



AAC Publications

Mt. Asgard, Never Laugh at Live Dragons, The Niv Mizzet Line, and Other Routes

Canada, Nunavut, Baffin Island, Auyuittuq National Park

Bronwyn Hodgins on the summit of Thor Peak with the Weasel River far below. Photo by Jacob Cook
I crouched on a rock ledge that was barely wider than a picnic bench and sloped disconcertingly toward the abyss. Both my hands supported our little stove as the water rolled to a boil. I quickly cut the fuel and poured the water into pouches of instant rice. There was no room for Jacob on the ledge, so he kneeled on a Grade 7 inflatable portaledge beside me. My watch read 1 a.m. Dinner in ten and then we'd try to sleep.

Our free-hanging camp was halfway up an unnamed 400m tower of golden granite on Baffin Island. Above us a headwall stretched upward, immaculate, totally blank but for one striking splitter that disappeared into the sky.

Five weeks earlier, Jacob Cook (U.K.), Zack Goldberg Poch, Thor Stewart (both Canadian), and I had paddled packrafts up Pangnirtung Fjord, riding the swelling tide on a magical calm day. After towing the loaded rafts partway up the Weasel River, we deflated the boats, hoisted our packs, and slogged up valley for four days under icy rain, aiming for a cache of climbing gear, food, and fuel that had been stashed by Peter Kilabuk—our local outfitter—via snowmobile four months earlier.

Zack Goldberg-Poch holding on for dear life as he and Thor Stewart make their way down the Weasel River. The prominent peak in the foreground is Mount Thor. Photo by Thor Stewart

We reached the cache (relieved that no polar bears had found it) and pushed on up the Caribou Glacier to make high camp under Mt. Asgard. In the morning, under a dazzling sun, Jacob and I set off to repeat the Brazeau-Walsh Route on the south face of Mt. Asgard's South Tower. But while approaching the wall, we spied a parallel crack system that deviated left after 100m and excitedly changed objectives. Twenty hours later, we were back in camp, having climbed a new route, Never Laugh At Live Dragons (600m, 5.11- R). The name quotes Bilbo Baggins from The Hobbit, who sneaks into the dragon Smaug's lair and steals back the sacred Arkenstone. We too felt as though we had snuck up on a beast, snatched our prize, and returned unscathed.

At the same time, Zack and Thor had made a free ascent of Polar Thievery (5.11-) on the North Tower of Asgard. This was, as far as we know, the second free ascent, and they completed the climb in a 23-hour continuous push.

Jacob and I next turned our attention to the classic 1972 British route on the east side of Asgard's North Tower. Near the top we found a three-pitch free variation (likely joining the aid line Bilfrost Buttress) up an airy 5.11+ finger crack, an excellent alternative to the often wet chimney finish. Meanwhile, Thor and Zack had their own adventure on what we believe to be an unclimbed subsummit of Mt. Midgard. In a 27-hour push, they established Beach Vacation (600m, 5.10+) on the east side of the subpeak (which they called Mt. Zacky), with mostly slabby face and crack climbing on excellent rock.

Impending storm clouds forced us back to the Weasel River Valley for some much-needed rest days. Rejuvenated, we inflated our packrafts and set off downstream, running what we could of the raging and technical Arctic whitewater. Two days later, we stopped to climb Mt. Thor, simul-climbing the

south ridge and succeeding in Thor's life goal to summit his namesake mountain! After several more days on the river and a failed attempt (due to poor rock) on the 600m west face of Mt. Tirokwa, we set up a final camp where the river meets the sea. We had time for one last climb—a new line on Mt. Ulu for Zack and Thor, and that unnamed golden tower for Jacob and me.

Above our portaledge camp, the alluring splitter crack tapered to a seam that was nearly closed. Jacob looked like he could pop off any second, but he finished the pitch and put me on belay. I started cautiously up flakes, pulled a roof, and then desperately crimped up the seam. I arrived at the anchor totally worked. The crack continued upward and the wall steepened slightly. It was going to get harder before it got easier.

Jacob set off again. He plugged our smallest Totem cam, pulled up the rope to clip...then whoosh, his feet popped and he came sailing down beside me. Next go, he fell one move higher, sagging onto the cam. He looked down at me: "Do you have the brush?" I had a funny moment where I was outside my body, looking down at the two of us, watching Jacob as he scrubbed the rock. It felt comical to be in such a wild place and faffing with the minutiae of hard free climbing. Jacob swung about, testing some moves and ticking the rock with chalk. "I give myself a 20 percent chance of sending," he shrugged after lowering again.

I watched Jacob—my partner for the past seven years—dance up the wall, looking desperate but somehow in control. Then he was past the crux and into finger locks, which turned to ring locks and eventually to thin hands. I whooped as he carried on up the perfect hand crack, cruising jam after jam.

Bronwyn Hodgins following pitch eight (5.12+) of the Niv Mizzet Line (400m, 5.13-) on an unclimbed tower in the Weasel Valley on Baffin island.

Photo by Jacob Cook

Breathe, I told myself. It's a slab, a very steep slab. I made about five moves before I was spat off. I pulled on again and fell almost instantly. I decided to yard on a few cams, thinking only, What a crazy place to be!

Above, I took the lead as we continued up a never-ending splitter on our tower's west face. There was a faint shout in the distance, and I looked across the cirque to see two miniature silhouettes on the summit of the neighboring Mt. Ulu, which may have been previously unclimbed. Thor and Zack had just finished the Beached Whale (600m, 5.10+ A0) on the south face. A pendulum down low was the only aid and could have been avoided if they'd started slightly to the left.

Soon Jacob and I stood on the summit of our tower, which rises to the north of the very east end of Ulu's north face. We called our route the Niv Mizzet Line (400m, 5.13-). I raised my eyes to look across at the jagged mountains, and then beyond at the fringes of the great white Penny Ice Cap. I let my gaze fall to the ocean fjord, the homestretch. I felt peaceful, deeply satisfied. This had truly been the trip of a lifetime. But my mind and body craved the safety and comforts of home.

After a long deep sleep at our seaside camp, we four friends pushed off into the fjord, aiming our bows south toward the small Inuit community of Pangnirtung. Before our flight home, we put up posters around the village inviting local kids to try rock climbing. Twenty of them showed up for an afternoon of top-roping. Sometimes we get caught up in our own stories in the mountains, but this day was for them, the children of Pangnirtung.

– Bronwyn Hodgins, Canada

Editor's Note: Two California climbers, Thomas Bukowski and Brian Knowles, repeated Never Laugh At Live Dragons on Asgard's South Tower shortly after the first ascent. They stayed in the obvious chimney up high, avoiding Hodgins and Cook's 5.11- R finish. According to Hodgins, their variation is likely wetter in early season but creates an all-free 5.10+ on excellent rock.

Images



Thor Stewart celebrates atop his namesake peak.



Believed to be the first to combine climbing and packrafting in this area, four climbers paddled tandem rafts up Pangnirtung Fjord and dragged their loaded boats about 10km up the Weasel River. On the way out, they paddled most of the way, saving about 25km of hiking with very heavy loads.



Bronwyn Hodgins on the summit of Thor Peak with the Weasel River far below.



Zack Goldberg-Poch holding on for dear life as he and Thor Stewart make their way down the Weasel River. The prominent peak in the foreground is Mount Thor.



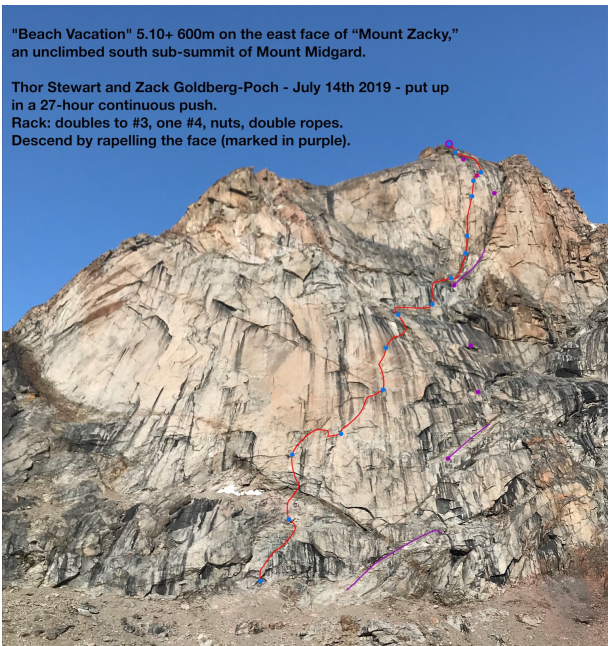
Jacob Cook leading pitch four of the Niv Mizzet Line (400m, 5.13-) on an unnamed tower in the Weasel Valley on Baffin island.



Bronwyn Hodgins following pitch eight (5.12+) of the Niv Mizzet Line (400m, 5.13-) on an unclimbed tower in the Weasel Valley on Baffin island.



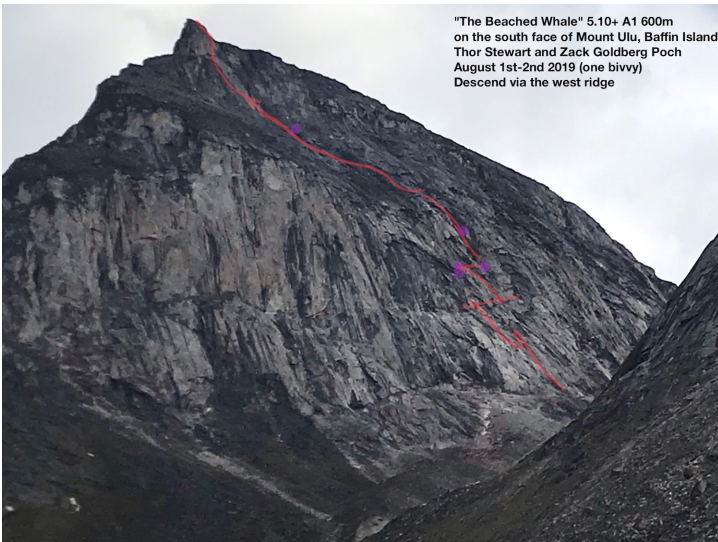
A Pangnirtung child on his first climb. After their expedition, Bronwyn Hodgins, Jacob Cook, Thor Stewart, and Zack Goldberg Poch set up top-ropes for the village children to play on.



"Beach Vacation" 5.10+ 600m on the east face of "Mount Zacky," an unclimbed south sub-summit of Mount Midgard.

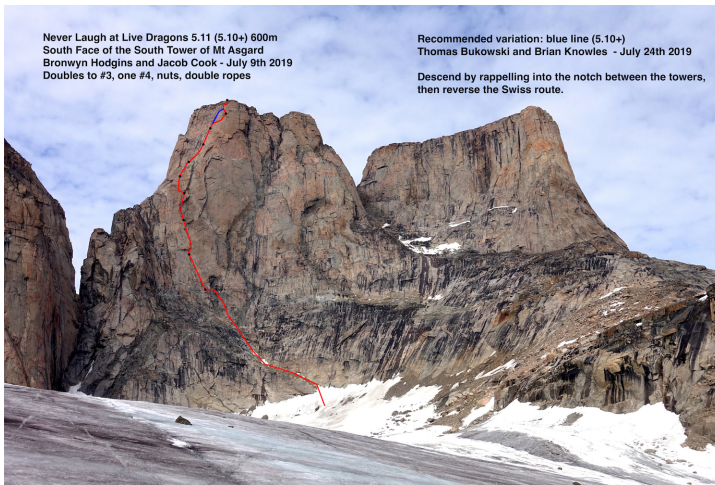
Thor Stewart and Zack Goldberg-Poch - July 14th 2019 - put up in a 27-hour continuous push.
 Rack: doubles to #3, one #4, nuts, double ropes.
 Descend by rappelling the face (marked in purple).

The topo for Beach Vacation (600m, 5.10+) on a subsummit of Mt. Midgard in the Weasel Valley on Baffin Island.

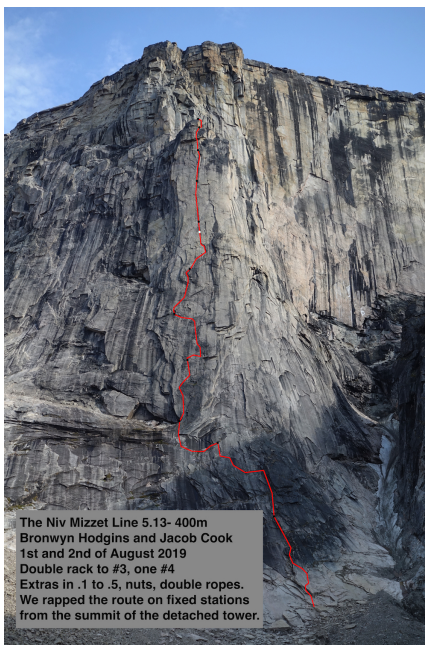


"The Beached Whale" 5.10+ A1 600m on the south face of Mount Ulu, Baffin Island
 Thor Stewart and Zack Goldberg Poch
 August 1st-2nd 2019 (one bivvy)
 Descend via the west ridge

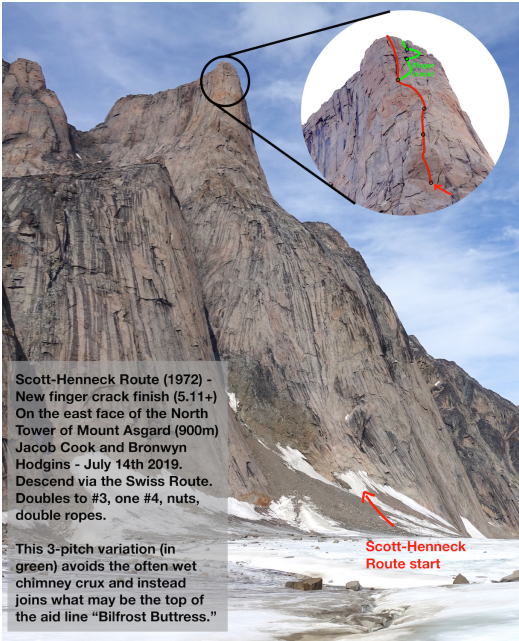
The topo for Beached Whale (600m, 5.10+ A1) on Mt. Ulu in the Weasel Valley on Baffin Island.



The topo for Never Laugh At Live Dragons (600m, 5.11- R) on Asgard's south summit in the Weasel Valley on Baffin Island.



The topo for the Niv Mizzet Line (400m, 5.13-) on an unnamed tower in the Weasel Valley on Baffin Island.



Scott-Henneck Route (1972) -
New finger crack finish (5.11+)
On the east face of the North
Tower of Mount Asgard (900m)
Jacob Cook and Bronwyn
Hodgins - July 14th 2019.
Descend via the Swiss Route.
Doubles to #3, one #4, nuts,
double ropes.

This 3-pitch variation (in
green) avoids the often wet
chimney crux and instead
joins what may be the top of
the aid line "Bilfrost Buttress."

Scott-Henneck
Route start

The topo for the new finish to the Scott-Hennek route on Asgard's east face in the Weasel Valley on Baffin Island.

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