



AAC Publications

Dogtooth, First Ascent

Alaska, Alaska Range, The Ramparts

Never have I sandbagged my friends or myself so incredibly hard. The whole adventure started when I convinced my poor unsuspecting victims, Reese Doyle and Robin Miller, to take a lovely flight out to my friend Matt Bertke's lodge at stunning Chelatna Lake, a little over 40 miles west of Talkeetna. We would then enjoy an eight-mile, beer-in-hand jet-boat cruise across the lake to a picturesque white sand beach, where we would begin our three-mile approach hike. The objective was to stand atop an unclimbed granite pinnacle known locally as the Dogtooth. At the southern gateway to the Ramparts, this peak rises sharply above a jungle of alders, rivers, and swamps just west of the toe of the famed Kahiltna Glacier.

The struggle began immediately after those moments of sun-infused bliss on the beach. We spent two days just trying to make it to base camp, which was still far from the climbing. We fought like hell with heavy packs, sometimes waist-deep in moving water, through 15-foot-tall alders so dense and disorienting they blotted out the sun.

In all, this first attempt lasted five days. We gave it everything we had—blood, sweat, tears, and more—just to be stormed off the mountain at the base of the first pitch. But nobody had it worse than Titus the dog. In a single hour, he got porcupined in the face and had a standoff with a bear and her two cubs. One moment I was yanking barbed quills out of his nose with a pair of pliers and the next he's growling and I'm stumbling backward with a .44 pointed in the direction of the hyperventilating sounds of a defensive bear. Although we never actually saw her, even though she was only 20 feet away, we later saw her cubs hanging out in the tree we had been approaching.

The logical thing would have been to write off this peak as a loss and move on. But I became obsessed. The prospect of such an incredible-looking unclimbed peak within sight of Matt's sauna deck, lit up with inspiration upon every sunset, was just too much for me.

After we dried out our piles of soaking clothes and gear at the lodge and had a good night's rest, Reese and I restocked on food and beer, loaded up the jet boat with chainsaws, and went back to the white sand beach. Our aim was to tunnel a trail through the alders for future adventurers and for Matt's guests at the lodge. After three days of hard manual labor, we had a tunnel to be proud of, extending over a mile to the Denali National Park boundary, where we could pick up game trails. The section of approach that had taken us nine hours on our first go would now take less than two. But the weather was closing in and my friends had to get back to their jobs in Anchorage.

A week later the weather was beginning to improve, but my friends were less than excited to return after such traumatizing events. My next victim was Travis Powell, who I knew would be down for this kind of sufferfest. This time, I flew us from Talkeetna to Chelatna myself, using our aerial approach to continue my off-airport flight training and complete my first short-field gravel landing in a fully loaded Piper Pacer. It was quite the learning experience.

We then set off with the heaviest packs either of us had ever carried and cruised the approach to base camp, a.k.a. Swamp Camp, where water squirts up from between your toes when you step out of the tent onto the tundra. Luckily, the hordes of mosquitoes that had plagued us two weeks earlier

were replaced by hordes of black flies. At least they didn't bite! The bushwhacking from Swamp Camp to the base of the real climbing is something that will simply not get better with time. This alder jungle rises 3,500' with relentless steepness and slick rock slabs. With lighter packs and lessons learned, however, we made quick progress compared to the first time, when we had to stop every 20 minutes to look at recon photos and debate which of the jutting rock spires was indeed the Dogtooth.

An approach that took us the better part of a day the first time was done in just under five hours. Before we knew it, we were standing on the wildly exposed southeast ridge, roping up for the first pitch. Here, our incredible effort was finally rewarded, as a classic ridge climb unfolded beautifully into 1,200' of 5.6 glory. The climbing was so fun and solid that we simul-climbed the entire route, entering that precious flow state. We only stopped to make belays a couple of times, when the rope drag became unbearable and we wanted to give each other the thrill of leading new terrain.

