

# Argonaut Peak (8369') – skiing (attempt)

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**April 14-15, 2011**

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**Weather** – Sun & warm at CG (50s+), TH and up Blizzard, high winds (10-25mph), temps 20's and lower at night. Morning sun patch dissolved to dense bright clouds and warm solar radiation

**Celestial** - Sunrise 6:18a, sunset 19:49, moonrise 3:56p, moonset 4:13a 4 days till full moon

## Short of it

Late start leaving from Eightmile CG, walk up Stuart Lake access road, ski up to camp. Spend five and a half hours going 1.7 miles in a whiteout and high winds. Catch some high angle skiing and nice wide open gentle slope (30deg+) turns and back to CG. Kinda' boring sounding, well, can't give away all the fun unless you read more.

## The plan...

On the list this year has been several ski trips into the Enchantment area. The well publicized Mudflow blockage of Icicle Creek looked like it'd squashed those ideas. With a weekend of rock climbing coming in that area it was a good time to put in a short trip... Needed two more details, a weather window and a partner to ski.

Wednesday was wet with the ever changing Thursday and Friday forecast looking good. Plan was going up the NE gully of Argonaut. Scott was game to ski it. We exchanged emails and talked and came up with a plan. A late start since didn't want to get to base camp and just sit for hours... Also some figuring on times with the low snow level and increased road walk.

## Getting going

A little running around and we arrived at the Eightmile CG. We parked at the fire pit of the coming Friday and Saturdays party. Some checking out of how far we could drive... Then a later than expected leaving up the old road bypassing the mud flow (1:08p, 1943'). A nice warm walk in shoes, a quarter mile over the bridge at Bridge Creek CG and up the wet road. Many rocks and boulders and snow patches on the way up. In about a half hour of ignoring the up two hikers with skis on pack came down. We milked them for beta. They were up for the Triple Col on Dragontail. Had dug a pit, didn't like the high amount of unconsolidated and left. As they turned snow cascaded down the route. They seemed relieved the extra omen that it was best to leave. Another ten minutes and we were changing from sneakers to boots and skinning up the snow covered road (1.7m, c2840, 2:00p).

## Where's the TH

Skinned up a short up and then down stretch then the long haul gently up. Past a 2' deep buried Eightmile TH and in two hours from the CG we landed at the Stuart Lake TH well buried in 2-3' of snow (3.9m, c3400', 2h5min). The warm of the valley long gone. Very cold wind and it was snowing. Wait! This is April, ... Oh, better than wet showers ; ) Thinking about it I've sure taken the summer drive up for granted.

The Stuart Lake trail was well covered. Firm, yet a softness with a new layer of snow building. Some marks where the earlier guys had walked post-holed. It took nearly an hour to get to the bridge with snow to the height of the top rail and wide enough to be a comfortable ski (on my skinnier skis) (5.3m, c3950, 4:10p). I'd definitely not want to walk it though. A break to add a jacket and Scott noticing he'd lost some gear. I move ahead slowly finding the lost trail while Scott did a back search –no luck –bummer.

I took it slow for Scott to catch up. This part of the trail rises up and switches a bit. Tracks went several directions. I took the direction that proved "creative" til deciding I wanted back on the trail instead of weaving the boulders up. It took an hour to go the ¾ mile to the Colchuck trail (6m, c4534', 5:20p).

## Eenie, Meenie, Miny Moe, which way do we go

Our decision was heading toward Argonaut/Sherpa so we kept on the main trail another quarter mile then followed the flat open meadow feel of the flat swamp. Staying on the right with a dodge near its end to regain the trail and rise around a bump. Three quarters a mile from the Colchuck TH we came upon a scurry of tracks. First thought an animal chase, then saw that each track went to an alder tree an inch or greater in diameter that looked to be hacked then dragged back downhill. I thought I saw snow shoe track, and paw tracks. First thought beaver, then wondered at the large prints. We didn't study it long before another distraction of two very substantial to the ground avy debris fields from most likely the past week or so (6.7m, c4610, 6:05p).

Onward on flatter terrain, seeing occasional signs of trail. Leaving it to the left to follow Mountaineers creek, found a snowbridge/log crossing then over a bump and then a short search for another crossing to the east. Many logs with high piles, downstream a wide logjam snow covered and easy cross (7.5m, c4597', 6:50p). Followed the gentle, but snow covered windfall strewn side of the creek. Scott testing the west side at times and me the east. We wanted enough time to set camp in the daylight. Avoid being anywhere near the open area to avoid avy issues and ideally a small opening to also avoid widow makers crashing down on us.

Passing a few great spot and finally at 7:20 one with flatter terrain and near the creek (8m, c4700', 7:20p) less than a quarter mile short of where the creeks splits to Argonaut and Stuart. Still snowing and wind gusting, we set the tent and settled inside while water heated for dinner. Perfect timing. Relax, eat, stay warm and asleep by 9:00 with the wind gusting outside. Man, I hope I don't have to get up in the middle of the night... It's getting cold, real cold out there.

### **A beautiful morning**

1am, woke, light from the snow reflection faintly glowing, wind blowing snow on the tent... I drift back to sleep, warm in my bag. 6am shake the tent then stick head out –still snowing and very cold (20F?). Back into tent and close door. Nice being warm so I procrastinate getting out of the warm bag. Can't wait, cold boots on feet and out of tent and start water boiling for breakfast. As we prep for the day the snow stops. By 7:40 we are off heading up the creek. In less than a quick half mile we've left the forest. Standing in the wide openness of the bottom of the glade below Argonaut with spotty sunshine and views stretching from Colchuck on our left to Sherpa on the right partially hidden by Mountaineers Ridge up front (.5m, c5089, 8p). Yesterday took longer than we thought. Originally thoughts were more on Sherpa. Seeing the closeness of Argonaut we head directly for the NE flank.

