

# the SCREE

## Mountaineering Club of Alaska

October 2017  
Volume 60 Number 10



### ISSUE INCLUDES

Mount Torbert and Mount Talachulitna  
Mount Yukla  
Bashful Peak  
White Lice Mountain  
Pioneer Peak  
Thunder Mountain  
Chena Dome

“Those Hut Point days, would prove some of the happiest of my life.  
Just enough to eat and keep warm, no more - no frills nor trimmings:  
there is many a worse and more elaborate life...the luxuries of  
civilization satisfy only those wants which they themselves create.

- Apsley Cherry-Garrard

”

MCA Meeting October 17, 6:30pm at the BP Energy Center

Please join us to elect the new Board of Directors, to vote on the annual MCA calendar, and for Nathan Hebda's slideshow "Chugach Rambling: Peak Baggin' in our State Park"

# The Mountaineering Club of Alaska [mtnclubak.org](http://mtnclubak.org)

*"To maintain, promote, and perpetuate the association of persons who are interested in promoting, sponsoring, improving, stimulating, and contributing to the exercise of skill and safety in the Art and Science of Mountaineering."*

**MCA Calendar Content.** Please bring vertical 8x10" prints of the October 17 MCA Meeting. Include your name, phone, and email on the back. Categories are climbing, people, scenery, and hiking.

**Cover Photo:** Josh Allely and Lee Helzer approaching the crux snow slopes at 10,000 feet to access the summit plateau of Mt. Torbert. Photo by Dave Hart **Scree Layout/Design:** Paxson Woelber

## CONNECT WITH THE MCA



Check the Meetup site and Facebook for last minute trips and activities.

**General Elections.** Annual elections for the MCA Board of Directions will be held at the general meeting next Tuesday, October 17 at the BP Energy Center. The following positions are open: President, Vice-President, Treasurer, Secretary and three Director seats.

For those of you who might be inclined, the executive positions are good resume builders and training is available from the current holders of those positions. While we seek experience, passion, energy and a desire to lead the club in needed directions are paramount. Part of keeping the Mountaineering Club of Alaska a viable organization is the willingness of individual members to step forward.

**Chugach Rambling: Peak Baggin' in our State Park.** Join us for a slideshow by MCA board member Nathan Hebda that highlights peak bagging in Chugach State Park.

Slideshow at the MCA monthly meeting, October 17 at 6:30pm. Slideshow will begin approx 7:45pm, after photo voting and elections.

**Article Submission:** Text and photography submissions for the *Scree* can be sent as attachments to [mcascree@gmail.com](mailto:mcascree@gmail.com). Articles should be submitted by the 24th of each month to appear in the next issue of the *Scree*. Do not submit material in the body of the email. Do not submit photos embedded in the text file. Send the photo files separately. We prefer articles that are under 1,000 words. If you have a blog, website, video, or photo links, send us the link. Cover photo selections are based on portraits of human endeavor in the out-doors. Please submit at least one vertically oriented photo for consideration for the cover. Please submit captions with photos.

## FROM THE EDITOR

I apologize for the late delivery of this month's *Scree*. We will return to a normal publication schedule earlier in the month in following issues.

- Dave Hart

### CHOATE'S CHUCKLE

*Q: A safe climber has what in common with a moored ship?*

*A: Good anchors*

## CONTENTS

<b>Mount Torbert</b> (11,413 feet) and <b>Mount Talachulitna</b> (11,150 feet)	<i>Dave Hart</i>	<b>3</b>
"The Eagle", <b>Mount Yukla</b> (7,535 feet)	<i>Dan Glatz</i>	<b>7</b>
Redemption in the Clouds 7/30/2017 - <b>Bashful Peak</b> (8,005 feet)	<i>Nathaniel Bannish</i>	<b>9</b>
<b>White Lice Mountain</b> (6,650 feet)	<i>Az Sellers</i>	<b>11</b>
<b>Pioneer Peak</b> (6,398 feet)	<i>Shane Ohms</i>	<b>14</b>
<b>Thunder Mountain</b> (Mount Nirvana) (9,098 feet)- First Ascent of West Face	<i>Eric Gilbertson</i>	<b>17</b>
Peak of the Month: <b>Chena Dome</b>	<i>Steve Gruhn</i>	<b>21</b>
From the Editor - Cairns and Summit Registers	<i>Dave Hart</i>	<b>22</b>

# Mount Torbert (11413 feet)

## Northwest Ridge, Mount Talachulitna (11150 feet) Southwest Ridge, and Peak 9550, Tordrillo Mountains

Text by Dave Hart

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**T**he impressively glaciated Tordrillo Mountains dominate the western skyline from Anchorage. Mount Spurr, 11070 feet, is the most famous possibly due to its August 19, 1992 eruption which coated Anchorage in a 1/8 inch layer of volcanic ash, but the highpoint of the range is Mount Torbert, 11413 feet. Mount Gerdine, 11258 feet; Mount Talachulitna, 11150 feet; and Nagishlamina Peak, 11068 feet round out the five eleven-thousand footers in the range. No one is known to have climbed all five of the Tordrillo high points, though Jim Sprott, Joe Stock, Dylan Taylor, and Andrew Wexler have each climbed four. Another point of interest is that Mount Torbert is the 9th-most topographically prominent peak in Alaska, and one of Alaska's 64 ultra-prominent peaks. This Alaska prominence list can be seen at <http://peakbagger.com/list.aspx?lid=41303>.

Lee Helzer and I made two previous attempts to fly into the Tordrillos over the prior six weeks. On March 11, 2017, our gear was packed with Ben Still and Sean Cahoon, but stormy weather re-routed Lee and me to Sovereign Mountain in the Talkeetna Mountains (see August 2017 *Scree* article). Then on March 23, 2017, Lee and I made it as far as several touch-and-go's at the 8500-foot Mount Torbert landing site before our pilot judiciously decided the hard pack sastrugi made plane damage too risky to land. We were very excited when Easter weekend three weeks later was forecast to deliver stellar sunshine.

On April 13, Lee Helzer, Josh Allely, and I met our pilot friends Conor McManamin and Ben Gray at Conor's Lake Hood slip after work for a long weekend of ski mountaineering. Lee and I piled in to Conor's Cessna 180 ski plane while Josh rode in Ben's Super Cub. An hour later, we landed at 7:45 p.m. at 9000 feet at the very head of the Triumvirate Glacier northwest of Peak 9550, 3 miles northwest of Mount Torbert. Fresh snow had filled in the



**Dave Hart and Josh Allely approaching the gentle southern slopes of Mt. Talachulitna. Photo by Lee Helzer**

dangerous sastrugi from three weeks prior. Though chilly and a bit breezy, it was a gorgeous evening with alpenglow lighting the glaciated peaks.

Good Friday, April 14, dawned clear and calm. We left camp at 9:00 a.m. Our campsite was a little inconvenient for Mount Torbert in that we had to skirt to the north of Peak 9550 and drop several hundred feet before reaching the valley leading to our northwestern ridge access route. The crux of our route was between 9000 and 10000 feet, where active serac exposure, avalanche slopes, and a few crevasses were all very real risks. After crossing a big crevasse, we were able to ski up a faint left-angling trough to 9900 feet, keeping right of the active seracs and left of the steepening headwall. We switched to crampons for the right-angling traverse across 40-degree slopes toward some larger bergschrunds and crevasses. Lee found a snow bridge across the main crevasse capping the small basin we had entered. Once past this we continued booting up easy snow slopes until the angle lessened allowing us to put our skis back on around 10300 feet. Some friends of ours climbed this same route on May



26, 2013, and found more difficult terrain in this area with more open crevasses and challenging route-finding. Greg Slayden's trip report can be found at <http://peakbagger.com/climber/ascent.aspx?aid=319182>.



