



AAC Publications

Castle Peak, The Drawbridge

Washington, North Cascades

Morgan Zentler is a baller. Last year he finished the Bulger List, climbing all 100 of Washington's highest peaks, and his suffering knew no bounds in his quest for completion. I've seen him pass out without a bug net or tent in a hideous swarm of mosquitoes, and I've picked him up after an epic Stehekin–Phelps Creek traverse that would be the alpine equivalent of four marathons in a row.

Not yet satiated, Morgan set his sights on an extension of the Bulger List—the strictly defined **Washington Top 100**. [Editor's note: The Bulger List generally employs a 400-foot prominence rule except in the case of volcanic sub-peaks, such as Liberty Cap and Colfax Peak, where it uses an 800-foot prominence rule. The Washington Top 100 employs a strict 400-foot prominence rule across the board. The two lists differ in seven peaks total.] **We ticked Colfax Peak via the Cosley-Houston in May, and he followed that up with a rare ascent of Lincoln Peak, near Mt. Baker, several weeks later.**

My tolerance for choss is limited, so it's infrequent that he and I can find overlapping objectives. But when he texted in late June of 2017 and asked if I wanted to try a new route on the north face of Castle Peak (8,306'), I couldn't refuse. It was the last peak on his list, and I was due for a good North Cascadian adventure.

We approached from Canada via Lightning Lake in Manning Provincial Park, which involves climbing up and over Frosty Mountain. Encountering deep snow at treeline, we gained the crest just short of the frosty summit and had our first views of Castle's north face. It was obvious that the face was snow-free enough for an attempt, so we descended into the States and the snowy Princess Creek basin before traversing on snow up to the Princess/Crow Creek divide. Dropping into the Crow Creek drainage, we set up camp on the only dry spot on the ridge, two-thirds of the way down to the glacier at the base of Castle Peak's north face.

We scoped the face in the last few hours of light and worked out a reasonable line up the central north buttress. The first ascent of the north face proper was made in 1979 (Beckey-Nolting-Tindall, see AAJ 1980). A formidable list of Cascade hard men and women have walked by this middle buttress over the past 30 years, and at least four more routes have been completed, but we were curious why the plumb line below the summit remained untouched. We agreed on a safe and clean-looking line that would surpass the obvious roof that guards the lower third of the buttress.

The approach to the face at first light was easy, and we were on rock less than an hour from camp. Gearing up, we were paralyzed by the whizzing sound of falling and exploding rock. The first rays of sun had loosened choss on the upper slopes and sent down a barrage of stones. They sailed overhead and cratered on the glacier. We hustled up easy fifth to get out of the firing line, setting up a belay at the base of an incredible looking dihedral and multi-crack system. Morgan took the lead on what would be the hardest pitch of the day.

Progress slowed as he encountered hard (possibly mid-5.11) climbing after 20m and had to aid a short section. He traversed out of the dihedral on a tricky flake with thin pro and was soon at a flat ledge with a good belay. I traversed left up a ramp and into a crack system that led into the roof. After a delicate slab with a good nut, the roof was surmounted on the left on fun but hard cracks and stemming.

The pace slowed to a crawl as the next two pitches involved a lot of cleaning. When things turned desperate, we pulled out the nut tool and excavated a crack. Where there was moss, there was often pro. The angle had eased off a bit here, but it was difficult to get good feet on the dirt- and moss-covered slabs. At the top of pitch five, we did an obvious traversing pitch to the right to gain the ridge proper. The rock quality remained sound on the ridge, and the cracks no longer required excavation. With the exception of one short, harder hand and fist crack, the climbing was moderate and less stressful than the face below.

In typical Cascadian fashion, the last technical pitch involved dancing delicately around teetering blocks. After ten pitches, we emerged onto moderate snow slopes 400' feet below the summit and unroped for the 3rd- and 4th-class terrain to the top. We lounged on the summit, 14 hours after starting the climb, and took in the views of the Pickets, Hozomeen, and the lonesome peaks in the heart of the Pasayten.

The walk off the south side and east ridge was breezy, and we were back at camp as twilight faded. We celebrated with Scotch whisky and tunes on the speaker. Morgan had finished his P400 list in fine style with the first ascent of the Drawbridge (IV 5.10+ A1). The walk back to Lightning Lake the next day felt entirely downhill.

– Jason Schilling

Images



The north face of Castle Peak in the North Cascades, showing the line of the Drawbridge (IV, 5.10+ A1). The first ascent of the north face proper was made in 1979 (Beckey-Nolting-Tindall, see AAJ 1980). Since then at least four more routes have been completed on the face, yet the central buttress directly below the summit was previously unclimbed.



Jason Schilling following the fourth pitch of the Drawbridge (IV 5.10+ A1) on the north face of Castle Peak in the North Cascades. Castle Peak is just one mile south of the Canadian border, and the easiest access is through Manning Provincial Park in Canada.



Morgan Zentler and Jason Schilling on the summit of Castle Peak after making the first ascent of the Drawbridge (IV, 5.10+ A1).



Morgan Zentler starting up pitch two of the Drawbridge (IV 5.10+ A1) on the north face of Castle Peak in the North Cascades. This pitch ended up being the crux of the route and required a short section of aid.

Article Details

Author	Jason Schiling
Publication	AAJ
Volume	60
Issue	92
Page	0
Copyright Date	2018
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions