



AAC Publications

Finger Crack Cirque and Weasel Tower

Russia, Chukotka Region, Bilibino, Chuvan Mountains

From July 23 to August 30, Australians Chris Fitzgerald, Natasha Sebire, and I completed several routes on the previously unclimbed rock wall of Finger Crack Cirque, and also made the first ascent of a rock tower. Our expedition almost didn't happen when, two weeks before we were due to arrive in Russia, we were informed that a special permit (*propusk*) was required to enter the Chukotka autonomous region. In 2014, Fitzgerald and Chris Warner were the first to climb in the area (AAJ 2015), but they did not have, nor even know about, this *propusk*, as very few people visit this area in far northeastern Russia.

Bilibino has received only three tourists in the last 10 years, and the Russian authorities did not appear to be used to issuing the permit. It proved impossible for us to get it in two weeks, especially as the authorities recommend applying about three months ahead of time. Luckily, our contact in Bilibino, Evgeny Turilov, managed to smooth things out, and we were allowed to enter the region without the permit. However, we were required to pay fines of 2,000 rubles (about \$30) apiece, and each team in the area also paid a fine for Turilov. There were two other climbing teams this season, so the region has probably received more visitors in 2015 than it has since being opened to tourists 20 years ago.

Off-road vehicles took us 60km from Bilibino to a drop-off point about 6 km from the Commander and General (where Fitzgerald and Warner climbed last year). Here, we met a seven-man European team on their way out, after a successful and mosquito-infested few weeks. We intended to climb in the Commander area toward the end of our trip, but first planned to visit another valley 8km east of the Commander, an unclimbed area discovered by Fitzgerald and Warner and dubbed Finger Crack Cirque.

We set up camp in a picturesque spot next to a lake at ca 68°19'03.0"N, 165°57'47.6"E (all coordinates taken from Google Earth). The main wall of the cirque faces north-northwest and is less than 1,500m in elevation. It is nearly 500m at its highest point, and more than 1 km of its total length has quality granite, with many crack lines. These lines usually have sections of dry, perfect rock, as well as damp parts with moss or grass, requiring a bit of cleaning.

Our first route on the wall followed a fairly continuous crack system to the right of a blunt buttress, and involved minor route-finding decisions. After 290m of climbing we reached a diagonal ledge of loose rock that we scrambled for 300m to the top to complete the Propusk (Australian 18/F6a). Descent from the top of the cirque is easy—we just hiked down the long ridge to our camp.

On August 7, after a day of rain, we scoped lines toward the head of the valley, where a large ledge bisects the wall at about one-quarter height. Below this ledge is a sweeping slab of perfect cracks. Although the day was cold and windy, I could not resist an impeccable, splitter hand crack that was relatively dry. Followed by Natasha, I climbed two rope-stretching pitches to the ledge to create Lemming Meringue Pie (110m, 16/5a).

A sunnier day followed, so we all climbed a route starting just right of Lemming Meringue Pie. We followed a series of cracks for seven full pitches, after which a few pitches of 4th- and 5th-class scrambling led to the top. Vodka and Lemming (505m, 18/6a) finishes at the highest point of the wall,

and at 10 p.m. the Arctic sun remained only on this upper section, bathing us in an orange glow. We soaked up the views and ran around excitedly, trying to find the highest rock to stand on. Although base camp was nearly two hours away, with 24 hours of daylight we only hurried because we were hungry.

We next set our sights on a steeper and very impressive part of the wall, where it looks as though a giant orbital sander had scoured its way up, leaving arcs in the rock. Our continuous crack line on the Orbital Sander Wall required a bit more effort from Chris, who led almost the entire route. It was the only time we placed bolts—four for protection (on two pitches) and others for belay anchors—as the route had short sections of fused cracks. We climbed Orbital Sander (440m, 8 pitches, 22/6c) over three days, using fixed ropes. On pitches three and four the leader made a couple of hangs on gear to clean cracks or place bolts, but these pitches were climbed free by the second.

Although snow doesn't normally occur in this region until the start of September, in 2015 it arrived on August 17. With the wet cracks freezing and snow plastering parts of the walls, climbing became more and more impracticable during our last two weeks, so we abandoned any idea of climbing in the Commander and General area. Natasha and I reveled in the spectacular tundra landscape, changing its cloak so rapidly from summer to autumn to winter, all in a matter of weeks. However, we were keen to visit a nearby valley and climb a rock formation that we'd named Weasel Tower (ca 68°20'48.9"N, 165°59'19.0"E). We saw much wildlife in the area, including weasels, lemmings, pikas, deer, and many birds species, including East Siberian gulls, a pair of which inhabit each lake.

On the 20th we climbed the front face of the tower, with Natasha racing up the first pitch and me leading the rest. It was cold and I found it a test of willpower, with toes feeling like wood and fingers numb. This forced me to pull on gear for two moves. The seconds sensibly stayed warmer in gloves and approach shoes, using any means to get up. After the pain, it was nice to complete Siberian Summer (160m, 4 pitches, 20/6b+ A1, bolts placed for two rappels) and stand on the small summit.

The Bilibino granite walls have huge potential for new routes, and there are valleys in which no climbing has so far been done. The walls lie in a relatively concentrated area no more than 12km across. On our routes we found rock quality to be generally very good and quite clean, but sometimes we encountered sections of moist moss, grass-filled cracks, loose rock, and flaky black lichen. The summer is very short in Siberia, and climbing here is a balance between going too early and enduring the mosquitoes or going a bit later and risking colder weather. When we left at the end of August, snow was only on the upper peaks, and our last day was enjoyed in sunshine, hiking 12km down a wide, warm valley, where there were still berries for the picking and the ground was almost glowing with splashes of warm autumn color.

Gemma Woldendorp, Australia

Notes on permits for the Bilibino area. The correct permit procedure for entering the Chukotka autonomous region is somewhat murky. Teams in 2015 were informed they needed to get the permit ("propusk") from a tour agency, at least 30 days in advance (some officials recommended 90 days or more). However, efforts to contact the recommended agencies were unsuccessful. Instead, Gemma Woldendorp recommends contacting the Chukotka governor's office, whose **website has a page (in English)** with instructions for obtaining tourist permits.

Images



Chris Fitzgerald on the final pitch of the Propusk.



Gemma Woldendorp on the second pitch of Orbital Sander.



Gemma Woldendorp leading the slabby second pitch of Vodka and Lemming.



Finger Crack Cirque with the lines of (1) Lemming Meringue Pie, (2) Vodka and Lemming, (3) Orbital Sander, and (4) The Propusk.



Gemma Woldendorp on pitch two of Siberian Summer, Weasel Tower.



Gemma Woldendorp digs out the crack to place gear on the second pitch of Vodka and Lemming.



Siberian Summer on Weasel Tower.



Natasha Sebire on pitch five of Orbital Sander.



Natasha Sebire and Chris Fitzgerald at the top of the first pitch of Orbital Sander.

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