



Mount Niles from Yoho Icefield

Photo by Lloyd Harmon, Banff

Summer Ski-ing

By Victor Kutschera, Banff

WHILE teeming millions of humanity suffer during those scorching hot weeks of the summer in the sultry atmosphere of our North American cities, a much happier contingent of sun-tanned disciples of the nordic ski spend their holidays high up on the salty-wet firnsnow of the world renowned Canadian Rockies.

"Why—how could one ski in the summer?" asks the uninformed man in the street as he wipes the sweat from his forehead, "It's certainly ridiculous to tell anyone that there's snow to ski on in the mountains . . ."

And I am afraid this is the average man's misconception about the sport of mountain skiing in general. It seems that there are but few people in ordinary walks of life who know and understand the basic reasons for our resplendent snow deposits that offer unexcelled sport to the ardent connoisseur of alpine ski-ing. Many have never even heard of a most usual natural

phenomenon in our great mountains: the occurrence of glaciers. These mighty flows of ice and snow are to them a veritable ninth wonder—or even a hoax—a good joke to laugh at. Nevertheless there are numerous ice deposits of truly appallingly huge dimensions in our celebrated Canadian Cordillera. Some of these vast remnants of the past ice-ages lie rather close to the beaten path—the railroad and automobile roads of modern times—and it is with awe that the trans-continental passengers' surprised eyes behold the strange sight of a colossal ice formation that caps the very summit of some or the other towering peak as the Canadian Pacific Limited speeds by. The sparkling and glittering masses of ice and snow that adorn the summits of the peaks vary in depth and size to a certain degree; for instance there is the magnificent ice crown of the gigantic massiv of our tremendous Mount Temple (11,636 feet) over a square mile in area and

several hundred feet thick. Mount Lefroy with its 11,230 feet of altitude or the three miles long summit ridge of ice enshrouded Mount Victoria (11,365 feet) at world renowned Lake Louise, and so many others are from a glaciological viewpoint taken so-called "hanging glaciers." Such ice formations are totally unsuited as practical and safe playgrounds for the enthusiastic skier. But there is another variation of ice known to the mountaineer—the great flows of the Columbia Icefields, the Freshfield and the Yoho belong to this group; these are the better known of the "Gletscher-felder" our Canadian Rockies boast of. These veritable rivers of ice flow imperceptibly slow from the lofty heights, they crunch and crack with terrific force down the broad vistas of barren rock to finally break off in a wildly serrated "ice-fall" of monstrous ice-pinnacles, towerlets and cubes that glitter and sparkle, scintillate and reflect the intense sunlight in a most unearthly sort of bluish-green hued diamond sparkle, while splashing, melting waters drip on to the glacier worn bedrock to join the rushing flood of the glacial brook on its journey into the far below alpine valley—or end in a more or less gentle "tongue" at the terminal moraine. These huge piles of accumulated rock debris and dirt were forcefully ground from the bedrock by the slowly moving glacier's enormous weight and friction. This latter type of glacial formation makes for easier ascents on to the ice proper and assures the summer ski-ing enthusiast a safe and quick reaching of the firnsnow itself.

"Well, what is 'Firnsnow'?" asks the uninitiated, "and why go on to a glacier for snow?"

Firn or nevé snow is wet crystalline snow of a salt-like consistency and is a left-over from last winter's snowfall. The millions of tons of ice below the firn act like a tremendous refrigerator during the hot months of the year, and thus assure the sportsman unequalled skiing under ideal weather conditions in the glare of the health-giving rays of the invigorating mountain sun. The bane of winter ski-ing—sub-zero, ice blasts of wind and all sorts of discomfort—are a thing unknown to our guild of sun-worshippers, but despite the warm sun and the long days—and unlike most alpine (European) summer ski resorts, our Canadian snow conditions during the hot part of the year, surpass the fondest expectations of skiers unacquainted with the actual quality of the running surface of our glacial snow. As a matter of fact, there are prolonged spells in the months of July and August, when to one's most pleasant surprise a deep layer of dry crystalline powder snow covers all the snowfields of our glaciers. This happy occurrence is the usual thing after every summer rainfall in the low valleys. The colder air of the alpine heights causes the precipitation to fall in the form of snowflakes, whereas the warmer valleys receive

a drenching of rain. It is an interesting spectacle indeed to behold with one's amazed eyes the vivid greens of the forest below the iceline, while myriads of sparkling, diamond-like cold snow crystals glitter in unbelievable beauty under the enormous vault of a cerulean summer sky.

