



AAC Publications

Horn Spire, various attempts; west ridge, second ascent.

Alaska, Coast Mountains

There are certain events in life that provide a reference point to a given time. If you are a climber in Southeast Alaska, one such moment might be when you see Horn Spire for the first time. It is a mountain that sticks in your mind and never disappears. For me, standing atop Peak 4,897', outside of Juneau, Horn Spire looked like a strange pyramid, dropped from outer space, ready to topple, held together only by ice, snow, and sky.

The mountain, located on the western edge of the Juneau Icefield, completes the highest point of the greater Icefall Spires, where sharp molars of rock rise out snow and ice to create a perfectly remote and challenging alpine climbing environment. After poring over maps and gaining information from the AAJ, longtime climbing partner Mike Miller and I began to form a picture of the mountain's modern history.

Horn Spire had seen only one recorded ascent, in 1973, by Juneau climbing pioneers Dick Benedict, Gerry Buckley, Craig Lingle, and Bruce Tickell. Lingle describes Horn Spire as "a triple-edged blade of rock, its 6,700' summit stands 4,700' above the valley glaciers below. Cliffs and steep, glaciated slopes rise 3,000' to the base of the actual spire; above, three symmetrical faces and ridges rise precipitously in a near perfect, needle-like pyramid." Alaskan climbers during that time period had developed a good deal of anxiety that Fred Beckey would bag their coveted local peak before they did. So, on June 30, 1973, the party from Juneau completed the bold first ascent of Horn Spire after a hard-earned siege on the mountain, using aid techniques to ascend the steep rock sections of the west ridge [AAJ 1974].

Knowing this history, several Juneau and Haines climbers set out with Mike Miller or I to attempt new routes on a mountain that hadn't been climbed since the first ascent in 1973. The mountain, however, has seen significant geological change in that short period of time. Many of the snow slopes have receded into hanging glaciers, creating more objective hazards. The Gilkey Glacier, which the first-ascent party hiked over on their descent, has receded to form a three-mile lake at the glacier's terminus. Still, Horn Spire contains two unbelievably aesthetic ridges and numerous faces yet to be climbed. We studied photos and maps, and scouted the mountain from the air, looking for the next great line. What followed was a friendly competition among a small community of climbers. Only after combining our own hard-earned knowledge through failed attempts could we repeat a classic route established well before our time.

In late April 2010, Mike Miller and Jim Thompson made a direct attempt on the west face of the mountain from the Thiel Glacier. They began on the west ramp, which leads to a massive hanging snow field 3,000' directly below the main summit pyramid. Although direct, the route is guarded by hanging glaciers and seracs mid-mountain, which deposit avalanches onto the ramp. Despite an alpine start, the objective hazards became too obvious, as blocks of ice peeled off the mountain. After 12 hours of climbing and then bailing, Miller and Thompson spent the following days scouting and dissecting other options on the mountain.

During the same time, Lauren Evanson and I set our sights on the unclimbed north ridge. Our plan was to traverse into the remote mountain and attempt the difficult ridge by crossing the western edge of the Juneau Icefield. With our starting point at the Katzhin River, near Haines, we hiked, skied, and paddled 75 miles over the course of nine days to the base of the mountain. Our approach took us up

the Meade Glacier, into the Lace River, up the Field Glacier, and down the Battle and Gilkey Glaciers to the base of Horn Spire. With a resupply from pilot Drake Olson at our base camp, we set out to climb the serrated north ridge on May 4. Hard-packed snow allowed us rise 3,000' above the valley floor in only 3.5 hours. The ridge had several high points demanding attention and several rappels to press onward. As the sun went down, a dense layer of coastal clouds moved in, warming the temperature into the evening and softening the ridge's cornices.

We bivouacked later that night on a table of rock perched on the serrated skyline. Dreaming of cooler temps, we awoke to a nightmare of warm, coastal air. The clouds breathed a light drizzle onto the heavily corniced ridge. With a half-mile of ridge separating us from the top, our summit hopes began to look slim. Rappelling the face seemed like the best option for retreat. After 700' of rappelling down the north face, we began a horrendous decent through 3,000' of isothermal snow. The slopes we had run up the day before had become waist-deep mush. Forced off the snowfields for our own survival, we rappelled through numerous rock bands to our base camp. As we arrived on the Thiel Glacier, a small earthquake trembled, releasing a section of cornice from the north ridge, swiping the north bowl. Happy to be alive, we spent the following days hiking and paddling to Echo Cove, at the end of the Juneau road system. It was clear that Horn Spire would not see an easy second ascent. Miller already had his sights on a second attempt.

In mid-June of the same year, Mike Miller and Steve Cashen flew back to the base of the mountain with their eyes on the unclimbed east ridge of the mountain. After climbing the first 3,000' of the lower snowfields, the two ascended a steep couloir near the middle of the Icefield Spires to reach the east ridge. A full day of running belays and several steeper pitches brought Miller and Cashen to a bivy at ca. 6,200', directly below the true summit. With only 500' of climbing left on an unprotected face, they retreated, rappelling the 1,000' face east of the summit. Ten hours later, Miller and Cashen found themselves utterly exhausted at the upper snowfields and significantly lighter on rock gear and rappel cord. After another 3,000' of descending through seracs and avalanche debris, the two attempted to hike out to the road system via the upper Thiel Glacier. After several days of wandering through dead-end icefalls, the two were forced to sat-phone a helicopter for a way out.

Less than a year later, on May 31, 2011, Mike Miller, Ben Still, and Steve Cashen began another trip to the elusive peak. They followed the first-ascent party's approach up Davies Creek and over the Thiel Glacier, taking several backbreaking days to reach the base of the mountain. After setting up an advanced base camp at ca. 4,700', on the southwest side of the mountain, directly below the summit pyramid, they set out to repeat the first-ascent route. After 700' of steep snow climbing, they reached the base of a 200' rock step on the ridge, which required over eight hours of aid climbing on the first ascent. Ben took the lead, free-climbing to a small ledge where he found some very degraded webbing from the first ascent. Above, the rock was very wet and covered in lichen. Clouds rolled in and the skies began spitting wet snow. Steve quickly aided up a short step to a narrow ledge. The walls dropped off on both sides into the clouds below. Above this point, they found unconsolidated wet snow. It seemed impossible to finish the climb safely. They retreated and finished the expedition by hiking and pack-rafting out via the Gilkey Trench to the Juneau road system.

Far from giving up on the mountain, Miller, with laser focus, waited for a weather window later in the summer when snow conditions would be more consolidated.

Out of sheer frustration, determination, and several failed attempts from all involved, Mike Miller, Ben Still, and I flew into the mountain via helicopter once more on August 14, 2011, hoping to repeat the only established route. We took a chance on climbing the mountain late in the summer, knowing that the main snow couloir gaining the west ridge would be melted out.

As on Mike and Ben's May 2011 attempt, we began on the southwest aspect to gain the west ridge. After climbing through a deep, melted-out bergschrund, Ben led three pitches of moderate slabs along the edge of the couloir, and then we finished out with several hundred feet of hard-pack snow climbing. Once we gained the west ridge, we left crampons and axes to lighten the load. Ben stepped

up with determination, leading the crux rock band, which consisted of 200' of 5.9 cracks. To save time, Mike and I jumared the steep rock step, carrying the overnight gear to a nice belay ledge. We then free climbed a short 5.8 step that had been aided previously, which led us to a ledge where we left sleeping bags, food, and a stove, and continued up three more pitches of beautiful, solid granite slabs.

We could finally see the actual summit. The ridge angle backed off and widened, allowing us to un-rope and run several hundred feet to just below the base of the now snow-free summit. Demoralized, we gazed up at the remaining 500' maze of weathered, rotten rock. There was no clear line to the summit.

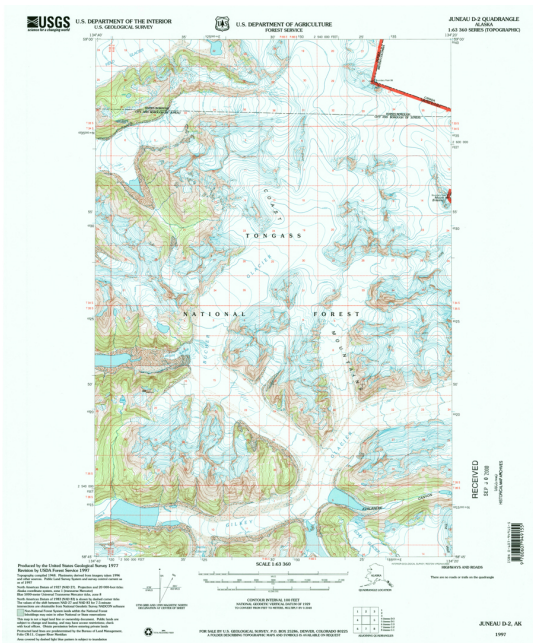
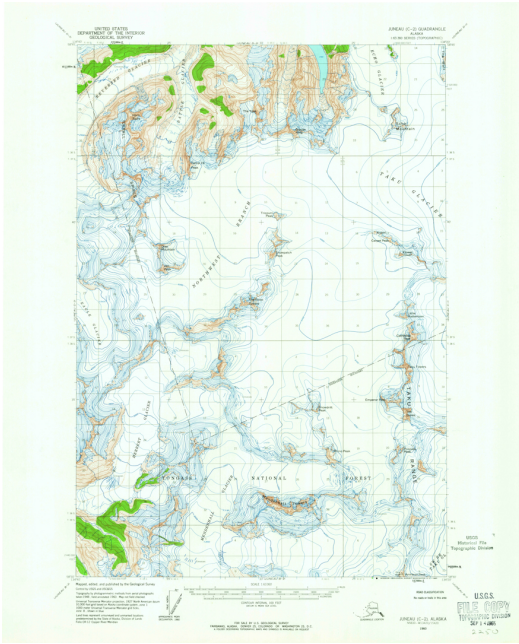
The final three pitches consisted of loose, runout slabs punctuated with precarious blocks held together by kitty litter. It was the worst rock imaginable without any snow or ice to hold it together. Ben delicately tiptoed up the next hundred feet, which steepened as we climbed, finding no protection. Only 100' below the horizon, it was still doubtful if the summit was attainable. Several small gullies guarded our entrance to the top. The last pitch was the steepest of the summit pyramid, consisting of rotten blocks barely held to the mountain (5.7). Ben followed this by leading another dangerous pitch, announcing, "That was the sketchiest lead I've ever done," a strong pronouncement coming from a climber with two decades of experience climbing the difficult peaks of Southeast Alaska. We were risking it all. But we could not come back to this mountain again. We wanted the top; we could taste it.

We reached the summit as the sun went down. After locating the summit register from the first ascent party in the fading light, we began our first rappel in what was to be a long descent. Seven double-rope rappels brought us midway along the west ridge to our bivy. We crawled into our bags after 18 hours of climbing and rappelling, and with the uneasy knowledge that we still had a 3,000' descent in the morning. After damaging ropes, dodging loose rock, and making five additional rappels the following day, we finally arrived at the mountains' upper snowfield, where we enjoyed the scenery and replenished. We didn't feel any guilt calling for a helicopter pickup; we had spent too much time hiking to and from this mountain.

On the flight out, I couldn't help but admire the style and determination of the first ascent in the early '70s. With all of our modern techniques and ambition we were still only following in the footsteps of those greats before us. We followed their way to the top of a mountain we will never forget.

William Wacker

Images





Miller and Cashen approaching.



Ben Still leading off on the successful ascent.



Miller and Cashen's attempt on the unclimbed east ridge.



Advanced base camp.



Dropping into Meade Glacier Lake



Ben Still leading beautiful cracks on the crux rock step while Miller belays.



Mike Miller rappelling the headwall.



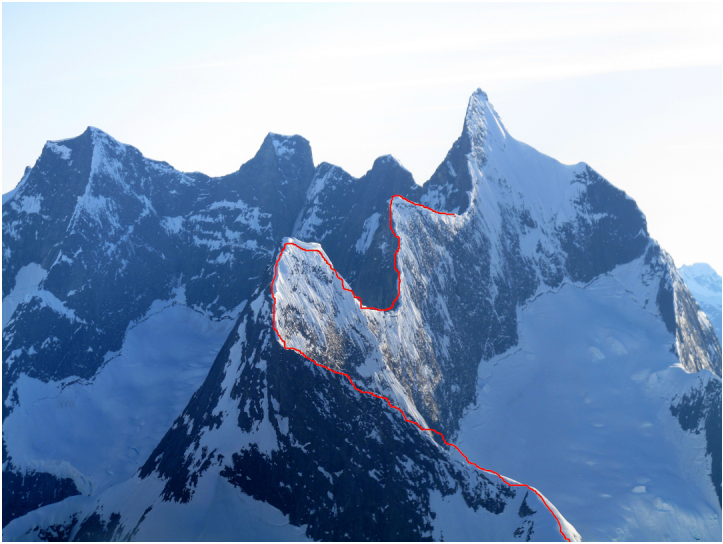
Approaching Horn Spire from the north.



At camp during the big approach.



North ridge attempt from the base. The massive Alaskan ridge is still unclimbed.



The north ridge attempt.



The unclimbed southwest face.



The striking Horn Spire, as seen from the air.



The striking Horn Spire, as seen from the air.



The west ridge route, shown here, is the only established route on the peak. Nearly 40 years passed before the route was repeated by Mike Miller, William Wacker, and Ben Still.



The striking Horn Spire, as seen from the air.

Article Details

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