



AAC Publications

Peak 8,290' and other first ascents

Alaska, Fairweather Range

In April and May, Kieran Parsons and I were fortunate to make the first ascents of three summits between Mt. Abbe (8,250') and Mt. Bertha (10,204') in Glacier Bay National Park in southeast Alaska. The most exciting of these was Peak 8,290', which sports a pyramid of clean granite leading to its summit.

After landing in the southern part of the range, we originally planned to attempt the unclimbed east ridge of Mt. Crillon (12,726')—a challenge put forth by Bradford Washburn in AAJ 1941—but heavy snowfall, high winds, and unseasonably warm temperatures made the approach to the ridge too avalanche-threatened. Hence, we made a 20km traverse north on the Brady Icefield to an area north of Mt. Bertha, where we climbed to a col at ca 6,190' and a high bowl overlooking the Johns Hopkins Glacier. [Editor's note: See AAJ 2010 for Paul Knott's report on the first ascents of Mt. Bertha's south face and northwest ridge. Also, see the AAJ online-only report where Knott describes the difficult access to the Johns Hopkins Glacier.]

On May 6 we made the first ascents of two snow summits on the south side of the bowl: Peak 7,507' via its snowy northern arête, and Peak 7,274' via its west ridge. The view from these peaks convinced us that the most direct approach to our third objective, the granite top of Peak 8,290', by its snowy southeast face, was not viable due to a threatening ice cliff and wet avalanches that ran down it each afternoon.

Early on May 7 we set off on the 2km-long southeast ridge of Peak 8,290' from a camp by the ca 6,190' col. We had noted the potential for time-consuming difficulties along this ridge, and beyond Point 6,706' we found ourselves tackling a series of knife-edged, corniced snow mushrooms and rime towers. It took us nearly three hours to negotiate a few hundred meters of ridgeline. Above, an easier snow arête brought us to the base of the granite pyramid. The only way up this was on steep rock, but the granite was superb, providing secure climbing with juggy holds and plentiful protection. We climbed close to the crest for three pitches (5.7) before reaching the summit.

From the top we could see the plentiful untapped climbing potential in this knot of granite peaks. Amazingly, this rock has been virtually untouched since Alan Givler, Dusan Jagersky, Steve Marts, and James Wickwire climbed here in 1977. The west side of Peak 8,290' sports a steep and continuous 1,500' pillar, and other summits in the Mt. Abbe group sport similar monolithic pillars up to 2,500'.

In the afternoon warmth we found the difficulties on the approach ridge transformed from mostly snow to mostly rock. Collapsing cornices, sodden snow, and disintegrating rock concentrated our minds and forced us to make two awkward diagonal abseils. It was hard to ignore the ominous clouds gathering over the ocean just south of us. We finally plowed our way to the tent in mist and light snow at 6:30 p.m., fearful that any oncoming storm would load the avalanche-prone slopes we still had to descend.

Fortunately, lingering high pressure held off the worst of the weather, and early the next morning we post-holed down from the col, finding our ascent footprints obliterated by wet slides. Toward the bottom of the slope we noticed a huge cone of ice blocks extending over the glacier; our cached snowshoes lay within the debris. This made the 20km walk back to base camp a distinctly unappealing prospect. Luckily, by the afternoon the weather had cleared and our pilot, Paul

Swanstrom, was able to pick us up directly below the ridge. After such a vivid experience, the spring greens, fragrance, and birdsong back in Haines were simply exquisite.

Paul Knott, New Zealand

Images



The west side of Peak 8,290' from near the summit of Peak 7,400' (photo from April 2011). The pillar is about 1,500' high. Paul Knott and Kieran Parsons made the first ascent of the peak by its southeast ridge.



The south side of Peak 8,290' from the high bowl overlooking the Johns Hopkins Glacier. The climbers reached the summit pyramid via the extended southeast ridge on the right skyline, and on the granite climbed the arête dividing sun and shade.



Kieran Parsons starting the second pitch on the summit pyramid of Peak 8,290.



Map of Glacier Bay National Park

Article Details

Author	Paul Knott
Publication	AAJ
Volume	57
Issue	89
Page	0
Copyright Date	2015
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions