



AAC Publications

Mt. Barrill, King Cobra

Alaska, Central Alaska Range

Another serac rips from the summit ice cliffs of Mt. Dickey, and the familiar roar of avalanche thunders through the valley. My calves shake on crumbling footholds, the infamous “Cracker Jack gravel” of the Ruth Gorge.

I’m balanced on an arête, well above my last piece. I reach for a Pecker piton and weld it into a thin crack with my free hand, tightening my crimp on the other. I launch into the corner above, loaded with tottering loose flakes.

The world disintegrates below as I fire in two hand jams, choss exploding hundreds of meters down the sheer east face of Mt. Barrill, swallowed up by the glacier below. Chemicals flood my brain: relief. Another piece of the puzzle unlocked.

Dan Joll, Kim Ladiges, John Price, and I came to Alaska at the beginning of June for the Kichatna Spires, lured by a dream of El Capitan–size walls set on remote glaciers. Living on the wall with a week of supplies, onsighting finger cracks on a steep headwall under a midnight sun. But the Kichatnas’ reputation for abysmal weather held true. After four days of sitting in Talkeetna, our patience ran dry. With time running out, we hatched a new plan.

An hour later, Paul Roderick of Talkeetna Air Taxi was flying us into the Ruth Gorge. Our eyes lit up as the huge granite faces filled the plane’s windows. Mt. Barrill and the famed Cobra Pillar (Donini-Tackle, 1991, see AAJ 1992) appeared in view—almost 1,000m of steep, featured granite, capped with snow, and plenty of potential for a new line.

We arrived at midday and the weather was perfect, so we went straight to work. As two teams of two, we would alternate 12-hour shifts to continuously push our ropes up the wall, capitalizing on the near-eternal daylight of the Alaskan summer.

Dan and Kim packed sleds for every eventuality and set off to quest up a new line on the face right of Cobra Pillar. Meanwhile, John and I established our glacier base camp. With John’s telephoto lens, we watched our friends inch up the first pitches. By the time our paths crossed on the glacier around 3 a.m., the haul bag of supplies was already hanging a respectable 120m up the wall.

John and I jumared the fixed rope and racked up for an intimidating warm-up: a wet, arching offwidth. Above, heinous, crozzly rock kept us on edge. After dawn, the heat of the sun warmed snowpatches on the summit, sending sluff avalanches cascading down the face unnervingly close to our line. We continued with trepidation, but eventually I was shut down by a disgusting corner, fused with a miserable excuse for granite.

On the next shift, Kim managed to pass this crux with an M7 lock-off, utilizing the rear hook of our piton hammer. But the atrocious rock tired him as well, and with his mentor Twid Turner’s wisdom in mind, one word echoed through Kim’s head: “Penji, penji, penji!” So he aborted our proposed line and swung into a new crack system far to the left. Twelve hours, two pitches. This was proving hard work. But we had now fixed into a potential nook to set up our first portaledge camp, so the following day John and I laboriously hauled up seven days of supplies.

Meanwhile, back in base camp, Dan and Kim watched in horror as a sluff ripped from the top of the mountain, plunging directly toward John and me at the belay. I looked up to see a river of wet snow crashing through the rock arch we hoped would protect us. I pressed my body close to the rock. Slush poured over us, soaking us to the bone. The torrent eventually subsided, fortunately without any chunks of rock or ice hitting us. A close call.

The radio crackled in my chest pocket; it was Dan.

"Guys, do you copy?"

"Yes, we're both OK."

"Good! I think we can tolerate the bad rock. But now that our line seems to still be in the firing line, we're not keen on the overhead hazard."

I scooped more snow out of my jacket hood.

"You're telling me. Let's get out of here."

That day it took 10 hours to haul and five hours to descend, as we navigated a maze of steep and traversing abseils with 80kg haulbags dangling from our harnesses.

After four day of effort, it was back to the drawing board. Plus, we needed a rest. The everlasting daylight was playing havoc with our body clocks.

Between servings of bacon grease and whipped-cream coffee, it became apparent the only sliver of the mountain relatively safe from avalanches was the central prow, which we believed to host the classic Cobra Pillar. In our haste while leaving Talkeetna, we had brought only one vague photo of the face, showing the lines but little else.

