

Riding the Tiger

Contributed by Adam Howard

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Visibility—zero—forces her to rely on a map, compass, and altimeter as we climb 2,000 feet up, shooting for the Baker col, and the Bow Glacier section of the Icefields. All told—if we make it—we'll ski 20 miles today to Bow Lake, after a week of powder skiing at Mistaya Lodge...

That was 2003, my first real taste of glacier skiing. I was hooked, but at the time, I struggled to understand what pulled me, and so many others, to these hulking, mysterious—vanishing—ramps of ice. And I'm still struggling; this time to articulate the importance of glaciers in Backcountry's second annual White Issue.

So, for a little perspective, I called legendary Canadian Ski Mountaineer and author Chic Scott, who first skied the enormous, several-hundred-square-kilometer Wapta in 1964 on wooden skis. I thought my question about why glaciers are symbols of adventure would give him pause. It didn't. "Simple," he said. "It's the king. Skiing in two feet of powder, with crevasse danger, and hanging seracs all around; glacier skiing is the pinnacle of the sport." He's right of course, that's what we all aspire to, or at least dream about. It's the kind of experience we want our children's children to have. But will there be any glaciers left for them?

Well, that's a question that no phone call or amount of research can answer. And trust me, I tried. All the writers for this issue tried. We wanted to present a great action plan to save the snow and ice; foolish us. There is no map, and Lily's compass and altimeter will serve only to show how thin the Wapta has become since Chic first skied it in the 60's.

But we do know one thing. This issue of Backcountry isn't a fad. Nor is climate change a flavor of the month. We aren't going to tell you about our recycled paper, or carbon offsets, or charge you to buy a hybrid. But if you haven't toured on a glacier, do it. Go. If it makes you feel better, buys some carbon credits. You'll thank me later. Because when the icy giants are gone—some within our lifetimes—they're gone.

"Losing the glaciers is like losing the world's big carnivores, the great animals like the grizzly, and the tiger," Scott says. "Sure the frogs and centipedes are important too—as is skiing a forested slope. But glacier skiing is the pinnacle. It's like riding the tiger."

-Adam Howard, Editor