

# the SCREE

## Mountaineering Club of Alaska

NOVEMBER 2022

Volume 65, Number 11



"It's truly a necessity  
to have a passion as  
a compass in life."

- Hilaree Nelson

General Meeting Wednesday,  
November 2, 2022, from 6:00 to 8:00  
p.m. at the B.P. Energy Center.  
Presentations on Mount Saint Elias by  
Chris Maus, Dane Ketner and Charlie  
Procknow; and the 30,000 Kilometer  
Mountain by Dr. Matthew Sturm.

### Contents

Goodhope Towers, Talkeetna Mountains

Tangle Mountain and Peak 5210, Amphitheater Mountains

Mount Saint Elias, Saint Elias Mountains

Peak of the Month: Skeen Mountain, Kenai Mountains

***"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."***

*This issue brought to you by: Editor—Abbey Collins assisted by Dawn Munroe*

## Cover Photo

Sunrise from above high camp on our summit attempt on Mount Saint Elias.

Photo by Charlie Procknow

## GENERAL MEETING

Wednesday, November 2, 2022, from 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. at the [B.P. Energy Center](http://www.bpeenergy.com) 1014 Energy Ct, Anchorage, AK 99508.

Presentations:

- \* Mount Saint Elias / A Lesson in Humility and Fragility in the High Mountains; Dane Ketner, Chris Maus, and Charlie Procknow
- \* The 30,000 Kilometer Mountain / Snow Travels and Studies in Arctic Alaska; Dr. Matthew Sturm, Geophysical Institute-University of Alaska

**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 11th 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. Send high resolution file photos separately, including captions for each photo. 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 outdoors. Please submit at least one vertically-oriented photo for consideration for the cover. Please don't forget to submit photo captions.

## MCA Icefest

Special thanks to Jayme Mack Fuller and the following instructors and volunteers for another successful MCA Icefest at the Matanuska Glacier!

Jay Rowe, Eric Wickenheiser, David Egan, Andrew Holman, Rick Roth, Stephen Austria, Carlene Van Tol, Kelly Kroprok, Jacob Lawlor, Max Neale, and Wayne Fuller.



*Kristina Kvernplassen climbs back up after being lowered on a pillar of ice as Stephanie Rice looks on.*

*Photo by Andrew Holman.*

## Contents

Goodhope Towers (West - 5,729 feet, Center - 5,776 feet, East - 5,742 feet); Talkeetna Mountains .....	4
Tangle Mountain (5,715 feet) and Peak 5210, Amphitheater Mountains.....	5
Mount Saint Elias (18,008 feet), Saint Elias Mountains .....	7
Peak of the Month: Skeen Mountain (5850 ± 50 feet), Kenai Mountains .....	12
Board of Directors Meeting Minutes .....	15

For the MCA Membership Application and Liability Waiver, visit  
<http://www.mtnclubak.org/index.cfm?useaction=members.form>.



**Check Facebook for last-minute trips and activities. Or, schedule one that you want to organize.**





## Announcements

### Election Results

The MCA held its annual election at the October general meeting on October 5. Positions occupied by Nathan Pooler (Vice President), Curtis Townsend (Secretary), and Directors Josh Pickle, Coleman Ahrens, and Brendan Lee were all up for election. Mike Meyers also finished a one-year position on the board as Past President.

Yelena Prusakova (Vice President), Andrew Holman (Director) and Matt Nedom (Director) ran unopposed and were elected to unanimous applause. Tom McIntyre (Director) and Donell Irwin (Secretary) later volunteered and have been approved by the outgoing board.

Thanks to everyone who served on the previous board, your contributions are appreciated. The 2022-2023 board looks forward to serving membership.

Position	Term End	Name
President	2023	Gerrit Verbeek
Vice President	2024	Yelena Prusakova
Secretary	2024	Donell Irwin
Treasurer	2023	Katherine Cooper
Director	2024	Andrew Holman
Director	2024	Matt Nedom
Director	2024	Tom McIntyre
Director	2023	Heather Johnson
Director	2023	Andy Kubic
Director	2023	Peter Taylor

### Board on Geographic Names Officially Renames Suicide Peaks

At its October 13 meeting, the Domestic Names Committee of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names voted to approve a proposal to officially change the name of the Suicide Peaks to Yuyanq' Ch'ex, to change the name of North Suicide Peak to North Yuyanq' Ch'ex, and to change the name of South Suicide Peak to South Yuyanq' Ch'ex. The MCA's Geographic Names Committee submitted comments to the Alaska Historical Commission on April 13, 2021, and again on May 2, 2022, opposing the proposal. The AHC rejected the proposal in May 2021 and again in June 2022. After the AHC's second rejection, the proponent submitted the proposal directly to the BGN and the AHC subsequently forwarded the MCA's comments to the BGN.

### Requests for Cabin Suggestions

The Forest Service recently announced \$14.4 million in funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law for the construction, reconstruction, relocation, and repair of cabins. They are currently asking the public for suggestions for projects in the Chugach and Tongass National Forests, with a deadline of October 31.

Read more here: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r10/recreation/?cid=FSEPRD1060419>

### Pioneer Ridge - Austin Helmers Trail Clearing

Thanks to Charlotte Foley, Kate Ginsbach, and Ben Heath for joining Gerrit Verbeek on October 8 to clear brush along the Pioneer Ridge - Austin Helmers Trail. The group cut back branches up to the tree line, slightly beyond the first picnic table. They couldn't do much about the deep muddy sections.

### Bomber/ Mint Huts Maintenance Mission

Many thanks to the crew that conducted maintenance missions to the Bomber and Mint huts on September 16 and 17, 2022 with Pollux Aviation owner Samuel Maxwell and helicopter pilots Jeremy Gardner and Chris Timpano.

Brad Nelson (mission leader), Andy Milauskas, Bill Byl, Bailey Booher, and Dave Staeheli installed new windows in the Bomber Hut. Dave Staeheli worked with Pollux to return four human waste barrels from the Mint Hut toilet.

Many thanks to everyone for your hard work and dedication to the MCA.

