



AAC Publications

Devils Thumb, North Pillar, Second Ascent (Solo)

Alaska, Coast Mountains, Stikine Icefield

I arrived in Petersburg, Alaska, at the end of July, about six weeks after setting sail from Port Hadlock, Washington in Ember, my Freya 39 sailboat. I was keen to get off the boat for a while, and a long walk to a big mountain seemed like just the thing. The normally soggy weather gave way to sunshine, but the locals remained pessimistic. The forecasters didn't know it yet, but nearly two weeks would pass before the next rainfall. I headed off to try the North Pillar of Devils Thumb (VI 5.9).

From my sailboat anchored in Scenery Cove, I rowed up Thomas Bay in my 8' dinghy. Floating slush thwarted easy access to the Baird Glacier, so I had to tackle it from its heavily crevassed central toe. I progressed in stages, reconnoitering unburdened then doubling back for my gear, until I gained a convincing spine. A mile of crest walking up a network of ice ribs brought me to a buffed path of ice winding up the center of the glacier.

The first and only ascent of the North Pillar, made by Bob Plumb and David Stutzman in August 1977, started on the left side of the massive 6,000' northwest face of the Thumb. Starting directly up the face, including several pitches through a running waterfall, they were persuaded by rockfall, loose terrain, and technical difficulty to traverse into the icefall left of the face. They had to bivouac in the icefall before reaching the pillar on the following day. That whole business looked terrifying. I dodged into the south arm of the Cauldron, aiming to traverse around the mountain to reach the upper 3,000' of the pillar, and the northwest face was soon out of view.

The inner Cauldron is a mash of quarry-fresh talus blanketed across dwindling ice, and I had some spooky close calls on the unstable terrain. Then came the south icefall. Climbing it felt wild and inadvisable—4,000' of things you should never do unroped.

Six days after leaving Petersburg, I reached the southern shoulder of Devils Thumb. It's an unlikely place to make acquaintances, but Mike and Tyler were already there, cozy in camp, having choppered from town a couple of hours before to climb the classic east ridge. They delivered a dream forecast, and we spent the evening ramping stoke for the mountain above.

In the morning I left the tent pitched below the southeast face and continued my slow spiral up the mountain. I crossed the eastern shoulder of the Thumb and traversed beneath the northeast face over frightening, snow-covered crevasses. It was a relief to finally reach the solid rock of the north pillar. The first few hundred feet is the steepest part of the climb. I self-belayed two pitches, then, once on easier terrain, I free soloed as much as possible (pack on my back, trailing my lone 7.7 mm rope, and wearing my boots to avoid carrying them), occasionally pulling out a tool to deal with snow and ice. I stopped in a notch roughly midway up the pillar and spent the night seated on a small ledge.

The next day I climbed through some dandy cracks in the morning sun, eventually reaching the long snow band that Plumb and Stutzman had traversed to join the upper east ridge. Bob Plumb had told me about a possible direct finish he'd seen around to the right, but by then I'd spotted Mike and Tyler high on the east ridge, and it seemed a sure thing I'd catch them in time to join their descent if I blasted across the snow. But soon I was puckered up, sloughing sugar snow as I excavated a path across the top of the snow band. I got into a bad position and had to back off a couple of moves to regroup. That's when I pulled a handhold off and wavered for an instant on the brink of destruction.

I couldn't shake the gut-sick feeling until I'd anchored securely at the far side of the traverse and led a pitch of wet rock, which I was too flustered to remove my crampons for. One more pitch brought me to the east ridge, and soon I caught Mike and Tyler on what passes for a summit up there—a fin of boulders cantilevered into space, 9,078 feet above my boat at sea level. After a proper sky-lounge, we made our way down the southeast face, returning to camp in the moonlight. [Editor's note: Taylor and Stikine Icefield climbing historian Dieter Klose estimate that Taylor climbed approximately 3,000' of the original Plumb-Stutzman line.]

First thing in the morning, the boys disappeared in a helicopter and I began the long retreat alone. The glaciers, ever changing, surprised me with fresh hazards. There were some doubtful moments, but I made it safely down the south icefall, out the Witches Cauldron, and back down the Baird Glacier to my dinghy in three days, ending a nine-day round trip.

Summer was over by the time I got back to Petersburg. The rains set in, and I started south through headwinds and changing seasons.

– Cole Taylor

Images



Cole Taylor's eight-foot dinghy, Scrounge, at the approach to the toe of the Baird Glacier. Floating slush thwarted his attempts to reach an easy section of the glacier, and he was forced to boulder onto the glacier's heavily crevassed toe.



Entering the Witches Cauldron, a talus-covered glacier below the Devils Thumb that makes for difficult and dangerous travel. Taylor approached via the Cauldron's southern arm and circumnavigated the mountain to reach the north pillar, instead of following the dangerous lower portion of the route on the northwest face pioneered by the first ascensionists.



Beginning up the south icefall on his way to the North Pillar of the Devil's Thumb (6,000', VI 5.9, Plumb-Stutzman, 1997). Most of the Devils Thumb massif, which includes the Cats Ears and the Witches Tits, is visible above. Taylor took a corkscrew approach around the mountain in order to avoid the dangerous terrain on the lower northwest face climbed by the first ascensionists.



Cole Taylor at his spectacular sitting bivy partway up the North Pillar of the Devil's Thumb (6,000', VI 5.9, Plumb-Stutzman, 1997). Taylor's ascent was the second (and first solo) of the route, which he accomplished in a nine-day round trip from his boat in Thomas Bay.



Cole Taylor high on the North Pillar of the Devil's Thumb (6,000', VI 5.9, Plumb-Stutzman, 1997). Taylor completed his nine-day round-trip ascent of the route during an unheard-of two-week spell of good weather. The prominent peaks on the skyline behind Taylor are Burkett Needle and Mt. Burkett (9,730').



Arrow marks the North Pillar of Devils Thumb. Unwilling to climb beneath the dangerous northwest face, Taylor approached via the south side of the peak (hidden), from right to left, then traversed past the classic east ridge and northeast face (left) to reach the pillar.

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