We started up again and, in the lead, John soon discovered a multitude of fixed gear with fun 5.10 climbing, confirming that we must have started up the Cobra. Determined to climb quality virgin terrain rather than crawl up an existing route in slow big-wall style, we branched out to the right from a big cave down low. Kim had spied a thin face climbing traverse to access a new crack system, and from a strenuous kneebar he laboriously hand-drilled a bolt and was able to crimp his way across the steep wall.

Upon reaching into a wide crack and looking upward, he could not believe what he had discovered: pitch after pitch of continuous splitter offwidth. Five- and six-inch cracks rocketed straight up the proudest part of the prow. Kim was in heaven. He led out mega pitches of glorious heel-toes and butterfly jams, as good as anything in Tasmania. It was some of the highest quality climbing any of us had ever encountered in the mountains.

Adding to the delight, Kim and John discovered a set of ledges to set up camp. The following day we all worked together to haul up heavy loads and establish our main portaledge camp, 350m up the wall. We were now poised for the upper pillar.

But that evening, a sickness that had been nagging John suddenly worsened, requiring a late-night evacuation mission. Fortunately, our five ropes strung together just reached the glacier, and John was able to fly back to town the following day.

With Kim and Dan exhausted from their all-nighter to evacuate John, I took over the lead for the day. And so followed the "Pecker Piton Pitch," which proved to be one of the most intense memories

engraved in my mind from the wall. I gained new appreciation of how it feels to discover brilliant climbing in its raw, natural state. With the help of my friends' wisdom, and with hammer and wire brush in hand, I was able to unearth incredible hand cracks, finger cracks, stemming corners, and roofs, ridding them of their dangerous blocks and loose gravel.

The thought that this might become a real classic spurred us on. Having climbed in many of the popular granite climbing zones, we genuinely thought this route contained some of the best alpine rock climbing in the world: sustained pitches of 5.10 and 5.11 cracks stacked on top of each other, in the mountains, and each one in its own right would be a crag classic.

Ropes fixed high, it was finally time for a push to the summit. After seven new pitches, we rejoined the Cobra Pillar route with its sensational arching splitter to crest the pillar. We stripped down into alpine mode and began simul-climbing more moderate ground.

Or so we thought. Kim led through increasingly wet cracks, drenched by melt from the summit's still heavy and unstable snowpack. Our worst fears were confirmed: We were too early in the season to safely reach the summit. Nearing the final technical pitch, the quantity of snow lying above became painfully apparent. It threatened to release at any moment. The decision to descend was sore but simple. There was just 200m of moderate, yet dangerous, terrain between us and the summit. As mountaineers we all heartily crave to stand on top, but will also quickly turn back when the conditions dictate otherwise.

We were disappointed not to reach the summit but happy with our beautiful all-free route: King Cobra (550m, 5.11). We arrived back at portaledge camp around 5 a.m. to find our precious Radix meals ravaged by ravens, powdered spinach and berries strewn across the rocks. The carnage back down at glacier camp was equally atrocious.

Fortunately, our own Raven of Denali was already in full flight, ready to pluck us from our glacial squalor and back to the living world.

– Alastair McDowell

Images



Kim Ladiges gears up below one of the many offwidth pitches on King Cobra (550m, IV 5.11) on Mt. Barrill in the Ruth Gorge. The route climbs predominantly wide splitter cracks just right of the classic route Cobra Pillar (Donini-Tackle, 1991) and meets it several pitches below the summit snow slopes.



