



AAC Publications

Cold Wars: Winter New Route on the South Face of Mooses Tooth

Alaska, Central Alaska Range, Ruth Gorge

Paweł Haldas climbing in rough conditions on the south face of the Mooses Tooth. Photo: Marcin Tomaszewski.

When Paweł Hałdaś (Poland) and I set off for Alaska in February, we had no definite plans but two areas on our radar: the Kichatna massif and the Mooses Tooth. We made a final decision without any hand-wringing and simply followed our intuition: The Mooses Tooth it would be, from the south. Our goal was a winter ascent.

Ever since I began climbing in 1990, winter has been my arena. Pushing myself in the coldest months for long stretches of time is a way to discover both my physical and psychological boundaries. My many cold ascents around the world—with Paweł and other great winter climbers, notably Marek Raganowicz—have taught me manifold lessons that I've brought into other areas of my life, from writing to filmmaking. More than anything, though, winter ascents prepare me for ever more winter ascents. [The author and Hałdaś's ascents include the first winter big-wall routes in Greenland and the Karakoram (see AAJs 2024 and 2022).]

Searching the web, I could find little information about big-wall routes on the south side of the Mooses Tooth—the best-known existing lines, like Ham and Eggs (Davies-Krakauer-Zinsser, 1975) and Shaken, Not Stirred (Crouch-Donini, 1997), follow icy gully systems—and no information at all about a winter ascent of the 1,000m section of wall I was eyeing. We decided to remain open to whatever the mountain might offer and try to avoid tunnel vision.

On our first morning on the Root Canal Glacier, February 28, we set the alarm clock for 6 a.m. and left the tent briskly at 7—only to return even more briskly less than a minute later! It was really cold, below -30°C and windy; our fingers immediately went numb. We took refuge in our still-warm sleeping bags. Going forward, we resolved to shift our morning routine an hour later.

When we ventured back out, I spotted a potential line on the steep rock face between The Tooth Obsession (2,900', V 5.10+ WI4 A0, Matusevych-Shirokov-Shuruyev-Vorotnikova, 2005) on the left and Ham and Eggs on the right. I took a series of photos so we could zoom in and study this system of meandering cracks.

Paweł Hałdaś ascending fixed lines at the bottom of Cold Wars (980m, 19 pitches, M5+ A3 70° snow/ice) on the south face of the Mooses Tooth, climbed over a period of 10 days in late February and early March. Photo: Marcin Tomaszewski

During the rest of the day, we focused on getting to the base of the rock, which proved a challenge from the first step out of camp—wading through thigh-high snowdrifts with heavy big-wall bags certainly gets the body temperature up. And the 200m snow apron was no picnic: Ice was only just forming at that time of year, the snow was unconsolidated, and the risk of avalanches was high. We roped up for the 60°–70° slope, weaving between rock outcroppings for protection.

As soon as we reached the rock, we built an anchor, established Camp 1 with our D4 Delta3p portaledge, and fixed ropes back to the glacier. The next day we shuttled up the rest of our equipment: approximately 150kg of gear and enough food and fuel for 20 days. On March 1, we committed to the wall and did not return to our glacier base camp from this point on. The forecast was good: Our inReach showed low temperatures but quite a few sunny days.

From the moment we started up the technical pitches, the battle with winter began. As on my other recent expeditions, I followed the rule that if I lost feeling in my toes or fingers, I would stop where I was and warm up—for as long as it took. I believe this is what has allowed my partners and me to make it through such frigid climbs without the slightest frostbite. We had to make a few more of these time-consuming stops than was advisable, as even during spells of bad weather, Paweł and I couldn't help removing our gloves to take photos and short videos. We did it again, I thought to myself each time I weathered another case of the dreaded "screaming barfies."

