



## AAC Publications

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### Recon: Revelations

Great Objectives in Alaska's Forgotten Mountains

**DEEP IN the southwest corner of Alaska, the Revelation Mountains, like their biblical namesake, comprise the final chapter of the Alaska Range.** These magnificent peaks are the last major folds of earth to rise above the western lowlands that stretch for hundreds of miles to the Bering Sea. Unlike most of the Alaska Range, the Revelations are entirely hidden from any road or city.

This seldom-visited corner of Alaska holds only whispers of history and still offers truly exploratory alpine climbing. The few who have ventured to the Revelations have left with an experience that marks a major milestone in their lives.

#### GEOGRAPHY

Like the Kichatna Spires 70 miles northeast, some Revelation peaks boast 3,000- to 4,500-foot granite walls, but these are tamed by more veins of ice and passages of snow. Most peaks resemble larger versions of the north and central Cascades in Washington state—the Enchantments on mega-steroids. Storms bred in the Gulf of Alaska hit the Revelations first and with little warning. Large low-pressure systems may mire over the range, bringing long periods of horrendous winds and heavy precipitation. On the rare clear and windless day, the Revelations rival any of Alaska's mightier alpine playgrounds.

Etched by the Big River to the north, the Stony River to the east, and the Swift River to the south, the Revelations contain 13 peaks over 9,000 feet and more than 35 peaks over 8,000 feet. Rock quality ranges from superb crystalline granite to mile-high mounds of frozen dirt.

The Revelations' highest peak is 9,828-foot Mt. Hesperus. Rising more than 7,000 feet from the Big River, this "Matterhorn of Alaska" is the northernmost peak in the main spine of the Revelations. During an attempt on the mountain in 1981, Fred Beckey found "snow and rock conditions intolerable" (AAJ 1983). The mountain has only been climbed once.

Where Hesperus resembles a 7,000-foot cairn of decomposing shale, with pockets of pale granite slabs, rock quality improves dramatically further south, where a line of wild, unnamed 7,000- and 8,000-foot peaks rises and falls in steady rhythm. These summits feature stunning xenoliths of quartz sandwiched between layers of fractured granodiorite. Large dikes cut down many of these peaks, often sporting enticing Ham and Eggs-style routes waiting to be plucked. The Apocalypse (9,345') holds numerous 3,000-plus-foot granite walls supporting the mountain's snowy crown. Peaks encompassing the rapidly receding, half-mile-wide Revelation Glacier, like the Angel (9,260'), Golgotha (8,940'), and the Four Horsemen (8,600'), contain the range's major pockets of immaculate granite.

East of the main spine, significant mountains are separated by expansive glaciers. Among the most inspiring are the Ice Pyramid (9,250'), Mt. Mausolus (9,170'), and Pirate Peak (9,005'). All of these have seen only a single ascent and contain some of the finest rock and ice lines in the range. The Ice Pyramid's southwest ridge is reminiscent of the southwest ridge of Peak 11,300 in the Central Alaska Range. The Mausoleum (AAJ 2012) on Mausolus' 4,500-foot west face contains more than 2,500 feet of continuous technical ice in a narrow slot between alluring and unclimbed granite

buttresses. To the northeast, a group of massive 9,000' peaks rises above the Big River. Several have been ascended from the north, but their impressive southern faces remain untouched.

Many summits are blocked by ridgelines stacked with seemingly impassible gendarmes and bomb-bay voids. Sinuous couloirs occasionally funnel down otherwise sheer rock faces. There has been limited activity by world-class skiers, but low snow volume in the Revelations favors technical alpine routes. Select peaks have big-wall climbing possibilities.

## HISTORY

The Revelations were first explored in 1967 by David Roberts and fellow Harvard Mountaineering Club members George and Rick Millikan, Matt Hale, and Ned Fetcher. Art Davidson, who was still recovering from frostbite after making the first winter ascent of Denali, rounded out the crew. The team made six serious attempts on the south ridge of the Angel, but atrocious bouts of wind and freezing rain drove them to the verge of hypothermia, defeating their efforts again and again. "During that summer," Roberts wrote in a 2011 [Climbing](#) magazine article, "we endured the most fiendish weather I would encounter on 13 Alaskan expeditions."