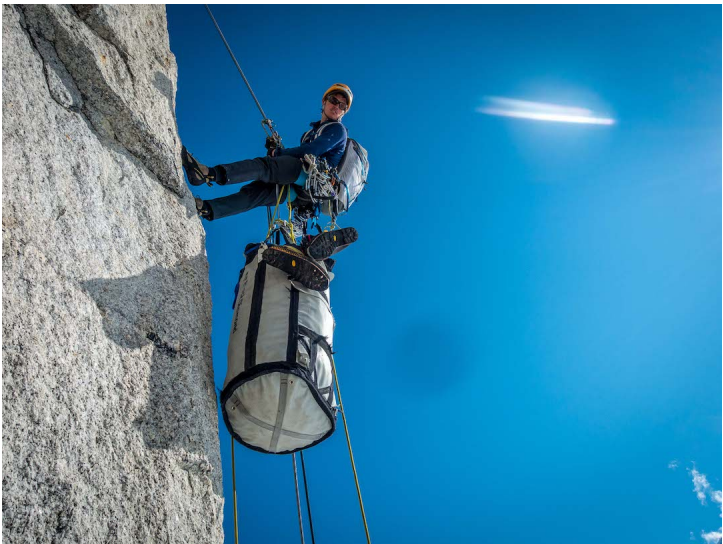
Kim Ladiges in the thick of yet another offwidth pitch on King Cobra (550m, IV 5.11) on Mt. Barrill in the Ruth Gorge. Ladiges, Dan Joll, Alastair McDowell, and John Price completed this new route to the top of the Cobra Pillar in mid-June 2019.



Dan Joll enjoy the comforts of the portaledge while contemplating the upcoming pitches during the first ascent of King Cobra (550m, IV 5.11) on Mt. Barrill in the Ruth Gorge of Alaska.



Kim Ladiges enjoys a perfect splitter fist crack during the first ascent of King Cobra (550m, IV 5.11) on Mt. Barrill in the Ruth Gorge of Alaska. The route is a major variation to the well-known Cobra Pillar feature on Barrill's east face, and meets the original route below the summit snow slopes.



Alastair McDowell rappelling with heavy loads after completing King Cobra (550m, IV 5.11).



Kim Ladiges prepares to jug the fixed lines back to the team's high point during the first ascent of King Cobra (550m, IV 5.11) on Mt. Barrill in the Ruth Gorge of Alaska.



The team's portaledge camp amid the soaring offwidth cracks that define King Cobra (550m, IV 5.11) on the east face of Mt. Barrill in the Ruth Gorge.



Portledge camp partway up King Cobra (550m, IV 5.11) on the east face of Mt. Barrill in the Ruth Gorge. One of the route's defining offwidth splitters is to the right.



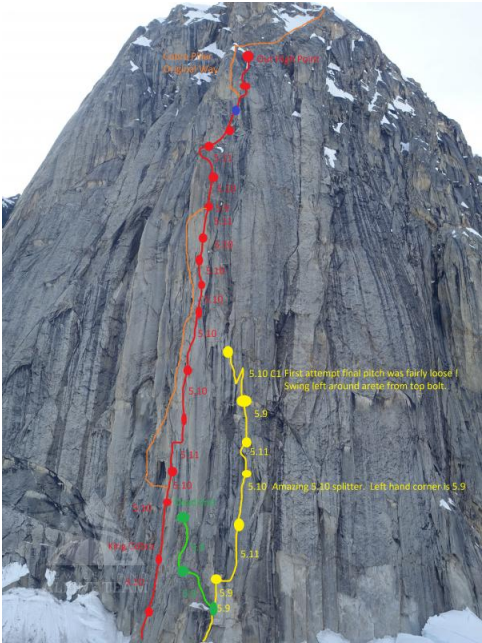
Reflections of the Alaska Range on the flight out from the Ruth Gorge.



Alastair McDowell juggling the wildly steep fixed lines to the team's high point on the east face of Mt. Barrill. The south face of the Moose's Tooth and the Root Canal Glacier are visible on the left.



Kim Ladiges jams his way up an immaculate splitter crack low on the east face of Mt. Barrill, during the first attempt.



The east face of Mt. Barrill, in the Ruth Gorge of Alaska, showing the line of King Cobra (550m, IV 5.11), in red. The route is a major variation of the Cobra Pillar (Donini-Tackle, 1991, in orange), climbing a system of clean offwidth cracks to the right of the original line. Dan Joll, Kim Ladiges, Alastair McDowell, and John Price completed this variation to the top of the Cobra Pillar in mid-June 2019. The team's initial attempts are also shown in green and yellow.

Article Details

Author	Alastair McDowell
Publication	AAJ
Volume	62
Issue	94
Page	0
Copyright Date	2020
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions