



AAC Publications

Hidden Mountains, Serendipity Spires, The Salmon Shark

Alaska, Alaska Range

"Glaciers, mountains, rivers, forests, tundra; a landscape rich with places that have never felt the tread of human feet. It thrills me not because I can break first ground, but because first ground remains unbroken." —Alaska author Kim Heacox

From June 22 to July 16, 2016, Reese Doyle, James Gustafson, and I spent 25 days exploring an alpine rock climbing arena in southwestern Alaska that we are calling the Serendipity Spires. But the history and meaning of this adventure run much deeper than simply seeing a mountain on a map and going for it.

As Alaskan rock climbers, we have made it our goal to utilize the thriving bush plane culture to continually search the vastness of the Great State for quality stone on unnamed and unclimbed peaks, separate from areas with previous climbing history. This simple prospect excites us to no end.

Although our trip was the result of four years of searching, logistical nightmares, and chossy misadventures, my first glimpse of these toothy spires was incidental. I snapped a photo of them from a great distance, purely by instinct, while flying to an entirely different destination. It wasn't until months later that I took a closer look at my aerial photos and started the investigation.

I had inadvertently taken pictures of these striking rock formations with my long lens, but locating them was not easy. I had to cross-reference the photograph time stamps and approximate headings on the aviator's compass with Google Earth images and inaccurate topo maps. After the coordinates were certain, I still had no idea what the rock would be like, where the nearest landing zone would be, or how to approach a base camp. I would have to wait another year for the snow to melt and for a perfect day to get in the plane once more.

When the day of departure finally came and our bags were packed, a floatplane brought us 100 miles west of the nearest road in Nikiski and settled into the choppy blue-green waters of Two Lakes, north of the Neacola Mountains and east of the Revelations. Our feet then took us five days through 16 brutal miles of thick forest, rushing waters, and sprawling tundra to a camp beneath the peaks, east of Two Lakes. Through tremendous effort, we had discovered our own version of paradise, where peaks remain nameless and even the USGS maps don't speak the truth.

By day eight of the trip, we were established at camp and ready to climb, and we set our sights on a beautiful peak we named the Salmon Shark. The weather looked threatening when we set out, but it seemed possible to get up and down in a small weather window.

The clouds began to lift as we roped up. Then the sun came out, and pitch by quality pitch this ultra-classic route revealed itself, following the southeast ridge to the unclimbed coffee-table summit of a striking peak. Predatory Waters (1,200', 5.8) was one of the most wild and exposed adventures I have ever known. Some downclimbing and two long rappels brought us to a col from which we were able to hike back to camp.

After completing Predatory Waters, we turned our attention to another striking arête on unnamed formation northeast of the Salmon Shark. Due to a full week of rain (luckily we brought whiskey), our

first attempt was delayed until day 19 of the trip. Laden with bivy gear and multiple days worth of food and water, we got a mere four pitches off the ground, due to the technical difficulties we encountered early on.

On day 22, with supplies dwindling and a four-day hike out still ahead of us, we made our final attempt, going as light as possible. The arête featured laser-cut cracks one after another—an impeccable yet stout 5.11 second pitch gave passage to glorious back-to-back 5.10 splitter pitches above. It was a legendary climb in the making, but unfortunately cut short by lack of time and supplies. We were 10 pitches up, and although we were likely past all the crux pitches, we were still less than halfway to the top. It was a bit of a heartbreaking moment, but we realized that if we continued it would be at least another one to two days before we got back to camp. We could deal with running out of food on the route, but we had to seriously consider what would happen if we ran out of food 100 miles from civilization, without fishing gear and with a floatplane as our only lifeline. As it turns out, we made it back to the lake with only one salami left.

Luckily, there was good flying weather the day we arrived, and the plane was able to pick us up that same afternoon and fly us back to Nikiski, where beer and pizza waited. What we're calling the Finite Spur (5.11, incomplete) has potential to be one of the best alpine rock routes in the state, but for now remains a project.

With tools like Google Earth and guidebooks for nearly every climbing destination on the planet, it's easy for the modern climber to forget that unexplored corners of the world remain. I go through the effort to do these exploratory trips not just because I believe the best rock climbs in Alaska are yet to be found, but also because the greatest gift we can give to a climbing community that has given us everything is to show people an untamed world they never knew existed. Images have the power to spark the imagination. And the alpinist's imagination is the most fundamental tool we possess.

This once-in-a-lifetime discovery trip was made possible by the Copp-Dash Inspire Award and the Mazamas' Monty Smith Memorial Grant.

– Zach Clanton

Summary: First ascent of the Salmon Shark in the southern Hidden Mountains of the Alaska Range, July 2016, by the southeast ridge: Predatory Waters (1,200', 5.8). This trip was supported by the Copp-Dash Inspire Award and the Mazamas' Monty Smith Memorial Grant.

Images



James Gustafson and Reese Doyle nearing the summit of the Salmon Shark during the first ascent on the peak via Predatory Waters (1,200', 5.8). Doyle, Gustafson, and Zach Clanton spent 25 days in 2016 exploring a remote group of granite towers in southwest Alaska they are calling the Serendipity Spires.



The Salmon Shark, in the Serendipity Spires of southwest Alaska, showing the line of Predatory Waters (1,200', 5.8) up the southeast face and ridge. The Serendipity Spires are located 100 miles from the nearest road. Clanton discovered this cluster of peaks while snapping photos from a bushplane's window far in the distance.



Zach Clanton encountering steep terrain and good-quality granite during the first ascent of the Salmon Shark via Predatory Waters (1,200', 5.8). Clanton and his partners nicknamed this cluster of granite peaks "the Bugaboos of Alaska."



James Gustafson climbing low-angle splitters along the ridge crest during the first ascent of the Salmon Shark via Predatory Waters (1,200', 5.8).



James Gustafson and Reese Doyle on the summit of the Salmon Shark after making the first ascent on the peak via Predatory Waters (1,200', 5.8). Gustafson, Doyle, and Zach Clanton spent 25 days in the summer of 2016 exploring this cluster of newly discovered granite peaks they named the Serendipity Spires, making one first ascent and an attempt on a harder, longer formation nearby.



A stormy day at base camp in the Serendipity Spires of southwest Alaska. This remote cluster of granite peaks is 100 air miles from the nearest road in Nikiski.

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