



## AAC Publications

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### **Thunder Mountain, West Face to North Face**

Canada, Northwest Territories, Ragged Range

**At 2,773m (9,097'), Thunder Mountain (Mt. Nirvana) is the tallest peak in the Northwest Territories. Prior to 2017, it had received five ascents, all via the north and east faces. But the biggest face of Thunder Mountain, the 1,000m-tall, 2km-wide west face, remained unclimbed.**

In 2015, I made several unsuccessful attempts on the west face, helicoptering in from Watson Lake, Yukon, with Dave Custer and Susan Ruff. On that trip we climbed to within a few rope lengths of the summit ridge, but retreated after encountering rotten rock that couldn't be protected without bolts. The next summer, Len Vanderstar and I made the first unsupported ascent of Thunder Mountain, paddling and bushwhacking in and out from Tungsten, NWT, and climbing the east face. But the west face still beckoned.

Dave, Susan, and I returned this past summer for another attempt. On the evening of July 14 we helicoptered from Watson Lake and set up base camp exactly as we had in 2015, at the edge of a small tarn, finishing up by midnight in the faint twilight that is as dark as it gets at that latitude in July.

Our first plan of attack was to try a line on a buttress just left of our 2015 attempt. This time we established an advanced base camp (ABC) halfway up the right side of the face to shorten our summit day. We spent the first week hauling loads and fixing lines to ABC. It rained every day. We were even forced to bivvy under an overhang to ride out a 36-hour rain event. But eventually we established the high camp.

On July 22 we got our first weather window, so we hiked, climbed, and jumared to ABC. The next day we climbed up to the southwest gully and then diverged from our 2015 route by traversing left on another ledge system. We made it up another six pitches before we were forced to retreat by bad weather, approximately 750m up the wall. Six rappels and a bit of downclimbing led us back to the main ledge, which we traversed back to ABC, arriving 24 hours after we'd left. On the way down, Susan twisted her ankle, which prevented her from climbing for the rest of the trip.

The normal wet weather of the Ragged Range returned, and we spent the next week back in base camp. In between squalls, I scrambled up an unclimbed peak just north of camp (Peak 2,075m). I ascended 300m of 3rd-class rock, then surmounted a tricky, overhanging ledge to reach the airy, moss-covered summit.

On July 31, Dave and I climbed back up to ABC, planning to attempt the south ridge. Over 13 hours of climbing on August 1, we reached an overhanging dead-end and retreated back to ABC. We made another attempt up the southwest gully the next day, but eventually had to retreat when melting snow above us turned the gully into a steady stream of water.

It appeared any route from ABC would either require aiding or would be too wet to climb. We didn't like either of those options, so we decided to try a promising-looking line on the left side of the face that I'd noticed in 2015. Over the next two days, we hauled all the gear and fixed ropes from ABC back to base camp and waited for another weather window.

On August 6 we set out at 6 a.m. After a few hours we reached a ledge system near Trident Col, north

of Thunder Mountain, and scrambled across to the right, eventually dropping into the gully separating Scylla and Charybdis (the two peaks north of Thunder Mountain). A full day of climbing mossy cracks, wet slabs, snow, and overhanging chockstones brought us to what appeared to be the crux of our route: a series of steep cracks that might reach the crest of the northwest ridge. Reluctant to start these unknown pitches in the dark, we opted to bivy, hunkering down for the night on a small scree ledge. The next morning our feet were numb and we were exhausted from the absence of sleep. We decided to retreat, retracing our route and eventually staggering back into camp at 1 a.m., 43 hours after leaving.

Fortunately, we had time for one final attempt. We rose at 1 a.m. on August 10. As I looked to the north I saw green curtains shimmer across the sky. The northern lights! This was the only time we'd seen them on the trip, and we hoped they were a good omen.

We began in the dim twilight, ditching the headlamps after a single pitch, and reached the ledge of our previous shiver bivy by 12:30 p.m., nine hours earlier than on our previous attempt. There was now plenty of daylight for the crux of the climb.

