



AAC Publications

Shot Tower, Free Ascent, and Other Climbs

Alaska, Brooks Range, Arrigetch Peaks

BROOKS RANGE Aviation delivered Drew Lovell, Forest McBrian, David Moskowitz, and me to Circle Lake on a warm and sunny afternoon on July 22. Over two days we walked into the valley called Aiyagomahala—the “Gentle Giant” in the creation myth of the Nunamiut people—where arctic sunshine allowed us to climb Shot Tower’s stunning west ridge (Roberts-Ward, 1971) on our third day in the range.

The night before—perhaps better described as a dimmed version of day in the land of midnight sun—we entertained the possibility of freeing Shot Tower. It was a far-fetched dream based on nothing more than naïve whimsy, having no clue what the aid portion would consist of, beyond what was described in trip reports as a 60’ crack adorned with tied-off pins. Climbing beta in the Arrigetch remains vague, even on the most popular routes, a phenomenon that is, arguably, one to cherish in this day and age. Bearing this in mind, I sincerely hope the value of sharing our observations outweighs any negative effects of information saturation. At the very least, it may spare interested climbers the burden of carrying aid gear up an otherwise moderate 1,500’ route.

At first sight, the aid pitch high on the route looked like it would go free, albeit at a difficulty above our team’s prowess. Fortunately, a more moderate option opened up along the far left edge of the slightly overhanging golden headwall. We climbed a short system of 5.11a cracks, then moved left around the arête onto a slightly run-out 5.9 slab above a roof, where the northwest face dropped precipitously below, making for an airy and memorable pitch. One more short pitch of 5.8 in a corner merged with the original line about a pitch below the summit. It is very possible that others have done this detour, but there were no signs of passage, and we left none ourselves. Finding and free climbing a variation of this fantastic route in the wild Arrigetch was a personal benchmark, a success due in no small measure to the unfailing encouragement from the finest partners one could have, along with a dose of good luck with warm, stable weather.

Over the following weeks of our 22-day trip, we camped and rambled in the Aquarius and upper Arrigetch valleys. We climbed the northeast ridge of Parabola, bailing off the top of its east peak in a rainstorm by doing seven 60m rappels back down the ridge. We also climbed Ariel via the north side, a scramble that, when snow- and ice-covered, was downright thrilling, given its nontechnical terrain.

David and Forest attempted the Albatross via the southwest ridge but retreated after contemplating several frictionless rain-soaked pitches. Meanwhile, Drew and I climbed a remarkable 500’ 5.10 dihedral on the lower flanks of the huge, unclimbed eastern buttress of Xanadu, which could be a sweet half-day outing, though it took us two attempts in the intermittent cold rains of early August. We referred to the right-facing corner as the Virga Dihedral, as we were frequently wondering whether leaden clouds building over the crest would produce precipitation heavy enough to touch ground. Typically, I forecasted rain while Drew argued it was only virga. We were each right at least once.

On the final clear day of our trip, August 11, we all enjoyed the south face of the Elephant’s Tooth, one of the few peaks still snow-free in late summer. Drew and I climbed three pitches (5.7–5.9) up the path of least resistance while Forest and David veered toward the steeper headwall to find bouldery and exciting 10c moves.

Sitting on the summit, surrounded by sweeping granite walls and elegant spires—the mythological fingers of the Giant’s hand outstretched in the origin tale from the people who came before us—left an indelible impression in our hearts and minds. Within our viewshed, we knew there were unseen grizzlies and black bears, wolves and fox, lynx, caribou, moose, Dall sheep, and wolverine, roaming the tundra expanses and spruce forests. It was all worth it—the relentless tussock, mosquito harassment, mega-carnivore avoidance, cold rain, slippery talus, heavy loads, and tent-bound restlessness. For those hardships we were gifted a handful of exceptional climbing days, weeks in the northern wildlands, and the company of kindred spirits, each of us moved by an evocative beauty radiating from the Arrigetch Peaks at the heart of the immense and incomparable Brooks Range.

– Steph Williams

Images



Steph Williams jamming up the free variation on Shot Tower.



Steph Williams one pitch above the "Mushroom" on Shot Tower's west ridge.



The team.



Shot Tower from the north, with the west ridge forming the right skyline.



Forest McBrien on the south face of Elephant's Tooth.



The headwall on the west ridge of Shot Tower, with the free variation shown in red and the start of the original A2 crack in green.



The first pitch of the Virga Dihedral on the eastern flanks of Xanadu.



Forest, David, and Drew on the upper west ridge of Shot Tower with the original aid line shown in green on the right and the free variation in red on the left.

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