Various team members climbed and named many peaks during their astonishing 52-day expedition (AAJ 1968), but none succeeded in climbing the Angel. On one of the final days, Hale and Roberts climbed to their highpoint in record time, intending only to retrieve the final scraps of gear left on the route. The siren summit pulled them higher than they had ever reached on any attempt. With only one ice axe, and no crampons or bivy gear, they were unprepared for a full-on summit bid. With anguishing reluctance, they descended on that perfect day when the summit was within their grasp.

The Revelations went unvisited by climbers for nearly 15 years. True to form, Fred Beckey caught wind of the area and attempted Hesperus in 1981. Deterred by poor rock quality, he set his sights on the craggy ice and rock peaks several miles to the east. "Facing us was a major granite rock wall, a climbing opportunity we did not have the time to undertake," he wrote in the AAJ. Navigating around the base of the south face, they made Mt. Titanic's (9,300+') first ascent via a snow and ice route on the east face. In 1981, Pete Sennhauser and Janet Smalley climbed Jezebel (9,620'), the range's second tallest peak. In 1983, Dick Flaharty of Fairbanks and friends spent 10 days on the central wall of Apocalypse, making it 1,500 feet up before encountering a band of poor rock.

On their third attempt, via three different routes, Alaskans Karl Swanson and Stephen Spalding, and New Zealander Justin Lesueur, made the first and only ascent of Hesperus in 1985 (AAJ 1986). That same year, Greg Collins, Tom Walter, and friends quietly amassed a handful of bold and prolific first ascents at the head of the Revelation Glacier. Among those was the Angel, via a difficult route on the southeast buttress that required several pitches of challenging rock climbing. Their ascent went unreported for several years (AAJ 1988). There are unconfirmed tales that a second team climbed their same route, thinking they were making the Angel's first ascent. Rumors say they found a rappel sling high on the route and were more than a little displeased. Further details are lacking. Such is the mystique of the Revelation Mountains.

The range lay mostly dormant for the next decade. Sporadic accounts of good climbing and poor weather can be found in the AAJ through the early 2000s. But even though every other range in Alaska saw frequent activity during this time, somehow the Revelations stayed largely off the climbing radar.

Between 2008 and 2013, the author made yearly expeditions to the Revelations, claiming five first ascents of mountains and several other routes on seldom-explored peaks. In that time only one other climbing team has visited the range (see [Climbs and Expeditions](#)).

While many of the most prominent peaks have now been climbed, few have seen second ascents.

Many obvious lines on shorter yet still incredible peaks have yet to be explored. Dozens of 8,000-foot peaks have never been attempted.

## **WHEN TO CLIMB**

The best times to climb in the Revelations are from mid-March through July. Before mid-March, it is not uncommon to see temperatures remain well below  $-40^{\circ}\text{F}$ . Sometime between late March and early April, the jet stream shifts and a noticeable temperature change occurs. Combined with the increasingly long days (nearly 18 hours of usable light in early April), this makes for very climbable weather in shaded gullies where ice is prevalent. March through April usually has long periods of high pressure.

After mid-April, most steep ice chutes and narrow couloirs become gutters that scream with rockfall and run with wet slush avalanches. By mid-May, the weather is warm enough to experience fully enjoyable rock climbing. By June and July, most of the snow is gone and the warmer temperatures bring inconsistent weather. Long periods of wind and precipitation can be expected. That said, midsummer conditions can be phenomenal.

