



AAC Publications

Heart of the Mountain

A Summer of Searching on Alaska's Juneau Icefield

IN MID-MARCH I glided my skis across a snow-covered glacier of the Juneau Icefield. A short distance away, near base camp, four of my closest friends were scattered on rocky outcroppings, watching the sun set over the Mendenhall Towers. The seven summits of the towers cast dark shadows down their cold north faces where snowshed had accumulated at the base. It was here that just a few days earlier the mountain had released its snow, tragically taking my boyfriend Marc-André Leclerc and climber Ryan Johnson with it. (See report [here](#).)

I looked beyond the towers to where the sun was setting. The great pyramid of Mt. Fairweather was silhouetted on the horizon, one of the last views Marc had seen from the summit of the Main Tower on March 5, 2018. Seeing Fairweather now reminded me of when Marc took me to meet Fips Broda, who recounted the story of the second ascent of this mountain, in 1958, at his home in West Vancouver. Marc would have been thinking of Fips when he looked across at the peak. It was clear to me, now, that Marc had led me to the icecap. This was where I needed to be.

All that spring I eased my grief-stricken mind by dreaming of climbing mountains on the Juneau Icefield. The Devils Paw was the largest and most intriguing. I studied photos online to learn more about the mountain—it looked steep and wild. Of the Devils Paw's four summits, the two northernmost looked to have the greatest vertical relief, so this is where I focused my search. The northern summit had been climbed by Roger Scháli and Simon Gietl in 2015 by the northwest ridge. The second and highest summit had been reached from the east in 1949 by Andrew Griscom, David Michael, and William L. Putnam, via complex glaciers and icefalls. An old aerial photograph from a northwestern vantage showed a massive jagged fin splitting the west face, as well as hidden gully systems. I became fixated on finding a route up the unclimbed 1,000-meter west face.

My motivation to return to the Juneau Icefield was enmeshed with the hope of making a recovery of Marc and Ryan's bodies. I knew this was like chasing an illusion. They were already gone, and finding their lifeless bodies wouldn't change that. But my heart searched desperately for Marc. At night I had recurring dreams that they would come back from the mountain, safe but exhausted after a long adventure. During my waking life I knew this was not possible.

Either way, I felt I needed to stay in the area to see how the sequence of events would unfold, to see how conditions would change over the season, and to formally acquaint myself with the icefield. Not only this, but also I needed to reflect on my life with Marc-André. Together our lives had revolved around mountains, and we had many plans. In October 2017, Marc had kite-skied out onto the Patagonian icecap to climb the Cordón Mariano Moreno—a one-day, 58-kilometer round trip from his camp at the edge of the icefield. He and I had been preparing for a similar trip together to explore the mountains and icecaps of northern British Columbia. Though Marc could no longer fulfill this dream, I felt he was still showing me the way. I collected potential climbing ideas as a skeletal plan, but I allowed inspiration to lead me.

On June 1, I flew onto the Juneau Icefield with my friend and climbing partner Caro North. She and I spent two weeks climbing and skiing various peaks, first climbing a new route on South Duke Tower, then ski-touring 20 miles across glaciers to Devils Paw. (The lack of wind made us resort to traditional ski touring instead of using kite power.) We climbed and skied the southeast couloir, and I

checked out the quality of the rock and condition of Devils Paw for a later date. Despite icy layers of frost, I saw spidering cracks that shattered the rock surface and would make for protectable climbing. The mountain seemed compact and relatively sturdy, in contrast to the crumbling reputation I'd gathered from previous reports.

When Caro left in mid-June, I teamed up with Gabe Hayden, a friend and climbing partner of Ryan Johnson. In two trips we made three first ascents on the Taku Towers and the south side of the Fourth Mendenhall Tower. [See report on these climbs here.]

I left Alaska in mid-July to attend to a few obligations but was set on returning as soon as possible. The month of August was warm and wet in Juneau, so I stayed in British Columbia to rock climb and wait for the skies to clear over the icecap. As September approached I simply could not wait any longer. I booked a flight back to Alaska, knowing that I might end up spending the month under a rain cloud.

Upon my arrival in Juneau, the first part of September showed nine full days of sunshine in the forecast. This was unheard of for late summer. All the climbers were making plans to head into the mountains, but my mind was occupied. The extended search to recover Marc and Ryan had ended. There was no more path to follow, it simply ended. It was then that I realized perhaps they were not meant to be found. Perhaps they should return to the earth, as I feel Marc would have wanted. Even so, the air felt heavy. I believe everyone who had been involved in the search, and both the families of Marc and Ryan, felt it too. But I remembered Marc telling me the previous October that if anything were to happen to him, he wanted me to be strong and independent, to keep going and keep climbing. This weather window was an opportune moment to celebrate Marc by attempting my biggest project, the Devils Paw.

Gabe and I hired a helicopter to fly up to the icefield once more. As we traced the vast Taku Glacier, my mind was drawn away from the anguish I'd felt from the search and into the present moment. We were attempting to climb a massive mountain, and it required our full attention. Dustin, our pilot, dropped us off in the cirque between Devils Paw and Michaels Sword. The dark granite walls encircled us like a fortress. The west face of the Paw looked icy and uninviting—a fresh layer of frost coated the rock and a biting wind blew. Gabe and I packed our bags to spend one night on the route. When the sun hit the face around noon we started up. I pressed my feet firmly on the rock and heaved my weight over them. The backpack was dragging me down, making 5.8 moves feel more like weight lifting than climbing. I stopped after 60 meters to belay Gabe. We decided to bail, return to camp, and prepare for a single-push mission the following day.

The alarm woke us at 4:30 a.m. Two hours later, we started up the mountain. Despite having removed the bivy gear and stove, our packs still felt heavy. We carried two 60-meter ropes, crampons, ice tools, climbing rack (including a bunch of pitons), food, water, jackets, and rappel cord. We simul-climbed the first 200 meters of 5.8 terrain, then the mountain steepened into 5.10, and we began belaying and hauling up the bags. The first crux was finding protection on a vertical face. The rock was so blank we even contemplated the time-consuming task of hand-drilling a bolt. But soon Gabe found an in-cut flake, behind which he hammered in a knifeblade piton. He committed to the moves over run-out terrain at around 5.11a. I followed carefully behind.

By noon we had pulled over the lip of the lower headwall and entered the gigantic heart-shaped bowl in the center of the west face. Like a hollow that once held a less resilient rock, it is here I imagined would be the heart of the mountain. The angle eased into 4th-class terrain, so we stashed the ropes in our packs and scrambled another hundred or so meters. The upper mountain consisted of three steep tiers of cliff bands. The rock here was more compact, which meant less protection. I pulled over small protrusions and rooflets, placing wires and cams wherever I could find them. We alternated between simul-climbing on terraces and pitching out the steeper sections. Finally we had made it through the third and final tier. Once again we put away the ropes and soloed the final 150 meters of 5.8 to the

top.

A frosted white snowfield led us to the summit, revealing our first views of British Columbia. Deep, dark valleys were filled with color: The green of trees and the browns of soil contrasted beautifully with the bright white of the icefield behind us. Looking back toward Juneau, all was white, but the sun was low in the sky, painting the snow with bands of warmth. In all of my travels and years of climbing, I have not stood on a more magnificent and peaceful summit. Not a gust of wind disturbed the air.

We traversed the summit snowfield and set up our first rappel by digging out a small boulder to sling with a cord. I watched the cordelette attentively as Gabe weighted the anchor, making sure it did not roll off the boulder. The cord held, and I followed Gabe down, but the low-angle rappel caused our ropes to catch when we pulled them, so I carefully climbed up the snow-covered slabs to free them, then downclimbed back to Gabe. Our second rappel was a full and free-hanging 60 meters into a rime-covered gully. I descended slowly in space, absorbing everything around me. The sunset cast an orange and purple glow across the evening sky.

As the black of night wrapped itself over the land and a scape of stars painted the sky, far in the distance I spotted a tiny yellow glow from the lights of a cruise ship. It looked beautiful, sailing away into the night. I was for a moment distracted by the warmth of the lights of town sparkling across the Taku Inlet, reminding me of the comforts of modern society.

Soon, I thought, the storms will return to the icefield, blanketing the glaciers under deep and intolerable cold. And yet, even the lifelessness of this place is mortal—ever-diminishing under the onslaught of climate change and the shortening of winter. How much time will pass before all of the ice melts away? Perhaps someday this land of ice will be replaced by a green valley, spark a settlement, and foster life.

I looked down to a land submerged in darkness. Marc's pitons rattled on my harness, and I selected each one decisively. I recalled the many lessons I had taken from Marc during all of the years we had climbed together: hammering bird beaks into incipient seams high on Great Sail Peak in Baffin Island, or the horizontal cracks that held our angle pitons on the Chinese Puzzle Wall in British Columbia. I imagined he was with me, overseeing the descent, and I knew he would be proud.

Around 3 a.m., the light of my headlamp became noticeably dimmer. I strained my eyes in search of piton placements in the compact rock. On a small, sloping ledge, Gabe and I decided to curl up for a moment to relax and recharge our minds. After about half an hour, the chill of the night set in and I knew it was time to start moving again. Rejuvenated, I felt fully absorbed in the task at hand: taking our time, building trusty anchors from pitons, nuts, and slings, pulling our ropes carefully. We made more than 20 rappels. Eventually, I lost track of the number. We arrived back at the base of the mountain at 9:30 a.m., 27 hours after our climb had started.

Gabe and I staggered back to the tent and fell asleep. To our dismay, a heavy rainstorm blew in unexpectedly and engulfed us in a dense cloud of water. We spent hours wiping the walls of the tent. The following day, strong winds blew the rain clouds out, but we worried that our frail single-wall tent might fail. It was as though the mountain had enticed us with the prospect of a nine-day weather window, and then, as soon as we completed our ascent, the weather returned to its natural pattern of fury and chaos. This climb was a gift from the mountain.

Summary: First ascent of the west face of Devils Paw (ca 2,600m) by Brette Harrington and Gabe Hayden, September 5–6, 2018. The route is called Shaa Téix'i ("Heart of the Mountain" in the Tlingit language, ca 1,000m, 5.11a). This was likely the second ascent of the main summit.

About the Author: Brette Harrington, born in 1992, is an alpine climber and rock climber based out of British Columbia. She spoke about this climb in an extensive interview in episode 12 of the Cutting Edge podcast (see below).

Images



Caro North and Brette Harrington ski-toured 20 miles across the icefield in early June to reach Devils Paw, where they skied a steep couloir and assessed rock quality for a later climb.



Steep featured rock on the west face of Devils Paw.



Very steep rappel off the top of Devils Paw after the first ascent of the west face.



Brette Harrington rappelling Devils Paw after the first ascent of the west face.



Gabe Hayden climbing near the top of the west face of Devils Paw.



Harrington starting up the west face of Devils Paw. A reconnaissance had revealed that, "The mountain seemed compact and relatively sturdy, in contrast to the crumbling reputation I'd gathered from previous reports."



Brette Harrington on the west face of Devils Paw.



View to the southwest over the vast Juneau Icefield from the summit of Devils Paw.



The line of Shaa Téix'i (ca 1,000m, 5.11a), the first route up the west face of Devils Paw's main summit. Although it appears taller from this angle, the northwest (left) top is lower.

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