



## AAC Publications

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### **Mt. Alice, West Face, First Ascent and Ski Descent**

Alaska, Kenai Mountains

**The winter of 2021-2022 was generous, allowing me to rack up a ton of training days in preparation for a top-secret ski alpinism project in remote Alaska.** But our air transport fell through on plans A, B, and C, leaving me to ride locally around my hometown of Seward.

At first I felt dejected, but the late season shaped up into epic steep riding conditions from mid-March through the end of April 2022. During this time I was able to accomplish a variety of airy and aesthetic ski lines in the area. The proudest of these was a first descent I completed with Michael Burmeister, Ryan Hokanson, and Ben Rininger on the west face of Mt. Alice (5,318') in the Kenai Mountains.

The western flank of Alice rises around 5,000' from Sawmill Creek, its summit guarded by an imposing 2,500' triangular headwall rising from a glacial cirque we lovingly call Wonderland. I had begun watching the face in 2015, obsessed with the local whispers about the remote possibility that the shallow features on the face might someday plaster with enough snow to yield a ski descent. [Editor's Note: According to Johnson, this face had also been attempted in the summer months as a rock climb by Jay Patterson, but was never completed.]

I'd been storm skiing for several days in March when the skies broke blue, and I decided to take a closer look at the face. I put in a trail with my sled for about seven miles from my home to the lower Sawmill Creek area, and then started the long skin from the river up into the basin below the headwall. I felt the dopamine hit as I looked through my binoculars at deep maritime powder plastered onto the ramps, panels, and snowfields that I hoped would yield passage through the enormous cliffs that define the face. I immediately contacted my local friends Mike and Ben, along with Ryan, who came down from Anchorage.

After a worrying overnight bluster, we left the house on snowmachines and repeated my approach from the previous day. Arriving below the face, we observed some light wind slab had formed on the final summit pyramid and the apex of the upper headwall. We decided to get up on the face while continuing to assess hazards.

We made our way through the steep and insecure snow climbing, milking the shallow natural features to find passage through the lower two thirds of the face. For a time we were stymied in shallow snow trying to pass the crux rock band, but we found two viable pathways and took the right-hand one through shallow but passable 65° snow above a big cliff. We dug three hasty pits and didn't bump into any red flags.

After reaching the apex of the face, we booted the remaining distance to Alice's summit on a windless afternoon. After a minor celebration, we began our descent. Ryan took a bold line directly down the upper face to access a hanging snow arête that bypassed the crux cliff band. I rode next, sliding joyously through the exposed upper panel to arrive at the eye-opening 65° passage through a small hanging panel above a steep eyebrow cliff, finding Ryan at a sheltered overhang. The splitboarders followed my line, with some scary moments for one of them transitioning onto the hanging panel above the eyebrow. After some more careful pitching, we all arrived in one piece at the base of the face.

For some of us, this descent salvaged a deep but challenging and windy season in the high country. For me, it was just the beginning of an epic late season chasing rarefied experience around our local mountains.

– **Raven (Samuel) Johnson**

## Images



Steep skinning up under the lower west face of Mt. Alice in the Kenai Mountains.



The west face of Mt. Alice (5,318') in the Kenai Mountains. Michael Burmeister, Ryan Hokanson, Raven (Samuel) Johnson, and Ben Ringer made the likely first ascent and descent of the face in late March 2022. The red line is the path of ascent and descent, while the yellow line is a headwall variation that Ryan Hokanson took on the descent.



Approaching what would be the upper crux of the descent while booting up the west face of Mt. Alice.

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