



AAC Publications

Denali, Light Traveler, Rapid Second Ascent

Alaska, Central Alaska Range

On June 4 and 5, Michael Gardner and I made the second ascent of Light Traveler (M7), on the southwest face of Denali. [Editor's note: Light Traveler takes a direct line up the southwest face, between the Denali Diamond and the Cassin Ridge.] **Marko Prezelj and Stephen Koch made the first ascent in June 2001 (see AAJ 2002) in a 51-hour continuous push round-trip from the 14,000-foot camp on the West Buttress Route (they reported climbing up to W16 M7+ in difficulty). Our strategy was a bit different—we climbed from Ski Hill Camp at 7,200' on the Kahiltna Glacier to the summit in 36 hours, stopping only for a four-hour soup and foot-drying break at around hour 15. [Their time from the bergschrund to the summit was 31 hours.]**

We found the climbing to be of the highest quality, with perfect granite providing solid protection for thin strips of ice often only inches wide. The technical cruxes came down low, but the physical crux was certainly breaking trail on the upper Cassin after many hours on the move. Summarizing nearly 9,000' of climbing in a few words seems futile, but some memorable moments include a snow-mushroom offwidth, laybacking a steep crack with perfect dime edges for crampon points, and wandering aimlessly in a snowstorm on Kahiltna Pass during the descent after being awake over 40 hours. We both highly recommend the route and are still inspired by the style of the first ascensionists, **launching into the unknown with no bivy gear.** [Editor's note: Denali ranger and historian Mark Westman noted in the National Park Service's 2018 Mountaineering Summary that the Gardner-Hennessey ascent was not only the fastest for this route but for any of the four routes generally considered to be most difficult on the mountain's south and southwest faces: Denali Diamond, McCartney-Roberts, Light Traveler, and Slovak Direct.]

– Sam Hennessey

Images



Michael Gardner following through the third rock band during the second ascent of Light Traveler (WI6, M7+), on the southwest face of Denali.



Sam Hennessey starting the third rock band during the second ascent of Light Traveler (WI6, M7+), on the southwest face of Denali.



Michael Gardner leading the Shower Pitch during the second ascent of Light Traveler (WI6, M7+), on the southwest face of Denali.



Sam Hennessey following in the first rock band during the second ascent of Light Traveler (WI6, M7+), on the southwest face of Denali.

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