



## AAC Publications

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### **Kooshdakhhaa Spire, first ascent**

Alaska, Coast Mountains

Between May 25 and June 14, Erik Bonnett and I climbed about 45 pitches of rock, ice, and snow in a relatively unknown glacial area on the border of southeast Alaska and northern British Columbia, bearing similarities to the Kichatna Spires. We then traveled over many kilometers of glacier and pack-rafted down the Chilkat River to civilization.

We flew into the area with Drake Olson out of Haines, intent on making the first ascent of what we've called Kooshdakhhaa Spire (2,200m), the southern summit and most prominent feature of a complex granite mountain. The neighboring mountain range over the border in northern British Columbia goes by the name Kooshdakhhaa, so this made sense to us.

I noticed the spire during three trips into the area as a NOLS instructor, entering from the British Columbia side. I know of only one other expedition to the range, by NOLS instructors headed up by Dave Anderson (AAJ 2004). They attempted a 300m spire north of the one we climbed; however, they were turned around by poor rock quality.

After Drake departed we spent 15 days in the area, staging climbs from a base camp on the moraine below Kooshdakhhaa Spire. We climbed the spire via a sustained couloir on its north side, reaching a col and then the summit: North Couloir (600m, AI3 M3). We also climbed a gully on the opposite side of the spire: South Couloir (350m, AI3 M3).

Our main objective, the steep, 700m, north-facing granite wall on Kooshdakhhaa Spire, turned us away during both of our alpine-style attempts, after we encountered tricky routefinding, poor rock, and difficult climbing (up to 5.11) about two-thirds way up the wall. The lower climb generally followed sustained and continuous splitter cracks up great rock.

We also attempted a couloir to the north of Kooshdakhhaa Spire, on another granite feature; however, we were forced to descend about one pitch from the top. The route contained physical mixed climbing up to M5.

After climbing, we walked 25km across the glacier over two days and began rafting toward the Chilkat River through small tributaries. Upon reaching the Upper Chilkat River we paddled two short sections of Class III whitewater in our pack rafts before dropping to the Chilkat River Valley, where we paddled more Class III whitewater. To our knowledge we were the first people to paddle the Upper Chilkat in pack rafts and the second team to paddle the 60km of river from the glacier to Haines. Toward the river's exit we encountered a thriving game area full of wolves, bears, and moose, inciting much nervousness—it was the most scared I was on the trip!

The name Kooshdakhhaa is derived from the lore of the Tlingit and Tsimshian Indians of southeast Alaska. Loosely translated, Kooshdakhhaa means, "land otter man," a mythical shape-shifting creature capable of assuming both human and otter-like forms. In many stories, the Kooshdakhhaa saves a lost individual by distracting him with curiously otter-like illusions of family and friends as he is transformed into a fellow Kooshdakhhaa, thus allowing him to survive in the cold. Naturally, this is counted as a mixed blessing. Kooshdakhhaa legends are not always pleasant. It is said the Kooshdakhhaa will imitate the cries of a baby or the screams of a woman to lure victims to a river.

Once there, the Kooshdakhaa either kills the person and tears him to shreds or turns him into another Kooshdakhaa.

Max Fisher

## Images



Max Fisher leading splitter hands on pitch two on an attempt of Kooshdakhaa Spire's granite wall.



Max Fisher following a steep thin-hands crack on the third pitch of an attempt on Kooshdakhaa Spire's granite wall.



Erik Bonnett on a tricky traverse midway up Kooshdakhhaa Spire's.



Near the highpoint of an attempt on Kooshdakhhaa Spire's granite wall, where the cracks became flared and bottoming and the rock deteriorated.





Max Fisher pack-rafting out from the glacier toward the Upper Chilkat.



Max Fisher portaging on a frightening game trail in the lower Chilkat River Valley.



Kooshdakhaa Spire is the prominent granite tower in the center.



Camped down by the river in the Chilkat River Valley.





With pilot Drake Olson after the flight into Kooshdakhaa Spire.



Erik Bonnett approaching the M5 couloir.



Max Fisher following the crux pitch on the M5 couloir.

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