**There are three empty poo barrels that need to go to the Mint Hut soon.** The MCA has many strong, capable members. Consider **volunteering to hike or sled a barrel to the Mint.** (See the October *Scree* article about our president, Gerrit Verbeek, who hiked a barrel in.)

Greg Bragiel- MCA Huts chairman

# **Goodhope Towers (West - 5,729 feet, Center - 5,776 feet, East - 5,742 feet), Talkeetna Mountains**

Text by Marcin Ksok

The towers are not easily spotted and often go unnoticed until one gains significant elevation on surrounding features. The three (some maps also show a slightly removed, eastern fourth tower but I failed to notice anything there except a culmination of a ridgeline) blocky features form a distant extension of Idaho Peak's ridge and are quite steep and distinct from afar. The center one is the most prominent; it's also the highest and trickiest one to ascend.

In preparation for our ascent in August 2020, I read a trip report in the 1969 American Alpine Journal by Vin Hoeman mentioning some acquaintances who ventured to the summit while also bagging Outpost and Turnkey peaks; unfortunately I am unable to find it now. We did retrieve an old sling from the top; it was about twenty feet long and grown over by moss, possibly left by the original 1968 ascensionists - Don N. Anderson, Don W. Anderson, and Mary Wilson.

Together with Greg Encelewski we made two bids at the prize, first approaching the towers from the north after biking up the Gold Mint Trail, but we retreated after not finding a suitable way up. Reading the map, one might think that ascending the northeast ridge from the valley floor would be straightforward but it didn't go for us.

Approaching from the southeastern cirque was fruitful. There is actually an old switchback trail present which rises to the bottom of the cirque that must be from mining days. It can be seen if one pays close attention right after crossing the creek draining the cirque above. The area is flush with both high and lowbush blueberries.

To gain access we scrambled up a nasty gully which terminates between the center and east towers. We then rope-scrambled up more nastiness and ended up below the summit block – another short, low fifth/high fourth class pitch – and we were on top. After digging out the old rappel sling, we built a new anchor and made our way to the north side. We traversed under the central tower's blocks, dropped to a saddle and scrambled up the west tower which is not nearly as steep and didn't require a rappel, although we did find a very recent anchor on top.

After returning to the saddle we descended farther on the north side until we reached a snow-covered remnant of a glacier (maps don't show one there but it does exist). Once again we traversed under the central tower and reached the east tower's north ridge since it looked to be the best way up. Some steep scrambling brought us to the summit. The way down was to the east now so we scrambled the steep upper bits until the angle eased off. Not wanting to retrace the loose gully, we opted for the east ridge down to the cirque which proved wise.

In retrospect, I advise no one to follow our route and instead climb this worthy formation via the Snowbird/Reed Lakes side for a lot less scree and less elevation gain. A rope would still be advised to rappel off the central block – not longer than fifty meters – and maybe crampons for the glacier if attempting the route later in the summer.

## Tangle Mountain (5,715 feet) and Peak 5210, Amphitheater Mountains

Text by Steve Gruhn; photos by Dave Hart



*Steve Gruhn on the return trip with Tangle Mountain at left and Peak 5210 in the clouds above his head.*

On July 25, 1998, Jim Green, Gunnar Knapp, and I teamed to compete in an orienteering race in the Amphitheater Mountains. During that race we reached the summits of Peak 4790, in the Fielding Lake and Octopus Lake drainages, and Peak 4403, in the Fielding Lake drainage (see the October 2006 Scree). Looking westward, I became interested in ascending the pair of 5,210-foot summits overlooking Clear Creek. Our course then took us into the headwaters of Clear Creek as we circumnavigated the two summits. My interest in them was certainly piqued, but I couldn't scratch that itch in the middle of an orienteering race, so I put aside such thoughts until a later time.

On September 5, 2015, Dave Hart, Ben Still, and I hiked up Peak 4403 while hunting caribou. Not finding any success on the southeast side of the valley, we moved to the northwest and also found nothing. I figured we might as well hike up the southern of the two 5,210-foot summits because we were already in the area and I didn't want to be completely skunked on this outing. Partway up the south ridge of that southern 5,210-foot summit, we encountered a small band of caribou. Dave and I each shot one, so our hunting-turned-hiking trip quickly reverted back to a hunting trip and all thoughts of reaching those 5,210-foot summits went to the back burner once again.

On September 2 of this year, Dave and I returned to the area once again. Dave had become interested in climbing 5,715-foot Tangle Mountain upon learning that it had a topographic prominence of over 2,000 feet. Although we told ourselves we were hunting for caribou, the herd was not in the area, so we took our rifles for a walk. Dave had seen a GPS track on Gaia that he suggested we follow north toward Tangle Mountain. It turned out to be a muddy all-terrain vehicle trail just east of the eastern boundary of the Tangle Lakes Archaeological District, an area that restricts off-road vehicle use to designated trails when the terrain is snow-free and frost-free.

Dave and I followed the ATV trail north from the Denali Highway across an unnamed creek and up the gradual slope to the north. As we left the mud, the route of the ATV track became difficult to follow. As we descended toward Clear Creek, we found the going to be brushier and wetter than our liking. So, at about 500 feet above the stream, we opted to follow the contour of the terrain.

After heavy rain overnight, the day had started crisp and clear with ice on the puddles. But after about three hours clouds began to obscure the higher areas and a drizzle dampened the



prospects of using our rifles. We crossed Clear Creek at about 4,300 feet and headed toward the 5,260-foot saddle east of Tangle Mountain. Near the saddle the drizzle turned to a light snowfall and the wind speed rose dramatically. We turned west a few feet short of the saddle and Dave led us up steep, loose, snow-covered boulders to the broad summit.

On the summit we observed a rock windbreak and debris presumably left by either the 1941 U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey crew led by Arthur Newton Stewart that made the first recorded ascent of the peak via Fielding Lake, the 1950 USC&GS crew led by Philip C. Doran that climbed the peak from Lower Tangle Lake, or a subsequent 1950 USGS party. Snow covered the ground and prevented us from locating the Tangle benchmark that Stewart's 1941 party had placed on the summit, which had been the source of the peak's name.

We didn't spend much time on the summit – well, I didn't; Dave waited a bit for me to arrive. Soon we were descending the same way we came. We crossed Clear Creek and I thought we might have enough time to try the northern of the pair of 5,210-foot summits. So, we hiked eastward and then ascended the loose rocks on the southwest flank of that summit. On the top was an overturned rock (lichen-covered side facing down) atop another rock that led me to believe that we weren't the first to visit that summit. As he was descending Dave used Tim Kelley's PeakPal app on his cell phone to determine that the northern 5,210-foot summit was higher than the southern one. So, we're calling the northern summit Peak 5210 and the southern one Point 5210.

We retraced our steps down the rocks to the vegetation. Once at the vegetation, we contoured along the west face of the ridge. Because there wasn't a large drainage basin above us, we were surprised when we encountered a lot of water in the form of marshes and numerous small streams. It seemed there was water everywhere, not merely in the streams marked on the map. But we were already wet from the rain, snow, and Clear Creek, so we pushed onward to the ATV track, which we followed to the highway.

At the unnamed stream a couple hundred feet from the highway, I noted that the water had risen significantly since the morning. I took one step in and the rushing current pushed me off balance and I fell in completely. What a way to end a hike!

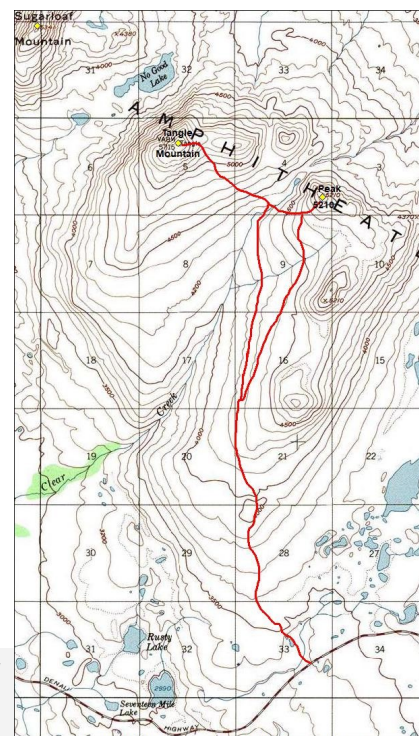
We didn't have the summit views we had sought, so we settled for the varied colors of autumn in the valleys and on the slopes. Despite the cold and wetness and the lack of caribou, it had been good to stretch our legs and visit a couple more summits in the Amphitheater Mountains.



*Steve Gruhn at the summit of Tangle Mountain with Long Tangle Lake in the background.*



*Steve Gruhn crossing an unnamed creek south-east of Clear Creek.*



*Tangle Mountain and Peak 5210 route.*



## Mount Saint Elias (18,008 feet), Saint Elias Mountains

Text and photos by Charlie Procknow



*Mount Saint Elias showing its full towering prominence as we start our expedition from the beaches of Taan Fiord.*

Every year, I try to pick one larger outdoor goal that pushes me outside of my comfort zone. This practice inspires me to train hard, sharpen old skills, and to learn new skills. This started in medical school, when I made my first goal to climb the south side of Mt. Hood. Slowly but surely my goals have escalated in challenge. After nearly a decade of this, I have seen my skiing and mountaineering skill set grow, small step by small step, through multiple routes on Mt. Hood, the Spearhead Traverse, Iliamna Volcano, Carpathian Peak, Bugaboo Spire, base camp skiing in the Alaska Range, and two Denali expeditions.

This season, my goal was extra ambitious, perhaps one of the most challenging objectives that is possible in the area of ski mountaineering – a sea to summit climb and ski of Mount Saint Elias. Mount Saint Elias has been skied from the summit a small number of times. However, nobody has skied from summit to sea in a single push. Multiple world-class skiers have fallen to their deaths while attempting to ski this mountain.

While the ski terrain on Saint Elias is steep, icy, and exposed, it is not the terrain itself that makes the mountain un-skied from summit to sea. Stretching 18,000 feet within just a few miles of the ocean at Icy Bay, it is sheer relief that makes it such a formi-

dable objective. Lining up proper snow conditions across this entire 18,000-vertical-foot span is a daunting task. During periods cold enough to produce snow at sea level, the upper mountain will be too cold for snow to stick, and will be a sheet of unskiable blue ice. During warmer periods, which will allow snow to stick to ice on the upper mountain, sea-level temps will be too warm to hold snow, and will create dangerous wet slide avalanches on the steep lower mountain. Add to this some of the most unstable weather in the world, and you have a ski puzzle that is nearly impossible to solve. Coming into the trip, I put our chances of skiing from the summit as very low. What I sought was not to be the first, but to push myself, test my skills, and to come home safely by remaining within my comfort zone.

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caption



So in late May, I flew out to Icy Bay with my friends Chris Maus and Dane Ketner to begin our expedition. We were dropped on a gravel air strip six miles from the head of Taan Fiord, where our ascent began. It was a beautiful day, and the entire mountain's 18,000 feet of relief was in full view as we walked the six miles of jagged coastline toward the base of the mountain. Within a day, we established camp at 3,000 feet at the base of the mountain. From here, the mountain rises steeply all the way to the summit, and the real climbing begins.

On the lower mountain, the late May temperatures forced us to climb at night, when the snow would be frozen and stable. During the heat of the day, rising temperatures and solar radiation created wet avalanches, rockfall, and unsupportable snow. This section between 3,000 and 7,000 feet was what we had identified as the crux of the route. There are three possible routes through this stretch. The first ascended route is known as the Harvard Route, a long ridge of weak crumbly rock composed of mixed low-5th-class rock and steep snow. The second is known as the Shale Ridge. Slightly steeper than the Harvard Route, it also has a mixture of crumbly shale rock and steep snow. The third route is known as the Milk Jug Couloir. This couloir is all snow and ice. It is an easier climb than the first two routes, but has significant rockfall hazard. As soon as the sun hits the cliffs above the chute, rocks begin tumbling down the funnel. A climber here at the wrong time of day could easily be killed by these fast moving missiles.

As we climbed, we identified that the Milk Jug Couloir would be the only acceptable ascent option. The near-surface rock on the Shale Ridge and Harvard Routes made the snow unclimbable. Solar radiation travels down the rocks and melts out the snowpack from below, creating a thin ice crust over mushy, weak, unprotectable snow. On the Milk Jug, we found a firm, icy névé - perfect for climbing. We double carried this section, which means we had too much gear to carry all at once, so we climbed once



*Pushing into dawn as we approached the base of the south ridge.*

with a full pack, descended with an empty pack, then climbed again with more supplies. We knew descending (which would be done as a single carry) would be more challenging, so we made sure we had good snow and ice for descent anchors as we climbed. Whenever we needed a belay, pickets, v-threads, and the occasional bollard provided solid protection for our climb and eventual descent.

Climbing the Milk Jug was stressful. It was steep, and we felt an urgency to move quickly to avoid rockfall hazard. Dane and I both had lethal rocks pass within feet of our heads on our first attempt, one we ultimately aborted due to it being too late in the day. We made our next two passes through the couloir much earlier, and while still quite stressful, these went without incident. When we topped out on our final climb of this section, now at about 7,500 feet of elevation, we were relieved – happy to have this danger behind us.

Relaxed, and atop the Milk Jug, we discussed our plan moving forward. We were all worried about descending what we had just climbed. A storm producing rain to 10,000 feet was forecasted to arrive in 4-5 days. We all feared that rain may deteriorate the snowpack to become weak, mushy, and unprotectable like it was on Shale Ridge and the Harvard Route. We decided to climb quickly to 13,000 feet, spend a day acclimating, push for the summit, then descend the following day. On this schedule, only a few short days would pass from when we climbed the Milk Jug to descending. We figured such a short window would preserve the snow quality we had found on ascent.

The rest of the climb, while constantly exposed and nerve wracking, went smoothly. The upper climb can be broken down into a few different segments. First, a steep exposed climb from the 7,500-foot bench to a ridge at 10,000 feet. A mile-long traverse of the 10,000-foot ridge, a traverse of the heavily crevassed north-facing slopes along Haydon Peak, a steep mixed rock and ice climb from the shoulder of Haydon Peak to high camp at 13,500 feet, then a long push through crevasse fields and



*Charlie and Chris starting out on the 10k ridge traverse, with the upper route in full view.*



steep ice to the summit at 18,008 feet. We found cold snow on the steep slopes from 7,000 to 10,000 feet, wintery conditions on the 10,000-foot ridge traverse, and firm icy snow on the exposed climb from 10,000 feet to high camp at 13,500 feet. We spent a much needed rest day, our only of the entire trip, at our high camp, acclimating what we could for the next day's summit push.

Acclimating at our high camp, Chris and I thought back on the climb thus far. Each segment of the climb proved more challenging than expected. We had surmounted every challenge safely, but we were mentally exhausted from long days of constant exposure. We both expressed that this might be the last trip we take with this level of objective hazard for quite some time.

On our summit day, a surprise storm and whiteout turned us back from around 17,000 feet of elevation. We hunkered down behind a wind break for a few hours on the flats at 16,000 feet before carefully navigating the crevasse field through whiteout conditions back to our high camp. We were disappointed not to have reached the summit, but agreed that we needed to descend ahead of the oncoming storm to ensure that we could safely descend the Milk Jug. With this in mind, we abandoned a second summit attempt, and descended the following day.

As we descended from our high camp, our packs grew heavier and the snow warmer. The steep slopes from high camp down to 10,000 feet, and the north-facing slopes of Haydon Peak, which just two evenings before were cold wintery snow, showed weak, mushy surface snow very early in the day. This melt was accelerated by a layer of greenish dust that wind from the previous day's storm had deposited over the snowpack. After reversing the ridge traverse at 10,000 feet, we paused above the slopes from ridge down to the top of the Milk Jug, giving the snow time to freeze before descending. Around midnight, we started to ski down to the Milk Jug, hoping to time this descent with those coldest hours of the night.

About a thousand feet into our ski descent, the snowpack suddenly collapsed under my feet, sending me tumbling downhill. I quickly arrested the fall (thank goodness, as the exposure below would have been le-



*Dane dug us a snow cave and emergency shelter on Haydon Col, while Chris and I went back for the cache.*

thal in an uncontrolled slide). I began cautiously side-slipping down farther, only to trigger a small wet slide just seconds later. These two giant red flags led us to take refuge in some steep rocks and wait for the snow to cool down further. From the rocks, we could see that three large wet avalanches had tumbled down the slopes we were descending sometime in the last three days since we had climbed it.

Sitting on the rocks, conversation was sparse. My mind worried about the snow conditions on the Milk Jug, and I assumed my partners' thoughts settled on the same troublesome topic. Around 1:30 a.m., we continued our descent. Snow conditions had barely improved, but we needed to start moving if we were to avoid rockfall in the Milk Jug. We cautiously side-slipped down, and while we all punched into the weak unsupportable snowpack a few times, we avoided triggering wet avalanches.

Safely down the steep slopes, we made our way across a large bench to the top of the Milk Jug Couloir. The snow was still weak, wet, sloppy, and not supporting our weight even with skis on. We experienced several collapsing snow bridges on thinly covered crevasses on our way across the flat, despite having skis on our feet.

From the top of the Milk Jug, we looked down 2,000 feet to the glacier below. If we could just reach this point, we would be safe; able to piece together a descent route regardless of the snow conditions. Given the events of the night, the weak snow, wet avalanches, and collapsing crevasses, we were nervous. Now about 3 a.m., we were at the coldest hour of the night, and the snow was not frozen. We dug down to glacier ice, built an ice anchor, and Dane rappelled down into the couloir to assess the slopes below. He rappelled past an ice bollard we had used to descend just four days earlier. It was melted into mush, certainly in no condition to safely support our weight. What had

been firm névé and ice just four days before was wet, weak, unsupportable, isothermic mush. Dane searched around for a crack to take a piton, or a rock horn to sling. None could be found. He built an anchor out of buried pickets, which failed easily under less than body weight in the weak snow. Finally, 6-8 foot deep runnels stretched vertically down the couloir, rendering the route un-skiable. To make



*Looking back at the north face of Haydon Peak*

matters more obvious, we watched a similar aspect across the valley rip into a natural wet avalanche during the coldest hour of the night. All signs were blatantly clear, we could not descend safely. Snow conditions were similar on the Shale Ridge, and we could see large swaths of steep snow on the upper reaches of the Harvard Route. Dejected, we made our way back to our previous campsite around 8,000 feet to get some rest, and hopefully put a clear head to our predicament.

I awoke around 8 a.m. to a hot beating sun. The snowpack, which never truly froze, consisted of a weak crust over wet sloppy snow below. This crust broke easily under my foot, even without a pack. I checked our weather forecast, one more sunny day, a night even warmer than last, then rain up to 10,000 feet of elevation. I woke Chris and Dane up to discuss our options.

Given warmer temps in the forecast, we had little hope of finding improved conditions the following night. If we were going to descend under our own power, we would have to free solo steep rotten snow. Any fall would be lethal. A wet slide, however small, would be lethal. Our options were two, leave behind all of our non-essential gear and free solo down-climb to our base camp with as little weight as possible, or climb back to the 10,000-foot ridge in hopes of getting a plane or helicopter ride down to our cache at 3,000 feet, bypassing the treacherous sections of the mountain.

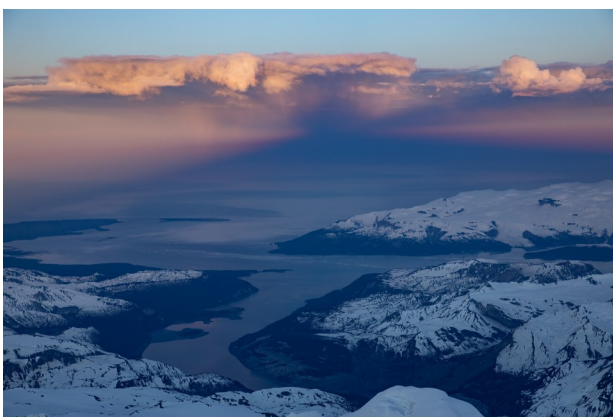
The second option, while clearly the safest, was hard to swallow. Asking for motorized assistance violates the ethos of mountaineering, a code of self-sufficiency, of owning the dangerous nature of our recreational decisions. We chose to come recreate here. We chose to keep climbing to the summit despite a sunny forecast. It can easily be viewed as vain and entitled to expect others to risk themselves to help us, when we put ourselves willingly and unnecessarily into danger. Most people agree that modern rescue infrastructure has been largely a good thing. It has saved countless lives. However, it has also set up a situation of moral



*Descending steep mushy snow on the route down to the Milk Jug.*

burnt out, demand rescue, or even fabricate non-existent dangers to manipulate rescuers into pulling them off the mountain. I have seen this first hand through previous work as a volunteer medic with Denali Rescue Rangers. The most cynical of rescuers view most every rescue attempt through this light. Even the most compassionate cannot ignore some flagrantly egregious stories from recent years. Clearly, rescue from the mountains is not a right, and it is ugly when people view it as an entitled foregone conclusion.

As I contemplated our own situation, I wondered where our group fell in this continuum. I was really scared at the prospect of downclimbing. I put my chances of surviving a descent with a fully loaded pack as quite low, maybe 30%. Any collapse in the weak snow would produce a fall or a wet slide, which would be fatal. Self-arrest was not an option with weak snow, heavy packs, and 60 degree slopes. If I abandoned non-essential gear, maybe my odds were closer to 50%. My body felt well, however, my mind was stressed, nerves frayed by the constant danger and exposure we had experienced on the climb. As I calculated these odds, I wondered if this “danger fatigue” caused me to overestimate the chances of failure.



*Mountain Shadow at Sunrise*

hazard. The knowledge of potential rescue can lead people to push harder than they would if rescue were not an option. Is it fair to expect help when we willingly push ourselves into dangerous situations? How do we offer assistance when needed, while also holding dear to mountaineering principles of self-sufficiency?

Further complicating these questions are incidents in recent years where climbers, exhausted and

On the one hand, our situation was not urgent. We had five days of food and good campsites to weather storms. We were all able-bodied, fit, and well. On the other hand, 30-50% are not good odds, and the conditions were forecast to get warmer and wetter the longer we waited. If we attempted to descend, we were likely to end up with a much more urgent situation on our hands. If we climbed



back up to the wide, flat ridge at 10,000 feet, a motorized pickup would not put our pilot at major risk. It would be a calm and comfortable situation. If somebody fell and was killed or injured, rescue from the side of the route could be extremely dangerous, or even impossible.

Asking for a rescue hurt my pride and self-image. But attempting a descent with such a high risk of failure would devalue the lives of me and my partners. From the safety of my couch, I vacillate on the philosophical debate of moral hazard in the mountains. However, on that day, sweating in a hot sunny tent surrounded by rotting snow, the answer was obvious: my pride is not worth my life. I could not accept my estimated odds of failure. Sealing the deal, a helicopter or plane ride from 10,000 feet would not be an overly risky maneuver in good weather. We wanted help.

The rest went smoothly. Our friends at home coordinated a ride, the park service messaged us about our situation, and was friendly, professional, and understanding. They issued a permit for a private helicopter to pick us up at 10,000 feet the following morning. We climbed back up through rotting snow the following morning, and had a mellow ride down from 10,000 to 3,000 feet. Our pilot was ecstatic, it was as beautiful a place as he had been, and he was grinning ear to ear while he had me hold his GoPro during the short flight. From the air, I could see in full view the rotting condition of the Milk Jug. What had been a short, knee-high, rock step just four days prior, was 60 to 100 feet of exposed rock with a waterfall running off of it. Clearly, without an anchor, that would have been impossible to safely descend. Our cache at 3,000 ft., which I had buried 6-8 feet deep just four days earlier, was sitting on the surface of the snow, fully melted out. In the face of such a rapidly decaying mountain, any doubts about our decision making quickly melted away. We made quick work of the trek back to the beach, and found ourselves safely home two short days later.

Now at home, typing on my couch, I continue to feel conflicted. I am ashamed that I put myself in a situation that I could not undo. I'm embarrassed to have asked a pilot to risk himself to help me out of my own mess, regardless of how trivial a risk the heli bump actually represented. That said, I am grateful to not have had to recklessly gamble with my life on descent. My friends and family share this gratitude.

This trip highlights the paradox of risk in the mountains. Pushing myself in the mountains adds so much richness to life. While I am here and living, these risks are 100% worth it. However, if that risk ever flips, and takes my life, it is no longer worth it. That hot day in the tent, the risk was suddenly no longer worth it. Most of us have lost friends in the mountains. I

certainly have. As I think about my friends who have died, to them, now dead, there is no way the risk was justified. It is a contradiction. Yes, the risk is worth it, until the rare instances where it suddenly, unexpectedly, and irrevocably isn't. For most who hit that point, it's too late to turn back. I am extremely lucky and grateful to have hit that point, and been able to walk out on the other side.

I cannot solve the dilemma of moral hazard in the high mountains. I maintain a huge gratitude to the park service, heli operators, and rescuers that do this work across the globe. I hope my actions were not a small step in the decay of mountaineering ethos of self-sufficiency. I hope they are not the beginning of an avalanche of inexperienced climbers jumping in over their heads and demanding rescue. Perhaps they are, or perhaps they represent an honest error, and a common tale in the modern age in mountaineering, where we can learn from our mistakes, and do not always have to pay for our poor judgment with our lives.



*Chris enjoys some rare quality turns above our 8k camp.*



*Breakfast at Sunrise*



## Peak of the Month: Skeen Mountain (5850 ± 50 feet), Kenai Mountains

Text by Steve Gruhn; photos by Wayne Todd

**Mountain Range:** Kenai Mountains, Grant Lake Peaks

**Borough:** Kenai Peninsula Borough

**Drainages:** Falls Creek and Grant Lake

**Latitude/Longitude:** 60° 25' 36" North, 149° 10' 43" West

**Elevation:** 5850 ± 50 feet

**Adjacent Peaks:** Peak 5240 northeast of Falls Creek Pass, Peak 5005 in the Grant Lake drainage, Snovia Peak (5050 feet), and Helios Peak (5584 feet)

**Distinctness:** 1100 feet from Peak 5240

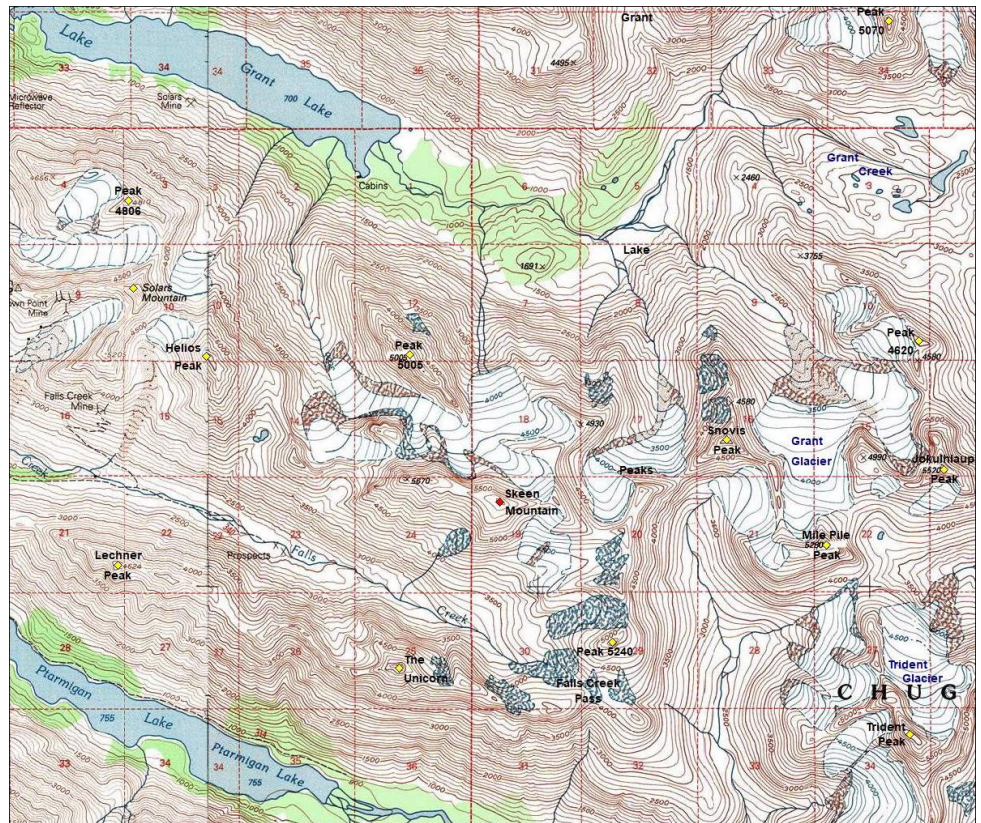
**Prominence:** 1890 feet from Trident Peak (6090 feet)

**USGS Maps:** 1:63,360: Seward (B-6), 1:25,000: Seward B-6 NW

**First Recorded Ascent:** August 5, 2001, by Wiley Bland and Tim Kelley

**Route of First Recorded Ascent:** South aspect

**Access Point:** Falls Creek Trailhead



In 1906 John Lechner and Frank P. Skeen prospected the Falls Creek valley, looking for gold. After finding encouraging quantities of gold, they, along with other investors, established the Skeen-Lechner Mining Company and the California-Alaska Mining Company.

The Skeen-Lechner Mining Company owned and operated the Betty Mine and the Portland Mine, both of which produced gold and silver, as well as small amounts of galena, a lead-bearing ore, and zinc. Later the two mines were consolidated and renamed the Skeen-Lechner Mining Company Mine. By 1915 the Skeen-Lechner Mining Company assets had been placed in receivership and sold.

Lechner and Skeen also owned a portion of the Skeen Mountain Mine, which was operated by the California-Alaska Mining Company to produce gold and silver and later renamed the Falls Creek Mine and the Black Bear Mine. The California-Alaska Mining Company consolidated the Mary Mine, the Falls Mine,

the Columbia Mine, the Betty Mine, the Bear Mine, and the Betty Extension Mine into the California-Alaska Mine and operated them in concert with the North Star Mine in the Grant Lake drainage.

