

ROLLING STONE JONES



Mountaineering guidebook author David P. Jones has scaled — or rather devoured — an absurd number of obscure British Columbian peaks. Meet the most modest mountain maniac around.

By Andrew Findlay

THERE IS A RESTLESS SPIRIT at the core of every true adventurer, an intense need for a life free from the dull, risk-diluted routines of modern living. David P. Jones is one of those adventurers. At 63, this mountaineer, guidebook author and insatiable explorer is proof you don't have to be young to be a climbing bum. He has arguably logged more miles and developed greater intimacy with devil's club, remote logging roads and obscure peaks

From left to right: First ascent, Ohno Wall, west face of Moby Dick, August 1972. It took Jones five days to walk in from Rogers Pass, BC, and then another five days to climb the 800-metre wall; Jones and his wife, Joie Seagram, descending from their first ascent of the west ridge of Nautilus, Nemo Group, South Selkirks, August 1998; Jones takes a well-deserved seat after completing the first ascent of Waldorf Tower in the Northern Selkirks, 1971. Photos: David P. Jones collection

"THERE'S AN EXCITEMENT AND EXHILARATION WITH A NEW ROUTE. IT'S AS MUCH MENTAL AS IT IS PHYSICAL. THERE'S A PEAK IN THE NORTHERN SELKIRKS THAT I'VE TRIED TO CLIMB FIVE TIMES, BUT I'LL BE BACK. I'LL GET IT ONE OF THESE DAYS."





Left to right: Jones topping out on the summit ridge of Salbty, in the Moloch Group, Northern Selkirks, August 1988. Photo: Graham Rowbotham. Heading with a load to base camp II on Manaslu, west-central Nepal, February 1978. Photo: David P. Jones collection. David P. Jones, Nelson, BC, April 2010. Photo: Peter Moynes



of British Columbia than anybody else tying into a rope these days, and he does it all without Red Bull sponsorship or a need to Tweet. My first and only brief encounter with Jones was back in 2006 in the Premier Range near Valemount, British Columbia. I was there as a volunteer rope leader for the Alpine Club of Canada's centennial summer mountaineering camp; Jones had wisely capitalized on the presence of an alpine club helicopter and dovetailed onto a flight with three buddies to climb in this rarely visited group of 11,000 footers. He had pitched his tent in a boulder field a 15-minute hike uphill from our large encampment, away from the crowd.

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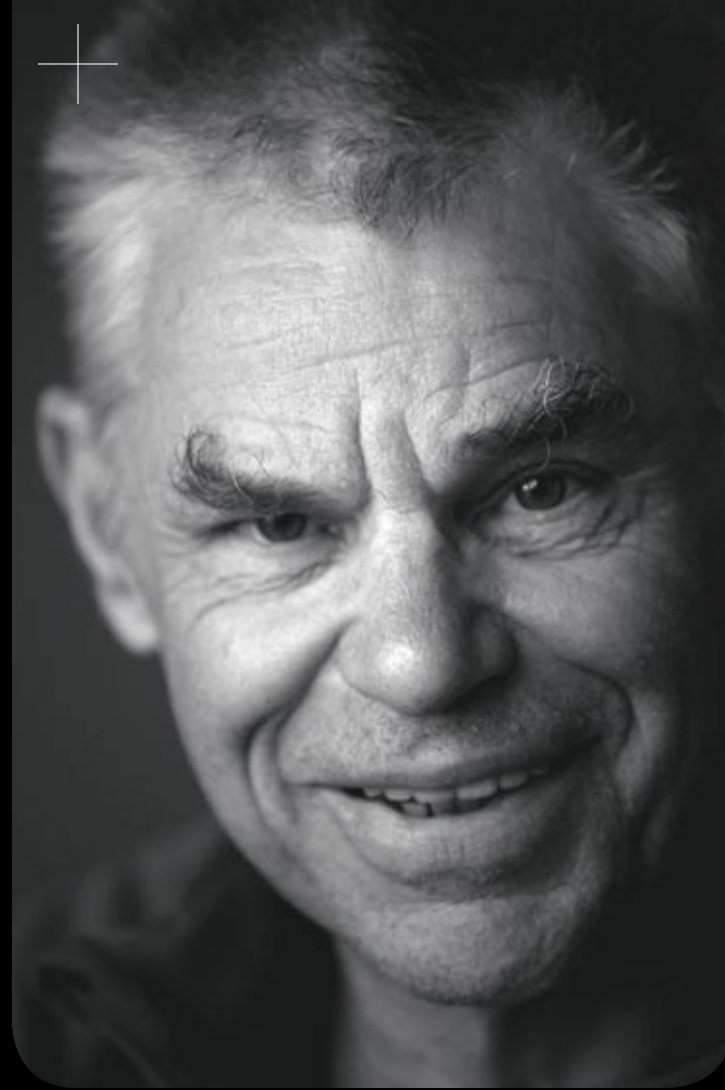
Tall enough to centre a basketball team, wiry and bespectacled, Jones has a slightly academic demeanour and manner of speaking with a gruff finish. When it comes to talking about routes climbed and ones on his tick list, or even waxing about the problems of the world, he is animated and energetic. That week in the Premier Range, while the other guides and I hauled B-trains of weekend-warrior climbers up the tourist routes on surrounding peaks, like Mount Sir Wilfred Laurier and Mount Sir Mackenzie Bowell, Jones and his cohorts galloped up and down the tougher, more technical lines, gliding across uneven glacial debris and moraines with the ease of figure skaters and burrowing through dense interior rainforest bush like hedgehogs.

“I LIKE GETTING off the beaten track. I don’t really enjoy crowds, so wherever I go there tend to be new routes to do,” Jones says over the phone from Golden, where he recently moved after retiring from his job heading up the University of British Columbia’s patent and licensing office. “I have always worked so I could climb.”

A great day in the mountains, Jones explains with deadpan seriousness, involves about 40 kilometres of cross-country travel and 2,500 metres or so of elevation gain, with bushwhacking, some burly crossings of glacier-swollen creeks and, yes, more bushwhack-

ing. And that’s well before he gets a whiff of the summit he has circled on a topo map at the head of some forgotten valley. “Sure bushwhacking is hard, but there’s an art to it. I quite like it,” Jones says, laughing. “Most people are not willing to put in that kind of effort to reach an objective.” But Jones has some cherished climbing cohorts. Accompanying him on his feverish explorations is his wife and regular rope mate, Joie Seagram, along with an extended family of dedicated climbing companions nicknamed “The Flying Circus.”

Beyond his inner coterie of climbing friends, Jones is probably best known in the outdoor scene as the author of two outstanding mountaineering guidebooks, *Selkirks North* and *Selkirks South*, which together document more than 1,200 alpine routes. His



connection to this wonderful, heavily glaciated range of quality rock goes back to his youth. In 1957, he immigrated to Canada from England with his family, settling in 12-Mile, a small logging town south of Revelstoke that was submerged by the Arrow Lake reservoir in the 1960s. He learned to move around in the bush there because he played outside with the creatures, critters and slippery moss-covered deadfall.

In his early teens, he tied his first climbing knot and he’s basically had a rope on ever since, amassing a resume of original trips and ascents too numerous to mention. In 1970, he did an 18-day, self-supported traverse from Albert Canyon to Mica Creek, north of Revelstoke, long before heli-skiing and heli-mountaineering became an industry in the Selkirks. He has scrubbed countless sport routes in Squamish and Skaha and has stood atop roughly 500 mountains, including more than 50 per cent of the Selkirk peaks greater than 2,500 metres.

Over the years he estimates he has completed close to 140 first ascents in the Selkirks alone, but has pioneered dozens of others elsewhere in the Cariboo, Monashees, Purcells and Rockies. And there are many more routes to be had, he says, so many that he can’t believe more people aren’t out there bagging them. He bristles slightly, however, when asked about his alleged quest to climb every summit in the Columbias, as though it’s a preposterous idea. At the same time, his relentless, infectious optimism makes you think such a knee-destroying goal might be possible. “There’s an excitement and

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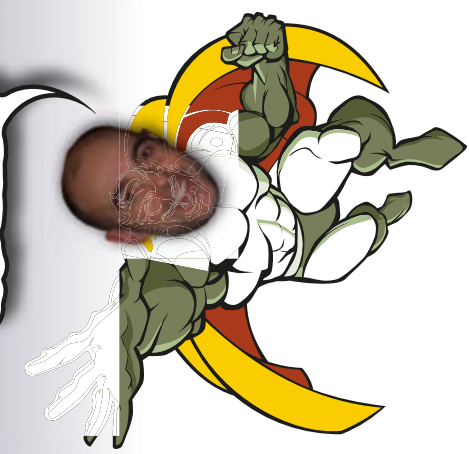
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Taking in the view of the western flanks of Selkirk Mountain's Battle Range, from the summit of Beowulf, July 2003. Mount Butters (left), Moby Dick (center) and Mount Proteus (right).
Photo: David P. Jones collection

exhilaration with a new route. It's as much mental as it is physical. There's a peak in the Northern Selkirks that I've tried to climb five times, but I'll be back," Jones says. "I'll get it one of these days."

THIS PAST WINTER and spring, when he wasn't busy banging nails on his retirement home on the benchlands above Golden, hitting the climbing gym or pedalling between 600 and 700 kilometres per week on his road bike, he was busy buffing up a stack of partially completed climbing guide manuscripts for the north and south Rockies, the Purcells (excluding the Bugaboos), the Cariboods and the Monashees. He is a meticulous researcher who pores over historical records, sifts through archives and interviews aging Canadian climbing legends so their experiences and stories remain for posterity. "The older I get the more interested I am becoming in history," Jones says, "and I'm finding a lot of errors in some of the old climbing guides."

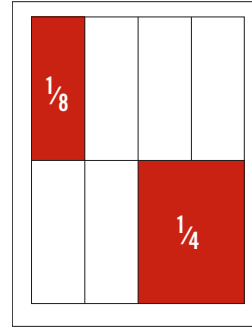
An eye for detail is one of the qualities Jones brings to any climbing trip. Every spring, he has a tradition of circulating an itinerary of prospective trips to the Flying Circus, complete with estimated helicopter and other trip costs. Like any dedicated alpinist of the old-school variety, Jones knows how to stretch a dollar. Last summer, in five weeks of climbing, he says his incremental expenses were \$500. He sleeps in the back of cars and prefers five-star camp stove grub. Tim McAllister is an Invermere-based mountain guide and has been a member of the informal Flying Circus for at least a half dozen memorable weeks in the mountains, feeding off Jones' boundless energy, whether on the side of a mountain or waiting out a storm back in camp. In 2002, he and Jones established a new route on the Camels, a tottering quartzite tower due east of Mount Tupper in Rogers Pass. McAllister, who was then still an aspiring

guide, was immediately impressed with Jones' ability to intuit a descent route on unfamiliar, complex mountain terrain, an artful aspect of mountaineering that is often overlooked. "He can blaze a rappel route so fast and basically build an anchor out of anything," McAllister says.

Jones takes praise with a shrug of the shoulders, seeming almost baffled he'd be the subject of an interview. For him it's about the climbing — always has been, always will be. To some people, such obsession might seem like self-absorbed hubris; to Jones it's the stuff of life. Over the years, he has been offered career-advancing jobs in places like Toronto, but for Jones, moving to a megalopolis without mountains in striking distance would be as logical as relocating a polar bear to Paraguay. He chose early retirement so he could keep climbing while still fit and able. Without kids or grandkids to anchor him to the easy chair, six-week intense summer climbing seasons will expand to six months. "You never know what's going to happen. Climbing is critical for me because I have so much fun doing it," says Jones. "I guess I just love the freedom. It might sound a little trite, but I truly have the freedom of the hills."

So if you find yourself thrashing your way up a remote and lonely British Columbian valley to the foot of some equally lonely peak, chances are David P. Jones has been there before you. Or if he hasn't, he probably has a note scribbled in the back of a logbook to go there soon.

Vancouver Island-based freelance journalist Andrew Findlay flew to Guatemala last winter with his mountain bike to do a pioneering traverse of the remote Sierra de los Cuchumatanes mountains, and now he's at home changing diapers and plotting a surf trip in the Caribbean with little Zola and Lisa.



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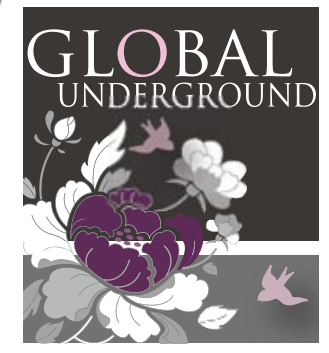
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