



AAC Publications

Balin Miller, 2002–2025

February 2021. I drove southwest from Colorado Springs in my Toyota Camry through the San Juan Mountains on slick, empty roads, to meet my 19-year-old brother, Balin, in Telluride for some ice climbing. Balin was driving from Bozeman on the opposite side of the range in his 2010 Toyota Prius, which, unlike my car, was equipped with studded winter tires.

What the Prius lacked in clearance was offset by a low center of gravity and an outsized mass for such a small car. Balin knew how to exploit those qualities. He raced past lifted trucks and SUVs on Hyalite's winding canyon road. He once set the fastest known time (75 minutes) for an audacious house-to-house solo lap up Genesis I, a WI3 that was close to the parking lot in Hyalite.

After a long, tumultuous drive, I finally slid into the quaint, gentrified ski town of Telluride. The silver Prius awaited, with Balin patiently reclined in the driver's seat, knackered after driving over 13 hours.

We both lived in Bozeman, sharing a small room, with barely enough space for twin beds. Tight quarters were nothing new: My younger brother and I had been sharing a room for nearly 20 years, since he arrived in our home in Anchorage in 2002.

We found a nice little pull-off just outside of town and dosed inside the Prius, where two moderately sized people were just able to lie flat, cocooned in our down bags. I said my ritualistic, "Good night, Balin."

He replied with a shivering, "Sleep tight."

The plan was to climb Bridalveil Falls. We slept poorly in the cold and woke to a glistening layer of frost inside the car and a foot of new snow outside, but packed up and set out. Balin had been climbing ice for several years, whereas I was new to it. He hauled me everywhere; it felt like we didn't climb anything easier than WI5+ that first season.

I once asked why he climbed with me, a novice, so much. He said, "As my brother, you're my built-in climbing partner for life, so I see you as a long-term investment."

Balin taught me nearly everything I know in climbing, and showed me tenacity. In the face of adversity, whether from a buildup of lactic acid or the danger of steeper, thinner, scrappier ice, he was unfazed. No matter how intimidating the situation, he was nonchalant, and it eased my nerves.

Clambering toward Bridalveil, we post-holed up to our waists. For a while, it was easier to crawl on all fours to avoid sinking in. After well over two hours, we reached the base.

"Are you ready to freak it, Dylan?" Balin asked, exuberant. I could tell by his tone that he was excited to tickle the ice, a phrase he'd coined to describe delicate climbing.

We began. Swing, kick, kick, swing, kick, kick. To me, at least, it all felt extra arduous, but we made a speedy ascent, business as usual for Balin. I followed the final pitch to find him soaking wet and

shivering uncontrollably. It was clear that his hand-me-down Gore-Tex one-piece from our father was no longer waterproof; perhaps it was even a little hydrophilic.

Quickly, I clipped into the anchor and gave Balin my dainty and insufficient synthetic puffy. My upper body for the moment remained dry; however, my legs were soaked, as it turned out my pants weren't waterproof either. The petrifying cold crept deeper and soon chilled me to the core. As night drew in, we rappelled, and of course the ropes froze stiff on the final rap. We were safely on the ground and almost ready to abandon the ropes, but we grabbed our Micro Traxions and simultaneously jumped on the taut ropes, which, to our surprise, broke free from the iced-up V-thread, having been frozen inside. On top of learning that our ropes weren't waterproof, either, we learned to be much more cautious and use preventive means around V-threads and wet ice.

After wallowing back to the car, we blasted the heater and shed our half-frozen garments. On cue, the screaming barfies ensued, enveloping our hands and feet in throbbing misery. Cursing his toenails, which were falling off, Balin exclaimed that he might not ever climb ice again.

The next day, after another restless night, yet suspicious of our sluggishness, we swabbed ourselves for COVID. Positive! Was ours perhaps the first COVID ascent of Bridalveil?

One short year later, two days after his 20th birthday, Balin returned to Telluride and free soloed Bridalveil Falls in badass style (carrying his 70m twin rappel ropes on his back rather than tagging them up).

Balin is best-known for his solos of the 9,000-foot Slovak Direct on Denali and the 6,500-foot French Connection on Begguya, in June 202, and earlier, in January, the nearly 2,000-foot Reality Bath (WI6+ VII), on White Pyramid in the Canadian Rockies, for only its second known ascent, 37 years after the first (see Balin's first-person account of these climbs on page TK). However, equally impressive is the ice climbing resumé he built before these bold climbs. Balin spent years quietly refining his craft, soloing many of the Canadian Rockies' classic testpieces, like Nemesis, Whiteman Falls, Virtual Reality, and Slipstream, among many more—often with nimble ease, all while camping out of the Prius.

As Balin's brother, I had the privilege of growing up with him and romping along for many escapades. Balin was my brother, climbing mentor, best friend, and adventure pal in all of life. I still often consult my inner monologue about everyday decisions and ask, "What would Balin do?" He would likely reply with a clever joke or something goofy and nonsensical—and that laugh that filled a room. Balin also, though, possessed the ability to speak his mind, even if it occasionally backfired. His honesty wasn't always something you wanted to hear, but he was usually right.

Balin's boisterous spirit is always with me. While Balin will be deeply missed by many, he left a noble path for us to follow. He reminded us all to dream boldly and speak your truth.

—Dylan Miller

Images



Balin Miller getting cozy in his infamous silver Prius parked in the South Fork of the Shoshone near Cody, Wyoming.



Balin Miller starts up Soul Creation on the Weeping Wall along the Seward Highway near Anchorage, Alaska.



Balin Miller getting jazzed up to climb Oh Le Tabernac on Mount Wilson in the Canadian Rockies.



Balin Miller starting up Urs Hole Direct on Cascade Mountain, Banff National Park, Alberta, Canada, just moments before one of his crampons broke mid route. Thanksgiving Day, 2022.

Article Details

Author	Dylan Miller
Publication	AAJ
Volume	67
Issue	100
Page	
Copyright Date	2026
Article Type	In memoriam