



AAC Publications

Five Years on the Cassin

Two Firsts on Denali's South Side

ON THE 14TH of June, I made the first ski descent of the Seattle Ramp variation to the West Rib of Denali, followed by the first female solo ascent of the Cassin Ridge, completing a longtime dream and a culmination of all the things I love about moving through the mountains: climbing a technical route alone, swiftly, in alpine style, using skis to approach and descend.

This wasn't my first climb of Denali, of course—I have a long history with the mountain. I first set foot on Denali in 2005 at the age of 19, when I summited by the West Buttress route and skied back down via the Rescue Gully. Four years later, I began guiding the West Buttress for the American Alpine Institute, and I did that for a few years. In the breaks between guiding trips, I went back up on the mountain and started ticking off ski lines that interested me.

In 2015, I started climbing difficult routes on Denali. I had climbed other challenging routes in the range—like the Colton-Leach and the second ascent (and first free ascent) of Polarchrome, both on Mt. Huntington, with Jewell Lund in 2014—but the first route I climbed on Denali, other than those in the West Buttress area, was the Denali Diamond on the southwest face, also with Jewell Lund, in 2015. This was the first time an Alaska Grade 6 route had been completed by a team of women.

Any time you climb a difficult route, the experience allows you to dream a little bit bigger. As someone who follows climbing history, I knew the Cassin Ridge had seen a number of impressive solo ascents. And that was something I was inspired to try. But what really excited me was the idea of adding skiing to the mix in an uncontrived way. In a way that made sense even. My vision was to ski down the West Rib, skin over to the base of the Cassin Ridge, free solo the route in a day with a light pack, and then ski down the Messner Couloir to return to the 14,000-foot camp on the West Buttress. My intent wasn't to set a speed record; I simply wanted to take the climbing and ski mountaineering skill sets I'd built over the years and combine them in the big mountains. The Cassin seemed like the perfect choice for an ascent/descent of this style.

In 2016 I flew into the Alaska Range with my eye on the Cassin, equipped with skimo-style skis and boots. I was quite fearful of approaching the base of the route solo, and I didn't think much about the actual climbing. Heavy snowfall and strong winds had me tent-bound for most of the trip, and I had a lot of alone time to talk myself out of what I was there to do. I wasn't convinced I was fit or mentally prepared enough to climb in the style I was interested in. I also made the mistake of taking a super-light kit—small tent, no books, and mostly freeze-dried food—during my few weeks of acclimatization. This didn't help keep the spirits high. I ended up bailing before I had a chance to make an attempt. But I felt motivated to come back more prepared and try again.

Over the following years, a solo of the Cassin was always in the back of my mind, and I refined my ski kit for the project. I tried multiple race skis in an attempt to find a ski that was extremely light but skied well, and I went through the same process with skimo race boots. Each year I prepared to “maybe” climb the Cassin, but I also made other plans in the Alaska Range with climbing partners—if I felt motivated after completing that part of my trip, then I'd fly back in to try the Cassin. For example, in 2017, Anne Gilbert Chase and I attempted the Slovak Direct on the south face of Denali and got stormed off 4,000 feet up the route. In 2018 we went back and completed the Slovak Direct—another first ascent for an all-female team. In general, I came back from those trips feeling contented and tired, and didn't feel the need to go back in and continue to push hard. So, the Cassin had to wait.

Finally, in the fall of 2020, I got serious about climbing the Cassin and laid plans for the 2021 spring season. Beforehand, I planned to try a route on the North Buttress of Mt. Hunter with Anne Gilbert. I knew that if I wanted to climb both routes in the same season, I needed to increase my fitness so I could recover quickly from the first climb and still have the psych to go up on Denali and acclimatize. I live in Lowman, Idaho, which has great access to skiing and ski mountaineering, but very few winter climbing options. So I hired a local climbing coach who helped me discover creativity on my home wall, which I had built years ago but had rarely been motivated enough to use. I learned how to stay strong for climbing with very little time investment. I also hired a friend who coaches endurance athletes (and is a ski mountaineer himself) to help me with endurance. I'm an extremely motivated person, but I can also be lazy and inconsistent with training. I felt the need for accountability.

In May I flew into the Alaska Range with Anne Gilbert for three weeks. We attempted two routes on Hunter. However, we had mostly stormy weather, short windows, and often very warm temperatures. At the end of our trip, I flew out of the range for a few days to recover and then flew back with a month of food and began the arduous process of carrying loads up the West Buttress.

