



AAC Publications

Denali, Ridge of No Return, Hot Cars and Fast Women

Alaska, Alaska Range

In what is becoming an annual tradition, Michael Gardner and I showed up in Alaska in the final hours of a massive high-pressure system. This year we chose to ignore the ominous forecast and flew into the west fork of the Ruth Glacier, with no real plans aside from seeing how the weather played out. A few hours later, we found ourselves partway up the Colton-Leach Route on the north buttress of the Rooster Comb (AAJ 1982) under descending clouds. Not wanting to be anywhere near the confined route in a storm, we bailed as the first snowflakes began to fall.

Four days later, after several feet of new snow, we took advantage of a short break in the storm to investigate a pyramid-like feature on the southeast face of the Ridge of No Return, which I had a chance to scope several years earlier on an ascent of Reality Peak. [Editor's note: The Ridge of No Return extends generally southeast from Point 15,000' on Denali's South Buttress down to the west fork of the Ruth Glacier. The ridge was first climbed by Italian Renato Casarotto, solo in 1984; see AAJ 1985.] As we had hoped, the waist-deep wallowing of the snow cone gave way to firm névé as the angle steepened. After several hundred feet of snow, we roped up for a pitch of thin ice and a scary traverse on faceted snow that brought us to the base of the main weakness.

What followed was 200m of sustained mixed climbing up to M6+ on perfect rock—an excellent treat after all the sketchy snow! Several rope lengths of easy snow, a fully buried M5 pitch that Michael did a great job of burrowing up, and a few final rope lengths of attention-grabbing steep facets brought us to an arbitrary high point along the Ridge of No Return. At this point the weather shut back down, and it began snowing. We chugged the rest of our water and started rappelling into the whiteout, somehow only leaving behind one knifeblade, one Stopper, and a bit of cord. Back in camp later that evening, we named our route Hot Cars and Fast Women (850m, M6+), after our friend Dominic Toretto from the movie *The Fast and the Furious*, who has inspired us for many years.

The rest of the season in the Denali area was marked by unsettled weather. Aside from guided ascents of Denali's West Buttress, Michael and my only successful climb in the next five weeks was a repeat of the Infinite Spur on Sultana. This is worth mentioning only because we carried skis up the route, making the round-trip from base camp in 48 hours. We feel the Spur is well suited for this style of "ski alpinism," as it is moderate enough to climb in ski boots and skiing makes the descent vastly easier, as well as eliminates the need for caches and return trips along the approach.

– Sam Hennessey

Images



The southeast face of the Ridge of No Return on Denali, showing the line of Hot Cars and Fast Women (850m, M6+). Michael Gardner and Sam Hennessey climbed this new line from the west fork of the Ruth Glacier. This photo was taken from near the standard base camp for Peak 11,300'.

Article Details

Author	Sam Hennessey
Publication	AAJ
Volume	62
Issue	94
Page	
Copyright Date	2020
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions