

## The Kingdom on the Horizon

by Stu Simpson

My God, that tree was close!

I sailed the Giant over a tall, jagged pine with less than ten feet to spare and snapped my attention back to the runway ahead. Over the button and still twenty feet up, I chopped the throttle, nosed over and headed for the grass. Still a bit hot on the speed, the Giant touched down hard and I danced on the rudder pedals to dodge the mole hills that dotted the runway like chicken pox. Luckily, the mounds were soft and squashed easily away beneath the tires.

Gustafsson was on the radio, now, emphatically warning Botting and Clarke to beware of the pines. I taxied all the way to the end to give my wingmen some room. I turned around just in time to watch Glen Clarke, the last of our troupe, bring his J-3 Cub in for an unusually rough landing. My heart nearly stopped when the Cub's left wing came within inches of the ground as he fought to control the plane on the strip's uneven surface. But Glen, who's one of the best pilots I know, got things back under control quite nicely and we all trundled over to the shut-down area.

All in all, just another routine landing at the Highwood- Adderson airstrip.

I quickly began refuelling with the extra gas I brought along. The Giant would need it for today's flight. The Dragonflies would leave this strip in the foothills and fly to the vast and mysterious kingdom of the west, called the Rocky Mountains. They sit next to the sky, only a few miles west of Calgary. Their blue-grey silhouettes are always just out of reach for the average ultralight pilot. Castled with granite ramparts that sometimes tear the very clouds from the air, the Rocks form a legendary, forbidden place. They're notorious for their meteorological treachery and have dangerously few places for emergency landings. All aviators must be cautious in this domain.

I knew these facts, but felt we could successfully challenge the mountains today. And I figured such a flight probably wouldn't be as dangerous as our landing at Adderson's.

During our time on the ground we met Royle Adderson, a successful businessman who owns the ranch and airstrip; and Bob Purkess who looks every inch the tough and ready cowboy that he is. Purkess runs the ranch for Adderson. Both were very welcoming and helpful, especially when Botting had trouble with his engine. He'd somehow fouled a



*Glen Clarke's J3 Cub. Photo by Stu.*



*Allan Botting's Vagabond. Photo by Stu.*

plug on start-up when we were ready to leave.

Despite an hour's work, and having all the supervision he could handle, Botting couldn't get the engine to run satisfactorily. He wisely decided to scrap the mountain trip and go home. Clarke volunteered to escort him. Gustafsson and I would continue on.

Soon after takeoff, the mountains ahead loomed high and sharp in the near distance. It was difficult, as we drew closer, to think of the surrounding peaks as anything other than alive. Like ancient monarchs of the earth, they projected absolute authority and practically dared us to make a mistake. They'd be merciless if we did.

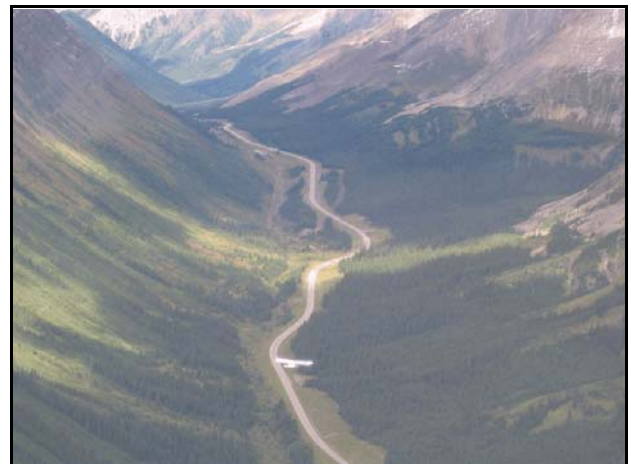


*Contemplating the options at Adderson's strip. Photo by Andy.*

The mountains are the undisputed kings of the world here. They know it, and with complete arrogance, they don't care who else knows. Hell, they can even control the weather. Like all kings, they jealously guard their power, being wholly unwilling to share even a bit of it. One can visit their kingdom, and even stay a while. But in the end, the mountains will always endure, always rule. Understand that, they seemed to say, and we'll get along fine. My heart beat a little faster as we reached the first northward turn into the Highwood Valley.

We banked our planes to follow the highway below and I'm not ashamed to say I stared open-mouthed at the spectacle before us. Here, the Highwood is broad and inviting, stunning and daunting. The lush green slopes give way to sparse grass further up the mountain sides, and then become bare rock for the last couple thousand feet to the summits.

And the height of the peaks! Gustafsson and I were in a continuous, shallow climb from the point we left Adderson's. But no matter how high our brave chariots took us, there was never any shortage of jagged spires ascending even higher. At one point, we were at 9200 feet and still craning our necks to look up and see the mountain tops. Ultralight pilots rarely see such dizzying numbers on the altimeter. We're unused to looking up at the earth as we fly. It was a startling refresher in humility.



*Andy Gustafsson in his Merlin begins a long slow climb through the Highwood Pass. Photo by Stu Simpson*

As we continued north, the valley walls featured cuts and gaps between the peaks. These openings led to who knows where. Each portal was a tantalizing temptress, promising adventure and wanton pleasure for the senses, if we'd only give in to our lust and explore them. And we were tempted! We'd have dearly loved to be seduced by those secret chambers in the sky. But we also knew that succumbing to the wiles of such harlots could easily lead to our deaths. Instead, we stayed our course and clung to the fragile illusion of safety with the road below. In our fidelity, though, we selfishly felt cheated.

The valley once again turned west for a few miles, and then back north. The terrain here, approaching the Highwood Pass, was much narrower than the area we'd just left. The slopes were steeper, too. Thus, a good deal of vegetation had been torn away by avalanches and rock slides. One broad cut in the eastern wall opened to another valley that sheltered a small, and incredibly beautiful lake. The water covered only a few acres of the valley floor and was reached via a small trail from the highway. Many hikers would visit this little Shangri-la, and some would even scale the surrounding mountains for a look at it. But only a very few men would ever see it as Gustafsson and I did then.

The Highwood Pass was nowhere near as high as I thought it'd be. In fact, at only 7200 feet, it was about a thousand feet lower than anticipated. But it was tight and thus made a wonderful backdrop for the photos and videos we shot.

There was one, last summit on the left as we exited the Highwood. Craggy and endlessly fissured, it possessed remarkable character and seemed to watch us very carefully as we flew past. Perhaps it worried that we'd made off with some of the palace treasure.

Kananaskis Country was next. One glance in the space of a heartbeat, and we were left breathless. To the west, the Kananaskis Lakes held us spellbound, while the glacier-topped mountains beyond forbade any but the most foolish aerial venture in that direction. The forests of the lower elevations covered the valley floor like a thick carpet, which, from our height, looked positively luxurious.

In turn, K-Country's various recreation areas passed beneath us. There were campgrounds, ski hills and vacation resorts. All the while, K-Country's summits passed beside and above us. One unusually shaped mountain looked like it had oozed, barely molten, from God's granite-pouring ladle and simply been left to harden like a nine thousand foot tall slag heap. Others nearby seemed to have their tops snapped off like pieces of hard candy. They were then abandoned, rough and broken and ugly. And in that ugliness lay their beauty, unblemished by the incessant human pursuit of symmetry, efficiency and straightness.



*"To the west, the Kananaskis Lakes held us spellbound." Photo by Andy Gustafsson.*

By unwelcome contrast, the TransCanada Highway, with its carefully surveyed boundaries and arrow straight lanes, soon came into sight. It conveyed thousands of hurrying people who cared nothing for little airplanes or broken mountain tops.

Gustafsson and I weren't yet ready to leave the Rocks and join that mob. So, we followed the cut-off road through the Stoney Creek region, just to stay in the wilderness a little longer. All too soon, the mountains gave way to the foothills. And they quickly descended to become the prairies, from where we'd always



wondered about the far off kingdom. We radioed to one another our sadness at having to leave. We wanted more excitement and unease, not comfort and familiarity. We wanted more mountains. Our spirits paralleled the diminishing numbers on our altimeters.

Yet, for all our sadness, we had no regrets. For we'd been to see the kings and the grand palace they all shared. True, we'd only strolled through a single, beautifully appointed corridor. But we'd glimpsed a few of the dazzling and magnificent chambers adjoining it. And even if we had to leave then, I know a couple of airborne voyagers who'll someday be back.



*"...at 9200 feet and still craning our necks to look up at the mountains tops." Photo by Stu Simpson.*