



AAC Publications

Albatross, Direct South Face; Xanadu, Arctic Knight

Alaska, Brooks Range, Arrigetch Peaks

THE NEWS THAT I'd been hired to work in the emergency department of a large trauma center was bittersweet. My friends Brian Prince, Adam Ferro, and I had been planning to travel to the Arrigetch Peaks to attempt the unclimbed west face of Xanadu. Grant funding would cover most of our travel expenses. Now, with the trip scheduled only four months after my job orientation, I was fully prepared to let my friends go on the trip of a lifetime without me. Fortunately, sending my supervisor the press release about our Mugs Stump Award and stacking up shifts worked magically—I was granted 19 days off.

Having less than three weeks for the expedition did not allow much time for screwing around. After arriving in Anchorage, we drove over 600 miles and about 15 hours north to the town of Coldfoot in one long push. Unfortunately, it was raining and we had to wait a few days before we could fly out. With the only hotel in town being prohibitively expensive, we crashed in an abandoned building.

When the weather allowed us to fly into Circle Lake on August 4, we learned that the biggest sandbag of the trip was the approach up Arrigetch Creek. Brian had thought the approach to the base of the west face of Xanadu would be only about five miles—no big deal. He obviously hadn't looked at the map very closely, and I hadn't had much time for research before the trip, stacking 12-hour shifts to compensate for a lengthy vacation. It had rained heavily for several days, and it took us about two hours of wandering around just to find a place to cross a small fork of the Alatna River—usually benign but now raging from the recent storms. We had to set up a Tyrolean to get our packs across. After thrashing through bushes and across several other small creeks, we eventually found a trail in the form of a muddy groove with water pouring down it. Traveling anywhere else would be hell, so this was our best option. After walking for a few hours, Xanadu still looked very far away.

On the second day of our approach, we spotted a peak named the Albatross. Although not something we had planned to climb, it was a striking granite fin with what looked to be an exhilarating summit block. Soon after passing beneath it, we were caught in a raging thunderstorm and had to camp short of Escape Pass (our route to Xanadu), in a nice valley just northeast of the Albatross. On the morning of August 6, the rain ceased but the pass was still covered in clouds; meanwhile, the beautiful southeast face of the Albatross was illuminated by the sun. We quickly changed plans and set off to find a direct line up the face.

We climbed all sorts of terrain, from solid rock with fun, pumpy moves to dangerous overhangs with stacked flakes waiting for someone to carelessly give them a good pull. All three of us had a good amount of experience with route-finding on varied alpine terrain, and we tried to stretch our 70m ropes to the limit on every pitch, and consequently we made a relatively quick ascent. The Direct Southeast Face was approximately 1,700', with difficulties to 5.10+—taller than the west face of Xanadu (which appears bigger than the Albatross on the map due to several hundred feet of slabs below the base of Xanadu). On top we found a summit register with only the signatures of the men who did the first documented ascent of the formation: Arthur Bacon and George Ripley, who climbed the peak in August 1969 (AAJ 1970). Since then, it is believed at least two parties topped out this incredible peak.

[Editor's note: This is the fourth known route on the Albatross. The exact line of the first ascent is unknown but was described as a gully on the south face that led to the southwest ridge (AAJ 1970). The

second ascent was made by Lorna Corson and Norm Larson in 1993, via a parallel crack system on the south face (5.9, AAJ 1995). In 2016, Katie Mills and Nick Pappas climbed the Albatross' north buttress via the Eye of Sauron (1,200', 5.10c), but did not continue along the ridge to the true summit (AAJ 2017).]

Long summer days allowed us to return to camp, make dinner, and fall asleep before it got dark—in mid-August nighttime lasted only a few hours. We were physically beat from a tough three-day stretch of hiking and climbing, yet the following morning the weather was fairly clear. So, only a few hours after we returned from the Albatross, we decided to load up on coffee and get after the main objective: the west face of Xanadu.

We got over Escape Pass, as well as a second unnamed pass, to reach the base of the wall in good time. [The group approached the wall from a steep pass on looker's left, thus accessing the wall above the lower slabs.] Zeb Engberg had sent us an overlay of the route he and his partners had climbed less than a week prior to our departure, and pointed out the line Silvia Vidal was climbing on. Based on time they put into those routes and the time we had to work with, we knew we had to climb in a push, and if we resorted to aid, we knew it had to be fast. When we got to the base and saw a beautiful corner system and steep cracks leading up the wall, we all thought it was the most natural and striking option for a possible free route.

But by then the wind had picked up and the clouds thickened. We started up the wall anyway, finding a 70m, five-star corner and three and a half more pitches before the first drops of rain and a healthy dose of arctic wind forced a retreat from about halfway up.

After that, we were tent-bound by intermittent storms. Without an accurate forecast and with our provisions running low, there weren't a lot of great options. After two days of tent festering, we only had half a day's worth of snacks and one dinner left. Though it wasn't raining, clouds surrounded the mountains. We had two choices: Hike out and retrieve more food from our cache at the airstrip, or hike back up and over two passes, attempt our route, and then go out to the airstrip to get food after the climb. We chose the latter.

We were dedicated to climbing in a style that would challenge us the most and allow the mountain a fair chance to defeat our attempts—alpine style, no fixed ropes, as little fixed gear left behind as possible. Midway up the wall, above our previous high point, the difficulties picked up. We were able to get past several serious runouts without placing bolts, and several cruxes up to 5.11+ went free—the most memorable being a big roof that required camping on finger locks. Doing all that with frozen fingers—and climbing in a whiteout—provided more drama than most would want on a remote alpine route, but after about seven pitches of climbing, most of which were a full 70m, we were standing on top of the wall. About 400 feet of simul-climbing along the ridge took us to the true summit, where we dubbed our route the Arctic Knight (1,600', IV 5.11+ R).

Although happy with the result, the thick clouds and freezing winds didn't allow us to see much or stay long. We rappelled our line of ascent with two 70m ropes.

It was a shame the weather didn't cooperate, as the wall had great rock and amazing climbing that would have been much more fun without the screaming barfies.

Because we had to get down from the wall, pack up camp, move five miles down the valley, hike all the way out to the landing site, pick up seven days worth of food, and hike back up to our new camp, the true crux of this day was endurance and willpower. We found our food cache at dusk, and shortly after it started to rain heavily. By the time we returned to camp the next morning, 29 hours after initially setting out for Xanadu, we were exhausted, drenched, and ready to ask any nearby grizzly bears to end this sufferfest for us.

Unfortunately, after all that effort to reprovision, it rained for several days in a row and climbing was

out of the question, though a few short weather windows were big enough to pick blueberries. We ended up flying out of the Arrigetch four days early to meet up with Brian's stepdad for a few days of salmon fishing. Despite only getting two marginal climbing days, the trip featured great partners, challenging days in the mountains, blueberries, fishing, learning to operate a plane, and not getting eaten by a bear— the full-on Alaska experience! Our trip was supported by the Mugs Stump Award.

– Vitaliy Musiyenko

Images



Looking up the Arrigetch Creek drainage on the first day of the approach.



Adam Ferro crossing a small creek on the approach up the Arrigetch valley.



The Albatross towers above the valley. The line of the Direct South Face is shown. Two earlier routes are hidden farther to the left. In 2016, Katie Mills and Nick Pappas climbed the Albatross' north buttress via the Eye of Sauron (1,200' 5.10c). The route follows the right-hand shoulder of the peak to read the obvious open-book feature.



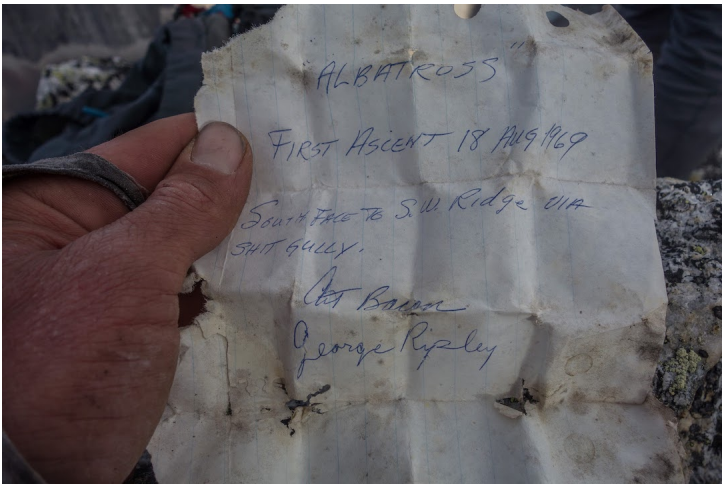
Adam Ferro crossing another creek on the way up toward the Albatross, which towers above the valley on the right.



Adam Ferro leads a pitch midway up the Direct Southeast Face (1,700', IV/V 5.10+) on the Albatross.



Brian Prince leading an exposed pitch high on the Direct Southeast Face (1,700', IV/V 5.10+) on the Albatross.



The summit register of the rarely climbed Albatross.



Adam Ferro following the first pitch of the Arctic Knight (1,600', IV 5.11+ R), a new route on the west face of Xanadu.



Brian Prince figuring out a way around one of numerous overhangs on the west face of Xanadu during the first ascent of the Arctic Knight (1,600', IV 5.11+ R).



Looking down the Arrigetch Creek valley as the late-night sun sets over the Alaskan tundra.



Vitaliy Musiyenko trying to connect limited cracks with run-out face climbing on the west face of Xanadu during the first ascent of the Arctic Knight (IV 5.11+ R).



After several days of continuous rain, a Tyrolean traverse over a normally small creek by the landing strip was required to access the Arrigetch valley.



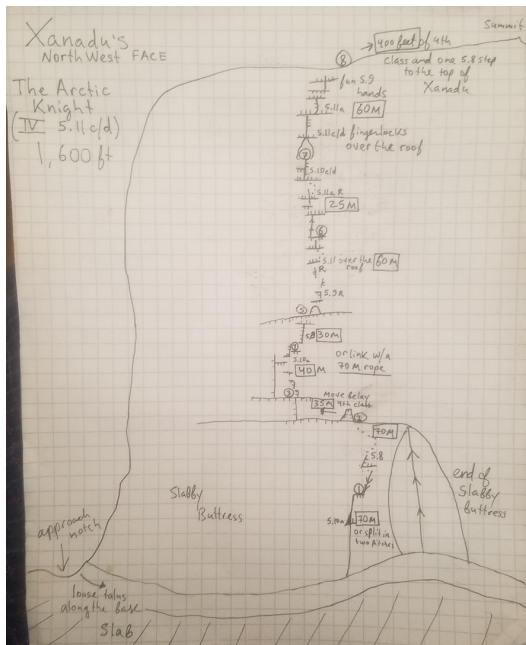
Brian Prince about to do some 5.11+ fingerlock campusing, just below the end of the difficulties on Xanadu's west face during the first ascent of the Arctic Knight (1,600', IV 5.11+ R).



Brian Prince belaying Adam Ferro in the fog on top of Xanadu's west face, after completing the first ascent of the Arctic Knight (1,600', IV 5.11+ R).



Adam Ferro (left) and Brian Prince on the summit of Xanadu with not much of a view, after completing the first ascent of the Arctic Knight (1,600', IV 5.11+ R).



Topo for the Arctic Knight (1,600', IV 5.11+ R), completed in August 2017 by Adam Ferro, Vitaliy Musiyenko, and Brian Prince. This was the third new route climbed on Xanadu's impressive west face in a single year—the face was unclimbed prior to 2017.

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