The Skeen Mountain Mine was named after the mountain northeast of Falls Creek, which had been named after Frank Skeen. The mineral deposits of the ridge have become collectively known as the Skeen Mountain deposit. On a 1910 map of the Kenai Mining District and Moose Pass area, the name Skeen Mountain was originally applied to the entire ridge northeast of Falls Creek, from its twin 5850-foot summits northwest to the peaks now known as Solars Mountain (5354 feet) and Helios Peak (5584 feet).

After driving to Crown Point on October 1, 2000, turning east on Solar Mountain Road at Mile 24 of the Seward Highway, and parking immediately east of the railroad tracks, Az Sellers, Kathy Still, and Wayne Todd biked a couple hundred feet east



to the Falls Creek Trailhead, which has several “No Parking” signs around it. (Note that on some maps Solar Mountain Road is labeled as Skeen Lechner Mine Road.) The three then biked and walked their bikes up the Falls Creek Trail for three miles and then continued hiking to the western summit of Skeen Mountain, where they left a cairn and a register, but approaching darkness prevented an attempt on the eastern summit. They returned to the Falls Creek Trailhead as darkness descended upon them.

On August 5, 2001, Wiley Bland and Tim Kelley ran up the Falls Creek Trail to the base of the northwest ridge of The Unicorn (5250 feet) on the south side of Falls Creek, and then rambled up the valley and ascended a snowfield to Falls Creek Pass where they turned north and hiked to the summit of Peak 5240. From Peak 5240 the two headed north, following the ridge for a mile, before turning west and crossing a small glacier to access the south aspect of Skeen Mountain, which they climbed to its eastern summit. On the summit they erected a cairn and looked westward, determining that they were slightly higher than the western summit, but then continued along the ridge to the western summit, where they found the register left by the 2000 party. Bland and Kelley then glissaded some 2500 feet from the summit to the valley floor, and then ran back to the Falls Creek Trailhead.

On August 10, 2007, Tom and Graham (no last names given) signed into the summit register left atop the western summit by the 2000 party.

On August 5, 2017, Wayne Todd and Carrie Wang hiked up the Falls Creek Trail and established a camp in a meadow south of Falls Creek at about 2600 feet. On August 6 they crossed Falls Creek and ascended the southwest aspect of Skeen Mountain’s western summit. The two then hiked to Skeen Mountain’s eastern summit, where they deposited a register. The duo then ascended Peak 5240, traveled along the ridge through Falls Creek Pass, and then ascended The Unicorn. They then descended The Unicorn’s northwest ridge to a steep snow gully that they down-climbed to return to their campsite. They returned to the trailhead on the 7<sup>th</sup>.

On May 2, 2020, Mat Brunton hiked and skied from the Falls Creek Trailhead to the head of the Falls Creek valley, veering northeast from the valley floor and ascending the steep snow chutes of the southeast face of Skeen Mountain to its summit. He skied the 2500-foot south face

to return to the valley floor. He was able to ski to the upper end of the Falls Creek ATV Trail, but then had to pack his skis and hike back to the trailhead over a sometimes-icy trail.

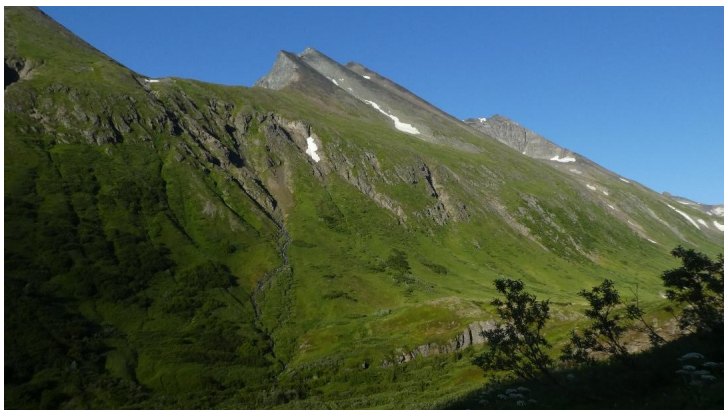
I don’t know of a fourth ascent of Skeen Mountain’s eastern (and highest) summit.

The information for this article came from an article titled “Says Sushitna Mines Will Clean Up \$50,000,” which was published on page 61 of the October 1906 *Northwest Mining Journal*; from David Hassan Sleem’s 1910 “Map of Kenai Mining District and Moose Pass Regions, Kenai Precinct, Alaska;” from an article titled “Alaska,” which appeared on page 478 of the August 27, 1910, issue of *The Engineering and Mining Journal*; from an article titled “Alaska,” which appeared on page 495 of the September 18, 1915, issue of *The Engineering and Mining Journal*; from a listing of mineral deposits in Appendix B of Robert G. Bottge’s and Michael J. Northam’s “Availability of Land for Mineral Exploration and Development in South-Central Alaska, 1985;” from Linda Cook’s 1998 book [A Stern and Rock-Bound Coast: Kenai Fjords National Park Historic Resource Study](#); from Kelley’s trip report titled “Magic Beans,” which was published in the September 2001 *Scree*; from Todd’s trip report titled “The Unicorn and Pegasus, Peak 5850, and Peak 5250,” which was published in the December 2017 *Scree*; from Brunton’s trip report titled “Trident Peak (6050 feet), The Unicorn (5250 feet) and Peak 5850, Kenai Mountains,” which appeared in the September 2020 *Scree*; from Brunton’s blog post titled “Trident, Unicorn, & 5800,” which is available at <https://anchorageavalanchecenter.org/trip-reports/kenai-mountains/trident-the-unicorn-peak-5800/>; from the register that Todd placed atop Skeen Mountain’s western (and lower) summit on October 1, 2000; and from my correspondence with Sellers, Still, and Todd.

