



AAC Publications

Peak 11,720', second ascent, new route; Celeno Peak, first ascent; Ocypete Peak, second ascent, new route.

Alaska, St. Elias Mountains, Twaharpies

In the '60s and '70s the Twaharpies in the University Range saw a flurry of activity. Large-scale, well-funded Japanese and American teams made first ascents (sometimes together) of most of the large mountains in the area. A Polish team visited the range in 1984, and among other ascents climbed a beautiful direct line from the north to the summit of Peak 11,720'. A lost gem, Celeno Peak (13,395') remained unclimbed and forgotten to almost all—until now Celeno was possibly the highest unclimbed peak in the United States.

Meanwhile, Jay Claus was growing up nearby at his family's lodge in the heart of the St. Elias Mountains. Jay is a third-generation bush pilot and climber. I like to tell him that he has these mountains in his blood. He had been dreaming of climbing Celeno as long as he could remember. On April 9 I had the pleasure of standing on the summit with him.

With six-plus days of food and fuel, skis, and a shovel, Jay Claus and I climbed the 4,500', ice-choked Black Couloir out of Canyon Creek Glacier (ca 7,000') to our first camp on the ridge west of Peak 11,720'. The next morning, April 8, we summited Peak 11,720' via a new route from the south (IV WI4 70°). From the summit, we traversed the ridge east to another unnamed point and dropped into the Balcony (ca 11,000') on the north side of the Twaharpies. A few hours before we arrived, Paul Claus, Jay's father and skilled bush pilot, had landed on the Balcony, leaving behind a gift: a stocked camp. His chosen landing spot was unlike any in the world—the commitment was staggering. His takeoff was guaranteed: He simply drove the Super Cub over the edge of a serac-encrusted 4,000' cliff.

We skied to Paul's cache, looked inside, and then kept climbing another 800' to our second camp just under the north side of Celeno Peak. The next day we summited Celeno from the col between Celeno and Ocypete, and spent an hour and a half on the summit with exceptional weather. The route was a classic, glaciated ski-mountaineering line (V AI4 70°). The only real event was chopping 10m off our rope to leave as a Tyrolean across a crevasse. We skied back to Paul's camp for the night to celebrate our success.

After a rest day and some strong winds, we left the tent at 5 a.m. to climb Ocypete(13,550'), first climbed by a Japanese team in 1977. We summited via a fairly direct line up the north face, under the notch on the twin summit. The peak was so small and exposed that we had to take turns on top. The climb took us approximately 16 hours round-trip. The face proved to be fun, moderate climbing with lots of ice and mixed climbing, and tons of exposure (V AI4 M4 70°). The ski back to camp was bathed in sunset with colors so deep they will saturate my memories forever.

The next evening Paul returned and offered us an escape from the incoming weather. After some debate, we agreed and soon found ourselves rocketing over the cliff. While the debate of our climbing style, due to the plane support, still leaves questions even as I write this, it is undeniable that this trip was truly an experience in the mastery of mediums—snow, ice, rock, and even the air.

Images



Jay Claus leading alpine ice in the Black Couloir on Peak 11,720'.



The Black Couloir on the south face of Peak 11,720', which Ditzler and Claus climbed to access Celeno Peak.



The Balcony.



The Twaharpies, showing (A) Aello Peak, (B) Ocypete Peak, and (C) Celeno Peak. Celeno Peak may have been the highest unclimbed peak in the United States.

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