**Hart, Gray, Allely, Helzer and McManamin during the evening drop off at base camp. Photo by Dave Hart**

We skied the remaining 1.5 miles to the summit, happy that the crux was much easier than during Greg's previous trip. Although the upper terrain was flat and monotonous, the surrounding views were, of course, stunning. As we neared the summit, Lee followed what he thought to be old ski tracks, but was instead a narrow crevasse, in which he fell to his waist. Rather comical, really.

We reached the top after 4-1/2 hours at 1:30 p.m. We spent the obligatory 30 minutes on top, taking in the views all the way from Iliamna Volcano, Redoubt Volcano, and Mount Spurr to the south, to Denali and Mount Foraker to the north, and Mount Marcus Baker to the east. And of course Cook Inlet, Anchorage and the Chugach Mountains 85 miles east of us. I found it funny that after living in Anchorage for the past 27 years, climbing in many other parts of the state, and looking across to the Tordrillos longingly on every sunny day, that I finally managed my first climbing trip over there.

The ski down was uneventful, though we did remove our skis and rope up to descend the crux crevasse snow bridge. The shallow ascent trough also proved to be tricky skiing with breakable crust, but aside from a few falls, we were no worse for the wear.

It was still early in the day and Peak 9550 stood between us and camp. Its icy east ridge looked tempting and drew us closer. We switched from ski mode to climbing mode at the 9000-foot base, armed with two tools and crampons, but our rope in the pack. The first 300 feet were pretty easy névé, which turned to a 45-degree ice ridge for the last 200 feet. Lee led the way with Josh and me following in his welcome steps. A slip would have resulted in an airy fast ride back down to the valley 500 feet below. We stopped for a few photos on top, both of Mount Torbert and our objective for the next day, Mount Talachulitna.

Camp beckoned a half-mile below, so we continued cramponing down the north ridge, the last 200 feet of which steepened enough that we down-climbed facing into the slope. We ended up on the wrong side of a final crevasse, so broke out the rope to safely hop across. Then an easy half-mile glide to base camp capped a fun 7-mile, eight-hour day. The western sunset and pastel evening alpenglow lit up the peaks around us nicely.

Saturday again dawned clear, so we headed out to Mount Talachulitna. While Torbert was steeper and closer, Talachulitna offered a gradual ascent with over twice the distance; perfect for skiing. We left all our technical gear behind and enjoyed traveling with lighter packs. We again left at 9:00 a.m. and started the 2-mile, 700-foot descent to the pass below us. At the bottom we saw some tracks traversing the glacier east to west – wolf or wolverine maybe? Certainly unexpected and fun to see. The next four miles was a gradual 2900-foot ascent with views



**Lee Helzer enjoying sunset in our 9000-foot base camp. Photo by Dave Hart**





**Dave Hart and Josh Allely donning skis after descending the crux of Mt. Torbert. Our route continued to climber's right of the visible seracs. Photo by Lee Helzer**

opening to the west toward a sea of lesser peaks invisible from Anchorage – the Revelation, Neocola, and Kichatna Mountains. One could not take a bad photo this day.

We were able to ski to within 100 yards of the summit, where a 2-foot-wide crevasse and an icy slope forced us to hike the last bit to the summit. It was 1:00 p.m. More wonderful views awaited us from our position seven miles north of Torbert from the previous day. Camp was barely visible as a tiny dot five miles to the south at the head of our tiny pocket glacier. It was a bit windy, so we limited our stay to half an hour before begrudgingly starting down. We packed the rope down, as we saw no evidence of crevasses on our ascent.

Unlike the sketchy breakable-crust snow conditions we found on Torbert, Talachulitna offered mostly hero powder snow on a hard base. Several of the slopes were joyous to ski. Hoots and hollers abounded. The 2900-foot ski descent took about an hour as we leisurely enjoyed the infinite views from peaks to sea level basking in afternoon sun. The final 700-foot ascent and 2-mile ski back up to camp allowed serene contemplation of a great weekend in the big mountains, so close to home.

We had the afternoon to dry out gear in the sun and enjoy camp life. We contemplated flying out that night, since clouds were forecast for the next day, but Conor texted (InReach) that he couldn't make it until the morning. So, we hunkered down for another beautiful evening.

We woke Easter Sunday and nervously poked our heads out the tent door. Sunshine! Conor would be doing

our pick-up with just himself since Ben was busy, so we rolled dice on our iPhone backgammon game to see who would be on the first flight out. Lee “won,” though when Conor landed at 11:00 a.m. we learned that Lee would get



**Mt. Torbert and Peak 9550 route in pink.  
Mt. Talachulitna route in green.**

dropped at Beluga Lake (246 feet) while Conor came back for Josh and me. By 1:00 p.m., all the cogs had clicked into place; Lee, Josh and I were reunited at Beluga Lake at an elevation that makes Conor's plane happy and powerful. One final taxi across the frozen lake saw us all airborne for the flight home across Cook Inlet. After unloading the plane and thanking Conor for making this all possible, we drove back to my house in time for Easter brunch complete with eggs Benedict and mimosas. It was a perfect ending to a great weekend.

Climbing in the Tordrillos is unique in that it offers a big mountain experience very close to home, and with little risk of altitude sickness. It also allows one to sit in the comfort of home while waiting for good weather. While our ascents of Torbert, Talachulitna and Peak 9550 were straightforward, there is one small nearby jewel waiting an ascent, and reachable from a camp anywhere on the upper Triumvirate plateau. Peak 9644 caught our eye during our first failed flight into the area. Although it has only 800-feet of prominence from a southeastern saddle, one could easily ski from our camp to the base of its western face and enjoy an aesthetic 1000-foot mixed snow, rock and ice route to its impressive summit with an instant 3000 feet of exposure off its northeast face.

A great reference to climbing in the Tordrillos is the 1999 book *Tordrillo: Pioneer Climbs and Flights in the Tordrillo Mountains of Alaska, 1957-1997*, written



**Lee Helzer descending Peak 9550. Our next day's goal Mt. Talachulitna dominates the skyline. Camp is out of photo to the left. Photo by Dave Hart**



**Josh Allely and Dave Hart nearing the top of Peak 9550. Our route up Mt. Torbert snuck up the right-most snow slope between the visible serac bands below the plateau. The summit of Mount Torbert is 1.5 miles distant out of the photo. Photo by Lee Helzer**

by Rodman Wilson and MCA founder Paul Crews, Sr. (Reference August 2017 *Scree* for Paul Crews' obituary and September 2017 *Scree* for additional remembrances). What turns many folks away from the area is the challenging access, primarily due to expensive flights. Talkeetna Air Taxi quotes \$850 per person round trip for a lower glacier drop off, and was unwilling to drop us where Conor put us. Anchorage flight services are similarly priced and include Sportsman's Air, Skydance Aviation, and Trygg Air. Palmer-based Blue Ice Aviation and Meekin's Air can also fly out there. Alaska West in Nikiski is another good option based slightly closer to the peaks, but a longer drive from Anchorage. Be aware, landing anywhere above 8000 feet on the Triumvirate Plateau risks either not being able to land as we initially found, or worse, getting stuck up there for a very long time. Be ready for it. Many other climbers have landed lower and skied up to the plateau, allowing themselves an exit if weather turns south. 📍

**Additional photos and videos are here:** [https://www.facebook.com/david.hart.988926/media\\_set?set=a.1422536801100009.1073741874.100000311085926&-type=3](https://www.facebook.com/david.hart.988926/media_set?set=a.1422536801100009.1073741874.100000311085926&-type=3)

**Hyperlink to Torbert GPS track is at:**

<http://peakbagger.com/climber/ascent.aspx?aid=790719>

**Hyperlink to Talachulitna GPS track is at:**

<http://peakbagger.com/peak.aspx?pid=14689>



# “The Eagle,” Mount Yukla (7535 feet) Western Chugach Mountains

Text and photos by Dan Glatz

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It was a doomed trip. At least that's what I thought as I pulled up to the Eagle River Nature Center. The whole drive back there we had followed the flashes of lightning and booms of thunder as it moved back the valley. Once the dark clouds began to move out, we could see fresh snow high up on Eagle Peak and Polar Bear Peak. The trip, that we had planned and talked about for months, was not looking promising.

Two others, Theresa Pipek and Marcel Krenzelok, and I were planning on climbing Mount Yukla. Earlier in the week, we noticed a clear two-day weather window in the forecast and elected to take Friday off in hopes of taking advantage of it. Our plan was to hike in Thursday night, summit on Friday, and hike out from there. However, as I stood there in the parking lot on June 16, 2017, watching the storm, I immediately regretted that decision.

After a brief time of deliberation, we elected to head down the trail and give it a try. The decision turned out to be the right one, as we were met by sunshine not far down the Crow Pass Trail. After a couple hours we reached the Twin Falls Trail and weaved our way through the alders and brush as the trail came and went. Luckily, thanks to the great directions we received and low vegetation growth, we made



**Approaching camp at sunset**

good time and got up into the hanging valley just before sunset. We set up our camp at the big rock and settled in on an absolutely calm and beautiful, bluebird evening.

Excitement had completely taken over and after just a couple hours of sleep we awoke to the morning light and a sky that was still completely cloud free. After a quick breakfast we slowly started our trek. At the base of Twincicle Glacier, we donned our crampons and ice axes. The snow was quite solid from the cool morning air, which made kicking steps a breeze. As we made our way up the glacier, we stayed just to the left of the center. This successfully avoided any exposed crevasses.

We topped out on Twincicle Pass in about two and a half hours. From there we traversed northwest, picking our way through snow gullies



**Theresa Pipek climbing the snow slopes on the northeast face**

and rock ribs until we reached the northeast ridge around 7000 feet. The last 500 feet involved a bit of rock scrambling, a short, but steep, snow climb and a breathtaking traverse from the eastern point to the western true summit.

Five hours after we left camp, we were on the summit. The views were absolutely incredible; we could see for miles and miles in any given direction. Being that it was Theresa's and Marcel's first 7000-foot Chugach peak and only my second, these views were unlike anything we'd ever witnessed before. A





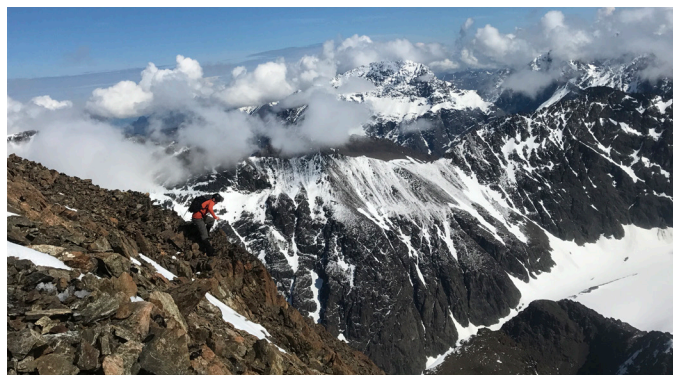
**Marcel and Theresa taking in the summit views**

Yukla summit on a clear day could easily be one of our best Chugach experiences.

We could have stayed on the summit for hours gawking at the views, but the clouds were clearly building up in the mountains and the memories of the thunderstorms from the night before invaded our minds. We made our way down quite quickly. The mid-afternoon heat softened the snow just enough to make it a perfect glissade. We quickly packed up camp and started our trip out as the first thunderstorm hit. The rain made for a slick and soaked trip down the Twin Falls Trail, but it let up once we reached the Crow Pass Trail. However, it was not done; on our final stretch to the Nature Center we were greeted with some of the loudest thunderclaps and heaviest rain any of us had ever witnessed in Alaska. By the time we reached the parking lot, we were drenched

and our packs waterlogged. It did not matter, though, we climbed the Eagle and it was worth every step! 🏔️

*[Ed. note: Yukla is the Denai'ina word for eagle.]*



**Marcel Krenzelok downclimbing the northeast ridge as the thunderstorm clouds build**

# Redemption in the Clouds 7/30/2017

## Bashful Peak (8005 feet), West Ridge, Western Chugach Mountains

Text and photos by Nathaniel Bannish

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I left my house at 5:30 a.m. and was biking around Eklutna Lake by 6:20 a.m. There was a lot of bear crap on the trail, so I did some extra “hey bear!” in addition to my two bear bells. This year has had a lot of bear encounters, and everyone, including me, was feeling a bit on edge. The last thing I needed was to start off with a close bear sighting!



**Eklutna Lake Trail over the East Fork of the Eklutna River. Bashful Peak visible behind.**

After 10 miles of loud riding, I prepared to ditch the bike at the start of the East Fork of the Eklutna River trail - but what was this? There were already some people here! A group of two declared their intention to climb Bold Peak (7,522 feet), and told me there was a group of three ahead trying Bashful Peak.

The two were still busy with gear, so I started walking and pretty soon caught up with the trio, glad to have some company for what I had anticipated to be a very spooky (bear-ey) one-mile walk to the common approach to both peaks - Stivers' Gully.

Once we arrived at Stivers' Gully, I bid farewell to the group and went on ahead.

Things went great until I took a very ill-advised wrong turn and ended up missing the alder tunnel, bushwhacking through some very nasty brush. I can't believe I did this - I'd been on the mountain before and hit

it just fine. Oh well. Maybe it was luck but it didn't set me back nearly as badly as I feared it would.

I got to the overlook for the grass ramp up to 3,000 feet. Scrambling down into the talus, I was reminded that rocks are constantly falling off Bashful - there were pockmarks all over. Seeing this, I was spurred on to make good time up onto the West Ridge proper. There was actually more bear poo up here too. Why are you up here bears?

At this point, the fog started to close in, and I feared that like my previous attempt in 2015, this would be another no visibility trip on Bashful. And it was. The weather stayed closed in until 7,000 feet rolled around, and with it, Chickenshit Gully.

Nearing the bottom of the infamous crux gully, the fog was thinning out and the sun peeped over a rock tower. It was amazing!

I had never been up Chickenshit Gully. I'd gotten to this exact same place before turning back in 2015. I had no idea if I'd be too, well, chickenshit to go up it. I didn't have a rope.

I started ascending, and immediately realized that this was going to be a nerve wracking down-climb. I made a decision, albeit a scary one, to keep going. Luckily, the top of the gully is much nicer than lower down, and pretty soon I was forgetting about the evil that waited for me during my down-climb at the bottom.

At the top of Chickenshit Gully, the route is once again is nice and easy. Bold



**Looking up Chickenshit Gully**



Peak and a whole assortment of other Chugach giants stood tall above the clouds, making me feel like I was on some far taller mountain, living a mountaineering fairytale. I followed some pleasant scrambling up to the 8,005' summit.

The summit itself was spectacular. From here, I could see the blanket of cloud covering everything below, and as I turned, I realized that at long last, I was at the top of Bashful Peak. I'm still in awe of how it felt up there, standing among the mountains. This is where I want to be. I spent a few minutes in reverie, signed the register, and headed down.

Down-climbing Chickenshit Gully was definitely scary. I came to the top, spent a few seconds contemplating my fate, and started down-climbing. There was an intense concentration that I had seldom experienced before - lots of breathing, lots of delicate testing with my fingers and toes. Never once did I feel out of control or in imminent adrenaline-pumping danger. But I didn't like it all the same. It would probably be downright murderous if it was wet. At the bottom, I let out a sigh.

In a few minutes after reaching the bottom of the gully, I heard voices - it was the trio! They offered me some water which I gladly accepted, and I regaled them with



**Summit selfie with the south summit of Baleful Peak just right of Nathaniel's head.**

visions of the amazing summit. They were stoked. And they had a rope. Good idea. I bid them farewell and happy mountain climbing.



**Summit view to the southeast with Baleful Peak (7,990 feet), South Baleful Peak and the Chugach Mountains visible**

The rest of the down-climbing went by fairly uneventfully. The cloud burned away more and more, making the day very sunny and quite hot! I came back down to Stivers' Gully in good time.

It was only as I was walking back along the East Fork that I considered the time it had taken me up and down Bashful. Under 8 hours! Speed is always a consideration to me, especially in getting to the summit. I relax a lot more once I'm there, depending on how the weather looks. But I hadn't intended it as a speed run. It just sort of happened. And now that I know the full route, I could probably cut a lot of time off if I had the inclination. Which, at least for now, I don't!

Overall, it was an incredibly fulfilling and beautiful day in the mountains. Standing on top of Bashful, the tallest peak around, high above a sea of cloud and other mountains, was an almost spiritual feeling. I won't forget it.

#### **Billy Finley Ascent Video 8/9/2013:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WEAYkwt-9Tg>

#### **Nathaniel Bannish Ascent Video 7/30/2017:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WGLjSM6T1FY>

*Editor's Note: Bashful Peak is the highest of the 120 peaks in the Chugach State Park and of the 166 peaks in the Western Chugach Mountains. It also ranks 55th of the 64 peaks in Alaska with over 5,000 feet of topographic prominence. The full list 64 peaks can be found here <http://peakbagger.com/list.aspx?lid=41303&cid=1280>. Subsequent to Nathaniel's ascent, someone placed a fixed line in Chickenshit Gully, the ethics of which are typically frowned upon. 🧭*



# White Lice Mountain

## North Summit (6650 ± 50 feet), West and North Ridge, Western Chugach Mountains

Text by Az Sellers

The sun trickled down into the city of Anchorage, but the mountains remained shrouded under a thick gray mass of clouds. The occasional break would allow the heat of the sun to seep through just long enough to sizzle the damp ground and within hours fresh clouds would rise and smother the peaks. And so it went all summer until the weekend forecast metamorphosed from cloudy with showers, to partly sunny, then partly cloudy ... It was time to pull out all the stops and take Friday off.

Kathy Still and I arrived at Eklutna Lake to a beautiful day. We biked around the sparkling lake, admiring the sprawling alpine ridges that dissolved into giant, sheer mountains. We parked the bikes behind the Serenity Falls Hut and began weaving along the trail to the Eklutna Glacier. The trail followed the forest for a short



**The namesake sheep of White Lice Mountain wandering on the upper slopes. Photo by Az Sellers**



**Summit view looking southwest from a prior year ascent. Photo by Ross Noffsinger**

while before emptying out onto gravel banks interrupted by the occasional stream crossing and scree traverse.

Soon we were in the West Fork of the Eklutna River Canyon. It is hard to describe the immense feeling of the canyon. “Mitre Mite” waterfall trickles down from massive cliff walls, “Freer’s Tears” waterfall gushes out of the hanging valley beneath Benign Peak and Bellicose Peak, and a waterfall plunges from the Eklutna Glacier. We sat on a small riverbank where all three streams converged, listened to them roar, and filled our water bottles.

Easy hiking through smooth glacial rocks led to the edge of the glacier. A smooth and gradual tongue of ice unfurled from the glacier and provided an easy route to its toe. From there we followed up the middle of the glacier; streams ran through rivulets in the blue ice and our crampons crunched. We exited the glacier on the left to the rock beside a waterfall that poured from between The Mitre and Ovis Peak. We followed smooth benches in the rock to a short, but relatively steep, snow gully that ascended to the base of Pichler’s Perch.

From the hut, we watched as the sun set over Benign Peak. Rays drifted slowly over the ridge and a lone cloud poofed above its



**Descending this west-facing gully to regain the far slopes which lead to the northern summit. The East and West Branches of the Eklutna Glacier are visible 2,500 feet below. Photo by Az Sellers**

summit like smoke from a dragon. Shadows crawled up the walls of the canyon below.

We woke early the next day to a perfect blue sky and ascended the ridge behind the hut as the golden morning light slid onto its slope, working up green patches to avoid the loose scree until we reached a pocket glacier between Ovis and White Lice Mountain. From there we had the choice of ascending the center ridge onto a steep snow slope streaked with ice and hanging above a large cliff or dropping onto the glacier and climbing to the col between Ovis and White Lice. After a quick look at the icy exposed snow, the choice was relatively simple. A quick glacier traverse dropped us into the shade of the valley. We were fortunate and the glacier was still covered in a wet layer of snow.

When we reached the pass I feasted my eyes on glory in every direction. In front of us the ridge extended endlessly. Loose rock rolled into cliffs on the side facing Pichler's Perch. To the east was a sheer, vertigo-inducing drop, emptying out into the East Fork of the Eklutna River, which slithered down through a luscious green valley. Behind us Ovis Peak jabbed into the sky, its scree slopes thinning into steep, rugged rocks.

The route up White Lice Mountain was a series of three cruxes punctuated by a moderately scrambly and gorgeous ridge. We reached the first crux just

above where the hanging snow field began. From there it looked like the easiest way would be to traverse lower scree slopes directly above the snow and gain the ridge at an easier point. Common sense deterred us. The gradual scree was pinched between the hanging snowfield below and cliffs above. Ice was nestled underneath the rock. It only took a few moments of watching rocks cascade down from higher up to opt for remaining on the ridge.

Regaining the ridge was the first crux. We climbed up through an awkward crack that deposited

us on a small ledge of scree to the east side. Suddenly everything was very exposed, my focus became sharp, and I began to tremble slightly. A short work-around led to a small 10-foot notch that allowed entry back onto the west side. Beneath the notch was a large cliff, but a small and short ledge traversed over the top of it. The move was awkward, especially with a pack, because the rock above overhung and I felt like it was trying to push me off the cliff. I climbed across followed by Kathy. From there the ridge softened. We quickly gained the point where our original western-ridge leading down to Pichler's Perch intersected the north ridge we were on and the North Summit finally came into view. My optimism for success dropped. But the day was young and the sky clear.

Soon the final horizontal summit ridge became more exposed and we worked our way along scree ledges on the west side that gave way to giant fields of cliffs. We navigated by dropping slightly below the ridge and skirting up and down and over until ascending back to the ridge for the second crux. That crux was a crack between the ridge and a massive boulder that had sloughed away from it. It looked like, despite the boulder being the size of a bus, it might still be loose. We climbed down through large wobbling boulders jammed inside the crack until we reached a drop into a small gully. That was accomplished by hanging off the sharp point



of a flaky rock, putting full trust in it, despite the poor rock quality, and lowering oneself down until the toes barely touched the ground below. After that move I tried to convince myself that we had crossed the fabled 6500-foot notch. I knew in my heart we hadn't.

Soon enough we were beneath the summit block. The ridge rolled smoothly into the cusp of the 6500-foot notch and on the other side a blocky cliff rose upward. We surveyed the area below the notch. A small gully fell into oblivion. I searched the sidewalls on the other side for a weakness, but the only thing I could find was a small shaft of scree more than a hundred feet down, rising above an immense cliff. I kept telling myself that it couldn't be the route; that something easier must lie hidden, but reality slowly settled and we broke out the rope.

Kathy belayed me into the notch. We used a horn on the top of the ridge for an anchor. The full single length of the 60-meter rope was long enough for me to descend the notch to a sidewall that could be traversed into the crack of scree. From that point there were a couple terrifying moments climbing the chasm. It emptied out onto a couple thin and exposed benches that could be crossed south onto a flank of steep loose rock. The rest was an easy scramble south.

I stood on the North Summit and peered down over the top to where Kathy was sitting. Kathy had elected not to rappel off the anchor, due to its semi-sketchy nature and wait for a belay from me. I looked south, down the thin razorblade of ridge that led to the 6650-foot South Summit of White Lice a couple hundred meters farther across an impassable gap, then back north to Ovis Peak and The Mitre dwindling slowly into the pale blue of Eklutna Lake, then to the immense peaks

surrounding me on all sides.

