



Rising to the occasion

Ain't no mountain high enough to keep the wedding from going on

Rick Kunelius took it all in stride when Keith Hannah looked at his watch, stopped the wedding march and announced his marriage ceremony should take place at that very spot. That very spot happened to be one pitch from the summit of 11,135-foot Mount Hector, at the

edge of a precipice plummeting several thousand feet into Banff's Bow Valley. "It was exactly 8 a.m., and at 8 a.m. on the same day the previous year, Keith had proposed to his girlfriend," Kunelius explains. "Nothing else mattered."

This was just one of many unusual ceremonies Kunelius has taken part in as a Banff-based marriage commissioner. Kunelius is as likely to find himself skiing, whitewater rafting or dangling from the side of a mountain as he is to be standing in a church. "Marriage is the most impor-

tant and sacred event in a couple's life," Kunelius says, "but that doesn't mean it has to be a sombre occasion."

Sombre occasion? Some of his weddings have been downright hilarious. Kunelius once had to stop the ceremony to let a herd of bighorn sheep pass through the proceedings. Perhaps the most memorable, however, was an all-day climbing event that culminated with wedding vows on the summit of glacier-capped Mount Temple, the ninth highest peak in the Canadian Rockies. "When we

came to the part where the bride was supposed to say, 'I do,'" Kunelius says, "she took one look at her man, one look at the 5,000 feet of air beneath us, and said 'F@%*#n'-A!' Everyone cracked up."

When Kunelius started performing adventure weddings in the mid-1990s, he was doing only one or two a year. Last year, he presided at more than 30 outdoor weddings. Kunelius thinks there are a number of reasons for the increase. For one, more couples are marrying later, and paying for their own weddings. Also, there's a growing trend towards approaching a wedding on the couple's own terms. "There's no guilt trip that people have to do it a certain way anymore," he says, "so why not express themselves by choosing a location and style that means something to them?"

Kunelius has to watch out for couples with too little experience and too much ambition. He prefers not to have large groups of people out on a long hike. "Sometimes visitors have all these grand plans and don't really realize what they are getting themselves into," he says.

Of course, then there are locals who say they want to get married, and four weeks before the ceremony Kunelius finds out the wedding is on a peak like Mount Hector. —Matt Jackson