



AAC Publications

Modern Classic: The South Ridge of Mt. Russell

Alaska, Alaska Range

Dana “Maddog” Drummond and I knew we were in for a good time when Paul Roderick admitted this was his first time landing on the East Fork of the Dall Glacier. Six miles up valley from our base camp lay the east face of Mt. Russell (11,670’), an impressive wall first climbed by Dave Auble and Charlie Townsend in 1989. Maddog’s and my intentions were comparatively modest. Over the past decade, Russell’s voie normale, the north ridge, first climbed in 1972, had become increasingly broken up and blocked by problematic crevasses. To the best of our knowledge, the mountain hadn’t been summited in the last five years. We hoped to find a new and moderate line to Russell’s elusive summit, and to make good on my promise to Maddog that we wouldn’t get in over our heads, we had brought a spare selection of hardware, including half a dozen ice screws, a biner of nuts, and three pitons.

We left our base camp at 4,900’ early on April 7 and headed for what we called the south face, a triangular feature bounded by two tributary spurs that rise to form the south ridge of the mountain. A line of steep snowfields led to the left-hand spur. Perfect granite gendarmes and hero ridge scrambling followed. Ten hours after leaving camp, we arrived at a snowfield a few hundred feet below the apex of the face and decided this was our best chance to dig a snow cave. After another three hours of aggressive chopping and man-labor, we had carved a ten-foot torpedo tube capable of housing us both head to toe.

The next morning we left most of our kit and set off for the summit. The weather seemed iffy but held enough promise of clearing to lure us on. Mellow ridge climbing led to a short corniced traverse before the ridge met with the final summit slopes. This last section of the ascent yielded otherworldly yet technically easy climbing as we navigated “Russell’s Cheeks,” a distinctive series of rime formations. On the summit we were rewarded with about five seconds of the lovely view looking north to Foraker before the approaching storm enveloped us for good. We carefully reversed the route to our cozy snow cave, where we elected to spend a fun-filled 36 hours snuggled together before returning to our base camp at a leisurely pace.

Although the first ascent of the Russell, accomplished in 1962 by a German and American team, is often described as having followed the south ridge, this is misleading. The party began their ascent on the Chedotlothna Glacier, to the north of the mountain, and followed a glacial route around its western flank to reach the col (“Bavarian Col”) on the main divide between Russell and Point 9,803’, southwest of the summit. From there, they ascended a 600’ “steep ice ramp” on the west face to reach the south ridge. We surmise that they gained the south ridge just before or after the steepest section of corniced ridge we negotiated, approximately 1,500’ below the summit. Given the overall length of the route and the fact that we followed the south ridge from its side of the divide, we feel confident saying ours was the first ascent of the south ridge. A better descriptor for the 1963 line might be the west face.

The lighthearted spontaneity of our little adventure belies an incredible stroke of luck. I have no doubts that Maddog and I stumbled onto one of the best technical moderates in the entire Alaska Range. The south ridge of Russell could and should have been done a half century ago. It’s every bit as classy as the west ridge of Hunter, the French Ridge on Hunting-ton, or the Cassin on Denali.

Summary: First ascent of the south ridge of Mt. Russell (5,000', AK Grade 4), April 7–10, 2017, by Dana Drummond and Freddie Wilkinson.

Images



“Hero ridge scrambling” partway up the south side of Mt. Russell (11,670’), high above the upper east fork of the Dall Glacier.



Moderate mixed on the south ridge of Mt. Russell.



Looking down the south ridge of Mt. Russell.



The corniced and rime-laden upper south ridge of Mt. Russell.



Mt. Russell's south side, showing the line climbed in 2017. The "Bavarian Col" (left) was accessed from the north by the German team that did the first ascent of Russell in 1962. They climbed the face above the col to reach the upper south ridge and the summit.

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