



AAC Publications

Elephant's Tooth, Junk in the Trunk Variation; Aquarius Traverse

Alaska, Brooks Range, Arrigetch Peaks

Ethan Berkeland pausing along the Aquarius Traverse. The snowy peaks in the background, including Xanadu in the center of the frame, lie at the head of the Arrigetch Valley. Photo by Tristan O'Donoghue.

In 2022, I was working in the central Brooks Range in the small towns of Wiseman and Coldfoot for the majority of the summer. Geographically, I was perfectly positioned to launch an expedition to the Arrigetch Peaks.

On July 13, my partner Tristan O'donoghue (who had graciously done all of the food and gear preparation back in Fairbanks) and I convened at the Prospect Creek Airport along the Dalton Highway, where Brooks Range Aviation would pick us up. We packed and repacked our bags under the midnight sun and were whisked away to Bettles the next morning. After weigh-ins and a voluntary Park Service orientation, we were on our way to the Arrigetch.

The flight teases you with a few distant glimpses of the highest granite peaks and then a sudden descent into the Alatna River valley. Landing at Circle Lake is very anticlimactic—our haulbag and aid rack looked wildly out of place sitting in a swamp with no climbable rocks in sight. Given our big-walling ambitions, we were forced to double-haul our loads up into the valley. We each carried about 140 pounds of gear into the upper Arrigetch Valley, where we established a luxurious base camp beneath the north face of the Elephant's Tooth. During the three days of hauling loads, we realized our rations were somewhat meager and we began to cut calories, a trend that would continue for the entirety of our trip.

While hauling our last load, we encountered our first rain, which continued intermittently for about a week. On our first morning at base camp, we awoke to our objectives at the head of the valley covered in a thick blanket of snow. Our desire to climb, much like our desire to gorge ourselves on snacks, was at odds with the reality of our situation. To distract ourselves from the lack of food at camp and abundance of snow on the walls, we went on many short hikes, read, bouldered and even made it one pitch up the north face of the Elephant's Tooth before rappelling in torrential rain.

The team's base camp, with much of the Aquarius Traverse visible in the background. Photo by Ethan Berkeland.

Finally, on July 24, 10 days after we had landed, we got a window of good weather that allowed us to climb the north face of the Elephant's Tooth in six splendid pitches. Our route was a variation of the Nestler-Stucki line (AAJ 2012) and included three new pitches of climbing, the best of which followed a fingers to thin-hands splitter for 40m of sustained, wonderfully protected climbing. We named our variation Junk in the Trunk (5.11a) and scrambled down the east ridge to our camp, comfortably avoiding any rappels.

After four more days of rain, another short weather window materialized. Shifting gears toward objectives that were not shrouded in snow, we settled on attempting a traverse of the ridge between the Arrigetch and Aquarius valleys. On July 28, we soloed up the east ridge of the Elephant's Tooth to begin our southwest-trending traverse. We then made three rappels on the southwest face and continued scrambling along the ridge, roping up when necessary. We quickly realized that our rappel materials were in short supply and began repurposing any and all rappel anchors we found along the ridge for our own purposes.

We climbed numerous pitches in the 5.6–5.8 range and did much 4th- to low-5th soloing and downclimbing. The technical difficulties along the ridge culminated while surmounting the second of two short towers—this alone was a quality three-pitch climb, with two pitches of 5.9 to a 5.11b overhanging splitter dihedral. A four-inch crack dominated the first 30 feet of the pitch, and, lacking a number 4 Camalot, creative gear placements were required to gain the upper portion, where the crack narrowed to well-protected ring locks. After this crux, we continued soloing, rappelling and occasionally roping up for several individual pitches and simul blocks, including a stellar and unlikely near-vertical 5.5 pitch and a vertigo-inducing “gangplank” pitch with 1,000’ of exposure on each side of the ridge.

We eventually reached an obvious notch above the head of both the Aquarius and Arrigetch valleys, directly east of Xanadu. From here we rappelled and downclimbed into the Arrigetch Valley, concluding the Aquarius Traverse (5.11b). In total, we roped up for eight pitches/simul-climbing blocks, made 14 rappels, and traversed a total of 3.5 miles of ridgeline in a 22-hour camp-to-camp mission. The only named summit we traversed over was the Elephant’s Tooth, so it’s possible that some of the peaks along the ridge were previously unclimbed. It was undoubtedly the experience that Tristan and I had come to the Arrigetch for—true adventure in a remote wilderness.

After a short day of rest, we hiked back up to the head of the Arrigetch Valley, where we repeated the Virga Dihedral on the eastern flanks of Xanadu (see AAJ 2019) under bluebird skies. Just left of Virga Dihedral, we cragged on a 35m splitter pitch we titled Virga Crack (5.10a). We then coiled our ropes and began the long trek back to the Alatna River, which we completed the next day. After reaching the Alatna, we enjoyed a leisurely float to Takahula Lake, where we were picked up after 19 days in the Arrigetch. This trip was partially supported by an AAC Mountaineering Fellowship Fund Grant.

— **Ethan Berkeland**

Images



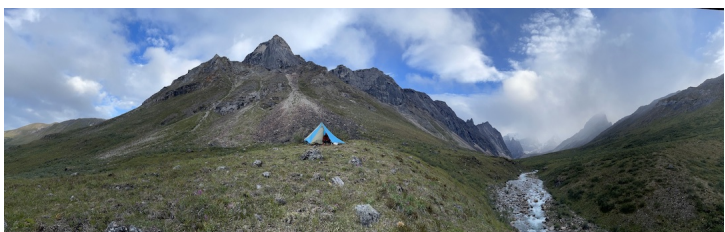
Tristan O'Donoghue stares up at the north face of the Elephant's Tooth at the start of the Aquarius Traverse.



Approaching below the north face of the Elephant's Tooth.



The crux headwall pitch variation on the north face of Elephant's Tooth, a left leaning straight-in splitter leading to an obvious V-notch



The team's base camp, with much of the Aquarius Traverse visible in the background.



Looking back on the ridge between the Arrigetch and Aquarius valleys from a nice traversing pitch. The Elephant's Tooth can be seen in the background.



Leading the splitter crux pitch of the Aquarius Traverse.



The very aesthetic Virga Crack on the East Buttress of Xanadu.



Floating down the Altna River to close out a successful expedition.



Tristan O'Donoghue studies the maps amidst an explosion of gear at Circle Lake.



Ethan Berkeland pausing along the Aquarius Traverse. The snowy peaks in the background, including Xanadu in the center of the frame, lie at the head of the Arrigetch Valley.



Tristan leading a short but steep crack along the Aquarius Traverse.



Tristan O'donoghue walking an easy section of the ridge during the first ascent of the Aquarius Traverse. The Elephant's Tooth is the background.

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