



AAC Publications

Juneau Icefield, Taku Range, New Routes and Summits

Alaska, Coast Mountains, Boundary Ranges

In July, Giselle Field, Dave Spies, Joey Jarrell, and I used an AAC Live Your Dream Grant to partially support a nine-day expedition to the Juneau Icefield. On July 14, after two days in Juneau, we were flown to the west side of the Taku Range by Northstar Trekking Helicopters. The four of us dug out a fine basecamp in the cirque between Taku Towers and Emperor Peak where we spent the following seven days encapsulated inside an omnipresent mist, mostly playing board games, reading books, and tending to our ever-melting campsites.

Giselle and I ventured out into the fog on July 15 to climb the northernmost and smallest of the three main summits of the Dukes massif. John Kelley made the first ascent of North Duke in 2014, doing so via the north ridge. In a Supertopo report, he refers to an unclimbed peak between Emperor Peak and North Duke, which he returned later that season to attempt via its north ridge, but bailed because of loose rock and seriousness. As a consolation prize, he climbed the south ridge of North Duke, making the second ascent of peak. In our reconnaissance, Giselle and I went to the base of the north ridge of this unclimbed peak and immediately understood why Kelley bailed.

Instead, we chose to ascend a series of corners on the southwest face. Our route, which we called the Candy Cornwall (4 pitches, 500', II 5.9), was very much a geologic puzzle connecting veins and dikes of solid granite in a sea of metamorphic choss. We found no evidence of prior ascent on the pointy summit, and named it the Duchess (6,250').

Over the next few days, we took advantage of sporadic weather windows to survey the remainder of the range's west side before attempting a few modest lines. On July 19, Giselle and I completed a full ascent of the west arête of the highest peak between Taku Towers and Cathedral Peak. Throughout the expedition we referred to it as Humpback Peak as it does not seem have a name on any map or publication. After climbing the lower, steeper part of the arête via four pitches (up to 5.9), we simul-climbed and belayed short pitches (5.6 R) along the upper arête which was wonderfully narrow. We called our route Humpback Arête (7 pitches, 850', III 5.9). The peak has a summit elevation of 6,350' (GPS: 58.603813, -134.374534).

On July 20, it rained lightly all day, so Giselle and I chose an easy-looking line and were rewarded with one of the most spectacular scrambles of our lives: the West Arête (1,100', III 5.7 50°) of the north summit of Cathedral Peak. The pencil-thin ribbon of gneiss, sculpted perfectly on both sides by the active glacier, led to the peak's dwindling icecap. Easy neve brought us to the north summit (6,400', GPS: 58.613177, -134.366251).

This distinct summit is approximately 100 feet lower than the true (south) summit and separated by a steep notch. There appear to be several options for reaching the true (south) summit by non-technical mixed routes; we assume the peak's first recorded ascent (Forbes-Merritt-Miller-Schoebles, 1949), which makes no mention of the route taken, chose one of these easy-looking options.

On July 21, the last day of our trip, good weather finally arrived. Giselle and I attempted the steep west pillar of the dome-like formation immediately south of the highest Taku Tower. Two pitches of splitters abruptly devolved into munge-cracks and runout slabs. We each took a huge lead fall but saw no reason to retreat, choosing to press onward until at last we dead-ended ourselves 20' below the top of the pillar. After four pitches up to 10a, we cut our losses and rappelled.

When we returned to basecamp, around midnight with a line of orange light still in the western sky, we learned that Dave and Joey had succeeded on their route Stoned Virgins (800', III 5.10d), which had proven quite a bit of work. This impressive line tackles thin cracks on the steep wall to the right of Humpback Arête. The route has 330 feet of independent climbing before merging with Humpback Arête.

