



AAC Publications

Sheep River Glacier: Alpine Rock Routes

Alaska, Talkeetna Mountains

Over seven days in the middle of July, Chris Williams, Gus Barber, and I climbed three new routes above the Sheep River Glacier, in the Talkeetna Mountains, north of the Matanuska Valley. I had seen some photos from a friend's ski trip in this area, and the mountains were reminiscent of Little Switzerland, where I had climbed the previous season. This area was especially intriguing because, as far as I could tell, little or no rock climbing had been done (or at least reported).

After a helicopter flight from Sutton and a stormy night, our first day on the glacier broke to unstable weather. Anxious to see the goods, we skied up the glacier to the base of Peak 8,733'. A route soon became clear: A 300' splitter crack went up the lower section of the south-facing wall to gain a ridgeline.

Despite the iffy weather, Gus, a 19-year-old young gun, racked up for the first lead, a chimney leading to a hand and fist crack that went to fingers high on the pitch. The golden granite was impeccable, the gear perfect, and the climbing unique and thought provoking. This 150' pitch was one of the best 5.9s I've climbed. Chris took the second lead, an intimidating steep crack that, like the first pitch, started wide then narrowed to overhanging but perfect hands higher up. This 5.10 pitch was even better than the first. After this, the route turned to mostly easy climbing (5.2–5.6), interspersed with moderate roped pitches of 5.8, with classic exposure as we gained elevation above the glacier.

We descended our line of ascent by a mix of rappelling and downclimbing. We returned to camp at 2:30 a.m., having established **Funding Denied (1,300', IV 5.10)**. [The route tops out the prominent main buttress of the peak, without continuing to the true summit of Peak 8,733'.]

After a day of rain and high winds, we were anxious to climb again and took advantage of the next marginal weather window. Our second route began with a fun cragging day but turned into something slightly more serious. Located on the east side of a short, unnamed buttress about a mile west of Peak 8,733', **Life Insurance Policy (650', III 5.10 X)** climbs deceptively good-looking rock that deteriorated as we went higher. One excellent pitch in the middle of the route went at mid-5.10, but without any good protection. After six pitches ranging from 5.7 to 5.10, a thunderstorm began to develop. We reached a pinnacle about 500' shy of the summit and began to rappel. After four complicated and somewhat exciting raps, we found ourselves atop a steep scree slope near the base of the buttress. A traversing exit pitch took us to a point where we could walk back to our skis.

The next day we headed back to Peak 8,733' to attempt the central southeast face, to the right of **Funding Denied**. After one pitch and a huge rockfall scare, we headed back to a 100' crack we'd seen on a small wall between the Life Insurance buttress and Peak 8,733'. Gus led through steep fingers and hands to establish **Hypothermic Sending Temps (5.11-)**. After several days of poor weather and zero visibility, we finally got a brief weather window for a pickup.

– Lang Van Dommelen

Images



Base camp on the Sheep River Glacier. Funding Denied (1,300', IV 5.10) climbs the buttress facing the camera on Peak 8,733', in the center of the photo, just left of the two boulders in the foreground.



Gus Barber exits the chimney on the first pitch of Funding Denied, Peak 8,733'.



Chris Williams on the ultra-classic second pitch of Funding Denied, Peak 8,733'.



Chris Williams and Gus Barber scrambling, about halfway up Funding Denied, Peak 8,733'.



The route line of Funding Denied on the south side of Peak 8,733'.



Last Frontier's A-Star helicopter coming in for landing to pick up the team.



The small buttress between Life Insurance Policy and Peak 8,733' where the team climbed a 100' crack they named Hypothermic Sending Temps (5.11-).



The view southwest from the team's base camp, showing the line of Life Insurance Policy (III 5.10 X). The upper portion of the route climbs out of view and finishes at the yellow dot.

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