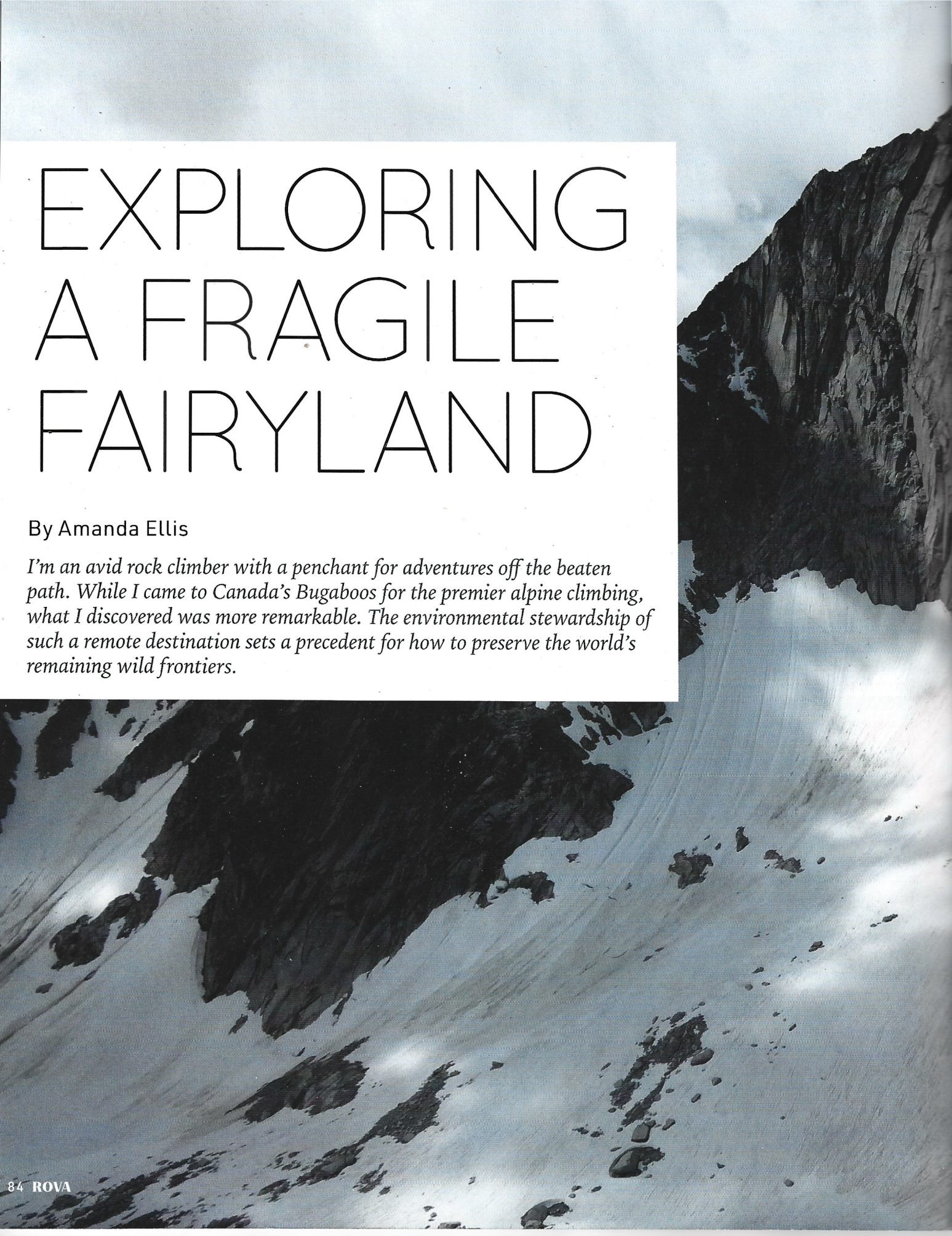
EXPLORING A FRAGILE FAIRYLAND

By Amanda Ellis

I'm an avid rock climber with a penchant for adventures off the beaten path. While I came to Canada's Bugaboos for the premier alpine climbing, what I discovered was more remarkable. The environmental stewardship of such a remote destination sets a precedent for how to preserve the world's remaining wild frontiers.





A campsite with mind-boggling views.

As we finally reach the Conrad Kain Hut, I topple beneath the weight of my pack and shimmy my body free of the awkward, 70-pound load. A half-mile and 750 feet in elevation still separate us from Applebee Dome Campground, today's destination; but beyond a patch of distant pines, I can finally see the Bugaboos.

Snow-kissed crests loom beyond granite moraines, gray against the cloud-dotted azure sky. That ice-scraped wilderness will be my home for the next week. Canada's Bugaboo Provincial Park, though a gem in the crown of the Purcell Range, has remained a mere whisper among backpackers, only visited by a few thousand people each year. My climbing partner and I won the American Alpine Club's 'Live Your Dream' grant to climb the Northeast Ridge on Bugaboo Spire less than three months ago. Inspired by the thought of being one of those lucky few visitors, I shoulder my pack again and continue leapfrogging from cairn to cairn up the steep, rocky steps that lead to Applebee Dome.

From the parking lot, the Conrad Kain trail funnels you through half a mile of temperate rainforest before climbing above the tree line. The path traverses steep outcrops with chain handrails and then turns vertical, following a ladder up a 15-foot cliff. Above the ladder, a flower-studded alpine meadow unfurls to the distant moraines.

It takes five hours, all told, to reach Applebee Dome Campground. Camp feels like a different dimension altogether from the forest below; a realm of granite and grasses through which a chill wind carries the sounds of clanking gear and hissing stoves. Colorful tents speckle the alpine tundra. As we pitch our own on a flat, granite slab, the memory of urban civilization begins to fade away.

We're on the edge of a glacier enclosed by a cirque of the most stunning granite spires I've ever seen—but it seems so vulnerable. Sparse plants peek out of tiny cracks, their precious existence threatened by a single human misstep. Crescent Glacier sprawls from the campground to the base of the distant peaks, a delicate half-frozen backdrop for the climbers who cross it.

The Alpine Club of Canada erected the Conrad Kain hut in 1972. It has since been a fixture on the mountain, helping explorers to reduce human impact on the fragile timberline area. A hydro-generator equips the cabin with heat, lighting, and hot water, and a pipe funnels a water supply up to a tap in Applebee Dome Campground. There are toilets at the hut, as well as Applebee Dome, Bugaboo-Snowpatch Col, and East Creek Camp. No camping is allowed in the park, except in designated areas and in essential bivouacking situations. We see very few signs of human impact on even the most trafficked trails, including up to the proximal Eastpost Spire and the approach hike to Bugaboo Spire.

Ascending the Northeast Ridge of Bugaboo Spire is the main objective of our trip. The technical climbing comprises 10 pitches classed 5.8 on the Yosemite Decimal System (YDS) scale—a class somewhere between beginner and expert—but the approach is long and challenging, boosting the route's overall National Climbing Classification System (NCCS) difficulty ranking to Grade IV—meaning a full day of climbing. The objective



requires an early-morning start from camp to tackle an arduous hike across snow, rock, and ice to the Crescent/Bugaboo Col. Then, tricky YDS Class 4 scrambling up chossy rock leads to the ridgeline that runs to the base of the route.

We set out at 4 a.m. on the final day of our trip, following cairns by headlamp out of camp along the faint trail that winds across the glacier. Only our labored breathing breaks the morning stillness. As I slot my ice axe into a frozen snowbank, I wonder how many people have passed this same way. Granite cairns and crampon-crafted snow stairs define the trail, but otherwise there's no sign of human passage. It's a stark contrast to other alpine approaches I've taken. On the hike into Matthes Crest in Tuolumne, California, earlier this summer, I remember people traipsing carelessly through groves and fields in the pursuit of shortcuts off the main trail.

By 6 a.m., we reach the col and begin scrambling up to the ridge as the sunrise spills coral rays across a promising cloudless sky. Arriving at the rope-up terrace is a welcome reprieve, and I give an elated squeal looking up at the elegant granite cracks rising skyward. The climb itself passes by in a blur of hand jams and foot locks that carry us across a sea of endless granite. My partner and I trade leads in perfect rhythm, flaking rope and exchanging gear at belays with practiced ease. Time ceases to exist, and my mind simply registers jumbled snapshots of the wild beauty immersing us.

As I stand on the summit of Bugaboo Spire and look out across the infinite landscape of rock and ice, goosebumps rise on my arms. There's no question that the world's prevailing backcountry cradles are dwindling. Without ramping up protective measures, they will perish. Most visitors to the Bugaboos seem to understand this precarious state of affairs. Here, humankind strives to maintain symbiosis with the land. Now, I understand why.

A day after climbing Bugaboo Spire, we pack up to leave. Our packs are lighter and the descent trail is downhill, making the task of hiking out effortless in comparison to what we experienced on our way up. My struggle is emotional; I've become attached to this place, and it is hard to leave.

As we near the trailhead, I trudge through a patch of mud and contemplate the footsteps left behind. The tread pattern of my hiking boot is visible, but I know the soil will dry. Soon enough, winter will blanket the entire landscape in snow, burying the remnants of our passage—not only our footsteps, but also the chalk and the fingerprints we placed while climbing those breathtaking granite spires, the imprints of our crampons from crossing the glacier; in a wilderness managed with care, these are fleeting, with no permanent mark of our visit left at all. All that remains are the memories of this fragile fairyland, ever beckoning me to return. **R**

Amanda Ellis is a rock climber, alpinist, and freelance journalist based out of Colorado's San Luis Valley. When she's not crafting stories to inspire others to get outside, she's adventuring in her converted campervan, 'Atlas'. Her work has appeared in online and print publications including *Rock & Ice* magazine, *Backpacker* magazine, and *The REI Co-op Journal*. You can learn more about Amanda at investinginadventure.net.

Amanda at the summit of Bugaboo Spire.