



AAC Publications

Mt. Dickey, East Face, Ruth Gorge Grinder

Alaska, Central Alaska Range

Every alpinist has one peak or a mountain feature they think about more than any other. The feature acts as a compass, providing direction and motivation for one's climbing. For the past decade, my direction has come largely from the east face of Mt. Dickey (9,545') and the ephemeral white lines that streak down it.

The plan to actually climb them was hatched at a sponsor booth and over a pint at the Bozeman Ice Festival. After I handed out the last set of demo tools for the night, Jackson Marvell asked, "So, are we climbing in Alaska this year?"

A few minutes later, a gentleman's agreement had been made to fly to Anchorage on April 1. Having never roped up together before, we made a point to climb together once a week back home in Utah before we left. Our days ranged from bolting new lines on local crags to big linkups, and our confidence in one another grew quickly.

Beeeeep, beep, beep. The alarm on April 3 came much too soon, as it usually does in the cold Alaskan night. Fortunately, years of expedition guiding have taught me to keep all things necessary to make coffee in the tent with you. On that morning, the nervous energy of waking up below a big face hit me long before the caffeine did. Without much delay, we donned our prepacked bags and skinned across the glacier to the base of Dickey's incomparable east wall, our sights set on Blood from the Stone (Easton-Steck, 5,000', WI6+ X M7+ A1; see AAJ 2003).

Without a cloud in the sky, we started climbing up steepening snow slopes that led to rock. Jackson led three pitches of engaging and steep mixed climbing (M5 R, M6+, M7), which brought us to a small snowfield where the really sustained stretch of the east face begins.

Our plan was to fix 400' above and return to a bivy site on the snowfield, but a pitch and a half up it became obvious to me there was not enough ice on the route to safely continue. After looking up at a large portion of dry, unprotectable rock, I made the decision to descend back to our bivouac.

If we didn't feel defeated enough already in that moment, as we rappelled back to the bivy, we saw two ravens fervently tearing through Jackson's bag of stashed food. As I approached them, they threw what was left of the 6,000 calories off the ledge and down to the base of the wall, so they could finish it in peace. The mood was somber as we finished chopping out the bivy ledge and started to talk about what our next play would be.

From the lower glacier we had noticed a large unclimbed cleft to the left of the Wine Bottle (Bonapace-Orgler, 1988), and it seemed we could access this by angling up to climber's right from the snowfield. After some quick math, we figured we had enough food for two more days at 1,500 calories a person, and we decided to quest off the next morning and see if we could find more ice in this unknown system.

Thankful for the wall's eastern exposure, we were greeted by the day's first rays of sun and were able to start out with dry kit. As we left the bivy, the climbing was surprisingly good, exceptional even. Shoulder-wide strips of ice with engaging mixed climbing to M6+ defined the first few rope lengths.

This led us to a pendulum point that would hopefully reach the main cleft. After swinging across the face, I was relieved to stretch out and swing into supportable névé.

The chimneys above were filled with near-perfect névé—albeit really steep! Jackson led the next four pitches: 60m stretchers of AI5–AI6+. We climbed these pitches fast, trying to beat the fading light and ominous cloud layers that had begun to spill into the gorge.

We arrived at a small area of 50° snow and decided to chop another bivy for our second night on the face. We received a forecast for four inches of snow and 0°F temps overnight, and with 2,000' of near vertical terrain overhead, we knew it would be a bivy to remember. We only had a tarp and light summer sleeping bags for shelter, so we dug in as much as we could and got ready for a cold, snowy night.

Around midnight the heavy spindrift blasts began. I assumed the position of a boxer on the defense, holding mitten-clad hands over my face so the spindrift could only land body blows. I glanced over at Jackson, who wasn't doing much better. He was sitting up with his hood cinched down to keep the snow from going down his neck. At 4 a.m., we gave up the illusion that sleep was possible and started melting water, followed by coffee. Around 5:30 we could see a gap in the cloud layers and it looked like the weather was breaking.

By seven, after Jackson literally dumped snow out of his sleeping bag, we were bathing in sun, although the warmth came at a price—the solar warming caused the rock to rapidly shed any remaining snow clinging to the coarse granite. Snow moved over and past us like a river, and our nervous giggling was occasionally silenced as big air blasts enveloped our small perch. Three thousand feet up the wall, we felt how truly vulnerable our position was.

Eventually the face finished shedding and we prepared to head into the final headwall, which appeared to offer some of the steepest climbing of the route. Dreamy yet almost unfathomably steep, the 340m ice-choked tube that split the headwall was rarely more than a meter wide, never easier than AI5, and at times sustained at 10° past vertical. As each pitch ended and I looked up at another perfect strip of ice above, I began to wonder if I would ever climb a better alpine route.

Soon the headwall was below us, but a new challenge awaited. We spent hours wallowing over the deceptively steep upper slopes of the mountain, managing run-out moderate mixed climbing through the shale bands. In two long simul blocks, often with no real protection clipped, we finally managed to top out the east face of the mountain. I was elated to walk on the moderate, non-consequential glacial slopes for the final hundred vertical feet to the summit—Ruth Gorge Grinder (5,000', AI6+ M7 AI1).