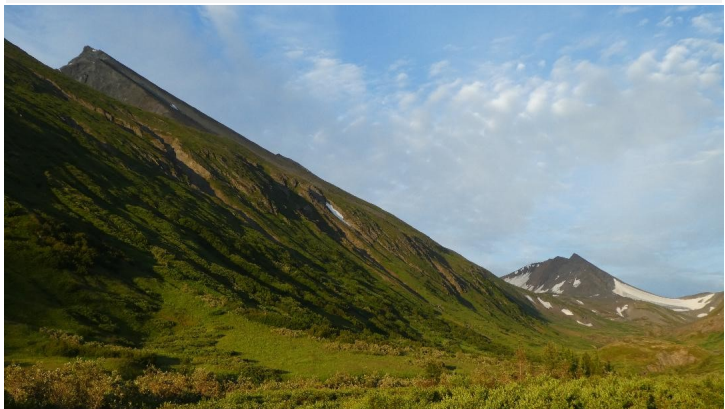


*Southeast aspect of Skeen Mountain*





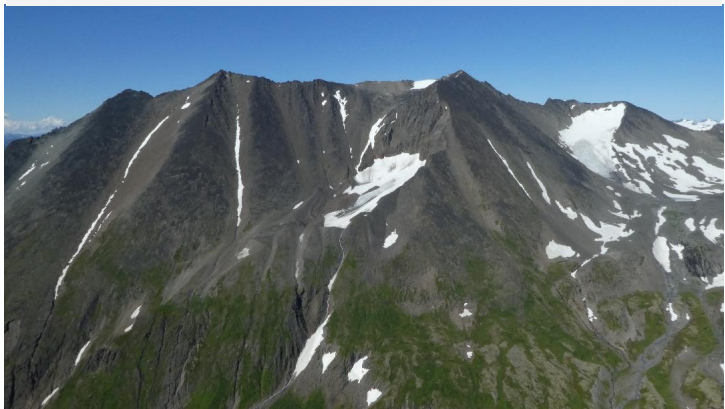
*West aspect of Skeen Mountain*



*Lower slopes of the west aspect of Skeen Mountain, with Peak 5240 at right.*



*Southeast aspect of Skeen Mountain*



*Southwest aspect of Skeen Mountain*



*Eastern aspects of Peak 5240 (center) and Skeen Mountain (under the cloud).*



*Az Sellers (left) and Kathy Still heading for the west ridge of the western summit of Skeen Mountain.*



*Carrie Wang near Falls Creek below the west aspect of the western summit of Skeen Mountain.*



## **Board of Directors Meeting Minutes**

September 28, 2022, 7:00-8:00 p.m. at King Street Brewing

### **Roll Call**

Gerrit Verbeek (President) - Present  
Nathan Pooler (Vice-President) - Absent  
Curtis Townsend (Secretary) - Absent  
Katherine Cooper (Treasurer) - Present  
Coleman Ahrens (Director) – Absent  
Brendan Lee (Director) - Present  
Josh Pickle (Director) - Absent  
Heather Johnson (Director) - Present  
Andy Kubic (Director) - Present  
Peter Taylor (Director) - Present  
Mike Meyers (Past President) - Absent

### **Board Discussion**

- Open discussion of what it means to be a mountaineering club at the present, and what the MCA should prioritize over the next few years
- Membership and board priorities are described in the 2015 and 2018 member surveys, and in the 2023 Strategic Plan
- Discussion about the pros and cons of a paid board position, for example a part time job working on MCA business for approximately 20 hours per week
- Discussion about ways to increase training opportunities, perhaps by involving professional instructors and guides
- Discussion about counting volunteered time towards membership rates as a way to encourage more volunteering

### **Time and location of next meeting**

- General Meeting - Wednesday November 2, 2022. 'Mt. St. Elias' (Ketner/Maus/Procknow) and 'The 30,000 Kilometer Mountain' (Sturm). In-person meeting at the BP Energy Center, but will also be broadcast over Zoom.
- Next Board Meeting on October 26, 2022, venue T.B.A.

# Mountaineering Club of Alaska

President	Gerrit Verbeek	<a href="mailto:president@mtnclubak.org">president@mtnclubak.org</a>	Director 1 (term expires in 2023)	Heather Johnson	<a href="mailto:board@mtnclubak.org">board@mtnclubak.org</a>
Vice-President	Yelena Prusakova	<a href="mailto:vicepresident@mtnclubak.org">vicepresident@mtnclubak.org</a>	Director 2 (term expires in 2023)	Andy Kubic	<a href="mailto:board@mtnclubak.org">board@mtnclubak.org</a>
Secretary	Donell Irwin	<a href="mailto:secretary@mtnclubak.org">secretary@mtnclubak.org</a>	Director 3 (term expires in 2023)	Peter Taylor	<a href="mailto:board@mtnclubak.org">board@mtnclubak.org</a>
Treasurer	Katherine Cooper	<a href="mailto:treasurer@mtnclubak.org">treasurer@mtnclubak.org</a>	Director 4 (term expires in 2024)	Andrew Holman	<a href="mailto:board@mtnclubak.org">board@mtnclubak.org</a>
			Director 5 (term expires in 2024)	Matt Nedom	<a href="mailto:board@mtnclubak.org">board@mtnclubak.org</a>
			Director 6 (term expires in 2024)	Tom McIntyre	<a href="mailto:board@mtnclubak.org">board@mtnclubak.org</a>

Annual membership dues: Basic ("Dirtbag") \$20, Single \$30, Family \$40

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). Material should be submitted by the 11th 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: Katherine Cooper — 209-253-8489 — [membership@mtnclubak.org](mailto:membership@mtnclubak.org)

Hiking and Climbing Committee: Vacant—[training@mtnclubak.org](mailto:training@mtnclubak.org)

Mentorship: Katherine Cooper and Lila Hobbs—[mentorship@mtnclubak.org](mailto:mentorship@mtnclubak.org)

Huts: Greg Bragiel—350-5146 or [huts@mtnclubak.org](mailto:huts@mtnclubak.org)

Calendar: Lexi Trainer

Librarian: Gwen Higgins—[library@mtnclubak.org](mailto:library@mtnclubak.org)

*Scree* Editor: Abbey Collins — [MCAScree@gmail.com](mailto:MCAScree@gmail.com) assisted by Dawn Munroe (350-5121 or [dawn.talbott@yahoo.com](mailto:dawn.talbott@yahoo.com))

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

Find MCAK listserv at <https://groups.io/g/MCAK>.

*Southeastern view with Wayne Todd on the western summit of  
Skeen Mountain.  
Photo by Kathy Still*

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