a heavy snowstorm in the Callaghan valley. They both love snow!

Steve Ludwig traversing the Baird Glacier below the spectacular spires of Mt Burkett and Devils Thumb on the Stikine Icefield, 2002.





Clockwise from above:
 "While skiing down the Grand Plateau Glacier we ran out of snow and had to camp in the middle of a sea of crevasses," 2003.

Stan Sovdat silhouetted against the Grand Plateau Glacier with the Gulf of Alaska beyond, 2003.

John digging out the tent during a five-day storm on the Juneau Icefield, 2013. Photo Linda Bily

Linda skiing amongst unnamed summits at the head of the Hoodoo Glacier, near the Iskut River, 2009.

Campfire at Alsek Lake at the end of the Glacier Bay Traverse, 2003. Lars Wilke, Linda Bily, Vince Mantle, Gord Ferguson, Stan Sovdat (left to right).

Mount Queen Mary. They had fabulous weather on this trip, experiencing 18 days of sunshine.

Spring 2005 and 2006 were spent in northern B.C., skiing from Stewart to Ningunsaw Pass and from Terrace to Kemano. While re-writing his guidebook from 2007-2009, John got to know a few skiers up north and over the years John and Linda have made four road trips in late winter to ski tour in the mountains around Terrace, Stewart and Smithers.

John and Linda returned to the Alaska Panhandle in 2009 to traverse between the Stikine and Iskut Rivers. In 2012 they visited the Stikine Icefield and in 2013 crossed the Juneau Icefield to Atlin Lake.

Most of these trips were done with Gord Ferguson and Stan Sovdat. John recalled, "Over the last 25 years I have done more than a dozen long ski trips with Gord and Stan. These trips are like visiting with old friends...we have a lot of fun."





“Throughout human history, wilderness has provided a place of solace and comfort, a place of spiritual renewal. Its timelessness and scale provide a perspective that restores a sense of balance and completeness to us as we live our busy lives. Lying on the mossy floor of the forest, swimming in alpine pools and climbing high onto icefields, we have come to feel part of the wilderness.”
—Soul of Wilderness

More Skyline Traverses

In the early 2000s John and Linda did three major summer skyline traverses with Lisa Baile and her husband Peter Pare. Their first trip together was in 2003. John Clarke had suggested to Peter and Lisa that they do a trip from Owikeeno Lake to Seymour Inlet, and John and Linda joined them.

The Powell Divide Traverse from Toba Inlet to Jervis Inlet in 2005 was their third traverse together. This was a low snow year so they chose to do this traverse as there was little glaciation and few crevasses to fall into.

John overlooking the tributaries of the Kingcome River, 2004. Photo Linda Bily
Linda Bily on the granite ridges of the Powell Divide, 2005.

The second trip they did together was the Kingcome Horseshoe Traverse around the Kingcome River in 2004.

This traverse is glaciated along one side (Ha-iltzuk Icefield) but on the other side it is bounded by long winding granite ridge tops. In between climbing peaks they searched for the perfect tarn. Often they stripped down and dove into these delightful pools of water. Lisa Baile commented: “How many places in the world can you take your clothes off and not worry about it.”





John looking at the route ahead from the summit of Stanley Peak on the 30-year anniversary Lillooet Icefield Traverse, 2010.
Photo Linda Bily

Thirty Years After

In 2010 John once more skied across the Lillooet Icefield, 30 years after he first did it. For John it was an opportunity to reflect on and to celebrate his years of traversing the big icefields of the Coast Mountains.

“In 1980 I didn’t know anything more than the major drainages and a few of the higher summits, but now in almost every direction I looked were familiar peaks. What once were only bumps on the horizon were now firmly etched in my soul. It wasn’t just the accomplishments that were there; it

was also the whole kaleidoscope of sights, sounds and feelings from years spent in the wilderness.”

“Seeing all these peaks was like looking back in time. A lot happens in three decades. Our original group of 20-year-olds was now in their fifties. We had gone on with our lives. One of our group members was a math professor, three were mountain guides, another was a computer specialist and was now retired, and I had written three editions of a ski guidebook and produced several topographic maps. Children were born and grew up, and parents and siblings had died. Good times and tough times. But I was just as excited to see what lay ahead and to feel the wonders of this magical landscape as I felt 30 years ago.”

Lots of other changes had happened over the years. Ski equipment was much better, packs were lighter and frozen boots were no longer a concern. Thirty years ago none of the major icefields had been traversed on skis but now most of them were visited on skis annually. This is due in part to the tremendous growth in the popularity of back-country skiing but also because John’s guidebook has helped many people to get out and explore these icefields. In the middle of their three-week trip they ran into a group of snowmobilers high on the icefield. This was a contrast to 1980, when the Lillooet Icefield was such a remote area that only a few people had ever been there. And of course the glacial recession as a result of climate change has been dramatic.