I descended carefully, but hastily, back into the notch and Kathy belayed me up to her. Climbing up the gully was much more comfortable and felt like it could be achieved easily without the rope. It had not felt like that on the way down. Soon enough I was basking in the sun and belaying Kathy down to the ledge. The waves of adrenaline folded into pure satisfaction as I watched her climb to the summit.

The end of the day found us working our way back down the ridgeline above Pichler's Perch in the last of the sun's golden light. Soon the summit would seem as a distant dream, yet surrounding me stood dozens of others, calling to me with their glory. 📍

*Editor's Note: It has long been a topic of discussion as to which of the two summits on either side of the distinctive notch of White Lice Mountain is the highest. The USGS topo map lists a spot elevation of 6,650 feet on the South Summit. Two hundred meters to the north is a second open 6,600-foot contour defining the North Summit, which Sellers and Still climbed. Ascents of the North Summit have been reported in three other issues of Scree: August 1964, September 1964, and September 2011. Ascents of the South Summit have also been reported in three issues of Scree: September 1962, September 1987, and December 2010.*



**Approaching the serrated final summit ridge. Peril Peak (7,040 feet) and the East Branch of the Eklutna Glacier are visible on the right. Photo by Az Sellers**



# Pioneer Peak (6398 feet)

## Western Chugach Mountains,

Sunday, August 6th, 2017

Text and photos by Shane Ohms

Under clear skies and a promising forecast for the rest of the Sunday, August 6, 2017 Ryan Senko, Sophie Tidler, Gerrit Verbeek, Steve Gruhn, and I parked at the Austin Helmers – Pioneer Ridge Trailhead and began selecting the climbing gear we would be taking on our trip. By 8 a.m., we were making our way up the well-traveled Pioneer Ridge trail with intent to summit Pioneer Peak's slightly higher, northern summit.



**Left to right: Steve Gruhn, Ryan Senko, Gerrit Verbeek, and Sophie Tidler making their way up the Pioneer Ridge Trail with the Knik River winding in the background.**

We stopped for a lot of water breaks because it was a hot day, but otherwise we maintained a strong,



**Pioneer Peak is far off in the distance. A long mellow ridge walk lies ahead of Ryan Senko.**

consistent pace up to the ridge at 5330 feet. We then made our way toward South Pioneer Peak via a sheep highway situated a little below the ridge on the north side. Once we neared South Pioneer, we abandoned the sheep trail and did some mild scrambling on



**Porcupine at 6200 feet, just below South Pioneer Peak.**

the trail leading up to South Pioneer. Around 6200 feet a porcupine was discovered and I stopped to take pictures.

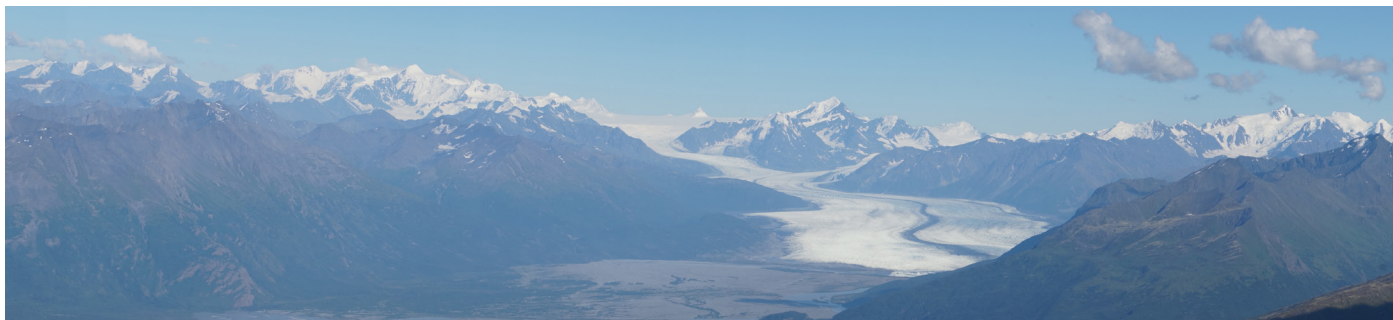
When I rejoined the group on top of South Pioneer, eyes were surveying the South and East faces of Pioneer. Sophie noted a potential scree gully on the east face leading up to the low point between the true summit and counterpoint. Unfortunately, our vantage prevented us from seeing the characteristics within the gully, so that path was questionable. The South Face yielded a lot more options, but all of them were narrower and looked like the type of gullies that magically transform into dead ends after you've committed your day's allotment of time and energy into them. We decided to get a closer look and

so we dropped to the saddle between North and South Pioneer. Sophie and Gerrit went to scope out the entrances to some of the gullies on the South Face, so I decided to walk around the other side and try to get a look inside that prominent gully on the East Face. As I walked around and saw more and more



**Looking at Pioneer Peak from South Pioneer Peak. Not seeing much in the department of friendly routes.**

of the gully, it began to look more and more promising; however, getting into it would sadly require dropping a sizeable amount of elevation. Senko (who was sitting on



**Mount Marcus Baker, Mount Goode, and many other mountains near the Knik Glacier.**

the saddle watching Sophie, Gerrit, and me) yelled over to me that they had found something good on the South Face. I quickly scurried over without question; I was just eager for the real climbing to begin!

The selected gully was one-at-a-time travel due to the crumbly Chugach crud that was constantly breaking off. By the time Senko and I had made it to the entrance of the gully, Sophie had already made it up and was piecing together the next bit of our route while Gerrit took his turn in the gully. After Gerrit had made it up, it was my turn. The gully was slow and crumbly, but that's exactly what I'd expected it to be like. It was noted that we would need to use rope to get back down it. After I made it up and out of the gully, we were on a miniature ridge and I could see Gerrit above, he gave me some instruction and pointers on getting up to his location, then he continued on and I made it to the spot he had been at previously. Eventually Steve's head emerged from the gully and I passed the same pointers down the line (telephone style) before going around the corner myself to see what the next leg of the climb would hold. The next leg turned out to be just some more scrambling on the miniature ridge and, after some easy up, I reached Gerrit who had found a nice spot of grass to take off the packs and rest. It was already 4 p.m. at this point and Gerrit was concerned that all the one-at-a-time our large group had to do might mean we wouldn't have time to send everyone to the summit. Sophie had already taken off for the top and from our grassy stop it

looked like it was just a little more scrambling to gain the west ridge, then traversing a series of scree fields to reach the summit. I left the rope on the grass patch with Gerrit, promised a turnaround time of 6 o'clock, and made my way for the summit. Being 9 pounds lighter I made quick work catching up to Sophie. At around 5 p.m., Sophie was on the summit of Pioneer. Before I disappeared behind a false summit Gerrit yelled up to me that Steve would be joining us and that he and Senko would be waiting on the grassy patch for us three to return. After that I made my way up to the summit and by 5:15 p.m. I had joined Sophie, soaking in the summit views.



