



AAC Publications

Mt. Despair, Northeast Buttress, Bipolar Buttress

Washington, North Cascades

Half the fun is getting there—that's usually true. Reaching the unclimbed northeast buttress of Mt. Despair (7,927'), southwest of the Picket Range, would first require venturing up a brush-choked valley at which even seasoned Cascades aficionados balked. Correspondence with local dignitaries yielded little hope for straightforward access. Nevertheless, Rolf Larson and I decided to risk three precious days of fair weather on an end-of-July attempt.

The northeast buttress of Despair is an appealing line. It rises from low in the green and rugged Goodell Creek Valley. This promises a myriad of challenges, as does the serrated ridgeline itself, which finally gains the north ridge near the high glaciers. A friend and soi-disant Cascades dignitary pronounced this yet another "last great problem" of the Cascades, while the other side of his mouth dismissed it as worthless "table scraps." In the end these proved to be prescient words: This thoroughly enjoyable climb was like eating a gourmet meal off a dirty floor.

We are lucky that the Cascades, owing largely to the abundance of peaks, but also to their verdant and varyingly pleasant approaches, still offer new and interesting problems to solve. Many of our peers desired to climb the northeast buttress of Despair but either had difficulty convincing a partner to brave the approach or were turned back by it. For Rolf and I, the approach was half the fun and the return trip comprised the other half. Counting the climb, you might say we had fun greater than one.

On July 28, the morning after our approach, we began climbing up a massive, 1,300' open-book corner on the lower northeast buttress (5.6). After that we continued via scenic scrambling on the crest over many notches. These notches required increasingly committing rappels, followed by steeper and more technical climbing. Our pre-trip research suggested a particularly deep cleft (several hundred feet) near the summit of the upper buttress—this weighed on our psyches during the whole climb. Upon reaching this cleft, the opposite wall appeared very steep and the few viable lines looked loose and difficult to access. But we rappelled in anyway and scoped it out. We settled on a right-trending ramp that kept the climbing reasonable and exciting (70m, 5.9). A shorter pitch followed, which led to moderate rambling. Eventually the buttress yielded a deluxe bivy site near a small col, where two glaciers meet.

The next morning we crossed the col and climbed a 70m pitch of steep rock to attain the upper north ridge. From there we continued up the final snow ridge to the summit, a remote and memorable place, with a unique perspective on the inimitable Picket Range. We descended by reaching a notch south of the summit and then headed down its west flank. We ultimately exited via Triumph Pass and the Thornton Lakes Trail to a stashed bike, where the lucky loser of roshambo commenced the eight-mile midnight ride to retrieve the car.

On a map, our adventure looks like a reasonable, horseshoe-shaped route. But make sure you plan for three physical days, two arduous stretches of hiking, and one experience far greater than the sum of its parts: Bipolar Buttress (3,700', 5.9, easy snow).

– Eric Wehrly

Images



The approximate line of Bipolar Buttress (3,700', 5.9, easy snow) on the northeast buttress of Mt. Despair, a remote peak in the North Cascades.



The Crescent Creek spires as seen on the approach.



Rolf Larson simul-soloing the initial part of the Bipolar Buttress (3,700', 5.9, easy snow).



Rolf Larson on the summit of Mt. Despair after completing the Bipolar Buttress (3,700', 5.9, easy snow). Picket Range in the background.



Rolf Larson climbs the final snow arête of the north ridge to reach the summit of Mt. Despair. The high point of the northeast buttress is barely in view at right. The Picket Range is seen in the background.



Mt. Despair viewed from the north. The northeast buttress makes up the left skyline, with the prominent deep notch (crux of the route) visible at the sun-shade line.

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