The battle with the wall was no easier than the cold. There were sand-filled and rock-choked cracks and chimneys, and on most pitches 70 to 80 percent of our protection was beaks and other pitons. But we couldn't believe our luck: The cracks we'd scoped from the glacier never disappeared. The wall always provided passage. The climbing did demand significant imagination and creativity, though; sometimes the crack was shallow, sometimes the rock was brittle, sometimes there was a thin layer of ice glazing everything. And always there were the unique challenges of winter. Despite warming fuel in our sleeping bags each night, it was still too cold for the stove to burn well in the morning, so we could only melt small amounts of water. Instead of cereal with milk to start our days, we had half a chocolate bar each and lukewarm coffee.

On March 4, about 270m above our first camp, we established our second bivouac on a convenient snowy ledge and fixed ropes back down to Camp 1. The next day we shuttled all our gear to Camp 2. Our plan was to descend from the top of the mountain by our ascent route.

Snow fell pretty much every two days, which resulted in intense powder avalanches from above, giving us pause every time they crashed around us. But we remained unscathed in our tent. We took turns leading each day, and I don't know which role was preferable, leader or belayer. Leading was mentally taxing, but the belayer, stuck at the anchor, had to avoid falling into the drowsy embrace of winter.

The climbing was not often difficult in the technical sense but was always engaging. On March 8, our tenth day of climbing, we made our final push. After reaching the top of the wall proper, we set off for the west ridge on mixed ground, angling over the upper face. The weather was on our side. Over the course of six full mixed pitches, we used every trick from aid climbing to free climbing. A final stretch of firn and snow brought us to the ridge, at the top of our buttress, and the end of Zimne Wojny ("Cold Wars," 980m, 19 pitches, M5+ A3 70° snow/ice).

The Alaska Range spread out in every direction below us—nearly empty at this time of year!

— Marcin Tomaszewski, Poland

Two New Routes on the Mooses Tooth Attempted: In late spring 2024, British climbers Mark Thomas and Mike "Twid" Turner attempted two new lines on the south face of the Mooses Tooth. The first started up the massive wall left of Shaken, Not Stirred, on a subpeak called the Incisor. (The left side of this big rock buttress was ascended by Gary Bocarde, Michael Clark, Charlie Porter, and John Svenson in June 1974; their Moose Antler route (800m, VI 5.8 WI4) was the second ascent of Mooses Tooth and the first route up the south side.) Thomas and Turner made it a few hundred meters up this wall over the course of three days. They drilled their only bolt placement at their high point to enable safe retreat. "In 38 [years] of climbing big walls we [haven't] seen such bad rock!" they wrote in a report about the trip. The second line they attempted began slightly right of Hałdaś and Tomaszewski's Cold Wars and had rock conditions nearly as dreadful as the first; the June weather also was dangerously warm and wet. After three days of climbing and fixing, Thomas and Turner reached a high point at about the same level as the Poles' Camp 2, about 475m up including the snow apron. Download the team's Mount Everest Foundation expedition report [here](#).

Images



Paweł Hałdaś climbing above Camp 2 on Cold Wars.



Paweł Hałdaś ascending fixed lines at the bottom of Cold Wars (980m, 19 pitches, M5+ A3 70° snow/ice) on the south face of the Mooses Tooth, climbed over a period of 10 days in late February and early March of 2024 by Hałdaś and Marcin Tomaszewski.



Paweł Hałdaś ascending a fixed line during a day of shuttling gear from Camp 1 to Camp 2 on Mooses Tooth.



Paweł Haldas climbing in rough conditions on the south face of the Mooses Tooth.



Marcin Tomaszewski about 500m up the wall, a pitch above the second bivouac on Cold Wars (980m, 19 pitches, M5+ A3 70° snow/ice).



Paweł Hałdaś in mixed terrain, four pitches from the ridgeline, on the south face of Mooses Tooth.



Marcin Tomaszewski (left) and Paweł Hałdaś on the ridge atop Cold Wars after the first ascent.



The line of Zimne Wojny ("Cold Wars," 980m, 19 pitches, M5+ A3 70° snow/ice) on the south face of the Mooses Tooth.



Portaledge camp on the south face of Mooses Tooth during the first ascent of Cold Wars.

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