



## AAC Publications

---

### Vågakallen, Northeast Face, Night Crosses the Crown

Norway, Lofoten

**Over two months of a Lofoten winter, a couple of friends and I managed to add a few new routes to the Magic Islands' collection—I think. I say “I think” because the nord-Norwegian alpinist is a tight-lipped creature, and information regarding what has and has not been done is often scarce or vague, at best. That said, we saw no traces of passage, and as I've corroborated our ascents with active first ascensionists in the area, as well as with *Alpinklatring* (the Norwegian alpine journal), we believe these are new climbs.**

The first is the biggest and proudest, with a feel more Alaskan than its low altitude might suggest. On the morning of February 16, fellow American Kurt Hicks and I clicked into our skis and skinned away from the lodge at Kalle (where we were both employed as ski guides for the season, thus able to spend two months in notoriously pricey Norway) at a still-dark 6 a.m. As the sun lit the Hopenfjord, we racked up below the northeast face of Vågakallen, the King of Lofoten and our backyard siren. The mountain has three distinct features on its northern aspect, the most conspicuous being the central Storpillaren, which bisects the face, with the north face proper to looker's right and the northeast face to the left. Records show routes on each feature, but no winter climbs on the left side of the northeast face. Taking the most appealing line, we climbed a series of runnels, benches, corners, and freshly iced slabs to the ridge at the top of the face, well left of the Scottish route (Benson-Robertson, 2001). The climbing was consistently thin and bold, but overridingly good, and we arrived at the ridge around 6 p.m. after roughly 18 quality pitches.

We believed we had overcome the bulk of the climbing, but the next eight hours to the summit exposed a gross underestimation on our part. The many pitches up the ridge included memorable levitations up foam on rock (one of which led to a fun fall after my tools and crampons simultaneously sheared with no protection in place, sending me skittering down the slab into a pile of snow) and a fine overhanging rappel from a bollard chopped out of a rimed cornice. Finally, after 18.5 hours of tapping up thin ice, chicken-winging frosted chimneys, winding around rimed gendarmes, and scratching up granite slabs, we reached the summit at roughly 1 a.m.

Advised to avoid the distasteful “walk along the coast” descent described by Colin Haley after he and the late Bjørn-Eivind Årtun climbed the north face in 2011, we descended via the summer route to the south and west toward Djupfjorden. Owing to an inconveniently missed text message with details of the egress, we scrambled over sea ice and frozen kelp before a sheer wall dropping from darkness to water forced us to contemplate the merits of either swimming or sleeping. We instead retreated and stumbled along the fjord's opposite side, bringing us to a waiting car at approximately 7 a.m. and back to the lodge an hour later, some 26 hours after leaving and just in time for breakfast. We named the 750m route Night Crosses the Crown and graded it V WI4+ M6 R, though I remain curious exactly what number to apply to inch-thick vertical ice with a Spectre in turf some distance below.

In the ensuing seven weeks I made multiple attempts on a variety of objectives, finding success only on a single pitch (WI5 M5), a new route on a promising buttress near Eide, which we believe to be the first on the wall.

The northeast face of Vågakallen showing (1) Night Crosses the Crown (2015) and (2) the Scottish Route (Benson-Robertson, 2001). The prominent buttress in center is the Storpillaren, home to several difficult

rock routes. The north face is to the right. Various other routes are not shown.

After so many failures, I got lucky again on April 6, the day before I had to leave, when my friend Danny Uhlmann and I set out for a line I had seen while ski touring on the north side of the island, near Falkfjorden. Our climb ascended one of a few iced gully systems on the west face of a 720m sub-peak on the ridge running south from Middagstinden (520m) to Nissvasstinden (750m). We climbed the route in eight pitches, with a thin, strenuous crux on an iced slab down low and another on steep rock and turf up high, with moderate terrain in between. We named the route Morning Bread (360m, III WI5 M5), and I left for the Alps the next day.

Two months and two real routes: When conditions in Lofoten are on, the climbing is otherworldly, a dream. The number of days when they are not explains why there is yet much to be done. Still, I'm going back.

— Chris Wright, USA

## Images



Morning Bread (center) with the descent route marked to the left.



Kurt Hicks low on the northeast face of Vågakallen.



Danny Uhlmann rappelling over the promising mixed buttress near Eide.

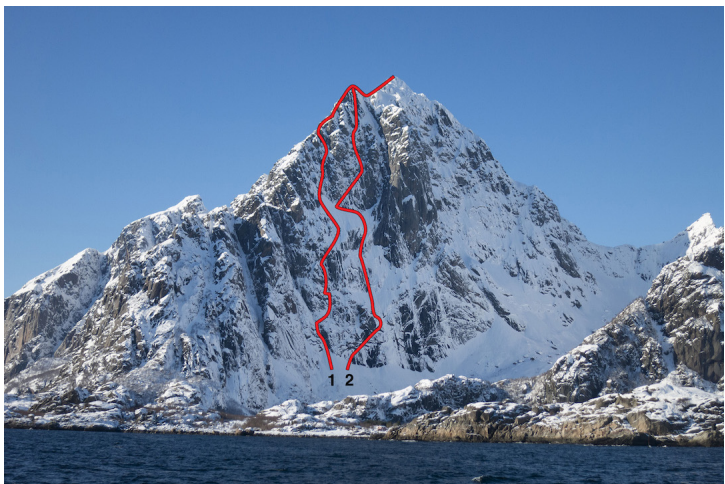




Danny Uhlmann leading the lower crux of Morning Bread.



Kurt Hicks checks out the view from the start of Night Crosses the Crown on the northeast face of Vågakallen.



The northeast face of Vågakallen showing (1) Night Crosses the Crown (2015) and (2) the Scottish Route (Benson-Robertson, 2001). The prominent buttress in center is the Storpillaren, home to several

difficult rock routes. The north face is to the right. Various routes are not shown.



Descending from the first ascent of Morning Bread.

Article Details

Author	Chris Wright
Publication	AAJ
Volume	58
Issue	90
Page	0
Copyright Date	2016
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions