

# 2000 WINTERS OLD

In the deepest wilds of the Kootenays, three modern-day adventurers retrace the footsteps of Canada's most famous explorer

Story and photos by Dave Quinn

David Thompson has been called the greatest land geographer of all time. Between 1790 and 1820, Thompson travelled over 90,000 kilometres on foot, snowshoe, horse and canoe, mapping one-sixth of North America with an accuracy that still astounds modern surveyors. As the first European to ever navigate the entire length of the Columbia River, the chance to follow Thompson's original, exploratory footsteps through the mountainous wilds of BC's southern Rocky Mountains by ski is not only an adventure, but an opportunity to step back into a world very different from today's.

One of Thompson's greatest Kootenay legacies was his pioneering fur-trade routes over Howse Pass in 1807 and Athabasca Pass in 1811. After a hostile Peigan blockade — Peigans are a people of the Blackfoot Confederacy, native to southern Alberta — prevented the use of Howse Pass after Thompson mapped it, the Athabasca Pass ultimately became the main trans-Rockies travel corridor for the next 50 years. The Athabasca Pass route follows the Whirlpool River in modern-day Jasper National Park



Main photo: Paul Bell, John Bergenske and Azul ski up the Whirlpool River towards Mount Kane peak.  
Inset: Artist Joseph Cross' rendition of David Thompson's party crossing the Athabasca Pass in 1811.

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BACKYARD  
THE KOOTENAYS BEST



HEAVILY LADEN MEN WOULD HAUL BUNDLES OF FURS TO THE PASS, WHERE THEY WERE MET BY MULE-TRAINS LOADED WITH TRADE GOODS SUCH AS BLANKETS, FIREARMS AND METAL TOOLS. THE SWAP OCCURRED AT THE COMMITTEE PUNCH BOWL, WHERE TRADERS DRANK A RATION OF RUM TO THE HEALTH OF THE HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY DIRECTORS.

to the height of land, then down the remote Wood River, located northeast of Golden, to what was once the Columbia River, but now the Kinbasket Reservoir.

It's late March, and our group arrives at the Whirlpool River trailhead, pumped for a suffer-fest ski tour retracing the footsteps of Thompson. Our plan is to ski up the Whirlpool, over Athabasca Pass, and down to the Upper Wood River. From there we plan to hail a passing logging crew for a ride to the ferry that crosses the Kinbasket Reservoir to Mica, a tiny outpost settlement 100 kilometres north of Revelstoke. Everything's ready: skis, backpacks, eight days of food and children's sleds stolen from our neighbours to haul it all. Only one thing is missing: snow.

As we drive north along the Icefields Highway toward Jasper, the blanket of white is steadily dissipating, until nothing but the dirty, dry brown of last year's grass lines the roadway. The only frozen water we see is a solid layer of ice left on the old Whirlpool Road. It's as if the Zamboni is just ahead, out of sight.

At a pullout high on Whirlpool Road, we leave our car behind and undaunted, the apostles of Thompson — John, Paul, Andy, and I — slip and slither our way along the road, sometimes hauling our sleds along ice, other times carrying everything on our backs while we slish along muddy sections exposed to the spring sun. Not an auspicious start to an extended ski tour. It would be another three days of sloggng before we finally find winter and its smooth travelling snowpack.

However, we cannot help thinking of the tribulations of Thompson and his men heading towards the unknown in this exact valley, into the depths of the dark, glacial January of 1811, no roads, wearing wool and leather, using wooden snowshoes with lampwick bindings.

In many ways, Thompson was smarter than our merry band of Gore-Tex-clad adventurers. He had two dog teams that carried much of the expedition gear — each dog towed an impressive 32 kilograms. They also served the purpose of being expedition food themselves, if the need arose. Our canine teammates, Azul and Lucia, balk at carrying their own food, wagging their tales knowingly when we threaten to put them in the pot.

Thompson's journal tells of following the Whirlpool River until a series of canyons forced them into the trees. Soon we ski out into an open valley and, like Thompson, make good time along the shorefast ice at river's edge, until jagged slot canyons force us back onto the trail. Athabasca Pass linked fur grounds, in what is now British Columbia, with the waterways that carried the furs to the markets in the East. Heavily laden men would haul bundles of furs to the pass, where they were met by mule-trains loaded with trade goods such as blankets, firearms and metal tools. The swap occurred at the Committee Punch Bowl, where traders drank a ration of rum to the health of the Hudson's Bay Company directors — Thompson was an employee of Hudson's Bay Company, contracted to find trade routes through the unmapped west — and returned the way they came with new loads.



John Bergenske and Paul Bell contemplate cooking dog for dinner.

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After another two days of wallowing through knee-deep, isothermic snow and hauling ourselves over countless fallen trees, we finally encounter skiable snow and make good time to the pass itself. Deep blazes on trees, which may have been left by Thompson himself, show us the trail. The tracks of a lone wolf leave a wilderness road sign showing us the way.

From the pass we can see back the way we came, to the unbroken wilderness of Jasper National Park. While to the west, in the Wood River area, alien polygon shapes denoting clear-cuts cover the valley walls like bad wallpaper. It's hard to believe that even here, nearly 200 kilometres and a ferry ride away from the nearest mill, industrial logging is taking place. Farther downstream, the Wood River itself disappears into a silty wasteland of cedar stumps, as the still waters of the Kinbasket reservoir ingest the river.

To the west, little remains of the landscape Thompson first explored a scant two centuries ago. His settlement at Boat Encampment is now under the still, glacial waters of the reservoir, and the ruins of his trading post on Windermere Lake, Kootenae House, are barely discernable among the sprawl and jet-boat thunder of the modern Columbia Valley.

Only the Upper Wood River, including Pacific and Jeffrey Creeks, remain as intact wilderness Thompson would have encountered 200 years ago. The same values that entice us to linger awhile in awe amongst the giant and ancient spruce, cedar, and hemlock of Pacific and Jeffrey Creeks have inspired others to help protect this landscape.

Wood River Forest Products—the timber licensee with cutting

rights to these last pristine valleys in this region—agreed in 2005 to forgo road-building and clear-cut plans in exchange for access to less controversial wood. Mica Heli Guides, a legendary heli-ski operation that flies in the region, has opted to remove ski runs in Pacific and Jeffrey Creeks to help preserve this incredible wilderness and protect the endangered caribou frequently sighted in these drainages. These agreements tie directly in with local conservation group Wildsight's vision to create the David Thompson Heritage Lands, a protected area that would preserve the opportunity to experience the last of David Thompson's wilderness, as we are, for generations to come.

After seven days we survival ski to the Wood River and follow moose and wolf tracks to the edge of clear-cuts that reach into lower Jeffrey Creek. Ten more kilometres of skiing gains us the main forest road, and the lack of fresh vehicle tracks tells us that spring break-up has arrived. As in Thompson's day, there would be no free ride down the Wood Arm for us.

We grudgingly load our sleds onto our packs and trudge the remaining 30 kilometres to the ferry crossing at Mica in our plastic telemark boots, a journey Thompson, no doubt, would have laughed at and finished before breakfast.

For more information on the David Thompson bicentennial visit [www.davidthompson200.org](http://www.davidthompson200.org)  
To check out the David Thompson Heritage Lands Project visit [www.wildsight.ca/programs/davidthompson](http://www.wildsight.ca/programs/davidthompson)

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