Strong, cold winds persisted on the upper mountain, and the ski conditions never improved above 16,000 feet during my time there. At one point during an acclimatization run, I climbed up the Rescue Gully above 14K Camp, and clouds and wind moved in during my ski descent. I lost visibility and sight of my track, and found myself exactly where I didn't want to be: on skis in a vast patch of blue ice. I had a mountaineering axe in my hand, and I swung hard to try and penetrate the ice, without success. I carefully balanced and removed my pack so I could grab my technical ice tool, anchor myself to the ice, and switch from skis to crampons one boot at a time. (When I got off the headwall, I came across a Frenchman who had watched the maneuver and called it a French transition—a term that was new to me.) My goal had been to touch the summit ridge twice before attempting the Cassin, but I only made it up there once.

The biggest challenge was keeping my psych high. I had a lot of time alone in my tent to convince myself that what I was doing was pointless and even stupid. But somehow I managed to make myself believe that, if I was patient, I would pull it off. Finally, a two-day weather window was forecasted to begin on June 13. Some friends had just climbed the Cassin and broke trail through deep snow, which I knew would be advantageous. Everything was lining up as I'd hoped.

There are basically four approaches to the Cassin Ridge. Historically, the Northeast Fork of the Kahiltna Glacier (a.k.a. the Valley of Death) was the most commonly used approach, as it takes you from low on the mountain directly to the base of the route at 12,000 feet, but it has an immense amount of overhead hazards and many large crevasses. The East Fork of the Kahiltna, leading to Kahiltna Notch, is a long and relatively nice walk, but it is a heavily crevassed glacier. The other two approach options begin from the 14K Camp (where most people acclimatize anyway) and ascend to 16,500 feet on the West Rib route. From there you can descend the entirety of the West Rib to approximately 11,500 feet in the Valley of Death and walk a mile on the glacier to the base of the Cassin Ridge, or you can take the Seattle Ramp, which exits the West Rib at approximately 15,000 feet and leads directly to the base of the southwest face and the Cassin.

Although I had descended the Seattle Ramp in 2015 en route to the Denali Diamond, it never really crossed my mind to ski it. I had mostly settled on skiing down the West Rib, but was still nervous about then having to walk a mile up the Northeast Fork of the Kahiltna alone. The Seattle Ramp is essentially an icefall, and though it is heavily crevassed and has overhead serac hazards threatening part of the descent, it is not nearly as crevassed as the other approach options. As my friend Colin Haley put it, "You can pick an option that has hundreds of crevasses or one that has less," and while I wasn't totally convinced, the Seattle Ramp did seem like the best choice.

Generally people approach the Cassin at night—with colder temps come safer conditions. I chose to leave late in the morning in hopes of finding better skiing conditions in the warmth of the day than at night, when the snow surface would freeze into a breakable crust. I went to bed at 14K Camp in the

evening of June 12 and slept through the night. The weather window was holding, and everything felt right. I never again questioned what I was doing.

I left 14,000 Camp at 11 a.m. and skinned and cramponed up the cutoff to reach the West Rib. From there I transitioned to skis and slowly started working my way down. Conditions were challenging, but after 1,000 feet, the slope angle eased up and I was able to open it up a bit more with my skimo setup. I ended up taking a pair of Atomic Backland Ultralight skis that were 78mm underfoot but only 149cm long—in other words, children’s skis. I wanted them to be super short for climbing on the Cassin. I wore Atomic Backland Ultimate skimo boots, which ski quite poorly in funky conditions, but they were acceptable. I was concerned about keeping my feet warm enough during the climb in skimo boots that didn’t have good gaiters, but I brought an extra pair of socks and took my chances.

A couple of hours after leaving camp, I made it to the Seattle Ramp. Suddenly, everything began to feel much more serious. I could feel my focus narrowing. Clouds moved in, I lost visibility, and it got quite warm. I couldn’t decide if I was pleased by this or freaked out. I slowly made my way down in mostly good ski conditions, straight-lining over icy crevasses that fell deep into the dark abyss. I carried about 25m of 6mm rope specifically for rappelling over the big bergschrund at the bottom of the Seattle Ramp, but when I got there I realized my rope was way too short. I transitioned to crampons and downclimbed and traversed skier’s left to look for a safe passage. Eventually, I found a feature I was able to downclimb to pass the ’schrund. I put my skis back on, traversed back skier’s right, and navigated down through big crevasses. Needless to say, I was quite scared. But at this point I just tried to ignore my fears and tricked myself into keeping a cool and level-headed mindset.

After exiting the Seattle Ramp, I traversed the southwest basin through big piles of debris from the hanging seracs 5,000 feet above. With the last of the debris piles finally behind me, I felt a huge wave of relief. I looked up and saw a bald eagle—something I’d never seen so high in the Alaska Range—thermaling not far above me. I couldn’t believe where I was, and I had an indescribable feeling of peacefulness. I skied powder down to a serac feature where I could drop into a shallow, protected nook to rest until it was cold enough to start climbing. The part of the journey that had concerned me the most was done, and now all I had to do was climb the Cassin, which, by comparison, sounded like fun.

In my pack I carried a small Reactor stove, a small gas canister, an extra pair of socks, a warm coat, a few pairs of gloves, 1.5 liters of water, and not enough food. I put on my jacket, burrowed into the tiny quilt sleeping bag and small bivy tarp I had brought specifically for resting at the base of the route, and settled in. I figured I’d get too cold at about midnight and I’d start to climb, but I comfortably slept through my alarm and woke up at about 4:30 the next morning. I drank coffee, ate a packet of oatmeal and a bar, and set off. I hit the bergschrund at the base of the Cassin at 5:30 a.m., and while I wasn’t there to set a record, I set the timer on my watch, as I was curious how long it would take me.

I had been on the nontechnical terrain above 17,000 feet on the Cassin twice before, while finishing other routes, but I had never climbed any of the technical terrain on the lower Cassin, so I was, in effect, onsighting. I had hoped the Japanese Couloir would be covered in snow to make travel quicker, but it was mostly moderate ice climbing with some steeper water-ice steps. I moved through the Japanese Couloir quickly and got to what is supposed to be the crux of the route—a wide chimney-like feature—by Cassin Ledge. I had positioned my skis vertically on the center of the back of my pack, and never had any problems with them getting in the way. Once I got to the Hanging Glacier near 14,000 feet, I was happy to see there was still a track—waist deep in places—and I wouldn’t have to do any deep trail-breaking. I continued through the first and second rock bands with some route-finding, as the previous parties’ tracks had been blown clean at these elevations. Some of the short steps in these rock bands felt more difficult than any of the climbing on the lower route, but overall the climbing was very enjoyable.

When I reached 17,000 feet, I stopped to brew up some water and change my socks. Already bonking a bit, I ate my last bar and started the long hike to the top of Denali, knowing that I might suffer, given

my shortage of food. It was easy trail-breaking, but still I had moments where I had to put my head down and mentally dig deep. I reached the summit just after 8 p.m., after spending 14:39 on the Cassin. It was a very quiet evening, and the only person up there was Zack Novak—a friend, but one I didn't know well. He gave me a hug and I started to cry in his arms. I was pretty tired, physically and mentally, but I was thrilled I had pulled it off. Zack made me a cup of tea and then skied off into the evening light.

The conditions on the upper mountain were too icy to consider skiing the Messner Couloir, but even had they been better, I'm not sure I would have tried. A mellow descent felt about right at that point. So I made my way down the West Buttress (a place I've skied many times), skiing or downclimbing as needed. I finally made it back to 14K Camp around 11 p.m., just in time for quesadillas prepared by wonderful friends I'd met during my time on Denali earlier in the season.

I honestly don't remember much about the climb. I felt like I was in a dream state throughout most of the day. The memories vanished the moment they were made. This has often been the case with my most meaningful climbing experiences—there are very few memories, just a sensation.

Summary: First known ski descent of the Seattle Ramp (Bertulis, Wickwire, et al, 1972) on the lower southwest face of Denali, followed by a solo ascent of the Cassin Ridge, by Chantel Astorga, June 13–14, 2021. After a bivouac near the base of the Cassin, Astorga climbed the route in 14 hours 39 minutes to the 20,310-foot summit, the first female solo of the Cassin (and, incidentally, the women's speed record). Astorga spoke about this adventure on episode 44 of the Cutting Edge podcast.

About the Author: Born in 1985, Chantel Astorga lives in central Idaho and works as a highway avalanche forecaster for the Idaho Transportation Department.

Images



The ski setup for Chantel Astorga's descent of the Seattle Ramp and solo of the Cassin Ridge on Denali.



Astorga stopping to visit friends en route to the Cassin Ridge on Denali.



Astorga (the tiny dot in lower left) cruises toward the Japanese Couloir, start of the Cassin Ridge

route, after descending the Seattle Ramp.



Selfie in the Japanese Couloir. The author skied onto the Seattle Ramp near the center of the big slope behind, then hugged the rock wall at far right.



Shadow self-portrait near the First Rock Band on the Cassin Ridge. The Seattle Ramp is in back, with Astorga's ski track visible.



Chantel Astorga climbing the last few hundred meters of the Cassin Ridge on Denali.



Chantel Astorga topping out the Cassin Ridge en route to the summit of Denali. The peak behind is Sultana.

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