Dave led a traverse pitch—a hand crack to a hanging belay—and another shorter crack to a small chimney. From there we stepped left to gain a gently overhanging crack system, finessed a steep, wide section, and continued up the crack to the crest of the northwest ridge. The ridge above looked quite sharp and technical all the way to the summit, but just below it on the north face the terrain looked easier. With five hours of daylight remaining, we moved onto the north face and swung leads across ledges and up faces, including some delicate traverses, until we were below what looked like the edge of the summit plateau. I wriggled up an offwidth, then reached the short, wide, overhanging crack noted by Buckingham on the mountain's first ascent in 1965. [Editor's note: Bill Buckingham and Lew Surdam climbed Thunder Mountain (one of nine first ascents or new routes during their expedition) via a long traversing route on the north face. It's likely they followed a lower line across the upper face than the 2017 team did, only sharing the last pitch.]

I climbed up the crack, pulled over the lip, and crawled onto a broad, gently sloping, boulder-strewn plateau. The summit was just a short walk away. To the north, a faint orange ribbon hugged the horizon in a narrow band of alpenglow. By 12:30 a.m., August 11, we both reached the summit, just as it became dark enough to need headlamps. It was an amazing culmination to our trip, having summited in the last possible window after a month in the range.

After a half hour we got cold and walked back to the edge of the plateau. Through the night, we reversed our route, down-leading, diagonally rappelling, and traversing back to the nice ledge at the edge of the northwest ridge by 7 a.m. From there we followed our previous rap anchors down the face and arrived in camp at 7 p.m., 41 hours after leaving. Our new route up the west and north faces of Thunder Mountain involved 30 pitches plus scrambling (1,000m, 5.9).

Bad weather was forecast for the next week, but thanks to Steve and Matt of Trans North, we managed to helicopter back to Watson Lake in the nick of time, on August 13, and then started the long road trip back to the United States.

– Eric Gilbertson, USA

## Images



Eric Gilbertson on one of the crux 5.9 pitches just below the northwest ridge of Thunder Mountain.



A foreshortened view of the west face portion of the 2017 route (Custer-Gilbertson) up Thunder Mountain.



Dave Custer traversing ledges on the successful ascent of the west and north faces of Thunder Mountain.





The north face portion of the 2017 route (Custer-Gilbertson) up Thunder Mountain.

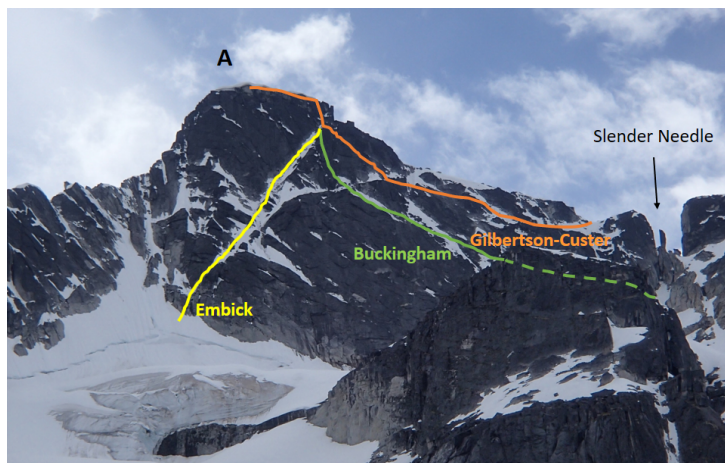


Susan Ruff leading during the first attempt on Thunder Mountain in 2017.



Detail of the upper west side of Thunder Mountain in snowy conditions, showing the high point

reached in 2015 (red line) and the 2017 attempt and successful ascent (orange lines). The climbers moved onto the north face to reach the summit during the successful climb via the left-hand line.



The north side of Thunder Mountain. Orange line: 2017 Custer-Gilbertson route (west face to north face), starting on the far side. Green line: approximate route followed for the first ascent of Thunder Mountain in 1965 (Buckingham-Surdam). The 1965 climbers reached the notch with the “Slender Needle,” then rappelled diagonally down and left to start their traverse line leading to the top. Yellow line: approximate line followed for the second ascent of Thunder Mountain (Embick-Long-Thompson, 1975).



The west side of Thunder Mountain, showing routes climbed or attempted in 2015 (orange lines) and 2017 (red lines). The advanced base camp used on the first attempts in 2017 is in upper right (ABC). The successful 2017 ascent followed the left-hand line (4) to the northwest ridge, then an ascending traverse across the north face (5) to the top. “Bivy” marks the high point of the first attempt on this line.

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