

WEEKLY

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OUTDOORS

A Journey to the Yukon

TOMBSTONE RANGE IS “CANADA’S PATAGONIA”

Story and Photo by John D’Onofrio · Wednesday, September 28, 2011



I first heard about Tombstone Territorial Park a few years ago.

A new park located in the northern Yukon Territory, Tombstone was created in 1998. The park’s management plan was approved in 2009 and the sign saying, “Welcome to Tombstone” went up this August.

Described as “the Patagonia of Canada” for its collection of soaring granite towers, the park consists of wilderness on a grand scale and is home to a healthy and intact ecosystem that includes grizzly bears, wolves, wolverines and caribou.

Its 2,200 square kilometers boasts a single hiking trail—the trail to Grizzly Lake—and even this is more a rough and tumble route than a trail in the usual sense of the word: Wild with a capital W.

The chance to explore this epic landscape before it was “discovered” was beguiling. And so it was that my old traveling pal Joe Jowdy and I hit the road north for the 2,000-mile drive from Bellingham to the Grizzly Lake trailhead last month.

Three and a half days later, suffering from serious road fatigue, we pulled off Canada’s northernmost road, the Dempster “Highway,” into the new Tombstone Interpretive Center to secure hiking permits. We were required to sign a waiver acknowledging that if we didn’t return, no one would come looking for us.

At the trailhead, we hoisted our backpacks and started up through a forest of brilliant yellow birch trees—among autumn color cognoscenti the Tombstones are just becoming famous for brilliant fall colors.

Before long, we found ourselves at the upper edge of the tree line and ascended a rocky alpine ridge with views widening with each step upward. All around us the sub-arctic wilderness was a blaze of color; the yellow forests yielding to deep red tundra where the ridges climbed out of the valley of the North Klondike River.

As we neared the crest of the first ridge, clouds appeared out of nowhere and soon we were being pelted by hail. The temperature dropped 20 degrees and a bitter wind blew across the lichen-covered rocks.

We traversed the serpentine ridge, climbing through notches and side-hilling on loose rocks. Thankfully, the weather improved and we savored sunlight streaming through the clouds. We began to get glimpses in the distance of the dark monoliths that encircled Grizzly Lake, rising like the mountains of Mordor. The tallest of these, Tombstone Mountain and Mount Monolith, had their jagged summits veiled by clouds.

After more than nine hours on the ridge, the route descended to golden meadows bustling with marmots. Another hour and a half over slippery boulders brought us to the austere shores of the lake in its cold and treeless cirque beneath vertical walls of stone.

The next days were spent exploring the epic landscapes around Grizzly Lake—climbing scree slopes to high and lonely ledges, watching rainbows shimmer over shattered grey rocks, observing the sacred ritual of sunrise illuminating the wild vertical topography.

The Gwich’in people, ancestral inhabitants of these isolated mountains, called them *Ddhal Ch’el*, which translates roughly as “among the sharp, ragged, rocky mountains.” No kidding. As we hiked back toward the waiting Subaru, the sun again broke through the clouds, and the tundra blazed in the golden northern sun, a perfect conclusion to our Tombstone sojourn.

For more information about Tombstone Territorial Park, call 1-866-617-2757 or go to: <http://www.env.yk.ca>