



AAC Publications

Snow Tower, East Face To East Ridge

Alaska, Coast Range

Snow Tower tops out at an elevation of 6,572' and has unusual prominence for its height: The peak ranks 62nd among all peaks in the United States and 32nd in the state of Alaska. Amazing, also, for an unclimbed summit that it was named on the USGS map. More significantly, for Mike Miller and myself, was that Snow Tower appeared to be another interesting, unexplored mountain in the vast wilderness of Southeast Alaska.

On the afternoon of June 7, Mike and I flew 40 miles east of Juneau with floatplane-pilot Gary Thompson of Admiralty Air. We landed at Crescent Lake (ca 174') and began a steep, forested ascent southward through cliffs and tangled forests toward the peak. As with many climbs in this region, the bushwhacking sections can make or break an attempt. After negotiating a few no-fall zones, we successfully exited the trees and pitched a high camp around 2,000'. Armies of mosquitoes attacked as we set up camp. From here, we were still too low on the mountain's shoulder to see anything but a rocky horizon swallowed in ice. It was unsettling not to see the summit.

We left camp at 4:30 a.m. and climbed to a point where we could see the north face for the first time. Warm temps had melted out the face, revealing large bergschrunds and exfoliating rock buttresses. We decided to gamble and traverse around the base of the tower toward the eastern aspect. To our relief we found a steep 1,500' snow slope that connected to the peak's east ridge. After four pitches of challenging, loose ridge climbing, through two deep notches, we topped out around 4 p.m. on June 8.

On the descent we spent another night at our high camp and descended the forest section the following day. The descent proved to be more involved than the ascent. As we neared Crescent Lake, we wandered off our approach route and got sucked into a more direct descent. After one rappel we found ourselves cliffed out at the lake's edge. Several sizable rock bluffs blocked the final quarter-mile exit to our resupply at the corner of the lake. To avoid climbing above and around the massive cliffs, we opted to leave our gear, swim the edge of the lake, and return with our pack rafts, which we had brought for a planned paddle out via the Whiting River.

Following a cold and strenuous swim to base camp, Mike and I arrived barefooted and soaked at a camp devoid of our exit supplies. The intoxication of our successful climb of Snow Tower gave way to the realization that our possessions had been ravaged and dragged into a nearby swamp by an unidentified animal. Exhausted and demoralized, we waded through shallow water full of floating sticks and pine needles to find a flotsam of perforated supplies. After two nights out and 28 hours of climbing we took a pragmatic inventory of our items in the swamp, both aware that the animal might still be nearby. A chewed can of pepper spray was found floating in the debris. Soon our eyes began to burn.

One pack raft was intact and we still had our SAT phone. Our bear cans filled with extra food also survived a massive chewing. However, our plan to float to the ocean was out of the question, as Mike's pack raft was ripped beyond field repair. I retrieved our climbing gear along the lake's edge and we phoned Gary for a pickup. As we waited an afternoon storm moved in. The lake became agitated and darkened into a deep black-green. The wind began to build and whitecaps sent waves of spray into the forest edge. Through a small opening in our tent, it was possible to see the intermittent flashes of lightning arcing above a dense forest and traversing the hanging fields of snow and blue

ice, until, finally, a delayed boom echoed from the distant rock towers of the Stikine.

Sometimes it feels as if anything might happen. Lightning might strike you; that bear might come back; your pilot might not get you in time. When you finally relax during a brief moment of vulnerability, the magnitude of what you have done finally sets in. Avalanche, rockfall, and any number of disasters could have found you. Yet, still, you are here. Sometimes adventure shows us what a gift it is to be alive.

– William Wacker

Images



Mike Miller wonders what's next during the first ascent of Snow Tower, an unclimbed peak in Southeast Alaska.



Snow Tower from the approach to the east face.

Article Details

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