John at camp on the 30-year anniversary Lillooet Icefield Traverse, 2010.
Photo Linda Bily





Climate Change

“When I give slideshows, one of the questions that I get asked the most is whether I have noticed a change in the glaciers over the years. The answer is a resounding yes. Some of the bigger glaciers have lost 150 metres of their thickness and have 8 kilometre-long lakes where the glacier snout used to be. In western Canada, predictions are that we will lose something like 70% of our glaciers by the end of the century. Climate change is something that I think about all the time. It is the biggest challenge of our time. When are we going to realize that the Earth is something that we have to take care of?”

Dan Carey looking west at the Lillooet Icefield through forest fire smoke, 2018. The large glacier-fed lake at the toe of the Bridge Glacier did not exist when John first crossed the Lillooet Icefield in 1980.

John also repeated two of his earlier trips from the 1980s on their 30-year anniversaries: the Homathko Icefield in 2014 (this time starting from Chilko Lake), and the Monarch Icefield/Talchako Horseshoe in 2016. Still strong and healthy as he approached 60 years of age John commented, “It feels good to still be able to do these trips.”

In 2007, after 24 years, John quit his job at the university. He started with just a year’s leave of absence to redo his guidebook but at the end of the year he was not finished so he took another year off. Then he decided to quit his job and just create books and maps. Although it is not a particularly lucrative career he is making a living at it. The kids are grown up and the house is paid for so John is semi-retired.

John continues to give slide shows, perhaps five per year. These shows are an opportunity to meet his many fans in the outdoor community.

Venues range from local club meetings to libraries to annual banquets. He has given presentations for the Vancouver International Mountain Film Festival, the Whistler Arts Council, the Canuck Splitfest, the Mount Cain Telefest and a fundraiser for the Northwest Avalanche Centre.

Linda was laid off from her job at Environment Canada in 2013 and the two of them are now just

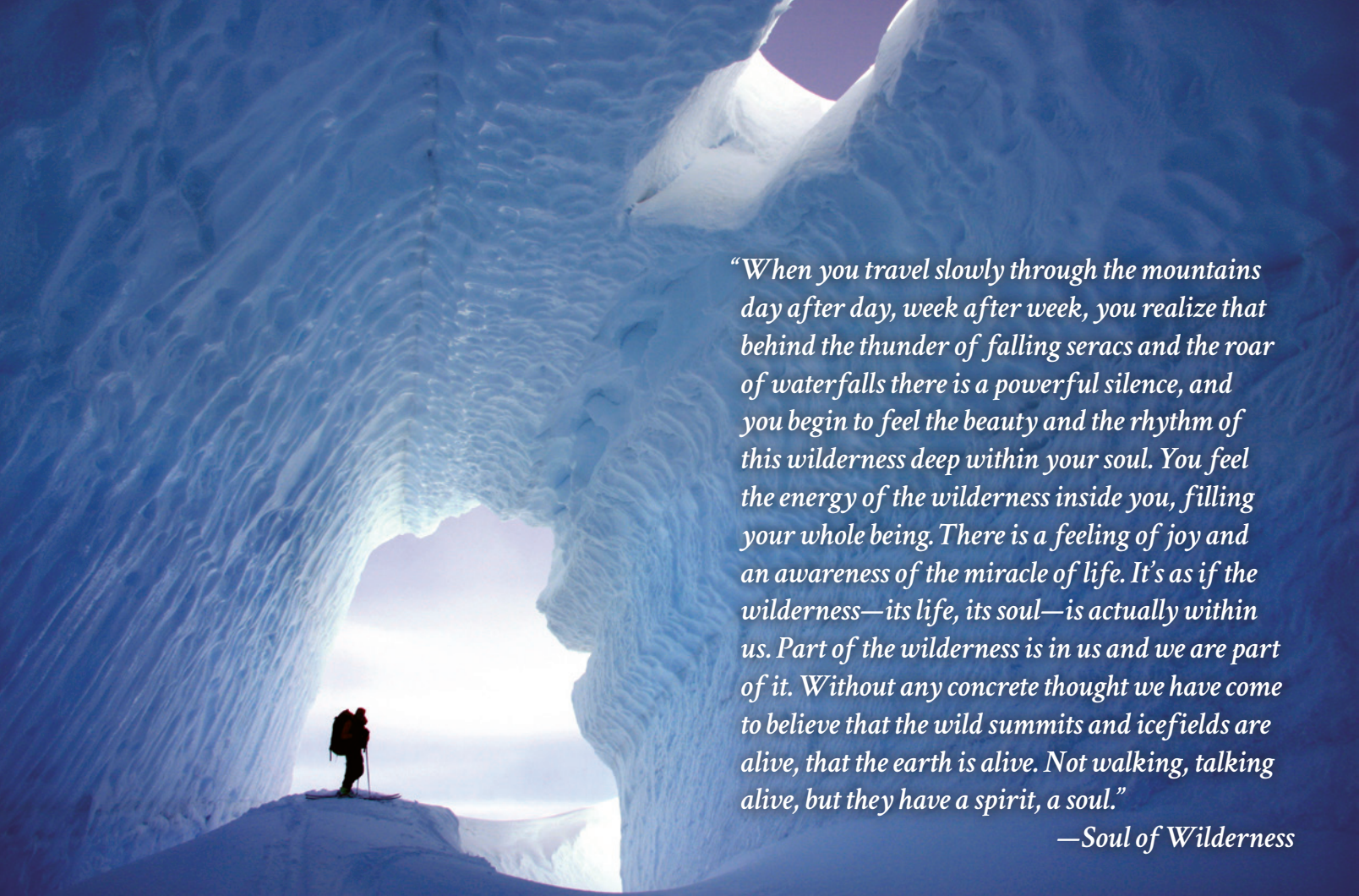
doing maps and books. Skiing is a huge part of their lives and they get out as much as 100 days each winter—local trips to the North Shore, Garibaldi Park, the Duffey, Coquihalla and Baker or road trips to Smithers, Terrace or Rogers Pass. Together they have visited many of the well known ACC huts, Callaghan Lodge, Burnie Glacier Chalet, Whitecap Alpine and, when John’s old friend Steve Ludwig built Snowy Mountain Lodge near Blue River, they went there for many years. They both started using Alpine Touring (AT) gear and Dynafit bindings in 2009.

In 2015 John was made an honorary member of the British Columbia Mountaineering Club. Although John has never sought recognition this was a very nice acknowledgement of John’s contributions to west coast mountaineering.

In recent years John has turned his attention to the drier, less glaciated east side of the Coast Mountains and done about a dozen summer alpine

A Forgotten Passport

“To get to our Glacier Bay trip we took the early morning flight from Vancouver to Whitehorse then drove to Skagway, Alaska. Stan had worked the night before we left and it was pretty hectic at the airport. When we got to the border between the Yukon and Alaska (which is out in the middle of nowhere), Stan realized that he had forgotten his passport. He explained this to the customs officer and started passing cards from his wallet. The replies came back, ‘library card won’t do...sorry sir, we don’t take VISA....’ We tried not to laugh. The customs officer understood our predicament. When he saw Stan’s firefighter ID for the City of Vancouver he said OK and let us go through.”



“When you travel slowly through the mountains day after day, week after week, you realize that behind the thunder of falling seracs and the roar of waterfalls there is a powerful silence, and you begin to feel the beauty and the rhythm of this wilderness deep within your soul. You feel the energy of the wilderness inside you, filling your whole being. There is a feeling of joy and an awareness of the miracle of life. It’s as if the wilderness—its life, its soul—is actually within us. Part of the wilderness is in us and we are part of it. Without any concrete thought we have come to believe that the wild summits and icefields are alive, that the earth is alive. Not walking, talking alive, but they have a spirit, a soul.”

—Soul of Wilderness

Above: Linda Bily in a spectacular roofed crevasse near the summit of Mt Goddard, 2014.

Right: Telephoto view of John at camp on the Homathko Icefield with the Waddington Range behind, 2014. Photo Linda Bily



traverses in the Southern Chilcotin Mountains, Cadwallader Range, Cayoosh Range and Stein area. “We have been exploring these areas one by one, reaching deep into the heart of each region on week-long trips spent roaming across the landscape, scrambling over rugged ridge tops, wading across rainbow-coloured hillsides of wildflowers and camping by crystal-clear lakes.... These are some of the most beautiful places on earth.”

Soul of Wilderness

“Ours are not heart-stopping tales of conquest and hardship.... The purpose of our trips is simply to see as many of these special places as we can.”
(Soul of Wilderness)

Linda had grown up poring over her parents’ coffee table books and National Geographic magazines and it had been her dream to one day do a photography book.

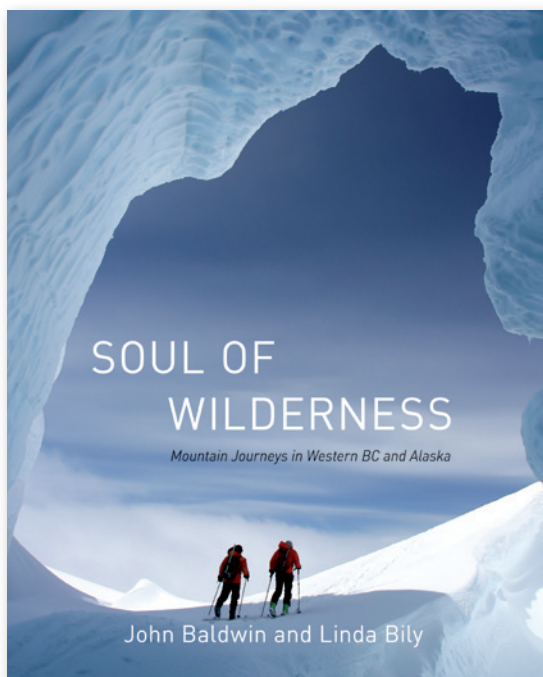
On top of that she is a dedicated environmentalist and committed to saving the planet’s last wild spaces. Linda commented, “I’ve always had this feeling that the mountains are somehow alive, that there is this soul to them.” With John she had been visiting, year after year, amazing places that very few people ever see and they both loved the idea of sharing these experiences. So John approached Howard White at Harbour Publishing who had published *Mountains of the Coast* and he was enthusiastic about the idea.