We had little time to celebrate on top, however, since it was already 6 p.m. and we hoped to arrive in camp before dark. Fortunately, we had excellent snow conditions and a bit of gas left in the tank. We cruised down the west face and through 747 Pass, and strolled back to camp in under three and a half hours. In the last moments of twilight, we ripped open the food bins and feasted like pigs at the trough.

– Alan Rousseau

Mt. Bradley Attempt: After climbing the route described above and repeating the Trailer Park (Cordes-DeCapio, 2000) on "London Tower" to the summit ridge, Marvell and Rousseau attempted a new route on the north face of Mt. Bradley. Approximately 3,000' up their route, Rousseau was hit in the face by a piece of ice, badly injuring his left eye, and the two retreated.

Images



Jackson Marvell following the ice tube above the steepest pitches on day three on the east face of Mt. Dickey. He and Alan Rousseau topped out later that day to complete the first ascent of Ruth Gorge Grinder (5,000', AI6+ M7 A1).



On the lower snowfield on day one, Alan Rousseau traverses over to the base of Blood from the Stone (5,000', WI6+ X M7+ A1). He and Jackson Marvell climbed a pitch and half of that route before turning back due to lack of ice. After a bivouac on the snowfield, the two changed plans and headed up what would become the Ruth Gorge Grinder.



Alan Rousseau leading the final simul block up low-angle M4 terrain on the northeast slopes of Mt. Dickey, during the first ascent of Ruth Gorge Grinder (5,000', AI6+ M7 A1).



Strolling up the pleasant low-angle slopes to the summit of Mt. Dickey during the first ascent of Ruth Gorge Grinder (5,000', AI6+ M7 A1) on the east face.



Alan Rousseau approaches the massive east face of Mt. Dickey (9,545') in the Ruth Gorge.



Jackson Marvell following overhanging terrain on the upper ice hose during day three on the first ascent of Ruth Gorge Grinder (5,000', AI6+ M7 A1).



Alan Rousseau checks in for a weather forecast from the first bivy on the east face of Mt. Dickey.



Jackson Marvell leading up an AI6 pitch on the first ice hose, during the first ascent of Ruth Gorge Grinder (5,000', AI6+ M7 A1) on the east face of Mt. Dickey.



Around 4 a.m. at the second bivy on the east face of Mt. Dickey. After unrelenting spindrift forced them to give up on sleep, Jackson Marvell contemplates the long day ahead.



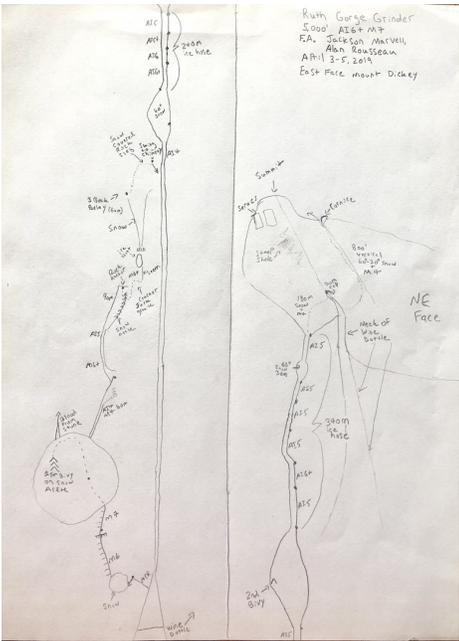
Alan Rousseau leading fun ice and mixed terrain in the middle section of Ruth Gorge Grinder (5,000', AI6+ M7 A1). He and Jackson Marvell climbed this new route on the east face of Mt. Dickey in early April 2019.



The east face of Mt. Dickey, showing the line of Ruth Gorge Grinder (5,000', AI6+ M7 A1). Alan Rousseau and Jackson Marvell climbed this new route on the east face of Mt. Dickey over three days in early April 2019. The two had originally intended to repeat Blood from the Stone (5,000', WI6+ X M7+ A1), which climbs above their initial camp on the lower snowfield and follows the obvious corners up the center of the wall.



Alan Rousseau climbing one of the final ice pitches before the low-angle upper slopes during the first ascent of Ruth Gorge Grinder (5,000', AI6+ M7 A1).



Topo for Ruth Gorge Grinder (5,000', AI6+ M7 A1) on the east face of Mt. Dickey in the Ruth Gorge of Alaska. Jackson Marvell and Alan Rousseau completed this new route in early April 2019.



The 5,000-foot east face of Mt. Dickey, showing (1) Blood From the Stone (Easton-Steck, 2002) and (2) Ruth Gorge Grinder (Marvell-Rousseau, 2019), with bivouacs marked. The prominent pillar to the right is the line of the Wine Bottle (Bonapace-Orgler, 1988), and the less distinct pillars to the left were climbed by Tomas Gross and Vera Komarkova in 1977.

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