## **GETTING THERE**

Getting to the Revelations is neither easy nor cheap. As of 2013, the average rate per person is between \$900 and \$1,300 from Anchorage or Talkeetna. The two best options for flights in to the Revelations are Rob Jones of R&R Guide Services in Anchorage, and Talkeetna Air Taxi several hours north. Jones flies straight to the Revelations from Anchorage and has a tremendous lodge, the Big River Lodge, within sight of Mt. Hesperus. Even if he cannot fly you in to the mountains, he can almost always access his lodge and watch the weather from there. As a pilot, he knows the range better than anyone. If flying with Jones, it is an easy and incredibly enjoyable (not to mention cheaper) walk or ski from base camp on any of the glaciers to his lodge. Leave the heavy gear on the glacier for Jones to pick up, and casually trek out in one or two days. Walking the 18 to 35 miles to the mountains from his lodge with food and gear would be less enjoyable. Talkeetna Air Taxi has bigger airplanes, but is farther from the Revelations, which could make it harder to predict local weather and modify plans. If going with more than two people, Talkeetna Air Taxi is the best bet.

Climate change is rapidly impacting the narrow glaciers in the Revelations. The overall volume of ice on many glaciers, including the Revelation Glacier, is steadily decreasing. More and more large boulders are strewn over the ice, limiting potential landing areas. Likewise, melt-water channels seem to run lateral to the glacier in many areas, making late-season landings on bare ice increasingly problematic. Landings on most glaciers in all seasons are still possible, but conditions are likely to change more in the coming decades. Numerous river bars facilitate late-season landings by small planes equipped with tundra tires, but this may increase the approach distance and difficulty for certain objectives. Helicopter landings are allowed in the area, but the flight from either Anchorage or Talkeetna would be exorbitant.

While the Revelations lack the massive expanse of the central Alaska Range, solitude is nearly guaranteed and adventure is out there. This remote and wild range inspires unparalleled possibilities for new cutting-edge climbs as well as modern classics. A chance for true exploration and a direct confrontation with untamed wilderness promises to exist in this beautiful corner of Alaska for years to come.

Those willing to embrace the mysterious spirit of the Revelations will find it well worth the journey.

## **About the Author**

Clint Helander, 28, migrated to Anchorage from Seattle when he was 18, and his passion for climbing

began with friends and mentors at the University of Alaska Outdoor Club. He has made six expeditions to the Revelation Mountains, most recently the first ascent of Apocalypse with Jason Stuckey in April 2013.

## Images



The west face of Apoc- alypse. The first ascent of the peak in April 2013 (A Cold Day in Hell, 4,400', AI5, Helander- Stuckey) followed a partially hidden ice line in right center. In 1983, a team climbed 1,500 feet up the central rock buttress. In 1985, Karl Swanson attempted to solo the ice line left of the buttress, reaching the upper snowfield.



Although Hesperus is known for rotten rock, ice lines may offer possibilities. Shown here: the unclimbed northeast face (at least 5,000 feet).



Looking southwest from Apocalypse, past Jason Stuckey, to the head of the Revelation Glacier. At left: Golgotha (8,940'). Center: Hydra (ca 7,800'). Right: Angel (9,265')



Hesperus (9,828') from Apocalypse.



A. Hesperus B. Apocalypse C. Dike Peak (unclimbed) D. Pyramid Peak (unclimbed) E. Four Horsemen F. Century G. Sentry H. Golgotha I. Hydra J. Angel K. Seraph (unclimbed) L. Vanishing Pinnacle M. Sylph N. Cherub O. South Buttress P. Patmos Q. Babel Tower (8,365', unclimbed). R. Exodus S. Medusa T. Ice Pyramid U. Mausolus V. Pirate Peak W. Peak 9,304' (unclimbed) X. Jezebel Y. Titanic Z. Peak 9,076' SLO: Hartman Glacier, area of 2012 Slovenian expedition (see Climbs and Expeditions).



The unclimbed southeast faces of the North Horseman (ca 8,400 feet, left) and Pyramid Peak (8,572 feet, behind right), showing potential for good rock climbs. Three of the Four Horsemen have been climbed. The North Horseman has not.



The 3,400-foot west face of unclimbed Pyramid Peak. The author made two attempts on the obvious ice line but was stopped by overhanging snow mushrooms. A massive W16 pillar hangs 2,000 feet up the route.



The unclimbed north face of Golgotha, seen from the Angel during the first complete ascent of the Angel's south ridge, the route attempted six times by David Roberts and party in 1967.



The 3,400-foot east face of Golgotha. Clint Helander and Ben Trocki attempted the direct route up an ice couloir splitting the face in 2012, but were driven off by spindrift. Instead, they completed the first ascent of the 8,940-foot peak via the ice ramp to the southeast face on the left.



Clint Helander



Mt. Hesperus has only been climbed once, via the ca 7,000-foot west face, seen here from Rob Jones' lodge.



West face of unclimbed 7,000' peak between Hesperus and Apocalypse, with ca 3,000 feet of relief.



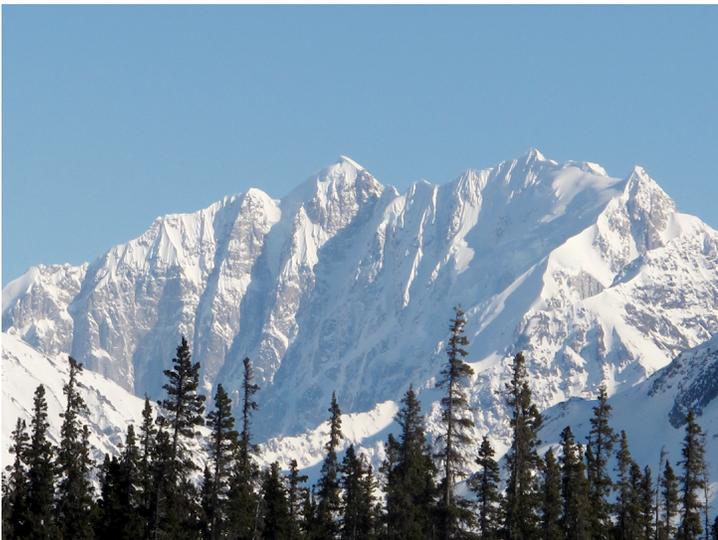
The 4,000-foot east face of South Buttress (9,345'). This beautiful peak has excellent granite and has seen only one ascent, via a couloir on the south face.



Peak 8,301', an attractive, unclimbed snow and ice peak at the head of the Swift Glacier, near Mt. Mausolus. The vertical relief of this face is about 2,800 feet.



The 3,000-foot-plus southwest face of unclimbed Peak 9,304', east of the Big River Glacier.



he ca 3,600-foot northwest face of Jezebel (9,650'), the Grandes Jorasses of Alaska. This peak has seen two ascents, one via the Ice Schooner route, near the left skyline (AAJ 2001) and the first

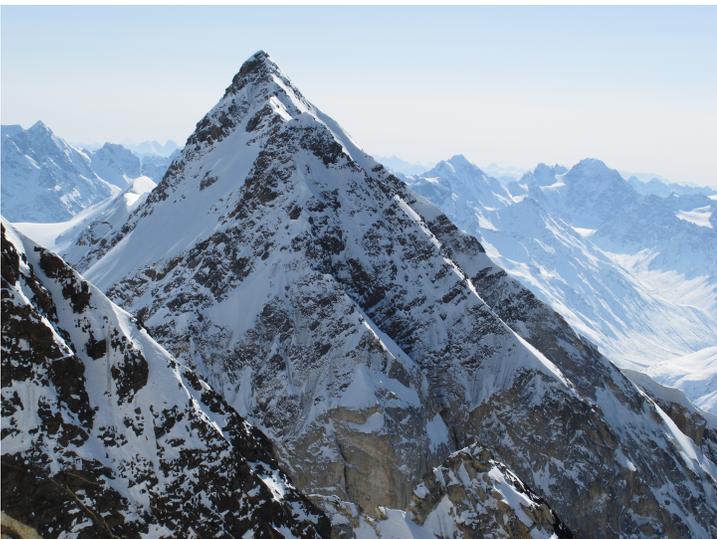
ascent by a couloir on the southeast face (AAJ 1982).



The unclimbed, ca 3,700-foot north face of Titanic (ca 9,300'). Fred Beckey and team made the peak's only ascent in 1981 via the east face.



Angel with route shown.



3000' northwest face of Dike Peak from Apocalypse.



Looking southwest from Apocalypse at the head of the Revelation Glacier.



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