



AAC Publications

Foula, Nebbifjeld, Ultima Thule

Great Britain, Shetland

FOULA is the most remote inhabited island off the coast of Britain, and in Roman times was known as Ultima Thule—the most northern land. Despite being part of the U.K., it takes more time for me to reach it from my home in North Wales than to go to Yosemite or Patagonia. I was there in May with Dave Macleod, one of the best all-round climbers in the world and a purveyor of the delights of Scottish climbing. His down-to-earth nature, as well as his ability to consistently pull hard leads out of the bag when the chips are down, make him a great partner.

Our proposed new line took on the steep central section of the southwest-facing cliff of Nebbifjeld, one of the highest sea cliffs on the island. [Two easier routes have been climbed along the buttress to the left of the main wall: The Nose (E4 6a, Jones-Turnbull, 2001) and the Lumof Loirafield (E2).] To scope the exit we used a drone to locate the final corner. From here a 250m rappel, straightdown with a few re-belays, brought us to the foot of the route at the top of a series of grassy ledges. While I generally don't mind rappelling, lobbing 300m of static rope down a decomposing, overhanging sea cliff full of vomiting fulmars, sharp edges, and precarious blocks isn't really my cup of tea, particularly in high winds.

After a few days swinging on our rope and trundling huge blocks, we had found a viable line in the upper half of the cliff. Below this the only way would be via a ground-up approach to link wandering overhanging features. When we eventually went for it, on May 19, we rappelled to the base of the wall and pinned down the end of the static rope with rocks, so it wouldn't blow out of reach in the strong wind. We thought it best to leave an escape route in place, but full gnar points to a team that doesn't!

The rock is sandstone and varies in quality from good to simply sand. The climbing was time-consuming, as we went back and forth, testing holds and placing nests of gear to safeguard progress. Fortunately, we had close to 24 hours of daylight. Dave led the second pitch (British 5c on bubbly soft rock) into a prominent corner, which I led on well-protected solid rock. A hard (6b) pitch then led to ledges, which we followed leftward (walk, crawl, heel-hook, slap, 6a) for nearly 70m to meet our rappel rope, in line with the section of cliff we'd previously inspected.

The wind picked up as we climbed strenuous walls and corners, the next four pitches being 6b. Dave pulled off some smooth leads, though looked surprisingly pumped on the last hard pitch. After the final roof, a grassy corner led more easily (5a) to the top, which we reached with more than a sense of relief. We named the route Ultima Thule (10 pitches, E7 6b). Most pitches are E5 and above, and are quite bold in the mid to upper half of the route.

– Calum Muskett, United Kingdom

The 24/8 Project: Dave Macleod's Foula climb took place a couple of months after a remarkable effort he completed on March 18–19. Within the space of 18.5 hours, near his home in Fort William, Scotland, he finished the self-created "24/8 Project," which involved climbing an 8a boulder problem (Cameron Stone Arête, 8a+), an E8 traditional route (Misadventure, E8 6c), an 8a sport route (Leopold, having to avoid an icicle on the upper crux!), a grade VIII winter route (Frosty's Vigil, VIII/8), and summiting eight Munros (peaks above 3,000' in altitude).

Images



Calum Muskett in the final grassy corner system (5a) of Ultima Thule on Nebbifjeld.



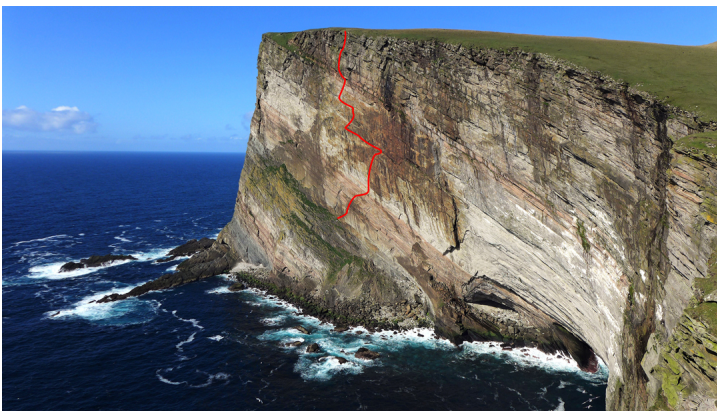
Calum Muskett on the first ascent of Ultima Thule, Nebbifjeld.



Calum Muskett on one of the several traversing sections of Ultima Thule, Nebbifjeld.



Pitch two (5c). Dave Macleod traversing to the large corner in the lower half of Ultima Thule, Nebbifjeld.



The imposing southwest-facing cliff of Nebbifjeld on Foula and the line of Ultima Thule. The west-facing prow was first climbed in 2001 at E4 6a by Crag Jones and Dave Turnbull.



Ultima Thule in Shetland

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