



## AAC Publications

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### **Black Spire, Chimaphila**

United States, Washington, Cascade Range, North Cascades

**“There we go,” I said flatly as my body slammed forward, ski goggles brushing the handlebars of my 1999 Yamaha Phazer.** I had acquired my snow machine for a bargain price, with the caveat that it had an “intermittent electrical issue, but not that big of a deal.” Now, while cruising at 55 mph, the engine and lights had cut off, bringing sudden darkness and deceleration.

Mark Allen and Jesse Charles were somewhere ahead, blasting along the 12 miles of unplowed highway between me and the truck. I was incredulous and dejected: Everything had gone so well up until now, from the morning’s snow machine ride to the approach and the climb. Then power roared back into the vile machine—and simultaneously into my psych.

We were on the way back from the 8,395' gneiss spire half a mile to the northeast of Black Peak (8,975'), a popular hiking destination. The spire had been previously climbed via its fourth-class southwest and east ridges; John Roper likely made the first ascent via the former, solo, in 1981. Though it has gone by at least one other name, we called the formation Black Spire and the creek that drains the large basin to the east Black Creek. No doubt there will be more routes climbed along the creek and on the spire.

After riding approximately 25 miles on snow machines from the winter closure on Highway 20 that February morning, we had skied west across Granite Creek and up the Black Creek basin for 3.5 miles to the base of Black Spire’s broad east face. At dawn, the temperature was -5°F (-20°C).

To start, Mark led a nearly 70m pitch of pale and delicate ice, rock, and snow about 30m right of a prominent gully. This zone of the face is mostly protected from overhead hazard by the steep terrain above it. After a traverse pitch into the gully, and after the spindrift pounding down the gully had abated, we climbed three pitches of good ice and névé and then a long, steep snow pitch to the ridge. We followed this northward to about 100m of steep snow leading directly to the summit. Moderate snowfall began as the sun met the montane horizon. Returning to the ridge, we put on the skis we had carried up the route and skied superb powder down the basin between Black Peak and Black Spire. After enjoying a huge half-pipe terrain feature linking this basin to Black Creek, we reached our track beside the creek—onsight night skiing in the mountains at its best.

Eventually we all made it back to Mark’s truck at the end of the plowed highway. But, once again, we quietly faced the power of winter when we discovered the truck’s battery was dead. A friend is someone who, at 11:30 p.m., leaves their warm bed and drives to the end of the highway to jump-start your dead battery: Thank you, Patrick Murphy, you are a true friend. As we drove toward town, our noses regained feeling and we commenced the sort of relaxed exchanges one does after an adventure-filled day.

We named our route Chimaphila (470m, IV AI4)—from the Greek *cheima* for “winter” and *philos* for “lover”; hence, “winter lover”—the genus of small forest plants abundant in cool temperate areas of the Northern Hemisphere. The Cree name for the plant, *pipisikweu*, meaning “it breaks into small pieces,” elucidates its past use to break up kidney stones. Thanks are due to Paul Butler for the ride-along to scope this route earlier in February.

—Seth Keena

## Images



Mark Allen and Seth Keena pausing to admire the view of Black Spire (8,395'), the middle of the three high points on the skyline, during the ski approach along Black Creek. After climbing Chimaphila (470m, IV AI4), a new route on the east face of Black Spire, the team skied back to the creek via a bowl behind the broad fluted ridge, and through the large slot feature left of the ridge.



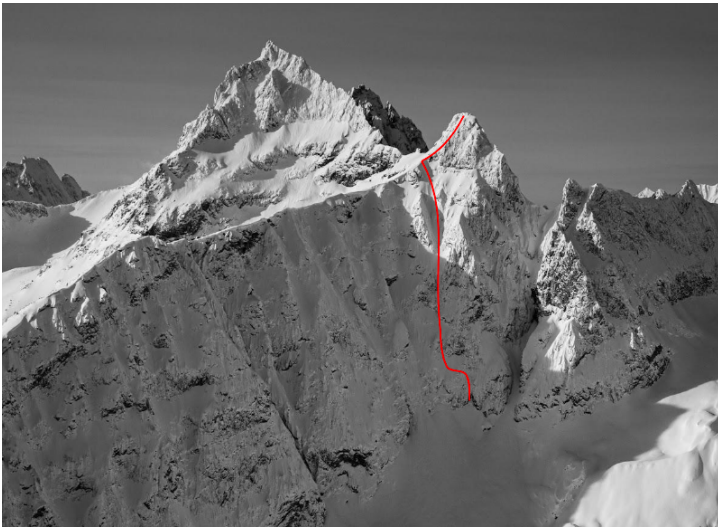
Mark Allen starts the team's ascent of Chimaphila (470m, IV AI4) on Black Spire with a pitch of pale and delicate ice, rock, and snow.



During their first ascent of Chimaphila (470m, IV AI4), on the east face of Black Spire, Mark Allen, Jesse Charles, and Seth Keena enjoyed thick water ice on several pitches, notably four and five. Here, Keena leads up pitch five.



Mark Allen and Jesse Charles nearing the top of pitch four of Chimaphila (470m, IV AI4), on the east face of Black Spire, North Cascades, Washington.



Chimaphila (470m, IV A14) on Black Spire (8,395'), the center right high point along the fluted ridge. From the ridge, the route ascends steep snow on the spire's southeast face. Black Peak (8,975') is in the background.



Black Spire (8,395') with Chimaphila (470m, IV A14), North Cascades, Washington. From the ridge, the route ascends steep snow on the spire's southeast face. Black Peak (8,975') is in the background.

## Article Details

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