



AAC Publications

Mint Peak Traverse

Alaska, Talkeetna Mountains

After a multi-year absence from Alaska, I spent some time considering what makes me enjoy the climbing and environment of the south-central part of the state. While the rock quality of most areas leaves much to be desired, there are other redeeming factors: for instance, the endless and striking granite ridgelines of the Talkeetna Mountains. I continually gaze up at them when in the area.

The Talkeetna Mountains, or more specifically the Archangel Valley, was a formative area for my Alaskan climbing partners and me. We spent many weekends camping in our trucks, jamming splitter cracks, cranking on chickenheads, and cleaning thick moss from new lines. Adjacent to Archangel Valley lies the Mint Valley, home to some of the taller and more rugged peaks of the Talkeetnas. The Mint Valley is reached by a seven-mile approach. Once there, one is greeted by a cluster of unique and attractive peaks framing the Mint Glacier.

To me, a continuous traverse of the Mint Valley peaks felt like an obvious objective. The line is truly aesthetic, standing out both from the valley floor and on a map. Upon moving back to Alaska, I thought about the traverse more and more, and when summer came I started to plan around work and weather to attempt the traverse. A perfect forecast appeared over the July 4 weekend, and when I proposed the idea to Clint Helander he was quite excited

Clint and I departed the Gold Cord trailhead at approximately 4 a.m. on July 3. We packed a light rope and rack, a 100' rappel cord, and food and fuel for three days. Although glacier travel would be involved, we decided to leave crampons and ice tools in Anchorage. The weight of our packs was quite reasonable, and we enjoyed about four miles of biking in the early morning sun before stashing the bikes and continuing on foot.

Birds, marmots, and beavers somehow seem to be the only animals occupying the lush and tranquil southern valleys of the Talkeetna Mountains, and we negotiated many parts of trail flooded from beaver dams. After some granite boulder-hopping, we reached the hanging valley beneath Triplemint Peak, where we would begin the traverse. After refilling our bottles from a glacial-melt pond, we picked an obvious ramp and chimney line up the southeastern flank of Triplemint and climbed unroped through mid-fifth-class terrain to reach the summit by late morning. We descended the northern aspect of the peak, carefully downclimbing steep, mossy terrain and eventually making one steep rappel to the glacier.

The rest of the day passed quickly—after Triplemint, we climbed up and over Peppermint Peak, Doublemint Peak, Sentry Spire, and Troublemint Peak. We roped up for a few pitches and found difficulties to 5.8 on this section of the traverse. We rappelled often but mainly kept the rope in the pack, using it only when necessary. After a moderately technical descent off the north side of Troublemint, we dug out a ledge on some snow and enjoyed the evening. It was about midnight by this time, and the sun was just disappearing behind the ridgeline we hoped to hit on day three.

We awoke early on July 4, had breakfast, and from our bivy descended a snow and ice gully onto the Mint Glacier. Clint found himself waist-deep in a crevasse immediately after mentioning that this was a “dead glacier.” We roped up after that and made our way to the southern aspect of Spearmint Peak. We gradually made our way upward, pitching out a few sections and negotiating some notably poor choss gullies to eventually gain the summit in the early afternoon. The final pitch was hard in

approach shoes and could be rated something like 5.8 A1 V4. We descended straight back to the Mint Glacier via a series of steep rappels and began making our way toward Montana Peak.

Montana is the tallest and most seldom-summitted peak of the group; it sits at the very back of the valley, looming over the Mint Glacier. To start, we ascended a broad scree gully on the southern ramparts, quickly gaining elevation up to the summit ridgeline. However, what appeared to be a straight and clear shot to the summit was in fact a convoluted series of collapsing gendarmes. The fatigue of the last couple of days began to set in just as rain started and the wind picked up. To continue, we slung a boulder and rappelled a steep and icy gully to access the west face. After some traversing, we were established on the face and Clint led us to the top in a monster simul-climbing pitch, with difficulties to 5.7. We topped out in zero visibility and deteriorating weather. We rapped straight back down the west face to gain a series of hanging glaciers below the western aspect of the final section of ridgeline between Montana Peak and Three Bell Spire.

Once reaching the base of Montana Peak, I noticed that these glaciers contained the most impressive crevasses I had ever seen in the Talkeetnas. Clint and I roped up and carefully negotiated through the monsters in dense fog and rain. It was about midnight by this time, and we were soaked to the bone but still thoroughly enjoying ourselves. We took turns breaking trail and telling jokes, following our noses to gain the ridgeline proper. Once there we made our second bivy, this time in a snow cave, which was made more comfortable by covering the entrance with Clint's homemade nylon tarp.

Luckily, the weather cleared early on the morning of July 5. From our bivy we were able to survey the ground covered and the remaining ridgeline. We rappelled directly from the bivy site to another hanging glacier. As our third day progressed we covered more horizontal than vertical terrain, making short rappels and pitching out steep steps on the sharp ridgeline. This part of ridge was characterized by ice and snow to the west and steep granite walls and gullies to the east. We were certainly pushing the limits of possibility for approach shoes as we negotiated steep and icy traverses without equipment. Eventually we scrambled to the top of Three Bell Spire, signed the summit register, crossed another pocket glacier, and descended near the area of Back Door Gap. Back in the valley, we sauntered toward Mint Hut and back toward the bicycles—our Mint Peak Traverse covered about 9.5 miles, 8,100' of climbing, and difficulties to 5.8.

During our three-day traverse [four days total (July 3-6) to reach the trailhead again], my key to the bike lock removed itself from my pocket and I resorted to breaking the lock with a stone. The satisfaction of freeing the bikes quickly dissipated as I immediately popped my back tire and watched Clint pedal toward leftover pastries and beer at the trailhead. As I walked my bike down the trail, I thought back on our climb and of my time climbing in the Talkeetnas. I am always appreciative of my absence from familiar places, as this time often fosters fresh ideas and aspirations for cherished places.

– Aaron Thrasher

Images



Aaron Thrasher ascending Triplemint at the beginning of the traverse.



: Looking north from Triplemint, with Peppermint, Doublemint, and Troublemint visible.



Clint Helander on Doublemint Peak, with Triplemint in the background.



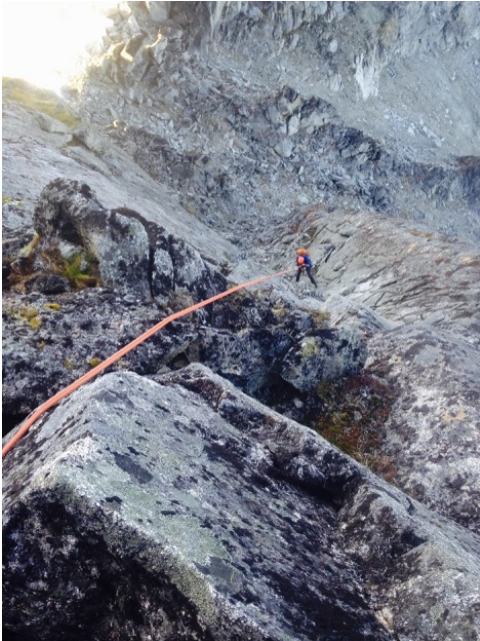
Clint Helander negotiating a steep downclimb just below the summit of Troublemint. Sentry Spire, Doublemint Peak, Peppermint Peak, and Triplemint Peak are visible in the background.



Clint Helander getting ready to rig a rappel on the descent from Troublemint. Spearmint Peak and Montana Peak are visible in the background and were climbed on the second day.



Clint Helander rappelling from near the summit of Troublemint. The ridgeline from Montana peak (right) to Three Bell Spire (left), where the team climbed on the day three, is visible in the background.



Clint Helander rappelling toward the bivy site near the end of the first day.



First-night bivy site.



View of the ridgeline the team would traverse on day three.



Clint Helander pulling the rope after a steep rappel from Spearmint.



Aaron Thrasher rappelling from the summit of Montana Peak near the end of the second day.



Glacier slogging near the end of the second day.



Clint Helander leads over steep gendarmes toward Three Bell Spire on the third day.



Clint Helander nears the summit of Three Bell Spire toward the end of the third day, with Montana Peak and Spearmint Peak visible in the background.



Aaron Thrasher at a belay after negotiating an icy traverse on the third day.



Waking up on the morning of the third day.

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