**Icicle Peak, Mount Rumble, and Mount Yukla – Three 7000-foot giants.**

Oh, and the views were spectacular! We could see the entire Matanuska-Susitna valley, Matanuska Peak all the way up the Knik Glacier to Mount Marcus Baker and Mount Goode, and everything from The Mitre to Mount Rumble to East Twin Peak. A few clouds were hiding the



upper elevations of Bold Peak and Bashful Peak, but it was as perfect of visibility as one could hope for. I immediately went to work, fervently taking panoramic photos and profile images of the beautiful mountains spanning every direction. By 6:00 Steve had joined us on top of Pioneer Peak. By 6:30 we reluctantly began making our way back to Senko and Gerrit. Upon reestablishing shouting distance with Gerrit he told us some great news; Senko had found an easier way back to the saddle that wouldn't require the rope I'd carried for nearly the entire trip. "Well," I thought to myself, "at least the rope was good weight training!" Sophie, Steve, and I traversed across the same several scree slopes and made it uneventfully back to the



**Gerrit Verbeek about to start going down Ryan Senko's route before going back up South Pioneer Peak.**

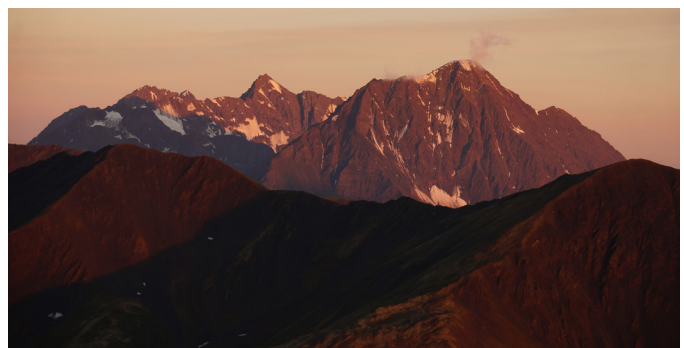
grassy patch where we had left Gerrit and Senko. Senko's route skirted along the south side of the southeast ridge and the worst of it was just a five-minute section of one-



**Right to left: Steve Gruhn, Sophie Tidler, and Shane Ohms on the summit of Pioneer Peak.**

at-a-time down-climbing. We made it back to the top of South Pioneer around 9 p.m. I don't even want to imagine what hour we would have reached South Pioneer had we needed to descend the same way we'd come up.

Descending from South Pioneer we saw the same porcupine huddled up in the same location. It was evident that the porcupine was stuck on the mountain and unable to get back down to the lush vegetated valley where it belonged. If there is one thing a climber could learn from that porcupine's misfortune; it is that you should never go up something you're unable to get down. We followed the ridge back to the trail, and then the trail back to the car. Fortunately, it was a full moon that night, but below timberline there was little the moon could do to help us. The trudge back to the car consisted of much stumbling and cursing over every unseen root and unexpected dip in the trail. By 1 a.m., we were on the road back to Anchorage where everyone (except Steve) had work schedules waiting for them at 8 a.m. or earlier. Pioneer Peak was a great exhibition of Chugach climbing, and the approach was ... much longer than I had expected. 🕒



**The sun sets on Baleful Peak, Bashful Peak, and Bold Peak.**



# Thunder Mountain (Mount Nirvana) (9098 feet)

## Highest Mountain in the Northwest Territories, Canada

### First Ascent of West Face – 5.9, ~30 Pitches

Text by Eric Gilbertson

Eric Gilbertson, Dave Custer, Susan Ruff

July-August, 2017

**T**hunder Mountain (Mount Nirvana), the highest mountain in the Northwest Territories, is a remote, technical peak nestled deep in the Ragged Range in Nahanni National Park, far from any road or airstrip. Its summit is the convergence of three razor-sharp rock ridges, flanked by sheer granite faces up to 1,000 meters tall and guarded by massive glaciers in the east and north cirques. The peak has seen only a handful of ascents since it was first climbed in 1965, of which two were on the north face, and four on the east face. The peak is still officially unnamed. The first ascent team called it Mount Nirvana, but currently the Canadian government is working to officially recognize the name Thunder Mountain, reflecting the local Deh Cho first nation name for the mountain.

I had previously been on two expeditions to Thunder Mountain, an attempt on the west face in 2015, and a successful ascent of the east face in 2016. In 2015 I helicoptered from Watson Lake with Dave Custer and Susan Ruff to the base of the west face. Over three weeks we attempted to figure out a way up the complicated wall of gullies, ledges, sheer faces, and

cracks. We ultimately reached a point roughly 16 pitches up a gully bisecting the face, but retreated when we encountered crumbling, unprotectable rock. The 2015 expedition was beset by the rainy and unsettled weather common to the area, with only one or two good climbing days per week. Despite the suboptimal conditions, we gained valuable insight into how to succeed on the face, with an eye to returning. At the end of the 2015 trip, I hiked out for a week and then paddled out the Nahanni River back to civilization (see pages 161 through 163 of the 2016 American Alpine Journal).

On the successful ascent in 2016, Len Vanderstar and I approached from the Tungsten mine, paddling and bushwhacking for a week to the base of the east face. We then spent a harrowing 51 hours dodging avalanches, climbing rock to the summit, and returning to camp. At the end of the climb, we bushwhacked for another week



The west face, with our different routes shown. Photo by Eric Gilbertson.

back to Tungsten (see pages 154 and 155 of the 2017 AAJ).

As of early 2017, the biggest face of Thunder Mountain, the 1,000-meter-tall, 2-kilometer-wide west face, was still unclimbed. Dave, Susan, and I were all available for another expedition, and planned to return that summer. This time we would try to learn from our past experience, and accordingly made modifications to our strategy.

We would budget roughly five weeks, instead of three, to account for the rainy weather and lack of good climbing windows. We would also shift the expedition later in the summer, between mid-July and mid-August, when conditions might be drier and more snow might have melted.

On the evening of July 14, we helicoptered in from Watson Lake, Yukon Territory, and set up base camp exactly as we had in 2015, at the edge of a small tarn, finishing up by midnight in the faint twilight that is as dark as it gets at that latitude in July.

Our first plan of attack on the west face was to try a system of cracks and steps we'd identified in pictures on a buttress just left of our 2015 route. In 2015 we'd climbed directly up from base camp to near the base of that buttress, but later discovered a long 4th-class ledge traversing the face halfway up. The ledge contained a few 5th-class sections, but we thought if we could put an advanced camp on that ledge, it would make it easier for us to explore different route options on the upper half of the mountain. To facilitate moving gear to the advanced base camp (ABC), we would fix ropes on the few exposed sections of the ledge.

With that plan, we spent the next week hauling loads and fixing lines to ABC. It rained every day, even forcing us to bivy under an overhang to ride out a 36-hour rain event, but eventually we established camp.

On July 22 it looked like we were getting our first weather window (our friends were satellite-texting us

forecasts), so we hiked, climbed, and Jumared up to ABC. The morning of July 23 we set off, alternating leads while simul-climbing across the snowy, exposed ledges, until we reached the southwest gully. We climbed two snow pitches up the gully, and then diverged from our 2015 route by traversing left on another ledge system.

From the ledge we climbed up a face with small holds, a big chimney, a fun hand crack, and a little bit of scrambling to the base of a tricky slightly-overhanging crack. A light rain set in as we reached the base of the crack, making free-climbing difficult. Nevertheless, Dave aided up the crack, amid more rain squalls and darkening skies. The pitch crested the arête, but by that point it was dark enough to need a headlamp, drizzling, cold, and windy. The route above us still looked difficult. In those conditions it was too risky to be trying more pitches of tough climbing, so we retreated.

Six rappels and a bit of downclimbing led us back to the main ledge, where we traversed back to ABC, arriving 24 hours after we'd left. On the hike back down to our base camp, Susan twisted her ankle, which precluded

her further participation in the climbing for the remainder of the trip.

The next week was a return to normal, wet weather of the Ragged Range, and we spent that week back in base camp. In between reading books, I managed to scramble up a small unclimbed peak [Ed. note: a 2075-meter peak located at 61.88403° North, 127.706366° West] north of camp, and place a fresh cairn on top.

Eventually another weather window was forecast, and on July 31 Dave and I climbed back up to ABC. Our strategy this time was to try a different summit route – the south ridge.

However, after over 13 hours of climbing on August 1st, we reached a difficult overhanging dead end on the south ridge, and retreated back to ABC. We made an attempt up a southwest gully route the next day, but eventually had to retreat on that route due to melting snow above us that turned the gully into a steady stream of water that



**Susan Ruff leading on our first summit attempt. Photo by Eric Gilbertson.**



threatened to give us hypothermia.

It appeared any route from ABC would either require difficult aiding or would be too wet to climb. We would have to find a different route, and our next option was to try a route on the left side of the face, which was accessible from base camp. Over the next two days, we managed to haul all the gear and fixed ropes back to base camp, and there we waited again for a weather window.

On August 6 we had another weather window, and set out from base camp at 6 a.m. After a few hours we reached the ledge system near Trident Col, north of Thunder Mountain, and scrambled across to the right, eventually dropping down into the gully separating peaks Scylla and Charybdis (the two peaks north of Thunder Mountain). There we roped up and started climbing.

Dave and I swung leads up mossy cracks, across narrow ledges, and around and through slabby waterfalls, eventually reaching a basin beneath Charybdis. From the basin we climbed up to the crest of an arête to the right and then rappelled down into the next snowy gully over.

From there we climbed a snow pitch and several overhanging chock-stone pitches until it started getting dark out. The face above us appeared to be the crux of our route – a series of steep cracks that might reach the crest of the northwest ridge of Thunder Mountain.

We were reluctant to start the unknown crux pitches in the dark, though, and were tired from a full day of climbing. Opting to bivy until daylight, we built a bomber anchor at a small scree ledge, clipped in, and hunkered down for the night.

Restful sleep eluded us. I put on all my layers, piled up the rope to lie on, wrapped up in a trash bag, and curled up in a ball to try to sleep. The night was cold, and I don't really recall sleeping for more than a few minutes in between shivering.

The next morning took much too long to arrive.

Our feet were numb, and we were exhausted from the previous day and the absence of sleep. We decided to retreat, not feeling up for the unknown crux of the route. We rappelled down and eventually staggered back into camp at 1 a.m., 43 hours after leaving.

Time was running out, and it looked like we had time for one final summit attempt before we would have to leave. We set August 10 as our last attempt, and rose at 1 a.m. that morning.



**Dave Custer traversing the ledges on the successful summit bid.  
Photo by Eric Gilbertson.**

As we were packing up in the darkness, I looked to the north and saw green curtains shimmer across the sky. It was the northern lights! This was the first (and only) time we'd seen them on the whole trip, despite looking outside most nights, and we hoped they were a good omen.

Dave and I set out at 2 a.m., carrying skinny ropes, and skimping on any gear we could. At the ledges we ditched our boots, changed into rock shoes, and scrambled over to the climb. I still carried my ice axe for the snow pitch, but planned to ditch that after the snow.

We climbed the first pitch in the dim twilight, and after that we no longer needed headlamps. We swung leads, each of us leading the exact same pitch we had previously to increase efficiency, and reached the bivy ledge by 12:30 p.m. We had gotten there nine hours earlier

than in the previous attempt! There was now plenty of daylight for the crux of the climb.

Dave led a traverse pitch, a hand crack to a hanging belay, and another shorter crack to a small ledge inside a chimney near its base. From there we stepped left to gain a gently-overhanging crack system, finessed a steep, wide section, and continued up the crack to the crest of the northwest ridge. Once on the ridge, we were greeted with a huge flat bench big enough to pitch a tent. It was the perfect place to take a short break and plan out the rest of our route. We had about five hours of daylight left, and hoped we could reach the summit before dark, when navigation would be considerably more difficult.

The ridge above us looked quite sharp and technical all the way to the summit, but just below it on the north face, the terrain looked easier. We moved onto the north face and swung leads across ledges and up faces, including some delicate traverses, until we were below what looked like the edge of the summit plateau. I wriggled up an off-width and then reached the short, wide, overhanging crack noted by Buckingham during the mountain's first ascent (see pages 33 through 37 of the 1966 AAJ).

After clipping my pack to a cam (to haul up later), I climbed up the crack, pulled myself up over the lip, and crawled onto a broad, gently-sloping, boulder-strewn plateau. The summit was just a short walk away.

To the north a faint orange ribbon hugged the horizon in a narrow band of alpenglow as the last hints of sun retreated below the horizon. By 12:30 a.m. August 11, we both reached the summit, just as it became dark enough to need headlamps. It was an amazing culmination to our trip, having summited in the last possible window after a month on the mountain.


We dug out the summit register, and signed ourselves in, with me adding my name from 2016 (when I couldn't find the summit register in all the snow). It sounded appealing to just sleep on the summit, and indeed we could have easily leveled out a spot, but unfortunately it was too windy and cold to hope for any sleep to occur.

After a half hour on the top, we were getting cold and down-climbed back to the edge of the plateau. Dave

found a crack near the edge, and we rapped off a cam and small, fixed chock-stone down to a lower ledge in the dark. After some down-leading, diagonal rappelling, and traversing, we finally reached the nice ledge at the edge of the northwest ridge by 7 a.m.

From there two rappels brought us back to our bivy ledge, and we easily followed our previous rap anchors down the face. We hiked down from Trident Col in the heat of the evening, on probably the hottest day of the year, and arrived in camp at 7 p.m., 41 hours after leaving.

Bad weather was forecast for the next week, but we luckily managed to helicopter back to Watson Lake in the nick of time on August 13, and started the long road trip back to the U.S.

For a full report and pictures on this expedition (and the others in 2015 and 2016) see <http://www.countryhighpoints.com/northwest-territories/>. 



**Eric Gilbertson on one of the crux 5.9 pitches just below the northwest ridge. Photo by Dave Custer.**



# Peak of the Month: Chena Dome

By Steve Gruhn

<b>Mountain Range</b>	Tanana Hills
<b>Borough</b>	Fairbanks North Star Borough
<b>Drainage</b>	Angel Creek and Olympia Creek
<b>Latitude/Longitude</b>	65° 5' 0" North, 146° 27' 55" West
<b>Elevation</b>	4421 feet
<b>Prominence</b>	1971 feet from Table Mountain (4472)
<b>Adjacent Peak</b>	Peak 4070 in the Angel Creek and Olympia Creek drainages; Peak 3610 in the Anaconda Creek drainage; Peak 3348 in the Angel Creek and Colorado Creek drainages; Peak 3450 in the Frozenfoot Creek, Olympia Creek, and Little Chena River drainages; and Peak 2875 in the Anaconda Creek and Colorado Creek drainages
<b>Distinctness</b>	871 feet from Peak 4070 in the Angel Creek and Olympia Creek drainages
<b>USGS Map</b>	Circle (A-5)
<b>First Recorded Ascent</b>	1952 by a U.S. Geological Survey party
<b>Access Point</b>	Chena Hot Springs

While conducting a survey of the Fairbanks and Birch Creek Mining Districts for the USGS in 1903, Thomas Golding Gerdine recorded the name Chena Dome for the highest peak in the Little Chena River, West Fork of the Chena River, and Angel Creek drainages. The name was derived from the nearby Chena River, the name of which had been derived from the Lower Tanana Athabascan name Ch'eno', which means "river of something" where the "something" was a thinly veiled reference to game animals, particularly caribou. The inference to be made was that was a good place to hunt caribou – so good that it was worth avoiding mention of that animal.

Alfred Hulse Brooks incorporated the name Chena Dome in his 1904 "Reconnaissance Map of Fairbanks and Birch Creek Districts, Alaska," which was included as Plate XIII in Louis Marcus Prindle's 1905 report titled, "The Gold Placers of the Fortymile, Birch Creek, and Fairbanks Regions, Alaska."


In 1952 a USGS survey party flew in a helicopter from Chena Hot Springs to Chena Dome and set a bronze tablet, stamped Chena 1952, in top of an iron pipe projecting 0.6 foot above the ground.

Chena Dome can now be accessed by the Chena River State Recreation Area's Chena Dome Trail that starts from the Upper Chena Dome Trailhead at Mile 50.8 of Chena Hot Springs Road and after about 10 miles ascends the east ridge of Chena Dome. The trail is part of a 29-mile loop that descends the southwest ridge of Chena Dome and terminates at the Lower Chena Dome Trailhead at Mile 49.4 of Chena Hot Springs Road.



