



## AAC Publications

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### Eldorado Peak, Southwest Arête, Oro de Tontos

United States, Washington, Cascade Range

Oro de Tontos (3,600', V 5.10) on the southwest arête of Eldorado Peak. The line on the right shows the approach to the arête. Photo by John Scurlock.

**In April 2020, during an attempt at the Pearl Necklace ski tour, I saw the largest feature in the Marble Creek Cirque for the first time: the western aspect of Eldorado Peak, a prominent 8,868' mountain that "should have the sobriquet 'Queen of the Cascade River,'" as Fred Beckey wrote. My eye went straight to the southwest arête, a continuous 3,600' ridge, interrupted only by a large fin-shaped tower and a final headwall, which later connects to the south ridge.**

Climbing activity in the Marble Creek Cirque dates back to Pete Schoening and Dwight Baker's 1951 route (4th class) on the west face of Eldorado. The west arête (2,800', 5.7/5.8, Emerson-Gove) was climbed in 1969. A team attempted the southwest arête in 1972 but retreated after about seven pitches. I checked with a few prominent local experts—guys like Jim Nelson and Lowell Skoog—and they remembered a team climbing a snow gully to climber's left of the southwest arête in the late '80s, but no one completing the arête itself.

On August 7, Chris Alstrin, Adrien Costa, and I did the 4.5-mile approach from Eldorado Creek and established a camp on the western margin of the Eldorado Glacier. (Adrien is a former professional cyclist who had an above-the-knee amputation following a climbing accident in 2018. Chris was documenting our climb for a short film about Adrien titled *Transcendence*, directed by Michelle Smith.) The next day, we did a trial run of the approach to the Marble Creek Cirque via a precipitous couloir 200' from our camp, which required 400' of rappelling over rock, 600' of downclimbing steep névé, navigating around the 'schrund, and finally descending 1,000' of glacier to reach the toe of our planned route.

At 3 a.m. on August 9, we started down this approach again. Three hours later, we soloed the first few hundred feet of the southwest are te and then began simul-climbing when the terrain got more technical. We climbed lower-quality rock to avoid a building-sized snow remnant that threatened the better-looking options. After three lichen-covered pitches up to 5.9, the are te relented and we transitioned to another long block of simulging.

Adrien Costa leading during a block of 5.8 and 5.9 pitches that spiral clockwise around the "Fin" gendarme on Oro de Tontos (3,600', V 5.10). Photo by Chris Alstrin.

To our surprise, dark clouds hidden behind peaks to the southwest brought light sheets of rain. We traversed north on a ledge to the crest of the are te, seeking rudimentary shelter or easier terrain, whichever came first. While we were equivocating—bail or continue?—the weather improved and the rock dried. Adrien and I swapped leads on five sustained pitches up to 5.10. The going was slow—the leader climbed with an ice tool to excavate vegetated gear placements and remove loose rock.

The vegetation dissipated around 6,900', and the climb relented into an enjoyable Skagit gneiss ridge. We gained ground swiftly on fourth- and fifth-class terrain with splendid position, arriving at the base of a large tower we dubbed the Fin. Here, I found a circa-1980s ice axe—the only evidence we saw of previous travel—which I stowed in my pack. Already behind schedule, we traversed north across the edge of a snowfield and spiraled clockwise around the Fin's technicalities in four pitches of 5.8 to 5.9.

A ridge of precipitous gendarmes lay before us. We decided to bivvy, and while Adrien and Chris

prepared camp, I rappelled into a couloir below in search of water and miraculously harvested five liters from some melting snow.

The next morning, we rappelled into the same couloir and climbed four pitches up to 5.9+. Within a few hours, we had connected to the lower south ridge of Eldorado Peak and thus gained access to the Eldorado Glacier to the east. Chris left us at this point and headed back toward the real world. Adrien and I continued with one rope, staying predominantly on the crest of the south ridge, with a few rappels to bypass gendarmes. The climbing was good, the mood was light, and the weather was perfect.

We summited at 1:30 p.m. on August 10. In all, we had climbed around 15 technical pitches up to 5.10, and simulated large sections of low fifth class. As to the ice axe we found, it would not make sense that it was dropped from above, given the terrain. For now, it remains a mystery.

We named the route Oro de Tontos (3,600', V 5.10), or Fool's Gold. We had aspired for this route to be of much higher quality, given that it is one of the largest alpine rock features in the Cascades. Alas, in the end it was only Oro de Tontos.

— **Mark Allen**

## Images



Oro de Tontos (3,600', V 5.10) on the southwest arête of Eldorado Peak, with bivouacs shown. The line on the right shows the approach to the arête.



Oro de Tontos (3,600', V 5.10) on the southwest arête of Eldorado Peak. The line on the right shows the approach to the arête.





Oro de Tontos (3,600', V 5.10) on the southwest arête of Eldorado Peak, North Cascades, Washington.



Adrien Costa leading during a block of 5.8 and 5.9 pitches that spiral clockwise around the “Fin” gendarme on Oro de Tontos (3,600', V 5.10).



Adrien Costa leads a 5.9 pitch on the upper buttress of the southwest arête of Eldorado Peak after an unplanned night out, just above a feature the first ascent team named the “Fin.”



Adrien Costa and Mark Allen approach their base camp on the Eldorado Glacier. Costa, a former pro bike racer, uses a prosthetic leg after losing his right limb in a climbing accident in 2018.



An ice axe found low on the route during Mark Allen, Chris Alstrin, and Adrien Costa's likely first ascent of the southwest arête of Eldorado Peak, North Cascades, Washington.

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