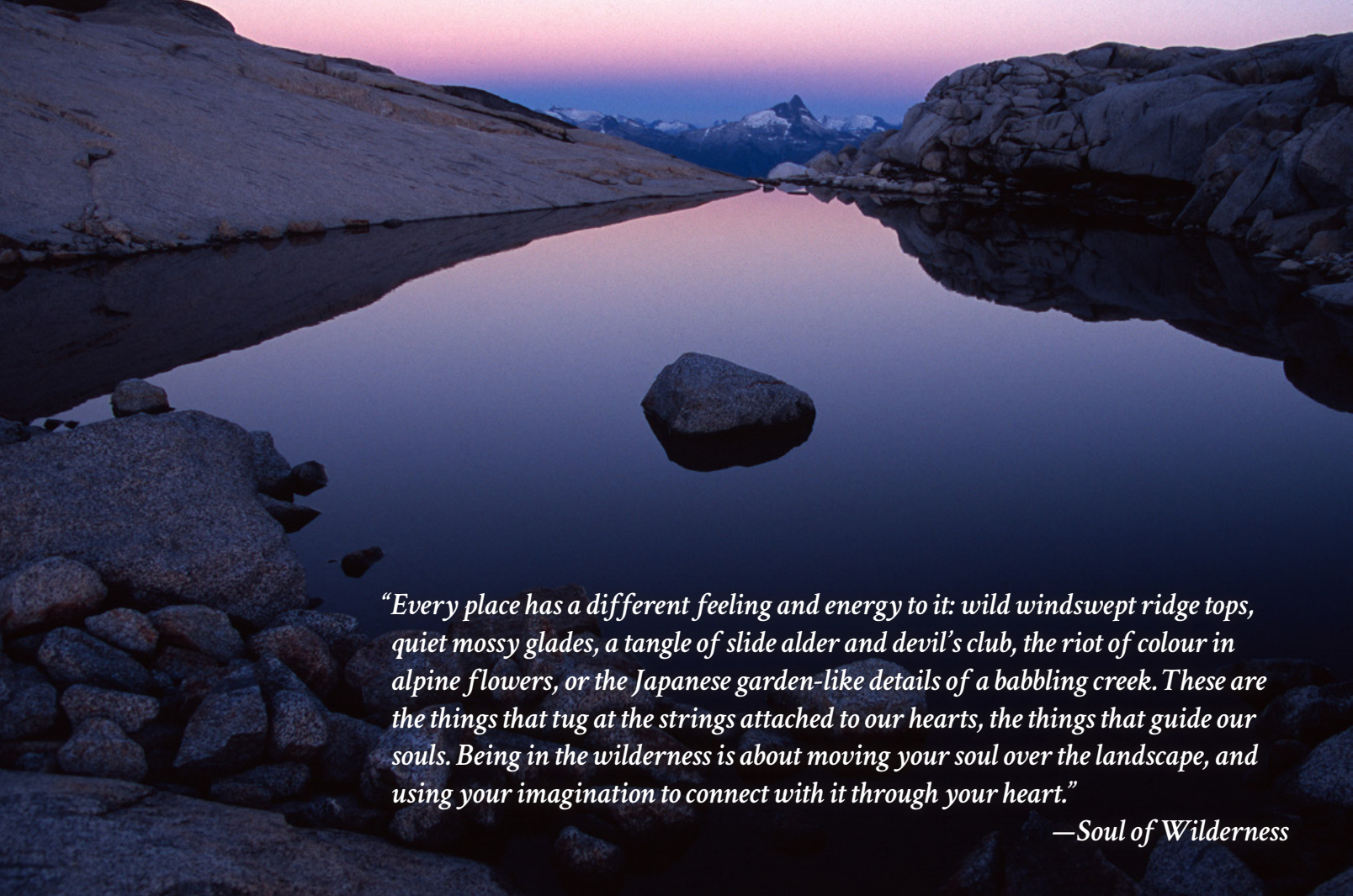
The book that they created together is called *Soul of Wilderness, Mountain Journeys in Western B.C. and Alaska*. Published in 2015, this book is an attempt to let people know what is out there and to share it, to connect people with the silence of nature. Over the years they have come to feel that the wilderness has a soul in ways that perhaps North American First Nations, Australian Aboriginals, eastern philosophies of Zen Buddhism and Hinduism, people from Africa and even the English romantic poets of the 19th century spoke of—the soul of the earth.



Alpine meadows in South Chilcotin Mountains, 2018.

The book is filled with marvellous photographs of the places they have visited. Soaring peaks and cascading glaciers are mingled with intimate images of the delicate patterns found in nature. John and Linda’s text is a poetic evocation of the sublime and some of their eloquent quotations are scattered throughout this chapter.





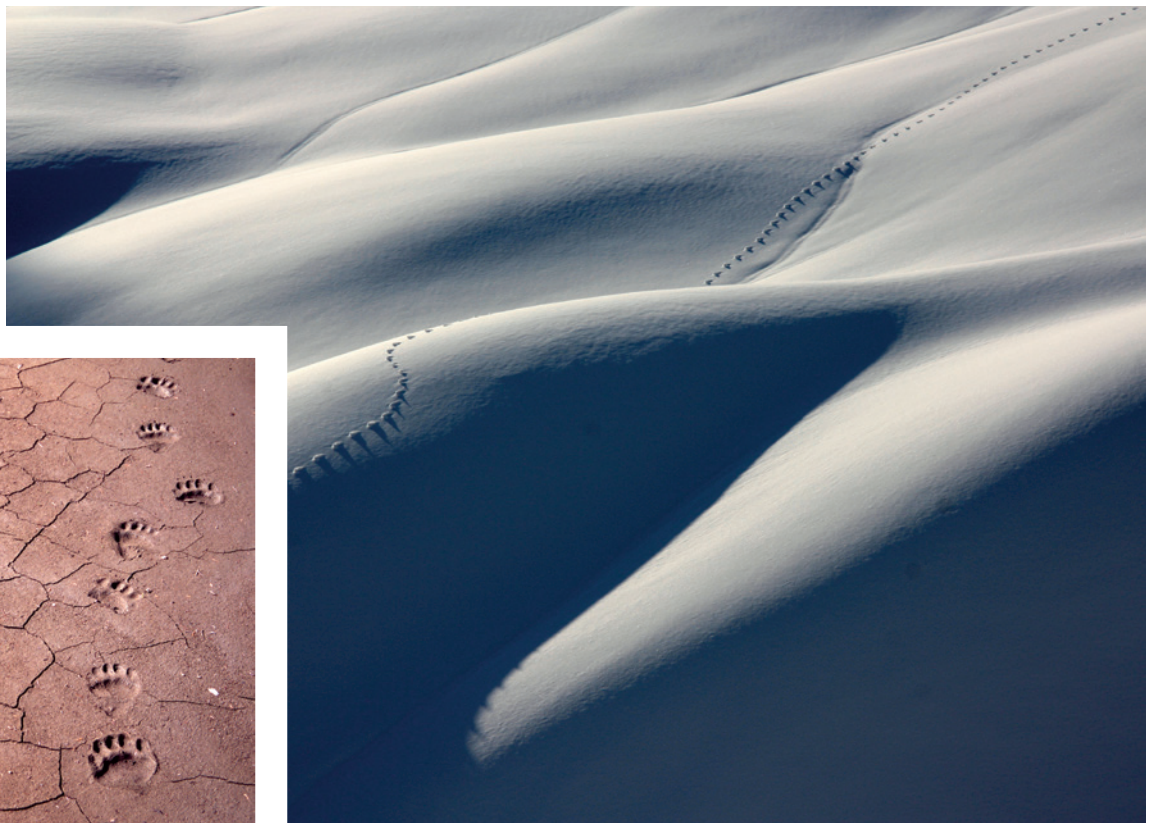
“Every place has a different feeling and energy to it: wild windswept ridge tops, quiet mossy glades, a tangle of slide alder and devil’s club, the riot of colour in alpine flowers, or the Japanese garden-like details of a babbling creek. These are the things that tug at the strings attached to our hearts, the things that guide our souls. Being in the wilderness is about moving your soul over the landscape, and using your imagination to connect with it through your heart.”

—Soul of Wilderness

Above: Haymaker Mountain rises above a tarn at sunset on the Kingcome River Traverse, 2004.

Right: Wind erosion of the snow has left a set of wolverine tracks raised above the surface of the Ring Glacier in Garibaldi Park.

Below: Young grizzly bear tracks contrast with patterns in drying mud.





Marriage

John and Linda were married April 16, 2011 at Callaghan Lodge in the mountains not far from Whistler. According to Lisa Baile it was a magic

wedding blessed by good weather. The wedding party took over the lodge and the happy couple, who wore matching skis and Gore-Tex during the ceremony, skied through an arch of ski poles. For their honeymoon the following year, John and Linda went to Skoki Lodge in the Rockies east of Lake Louise. Fittingly, they stayed in what is called Honeymoon Cabin.

Above: John and Linda ski under an archway of ski poles after being married on skis outside Journeyman Lodge in the upper Callaghan Valley, 2011.

Left: John and Linda hug after the wedding ceremony, 2011.

Below: Steven, Rachel, John and Linda, 2012.





John swims in an Olympic-sized super tarn above Princess Louisa Inlet, 2013. Photo Linda Bily

Alpine Tarns

“When I first started going to the granite coastal ridge tops with John Clarke I fell in love with swimming in alpine tarns. We would stumble on these beautiful pools of crystal clear water nestled among the granite slabs. It was always so refreshing to drop our packs and take off our sweaty clothes and swim. Growing up on Deer Lake, swimming was an integral part of summer and we would often spend the whole day in our bathing suits. On one trip with Lisa and Peter there were so many beautiful tarns along the way that we had to limit our swims to four per day. We even nicknamed the trip, “The search for the perfect tarn.”

Exploring the Coast Mountains on Skis Third Edition

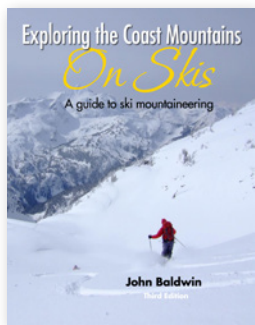
In 2009 a third edition of *Exploring the Coast Mountains on Skis* was published. The size of the book has doubled with each new edition and what started as 144 pages with a dozen photos in 1983 has grown to 448 pages and 700 photographs.