Summer ski-ing as a sport in the Alps is as old as ski-ing itself. Snow conditions on our Canadian glaciers are far superior to anything Europe can offer—therefore it is most surprising that this splendid pastime has hitherto been sorely neglected by the rank and file of Canadian skiers. The only probable explanation for this fact is, that most of the known icefields in the Canadian Rockies are rather a bit too far off the beaten path and not undulating enough to suit the modern connoisseur of the slippery hickory blades. Our tremendous glaciated areas, like the fields of the Yoho and other icefields, belong to this unfortunate category of glaciers. On the other hand, it is easy to understand that the magnificent glaciers in the Skoki-Red Deer district were until lately little visited, because there was no satisfactory accommodation in close proximity to the snows available. It is also reasonable to suppose that few only visited these splendid snowfields because these glaciers were not well known to the ski-ing public as a whole. It was the hardy winter ski mountaineer who but recently "discovered" these large ice areas. This well renowned ski sport centre lies in the very heart of a magnificent ski-ing district that embraces an area of approximately four hundred square miles. Its most outstanding attraction, however, is its glaciers.

Nearest to Skoki is the steep Ptarmigan glacier, providing a superb alpine ski-descent for the more or less experienced ski mountaineer—and even during the hot days of July and August offers two thousand vertical feet of sport-ing downhill running. But it is the Drummond and the Douglas glaciers with which we want to acquaint ourselves—for either of these great vistas of ice end into gentle tongues and are easily ascended by any competent skier, without the aid of an encumbering alpine rope, nor is the use of crampons, or even an ice-axe necessary if one stays away from the clearly visible crevasses of the wildly broken body of ice. We do not ski on the blank ice as some people erroneously believe. The summer skier indulges in his sport mainly on the feeding firn-fields of snow that replenish the melting ice with new snow for the further building of the coarse grained dirty ice that freezes and melts and re-freezes, until after years of punishment and changing, our eyes behold the sparkling pureness of glittering blue-ice.

The Drummond glaciers and the Douglas ice area comprise some of the best ski-ing terrain the famed Skoki-Ptarmigan district can offer to the discriminating summer skier. Located

somewhat north and east from world-renowned Lake Louise, one reaches these ice fields in an easy jaunt on a western cayuse's back via Ptarmigan Lake and over Deception Pass down to the modern lodge at Skoki. The Skoki Ski Lodge is the centre of all serious winter skiing activity in the mountains and consists of a cluster of modern log cabins grouped in an idyllic setting around the big two-storey lodge of most attractive western design. From there it is several miles to the aforementioned glaciers.

The Drummond firn includes a snow area of something like fifty square miles, with a continuous summer ski descent of 2,500 vertical feet of open running and some five distinctly different variations of routes.

Imagine yourself on the ice. A competent alpine skiing guide leads your party on foot over the lower firn slopes. So as to gain in time and altitude all carry their skis; slowly but steadily they work their way up. The salty-wet snow splashes in explosive bursts in all directions as the squared toes of heavy ski boots kick in the semi-solid surface. Great drops of water run off the highly polished, glistening shoe leather, but none experiences wet or uncomfortable feet, for a well shined, polished boot keeps all dampness out while skiing on summery firn. There are several gentlemen and a lady in the party. All wear the short, comfortable plus-four type of pants that is more suitable for mountain work in the heat of a blistering July sun than the customary long heavy trousers of the winter. They are clad only in cool linen sportshirts with open necks, a lightweight pullover and some sort of unconventional headgear to protect themselves from the glacial sun. Snow goggles are indispensable and most essential for all—but it seems the lady prefers to wear no stockings to protect her legs from severe sunburn—and the coarse snow, just in case (I merely insinuated "just in case") of an unexpected, though nevertheless harmless headlong toss into the cool snows which would prove a rather most annoying misfortune to the young lady, should she scratch her by the sun tenderly burned skin.

Steadily they climb and climb, until the guide stops and bids them take a much needed rest. "What a lovely spot," exclaims the lady. "Guide, do you know the name of this sinister appearing mountain across the heavily timbered valley?" And while they sit down for a smoke and laugh at the strange feeling of sitting on the pleasant coolness of the wet, solid firnsnow, the swarthy sun-tanned guide explains the terrain as he points out with his ski pole the objectives of his lecture.

"The high mountain is the massif of St. Bride and attains an altitude of 10,875 feet, but the peak in the foreground is known as the Douglas and reaches only 10,615 feet into the sky. All this blinking and glittering snow and

sparkling ice over yonder belongs to the Douglas and Lychnis glaciers. There's sure some mighty fine skiing on those northern exposures," adds the guide in his wistful manner, as he prepares to rise from the snow.

More walking brings them high up on to the great firnfield. A number of individual summits rear not unlike miniature mountains into the ethereal blue of the indigo sky, not a cloud breaks this unbelievable blue that spans like a tremendous vault across the glistening, scintillating sea of snow. Somehow it seems as if these corniced, sharply jagged peaklets with their small bluish-green hanging glacial icefalls were adrift in the intense glare of the afternoon sun, something like old-fashioned sailboats, drifting afore the gentle breeze that soothes the sun-tanned skin.

"Here's where we stop. Better put your skis on—but don't forget to wax 'em carefully." The guide takes his pack off, and distributes tins of Ostbye klistor. He opens the small can and applies dexterously the coal-black grease on to the shiny running surfaces of his hickory skis. "Evenly and rather sparingly thin," is his advice to the tourists, "or you'll stick like the very devil."

A few minutes later all have their skis on and stand ready, but rather excited in view of the adventure ahead of them. "Would you mind clamping your Kandahar cables up before we get a'going?" warns the guide to one of the gentlemen, "and please none try to run too fast and race me—just keep behind me so I can keep an eye on all of you. The lady comes first."

A dig and a punt with the steel poles and the guide shoves off. His lithe figure leans over the skis, feet and skis close together; elastic and relaxed knees bend in an astonishing angle forward so as to attain maximum "spring" and flexibility to aid his effortless running. Arms out, bent elbows close to the body, the poles drag ever so slightly in the granular snow. The speeding skis run smoothly over the firn vibrating in tense, tremulous rhythm while the salty-wet snow sprays up to the very knees of the runner. "Wonder how the lady likes that for her legs," mutters the lad to himself as he turns his head to look for his tribe that follows him in mad pursuit, with sticks in the air and wildly waving arms, unsteady of body and awkward of stance. One of the men spills suddenly in a most comical summersault. He shakes his head as in wonder—as if such never ought to happen to him. But the experienced guide's eyes notes his faults: tramline tracks and insufficient body-forward lean. Such gross neglect in style will always spill a man no matter how strong he may be. The slope increases in steepness and forces the speeding flock to swing and turn so as to keep under control. The skilful mountaineer commences to soar not unlike a banking glider in beauti-

fully executed swings down this nearly thirty degree slope. Precisely and rhythmically he dives from christiania into christiania-swing; the inside ski pushing ten to twelve inches smoothly ahead to facilitate the parallel shear-christies in their effortless execution—while the outside arm brings the ski pole in a graceful forward motion around. Snow flies high into the air with every swing, the wind whistles by your ears, shadows speed in unbelievably grotesque distortions down over the damp, glistening snow—your wildly running skis clatter and bounce nearly out of control on joyous pursuit and with a mad desire to catch up just for once with these ever evading spidery, gargoyle-like phantasmagories—but all is in vain. The faster you aim to chase these phantoms, the speedier they elude your efforts. The cool air rushes against your sun-browned face and as the teasing winds play with your tousled mop of dishevelled hair, life begins to feel good once more. Forgotten is the heat sweltering city with all its artificiality, its nervous hustle and bustle, a thing of an unreal

past are the stench and all this frightful noise—forgotten are the worries and the sorrows that seemed so most important some time ago.

Out here you're a boy again and as you speed in reckless abandon down these steep firn-slopes of the glorious Drummond ice-fields you become a youngster once more—a mere lad in spirit and in heart. Brilliant sunshine over the intense glare of the sparkling snows about you—the glorious thrill of the whistling rush of air around your ringing ears from the sudden loss on altitude—and a pair of swift planks of hickory under your feet as you speed on and on down mountain into the far below summer green valley.

What more can a skier wish for in life, than a fortnight of magnificent sport and fun on the vast snow slopes of our western glaciers—thrills and spills galore in the cool, refreshing rush of a ski descent over superb crystalline firn while the scorching July sun bakes and shrivels life into apathic helplessness and indifference in the broiling gaseous vapors of the deep canyons of luckless modern cities.

Photo by Lloyd Harmon, Banff

Niles Pass, Waputic Ice Field