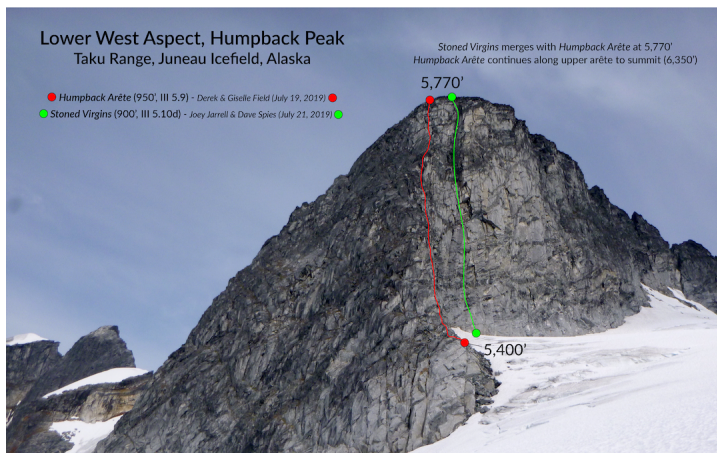
The following day, we stepped out of the helicopter in Juneau feeling content with our trip. In spite of subpar weather we managed to have a fun time and walked away with an amazing experience that brought us closer together than ever before.

– Derek Field, Canada

Images



The southwest face of the Duchess in the Taku Range of the Juneau Icefield. Derek and Giselle Field make the likely first ascent of “the Duchess” via Candy Cornwall (4 pitches, 500’, II 5.9) in July 2019.



The previously unnamed and unclimbed Humpback Peak (6,350’) showing the line of Humpback Arête (7 pitches, 850’, III 5.9) and Stoned Virgins (800’, III 5.10d). The two routes meet at the ridge and continue along the upper ridge to the true summit.



Cathedral Peak in the Taku Range of the Juneau Icefield, showing the West Arête (1,100', III 5.7 50°) of the north summit. Derek and Giselle Field made the first ascent of this long ridge scramble in July 2019.



The southwest-facing aspect of the Duchess (left) and North Duke (right). Derek and Giselle Field make the likely first ascent of the Duchess via Candy Cornwall (4 pitches, 500', II 5.9) in July 2019.



Derek Field leading the crux third pitch, the Open Book, during the first ascent of the Duchess via Candy Cornwall (4 pitches, 500', II 5.9).



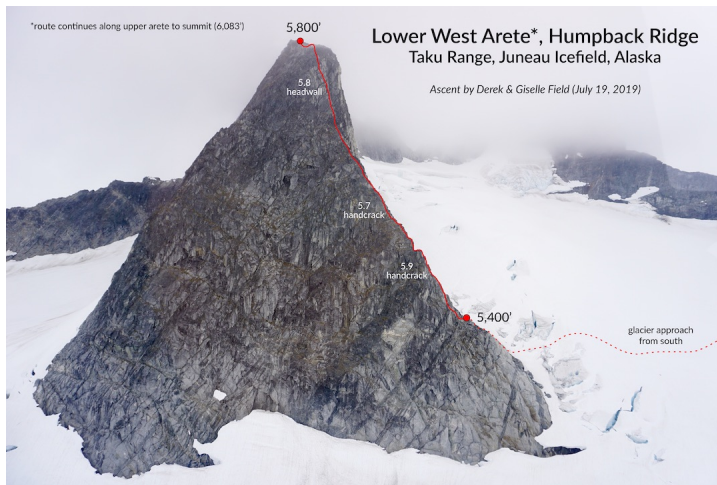
Looking south at Humpback Peak (6,350') from the north summit of Cathedral Peak. The route Humpback Arête (7 pitches, 850', III 5.9) ascends the long right skyline.



High on the west arête of Cathedral Peak, Derek Field heads up the spiral staircase into the mist.



Giselle Field enjoys the first bluebird day of the group's 10-day trip during an attempt on a large dome just south of the Taku Towers.



"Humpback Peak" from the northwest. The Humpback Arête (III 5.9) followed the right skyline, then continued up the long upper ridge (hidden) to the top. Stoned Virgins (III 5.10d) takes a steeper line to the right.

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