



AAC Publications

Mt. Titanic, North Ridge; Tantalus (Peak 8,910'), South Couloir

Alaska, Alaska Range, Revelation Mountains

From March 11 to April 7, Bas Visscher and I visited Alaska. After six days of sitting out bad weather and enjoying the true Alaskan lifestyle in Talkeetna, we finally got flown into the range. To our surprise, we stepped off the plane and onto the Fish Glacier in waist-deep snow. When the sound of the engine disappeared and the last snow crystals whirled down, we were surrounded by a deep and prevailing silence.

The first week brought bad weather with more fresh snow. We spent time excavating a snow cave and did a lot of reading. Occasionally fragments of the mountains surrounding us loomed out of the colorless fog. The amount of snow made us drop our initial plan of a strategic base camp on a pass to the north. Although we made numerous exploratory ski trips to this pass, our hard-fought ski tracks were erased every single night.

Finally a large high-pressure system came in. With the first blue skies and rays of sunlight, we skied over the pass to the north side of Jezebel (9,620'). We were amazed that this side of the mountain was extremely dry; the glacier was completely icy, a huge contrast with the deep snow on the east side of the mountain. We skied down the winding mass of ice past visible crevasses and lots of disordered boulders. On the left we passed the dark and gloomy unclimbed north face of Jezebel. Immense seracs loomed over us like weapons of mass destruction. After a challenging day of skiing with heavy backpacks, and the burden of insecurity on our minds, we finally arrived underneath our main goal, the north face of Mt. Titanic (ca 9,300'). [Editor's Note: Titanic has only two previously recorded ascents: the first ascent of the peak via the east face (Beckey-Hogan-McCarty-Tillery, AAJ 1983), and the west face (Helander-Zimmerman, 2015, AAJ 2015).] We immediately noticed the dry conditions on the face, and that night we heard the ominous thunder of a snow avalanche crashing down the only plausible line on the face. Our goal was so close but felt more out of reach than ever.

Worried about the signals the mountain was giving us, we decided to try Titanic's unclimbed north ridge instead. At first we expected an easy climb, but arriving at the base of the ridge at dawn, a sentence from an expedition report immediately crossed my mind: "In Alaska everything is bigger than it seems." We climbed on the ridge as much as possible, but sometimes we were forced to climb the eastern flank to pass deep notches in the ridge. Straightforward climbing alternated with challenging and demanding pitches on bad snow and high-quality granite. The money pitch was a beautiful corner leading up to a squeeze chimney surpassing a gigantic chockstone. After the knife-edge summit ridge, we arrived on top of Titanic, enjoying the arctic palette of colors and a stunning view of the Alaska Range (1,130m, M5 60°).

After downclimbing the upper ridge and descending the east face to the glacier, our return trip to base camp was long and heavy. Whiteouts, unexpected slides, and constantly changing snow conditions made skiing a hellish yet often hilarious undertaking. The high-pressure system was holding, so we prepared for another attempt, this time on the unclimbed northwest face of Peak 8,910'. [Editor's Note: The first ascent of Peak 8,910' was made via a col on the north side leading to the east ridge (III 5.4, Funsten-Gonzales-Raynor, 1994. See AAJ 1995.)] Unfortunately, we quickly climbed into a section with bare granite slabs, without ice or protection. From our high point we caught a tantalizing glimpse of a perfect line through the face—close but unreachable.

At this point we decided to take a step back in our ambition. From base camp we tried a nice ridge to

an unclimbed subpeak of the Obelisk. This attempt was also aborted quickly, mainly due to extremely bad snow. Back in camp, we hid in our sleeping bags and behind our e-readers. In my mind, I tried to put our failed attempts into perspective. An appropriate quote from Ernest Hemingway caught my attention: "The ultimate value of our lives is decided not by how we win but by how we lose."

Now a strong low-pressure system was building over the Gulf of Alaska. On the last beautiful day in the range, we left base camp in a windchill of -22°C . Our objective was the south couloir of Peak 8,910'. The biting cold soon gave way to burning sun as we climbed up the beautiful couloir, flanked by steep, red granite walls. The couloir was interrupted in two places by steep sections without snow, where we enjoyed short sections of technical climbing. Unfortunately, the final ridge consisted of bizarre unconsolidated snow, and we struggled to find any holds on the smooth granite slabs beneath. Our hard work eventually paid off and we stood on the summit of Peak 8,910' (800m, M4 60°). We downclimbed and rappelled our line. A beautiful mountain in a stunning mountain range deserves a name—we would like to propose Tantalus, a figure from Greek mythology that symbolizes something that's highly desirable but just out of reach.

– Niek de Jonge, Netherlands

Images



Niek de Jonge leading an aesthetic pitch during the first known ascent of the north ridge of Mt. Titanic (ca 9,300').



Bas Visscher and Niek de Jonge on the summit after making the first ascent of the South Couloir on Peak 8,910', which they suggested naming Tantalus.



Niek de Jonge back at camp after a failed attempt on the unclimbed northwest face of "Tantalus" (Peak 8,910'), which is partially visible in the background.



Niek de Jonge headed up the knife-edge section of Titanic's north ridge during the first ascent.



Bas Visscher soloing up the aesthetic south couloir of Tantalus (Peak 8,910').



Bas Visscher on his way to the summit of Mt. Titanic (ca 9,300') during the first ascent of the peak's north ridge. The unclimbed northwest face of Tantalus (Peak 8,910') is in the background.



Bas Visscher near the summit of Tantalus (Peak 8,910') after making the first ascent of the south couloir. Behind him is the Obelisk (left) and Jezebel (right).



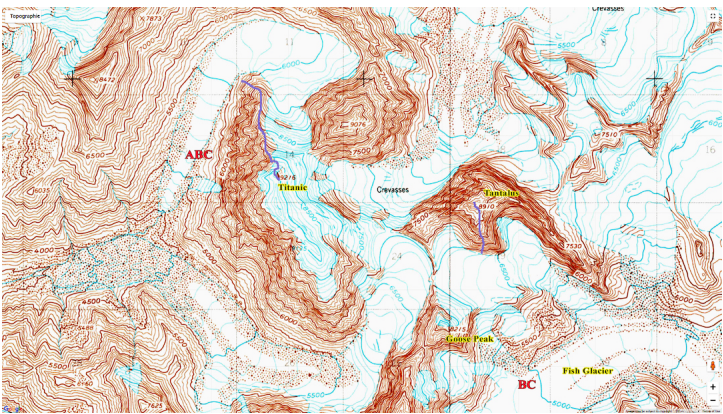
Bas Visscher with a long way to go on the north ridge of Mt. Titanic. The summit is visible in the distance.



Bas Visscher and Niek de Jonge on the summit of "Tantalus" (Peak 8,910') after making the first ascent of the south couloir. The summit ridge of Mt. Titanic is behind them.



The south face of "Tantalus" (Peak 8,910'). The south couloir is the prominent line in the center of the photo, first climbed by Niek de Jonge and Bas Visscher in early April 2019.



An area map of the team's expedition in the northern section of Alaska's Revelation Mountains, showing the peaks climbed or attempted and location of camps.



Bas Visscher high on Mt. Titanic's north ridge during its first ascent.

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