One reviewer, Robert Ballantyne wrote, “The Third Edition is a major reworking of this essential

guide. It is truly breathtaking...almost every page is illustrated with stunning pictures of the locations... People who love mountains will cherish every glorious page of this book.”

In 2010 The American Alpine Institute gave *Exploring the Coast Mountains on Skis* the Guides Choice Award for 2010. “Our guides have found that the larger format and better photos make this guide more worthy of a coffee table than a bookshelf... The route descriptions are very clear, concise and easy to follow... We all agree that this book is easily one of the most comprehensive ski guides there is.”

The third edition took two years to complete. Many people helped John with the book and although he has done about 85% of the tours in the book and is the one who sat down and wrote it, he feels “like it is a collaborative effort by the community.” The three editions of *Exploring the Coast Mountains on Skis* have sold almost 20,000 copies over the years. According to John, “One of the unexpected and most rewarding by-products of researching and selling the guidebook is the whole community of people I have met up and down the Coast Mountains—people that share my passion for skiing and love of mountains.”





Beach Hikes

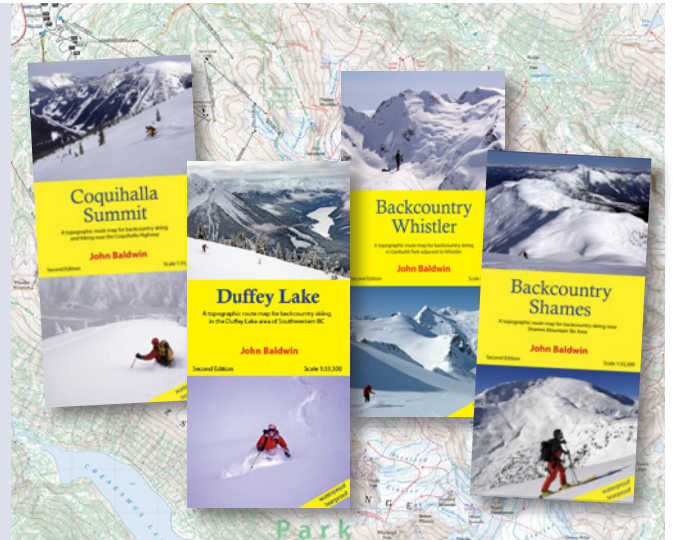
“I have always been fascinated with the ocean. It is the only thing that is as wild as the mountains. In the VOC we used to go to the Olympic Peninsula (in Washington State) and hike on the beach and I hiked the West Coast Trail in the early 1980s.

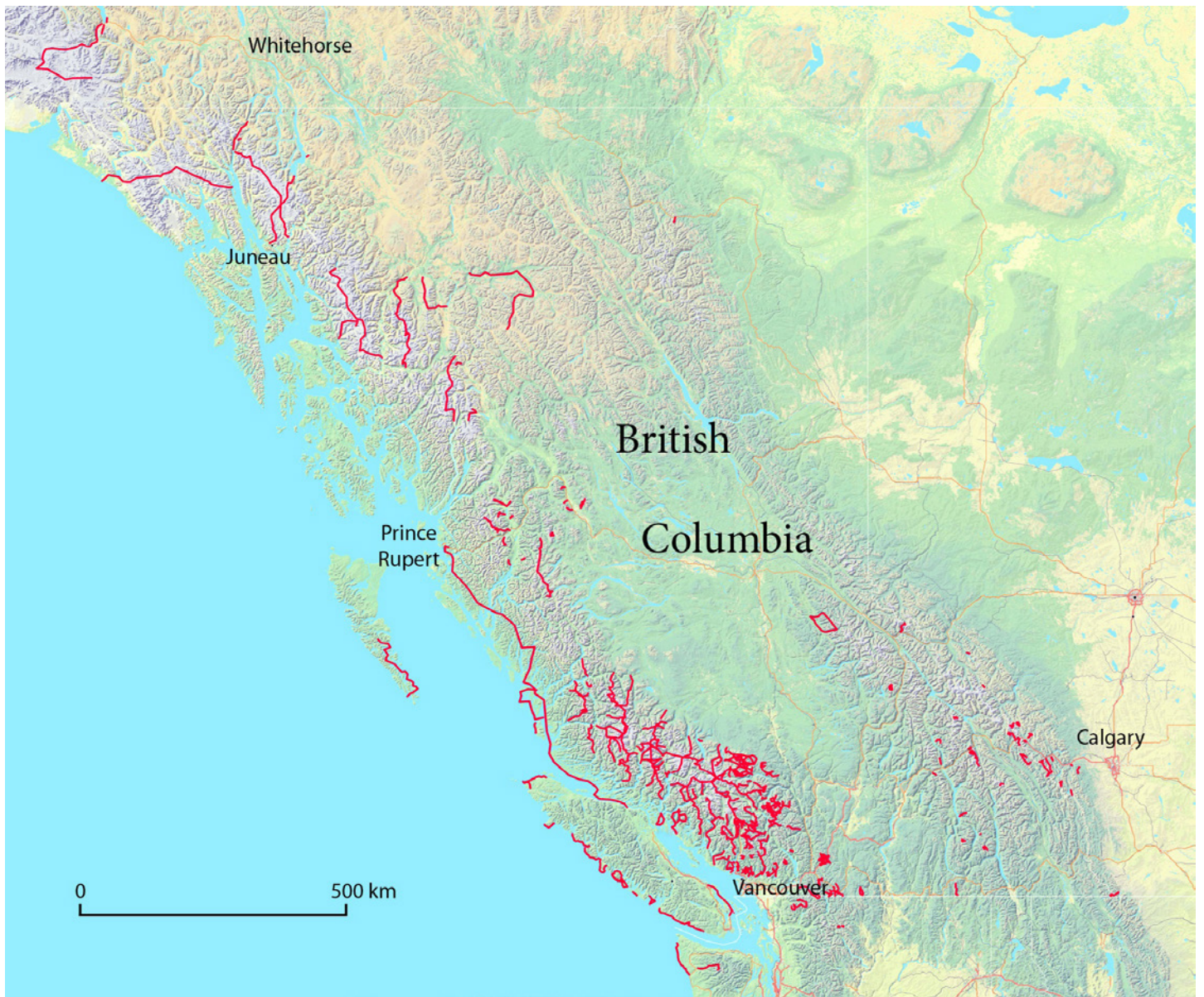
When my kids were young I discovered the potential for other West Coast hikes. These are week-long hikes to remote sections of wave hammered coastline and we did close to a dozen of these trips as family hikes. I later made topographic route maps for four of the hikes.”

Rachel hiking along the beach on the Brooks Peninsula, Vancouver Island 2009.

Backcountry Maps

John continued to produce topographic route maps and now has four ski maps and four coastal hiking maps. When he first produced Backcountry Whistler in 1999, he was unsure of what kind of market there would be for such a map. But the map sold well over the years and after the third edition of his ski guide book was published, John decided to publish more maps. In 2010 he published ski route maps for Coquihalla Summit, Duffey Lake and Backcountry Shames. In 2016 he published route maps for some of the most popular coastal hikes on Vancouver Island—North Coast Trail, Nootka Island, Hesquiat Peninsula and Tatchu Peninsula. Recently all of the ski maps have been updated to a metric base map at a large scale. “They have all been super fun projects. It is very rewarding to just focus on an area and learn all about it so that you can make a map about it. You get to know the area in a different way.”





Chapter Seven *A Life Dedicated to Mountains*

John's 45 years of mountain trips combined on one map.

John Baldwin is a mountain explorer in the West Coast tradition of Don and Phyllis Munday, John Clarke and Neal Carter. His quest is not to triumph over nature, to climb difficult mountains or to set records but to immerse himself in the mountains and become a part of them. Many years ago Phyl Munday wrote:

"We didn't go into the Waddington country just to climb one mountain and run out and leave it. We went into the Waddington country to find out all we possibly could about glaciers and mountains and animals and nature and everything about that particular area."

These are words that John Baldwin could have written today.

John has devoted his life to exploring the Coast Mountains and to communicating what he has experienced. And he has been successful in his quest. According to Helen Sovdat, "John is the guru of Coast Range skiing. He has made everything so accessible. He is happy to help people. He is the expert and is happy to share."

John feels that it is important that people get out there in the mountains: that they see it and they know what it is. Then they will tell everyone about it and it will become part of our culture. Only then will we value it. John explains: "I have given slide shows and someone comes up and says they have had the best trip of their life because of my map or my guide book. To be able to help somebody do



that is incredible. This is the most memorable thing they have ever done and you helped them do it.”

A self-taught mountaineer and skier, John never took any courses other than the informal courses offered by the VOC. Although he is the de facto leader of all his trips, he has never had any interest in professional guiding. According to Gord Ferguson and Stan Sovdat, John is a great leader and a master planner of expeditions with meticulous attention to detail. And when you get out there he is a brilliant route finder with an uncanny sixth sense of where to go. He has an intuition, a gut feeling and can almost anticipate the terrain ahead. According to Lisa Baile, “John can look at a map and see it in three dimensions.”

It is notable that there have been no tragedies or serious epics on any of John’s trips. According to his friends, the trips are predictable. John has a subtle style of leadership, a quiet competence. According to Lisa, “John was an unassuming leader. We always looked to him for where we were going the next day. He is the best guide you could have. John has all the best ideas.”

And according to his companions John is easy to be with. Simple and childlike, John likes to explore. He has a good nose for seeking out interesting

things and is quietly finding himself in the wilderness. His trips are not too serious and, despite the hardship, everyone has fun and gets along well with each other. According to Lisa, “John takes joy in every minute. He is never negative. He is

John admires a vibrant patch of subalpine lupine on a week-long traverse of the Shulaps Range, 2013. Photo Linda Bily

“There is a tremendous feeling that comes on a trip like this, with so much to see and so much to do and all of it unknown. Have you ever taken a dog on a hike? Well, imagine yourself as the dog. As a dog you don’t worry about the weather or the route. the details of the hike are not concerns of yours. your only concern is to swim in every tarn, climb over every rock and experience every moment of this mysterious hike that you are being taken on. But who, you might ask, is taking you on the hike? The mountains! Who else lays out the route? Who else decides when it is sunny and when it rains? And who else do you sidle up to panting, hot and exhausted?”

—John Baldwin in the Canadian Alpine Journal 1989



John above a sea of clouds near Mt Cain, Vancouver Island, 2012.
Photo Linda Bily

not fighting the mountains, he is just in them. John lives in the moment where you find the unexpected. It's about the fun of exploring."

A very positive guy, John rarely mentions anything negative or speaks ill of anyone. One of his friends called him boringly normal. He loves

rock and roll music but does not consume alcohol, caffeine or drugs. Other words that have been used to describe John are: controlled, consistent, authentic, happy and strong. Over the years he has attracted a great group of people around him.

Physically John is incredibly strong. According to Lisa Baile, "John could just power up a mountain. He never got tired. He was unstoppable, super fit." Although of modest stature he moves efficiently, at a steady, even pace. Mentally he is very strong willed and has a quiet determination. When his mind is made up, he reaches his goal.

John Baldwin is a humble man and doesn't like to talk about his accomplishments. At heart he is a private person although his friends say that he has opened up since he met Linda. He has a great sense of humour and can be very playful. In short he is a very pleasant person to be with.

Although in his 60s now John is aging well and is planning trips for many years to come. There is a meditative quality of a long walk in the mountains that appeals to John. "I certainly don't feel like I'm in the middle of nowhere when I am out there. I feel like I'm at home. But at the same time there is the sense that you are on the edge of some great unknown... you're on the edge of the universe."



Making Gear

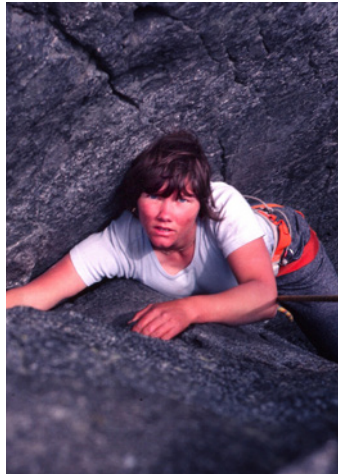
"I have always loved making gear. When I started out there wasn't all this incredible gear that we have today and you were often better off making your own gear. It all started on my first VOC Christmas trip to Little Yoho in 1974. I needed some overmitts and nylon wind pants to wear over my wool pants. My mother taught me how to use the sewing machine and helped me to make these. I progressed to jackets, packs, tents, gaiters and even matching spring ski pants for Linda and I. (see photo) My sewing isn't pretty or tailored but it works—the bag that I made for my frame pack lasted 30 years."

John and Linda try on the new lightweight spring ski pants John has just made, 2016.

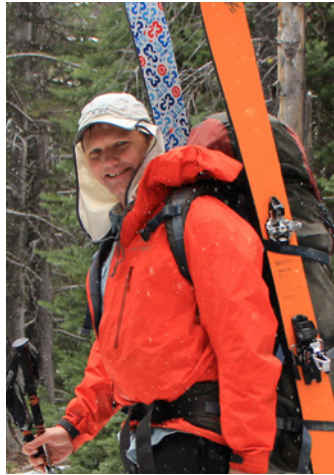
Trip partners through the years...



Steve Ludwig



Helen Sovdat



Stan Sovdat



Gord Ferguson



Lisa Baile
Photo Linda Bily



Peter Pare



Francis St Pierre
Photo Linda Bily



Jos van der Burg
Photo Peter Pare



Mary Hearnden and Dan Carey
Photo Linda Bily



Greg Stoltman



Alison Sydor
Photo Linda Bily



George Fulton
Photo Linda Bily



Graham Henderson,
Callaghan Valley 2018.
Photo John Baldwin

Known affectionately to his friends as the King of the Coast Range, John Baldwin has spent his life in a quest to experience the west coast wilderness. Since his teenage years he has explored the rugged Coast Mountain Range, climbing 700 peaks, many of them first ascents, and making perhaps one hundred multi-week, long-distance forays across the icefields and along the ridges of what is one of the last true wilderness areas on earth. Shunning the easy path, John has forged his own way through some of the toughest geography on the planet. He is a mountaineer and explorer of the first order.

His guidebook *Exploring the Coast Mountains on Skis* has opened the door to wilderness travel on skis for several generations of adventurers, and his two books, *Mountains of the Coast* and *Soul of Wilderness* have shown us the incredible beauty to be found in the mountains north of Vancouver all the way to Alaska.

Intelligent, polite, considerate and friendly, John Baldwin is the embodiment of the west coast ethic of simple and environmentally responsible exploration and the worthy patron of the 2019 Mountain Guides Ball.



For further information regarding the Summit Series of mountaineering biographies, please contact the National Office of The Alpine Club of Canada.
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