The summit was so close that we could almost throw a rock at it, and I thought we had it in the bag, when I heard a deep rumble. The smoky skies, caused by interior wildfires, had warmed the air and clouded our long-distance vision, allowing a thunderstorm to sneak up on us. Suddenly, a massive lightning bolt appeared right in front of us at eye level. We were almost on top of the highest thing around, covered in metal, and horrified. I was frozen at a point of indecision. I didn't want to go down, but I didn't want to get fried to a crisp either. Travis took action, made an anchor on one side of the ridge, and rigged a rappel to a small overhang below. We quickly escaped our high point, jumped out of our harnesses on a small ledge, and hid in the cave until the thunderhead passed.

At this point, I contacted Matt at the lodge via InReach and told him we were just 20 minutes from the summit. When we got there, it was so still and quiet that a lone mosquito managed to land on my shirt. And then we heard it—the drone of Matt's Super Cub coming right for us. He had taken off from the lodge as soon as he got my text and proceeded to buzz us eight times, with his girlfriend in the back taking pictures.

We named our route Eye Level (1,200', 5.6) for the airplane full of friends that buzzed us at eye level, the lightning that appeared at eye level, and because Travis had gotten stung between the eyes by a wasp when we got off-route on the approach.

After the sound of Matt's engine faded back into the silence of the smoky sunset, we took a few more pictures and turned our attention toward the long descent. Once we reached the bush line, we were extremely tired and it was getting so dark that we couldn't bear the thought of doing that steep downhill bushwhack. We found water and a grassy spot to lay our heads, put on our mosquito nets, and passed out. Deep satisfaction saturated us to the bone, and we didn't wake up until nine hours later when it started to rain. Then the real saturation began.

– Zach Clanton

Images



The south face of the Dogtooth in the Ramparts of the southern Alaska Range. Eye Level (1,200', 5.6) follows the southeast ridge on the right-hand skyline. The striking, sunlit southeast face is unclimbed.



The southeastern aspect of the Dogtooth, seen from the air. Though the striking peak is visible from the Chelatna Lake Lodge, it took several days of intense bushwhacking just to reach the base of the mountain.



Zach Clanton on the summit of the Dogtooth after making the first ascent of the peak via the southeast ridge. Chelatna Lake is visible in the background.



Travis Powell gazes toward Chelatna Lake while climbing along the southeast ridge of the Dogtooth. Shortly after this photo was taken, he and Zach Clanton were nearly struck by lightning.



Looking down from the southeast ridge onto the unclimbed south/southwest face of the Dogtooth.



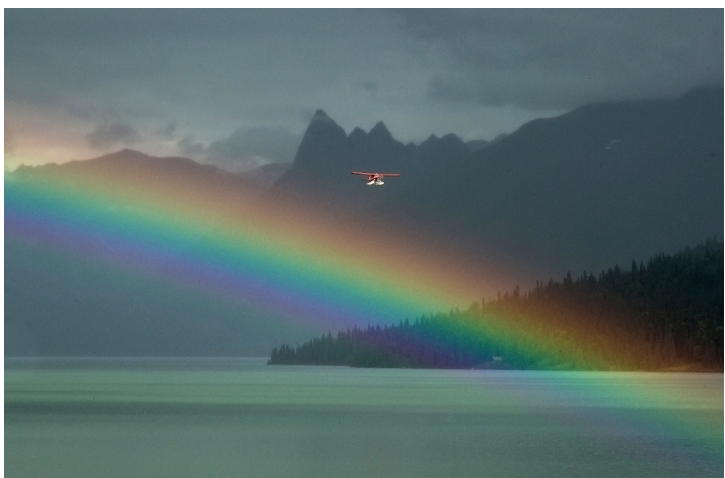
Travis Powell at camp two. After making the first ascent of the Dogtooth via the southeast ridge, he and Zach Clanton camped here to explore potential routes on the south face (behind Powell on the right) but were thwarted by bad weather.



The trailhead at the end of Chelatna Lake, a.k.a. Beach Camp. After their first attempt on the Dogtooth, Clanton and Reese Doyle spent three days cutting a trail from here toward the peak with chainsaws.



The view across Chelatna Lake from the Chelatna Lake Lodge. The Dogtooth is the spiky summit on the right side of the upper valley.



One of Chelatna Lake Lodge's de Havilland Beaver planes heads for the end of the rainbow with the Dogtooth in the background.

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