On May 23, 2015, Jennifer DuFord, Wayne Todd, and Carrie Wang climbed Chena Dome from the Upper Chena Dome Trailhead via the trail on the east ridge and descended via the trail on the southwest ridge to the Lower Chena Dome Trailhead. Their route included ascents of Peak 3750 and Peak 4070 in the Angel Creek and Olympia Creek drainages; of Chena Dome; of Peak 3348 in the Angel Creek and Colorado Creek drainages; and of Peak 3450 in the Angel Creek and Stiles Creek drainages.

On December 30, 1951, Transocean Air Lines Flight 501 from Umiat crashed at the 3850-foot level of the west side of the south ridge of Peak 4070 east of Chena Dome while en route to Fairbanks. All four people on board perished. The wreckage of the Curtiss C-46F Commando remains at the site about 8-½ trail miles from the Upper Chena Dome Trailhead.

The information for this column came from Alfred Hulse Brooks' 1904 "Reconnaissance Map of Fairbanks and Birch Creek Districts, Alaska," which was included as Plate XIII in Louis Marcus Prindle's 1905 "The Gold Placers of the Fortymile, Birch Creek, and Fairbanks Regions, Alaska" (a copy is available at <https://pubs.usgs.gov/bul/0251/report.pdf>); from Donald J. Orth's 1971 *Dictionary of Alaska Place Names*; from Gary Holton's "Talking Alaska" blog (<http://talkingalaska.blogspot.com/2010/03/chester-and-chena.html>); from USGS field notes available at <https://www.geocaching.com/mark/details.aspx?PID=TT6967>; from Chena River State Recreation Area's "Guide to Chena Dome Trail in Chena River State Recreation Area" (available at <http://dnr.alaska.gov/Assets/uploads/DNRPublic/parks/maps/chenadometrl.pdf>); from Wayne Todd's trip report titled "Chena Dome Trailathon," which appeared in the March 2017 *Scree*; and from the Aviation Safety Network Accident Database (available at <https://aviation-safety.net/database/record.php?id=19511230-0>). 



**Communications shed on the summit of Chena Dome.  
Photo by Wayne Todd.**

## From the Editor: Cairns and Summit Registers

There's been a bit of chatter on the MCA Facebook page lately about the merits of trail cairns, summit cairns, and summit registers. The debate seems to center around the traditional backcountry edict of "leave no trace" versus the safety merits of cairns and the historical merits of summit cairns and registers. It is essentially a purist versus pragmatist viewpoint.

Certainly both arguments have merit. I think many backcountry travelers would agree that unnecessary and redundant cairns provide no true value, except to make the builder feel some sort of odd accomplishment. However, I believe that strategically placed trail-marking cairns can provide a level of safety to mark key spots on a challenging route, or to provide critical guidance when traveling in cloudy weather. What might seem like an obvious route in the sunshine, can be surprisingly misleading in the fog. Today's electronic navigation devices can mitigate some of these risks; however, I believe safety does warrant some use of well-placed navigation cairns.

Summit cairns have less utility on peaks where the top is unmistakable. Even still, it can be confusing at times to know when one is on a true summit in cloudy weather. I know there are some climbers who pride themselves on destroying both trail cairns and summit cairns. They believe in a purist interpretation of "leave no trace," so that all subsequent travelers experience an undefiled peak.

Summit registers might be the most controversial item discussed here. Again, the purist would argue that they exist solely to fill the human need for recognition, and that there is no place in the mountains for that egotistic behavior. To a certain extent they are correct. But I believe it is more complex than that from a historical perspective. Certainly a present-day register with names from last week, last month, or even last year is of little significance. However, that same register three, five, or ten years from now does start having historical significance, or at least may be of historical interest. When the State of Alaska was trying to show historical use of the Rabbit Lake Trail on

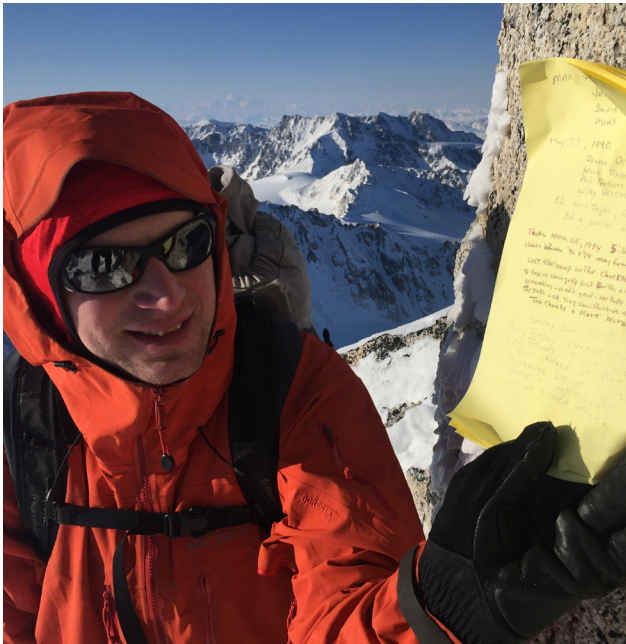


Upper Canyon Road, they used the North and South Suicide Peaks summit registers as evidence. Mountaineering historians and armchair historians also appreciate the information that is accrued over time in these registers. And finally, search and rescue operations have used summit registers to reconstruct position and timelines of missing climbers.

I would suggest to folks, be judicious in both your placement of and removal of trail cairns, putting yourself in the shoes of those less experienced than you. They might need some strategically placed cairns to get off a peak safely. Small summit cairns shouldn't detract from anyone's true appreciation of the ascent, and additional small summit registers hidden in the cairn should also not be cause for concern. Again, the operative descriptions for each of these items are strategic, small, and reasonable.

*The SCREE* welcomes other points of view on the use of cairns and summit registers. 🕒

- Dave Hart



**Lee Helzer and the summit register of Sovereign Mountain (8,849 feet), Talkeetna Mountains 3-11-2017.**  
**Photo by Dave Hart**



**Tokosha Mountains, Alaska Range taken from Curry Ridge, Denali State Park. Photo by Frank Baker.**

## Mountaineering Club of Alaska

President	Charlie Sink	258-8770	Board member (term expires in 2017)	Stephen Austria	402-540-7037
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### Annual membership dues: Single \$20, Family \$25

Dues can be paid at any meeting or mailed to the Treasurer at the MCA address below. If you want a membership card, please fill out a club waiver and mail it with a self-addressed, stamped envelope. If you fail to receive the newsletter or have questions about your membership, contact the Club Membership Committee at [membership@mtnclubak.org](mailto:membership@mtnclubak.org).

The *Scree* is a monthly publication of the Mountaineering Club of Alaska. Articles, notes, and letters submitted for publication in the newsletter should be emailed to [MCAScree@gmail.com](mailto:MCAScree@gmail.com). Articles should be submitted by the 24th of the month to appear in the next month's *Scree*.

Paid ads may be submitted to the attention of the Vice-President at the club address and should be in electronic format and pre-paid. Ads can be emailed to [vicepresident@mtnclubak.org](mailto:vicepresident@mtnclubak.org).

Missing your MCA membership card? Stop by the monthly meeting to pick one up or send a self-addressed, stamped envelope and we'll mail it to you.

Mailing list/database entry:	Brian Miller - <a href="mailto:membership@mtnclubak.org">membership@mtnclubak.org</a>
Hiking and Climbing Committee:	Ed Smith - 854-5702 or <a href="mailto:hcc@mtnclubak.org">hcc@mtnclubak.org</a>
Huts:	Greg Bragiel - 569-3008 or <a href="mailto:huts@mtnclubak.org">huts@mtnclubak.org</a>
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**Josh Allely ascending southern slopes of Mt. Talachulitna. Mt. Torbert visible 7 miles to the south. Photo by Dave Hart**

**Web: [www.mtnclubak.org](http://www.mtnclubak.org)**

Find MCAK listserv at <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/MCAK/info>.

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