West Fork of Ruth Glacier, South Buttress Attempt and Condition Update

Alaska, Central Alaska Range

From May 8–12, Gabriel Messercola, Robert Paulsen, Freddy Romero, and I attempted to climb through the icefalls at the head of the West Fork of the Ruth Glacier in an effort to climb the 1954 Thayer Route on Denali's South Buttress. [Editor's Note: The most recent recorded ascent of this route was in April 1996, by Joe Puryear and Mark Westman.]

After being flown to the West Fork airstrip, we ascended to a camp at the base of the icefalls at approximately 8,400' and spent the next two days scouting a route to Margaret Pass. We found the lower of the two icefalls to be split, about halfway up, by a single very large crevasse. After scouting this at numerous points, we realized the crevasse cleanly crossed the entire glacier [62.98562, -151.00892, approximately 1 mile up-glacier from the foot of Ridge of No Return]. We investigated more jumbled terrain to climber's right, but still couldn't find a way around. The crevasse may have been passable on climber's left by traversing under a large cliff west of Mt. Huntington, but the objective hazard posed by constantly falling seracs and avalanches there made investigating this option unsafe.

From our vantage in the lower icefall, the upper icefall looked similarly jumbled, and, notably, the headwall of the West Fork looked surprisingly icy and laden with seracs. We retreated to lower on the glacier to climb smaller objectives around the North Fork before flying out on May 17.

— **Ryan Wichelns**

Images

Robert Paulsen probing up to the deal-breaker crevasse that split the entirety of the West Fork of the Ruth Glacier in 2021. The headwall of the West Fork leading up to Margaret Pass is visible in the distant background. According to Alaska Range authority Mark Westman, this icefall is currently the most broken and jumbled he has ever seen.

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