### **A long way up**

Low angle at the lower reaches we head directly up. Snow 4-6" deep with bumps blown clean to ice. The direct route up the middle looks un-inviting so we veer left at c6080' to a rib with sparse larch standing upright. At c6700' the rib has brought us back to the still wide, but narrowing NE Face. As the pitch angled up we switched back working our way up and testing the snow as we went. 6" deep here, 14" there and 30"... Obvious the wind had deposited snow and it was not consolidated. At noon (very coincidental) we stopped at c7160 (1.6m from camp) just below the narrowing of the gulleys and across from the exit of the narrow NE col for a break and dig a pit. The weather had changed long ago from sun to obscuring clouds and snow. Snow tests indicated stable conditions. 6-8" fluff on a consolidated layer. A denser layer about two feet down and more consolidated below.

### **To gulley or**

Food, water, and some talk. With the wind loading and depth we saw in places ascending the narrow NE col was ruled out. A little to the left a shorter col looked to lead to the east Argonaut Ridge. Shortly the steepening angle combined with the snow had us kickstepping directly up with skis on packs. Below the surface powder a firmer layer providing good kicking. On our right an impressive show of vertical cliffs and towers capped with huge cornices. Very glad to skirt away from their potential fall zone. Then within ball throwing (snowball) of the ridge the gulley narrowed and the snow near the rocks was rotted stopping progress. Scott led left to an intermediate snow covered arête airy on both side. The angles were around 50+ deg. Doesn't sound like much, but it was a long way down... Only another 75' up the arête and Scott expressed victory for gaining the ridge... then disappeared. What? He popped up again, still happy. I followed and we dropped our gear in a slightly sheltered boulder area (1.7m, c7770', 2:10p).

## **The East Ridge**

The wind howled and sun felt warm trying to burn through the dense cloud. East a faint view of tall sharp Gendarmes. To the west a void. Back the way we came a vertical drop and towers and to the south a gentle sloping plain. We booted the flattish walk to the base of the summit block stopping at c7800' (1.9m, 2:35p). Wind howling and visibility at 50-100' we decided continuing on to the summit a no go. No view, iffy snow conditions, and getting late. At our rate of progress it could take an hour or could be several. It should be a great ski down as a fitting reward.

## **Things change**

Back at the ridge, we de-skinned. The snow on the skins had melted from the solar heating and re-froze. Scott eyed some gulleys and we chose to drop the same one we came up (3:02p). The top of the gully was a little challenging with 2" of sloughing on top of very firm. We leap-frogged with ever improving conditions. Gathering below the gully we both appreciated the calmer conditions and that it had stopped snowing.

At c6700' we veered only slightly right amongst trees and boulders over a hump. The pitch eased to about 25-30 degrees and opened up. A right turn to cut the slope and a short crack appear ahead of me. It stopped. I turned up hill above it stopped and anchored. Another crack and I watched as the snow below separated cracking a hundred feet each way and slowly starting to move down hill (oh, I also yelled to Scott, "Crack!"). Waiting for the snow to stop moving I traversed on the now clean layer away from Scott's way down so he could try to clean any more of the instability.

Conditions had changed since our ascent. Snow now heavier on top. The snow had moved on a lower angle slope than the upper reaches. A move to skier's right and an area with small trees poking up. I'd been fighting the entire descent. The new skins from last week hadn't stuck so I'd brought an old pair. I quickly found where the glue had gone from the new skins. Snow stuck to my bases over 2" thick. Skiing felt like driving with a new student learning a clutch. Despite that the skiing was fun in the heavier spring snow. Into the trees traversing back to the tent along our uphill skin track (3.5m, c4700, 4:00p).

## **The long trail down**

At camp the smoked salmon hanging in the tree had not visibly attracted any attention. In short order we packed camp and followed our track back to the trailhead (4:25p). Packing the tent the sun cut through the trees. Once a the swampy areas the sun was gone, leaving a slightly obscured view of Argonaut. Some see clouds as obscuring all views. I see it as a reminder to re-direct ones focuses. The softness created by the mists and the textures closer to us. This distraction worked well most of the way down. The tighter trail a bit of a challenge at times. Heavier snow making maneuverability interesting. No new tracks coming in since ours. Stuart Lake TH at 6:30p (7.7m, c3400'). A long flat skin past Eightmile TH, signs of a skate skier, finally a little down (sans skins) a bare patch or so to dodge, a snowshoer heading in for the weekend. Snow ended leaving us 1.7 miles (7:14p) to walk back to an awaiting campfire at the campground (11.5m, c1940', 8:20p). Of several trails the Stuart Lake trail seems to go on forever. On skis helped and so did good company.

A good ski tour and skiing even with the change in the weather from the original forecast. Thanks for the good time.

Happy Trails!

fwb

## **Stats:**

**In to camp:** 8m, 6h12m, 2857'ascent

**Camp to high point:** 1.7m, 5h30min

**Out:** 11.5m, 12h40min, 3300'ascent

**TT:** 19.5m, 18h52min, 6157' ascent