



AAC Publications

The Tooth Traverse

Five Days Across the Mooses Tooth Massif

There are certain skylines wilder and far more beautiful than the sum of their parts: the Fitz Roy massif in Patagonia, the Aiguilles of Chamonix, and the Trango group in Pakistan. These are places where each mountain seems positioned to complement the next, the ridges and couloirs folding against each other in harmony as if one peak cannot exist without its neighbors. The Mooses Tooth massif in Alaska's Ruth Gorge forms another such skyline.

The Mooses Tooth massif appears more like a long ridge of connected summits than a singular mountain. Indeed, it looks like a jawbone, curved in a subtle horseshoe, each successive point rising in prominence. First there's the Sugar Tooth with its snow-pillow summit, then the canine-shaped Eye Tooth and the gleaming white incisor of the Bear Tooth. Last comes the Mooses Tooth itself, a molar-shaped mountain of bronze buttresses and narrow couloirs, capped by a summit ridge that stretches a mile from its highest point to the west summit. The ridge continues for another mile, dropping steeply to the floor of the gorge.

I can't recall when the idea first popped into my head. Others, I would later learn, dreamed up slightly different iterations of the same concept. I do remember that it began with a photograph, and it came in a heartbeat. I only needed to turn on the light. One second the Tooth Traverse didn't exist. The next, it was the most obvious and beautiful line in the world. All told, I guessed the Tooth Traverse represented five miles of climbing, perhaps 10,000' of elevation gain and loss. To travel it all, from one end to the other, became my dream.

I first applied for a grant to attempt the Tooth Traverse in 2008. I didn't win. It turned out to be the year of the enchainment in the western hemisphere: the Torres in Patagonia; the Isis Face to the Slovak Direct on Denali. I happened to be in both places, and I that traversing this type of giant terrain is not, strictly speaking, logical—mainly because it involves a lot of transitioning from one style to another, across different mountain mediums: from ice to rock, from rappelling to post-holing. It therefore requires good conditions and time, days of bivouac-enforced commitment, rather than a pure, nonstop single push. To pull off a big enchainment, you have to have staying power.

July 2009

In the spring of 2009 I hitched a ride to South Boulder to crash for a week at Renan Ozturk and Zack Smith's house. They were planning a trip to the Ruth Gorge that summer. One evening, over beers, between my goofy impressions of velociraptor climbing techniques, I let my tongue wag about how cool it would be to enchain the Tooth massif. Eyes sparked with giddy anticipation.

Six weeks later, Renan and Zack started their trip with a quick repeat of the Cobra Pillar. Afterward, they were stopped below their main objective, the southeast buttress of Mt. Dickey. They turned to their backup plan. It was early July. The nights passed without darkness or freezing temperatures, and the spine of the Tooth Traverse lay mostly exposed in naked rock. Renan and Zack embarked for the traverse in the lightest of styles: Other than a stove, they carried no bivy gear.

Starting at Cavity Gap, a narrow brèche south of the Sugar Tooth, they changed into rock shoes and began simulclimbing. In a mere 12 hours, they onsighted a gendarme-studded new route over the

Sugar Tooth, rappelled off the other side, put on their boots and crampons, completed the second ascent of the gargoyled Talkeetna Standard, and reached the summit of the Eye Tooth. From there, they set off across the snow ridge toward the Bear Tooth. Ahead lay massive cornices and steep slopes. The ridge proved to be a slushy mess. They huddled for a brew. It was too risky to continue. They retreated back across the ridge to the summit of the Eye Tooth and rappelled. Soon after their return to civilization in July 2009, I got an email from Renan. In its entirety, it read: "yo freddie! want to go party of 3 on the traverse some time soon we love velociraptors!"

May 2010

"Should we take it to the scales?" asked Zack. Mt. Dickey rose like an altar above our camp. Concentric piles of gear stretched in every direction. Zack knelt in the center of it all. In each hand, he held a lightweight bivy jacket. He slowly hefted them in turn. Zack had actually brought a digital scale to base camp to weigh gear. I chuckled. In truth, I cared a lot less about what we brought than I did about getting to know my two partners better.

The biggest question mark was the south face of the Mooses Tooth, a large shield of unclimbed granite that sliced into the sky above the Bear Tooth–Mooses Tooth col. It was Zack's idea that we attempt this section on its own. From the col, the first part looked innocuous enough. Non-threatening flakes breached a sunburned slab into an alcove where the wall steepened. Wearing rock shoes, Zack scurried up the first two pitches. Renan took the lead for what seemed the obvious crux. An hour passed, then two. "Freddie, get up here!" he yelled. Renan lowered to the belay, a gash from his middle finger bleeding profusely. Near the end of the difficulties, he'd tried to place a piton in a shallow flare, only to have a hammer blow ricochet.

I batmanned to his highpoint. The crack pinched down to an unusable seam. After wasting too much time exhausting the alternatives, I cleverly solved the impasse by drilling a bolt. It was the first and only bolt I've placed in the mountains. When I weighted it, the quarter-inch stud flexed mightily. I hooked the pick of my ice axe in the crack above, gave it a few reassuring blows with the other tool, and aided upward toward a belay. My partners quickly joined me, rejuvenated. It hadn't been pretty, but the Bleeder Pitch opened the door to the entire traverse. From the summit, we rappelled Ham and Eggs in only two hours.

After a couple of sun-soaked rest days, we skied toward Cavity Gap, the start of the traverse, with high expectations. We climbed steadily, if not rapidly, toward the summit of the Sugar Tooth. Then Renan slipped, core-shot the rope, and dropped an axe. As the sun dipped and the gorge washed in shadows, we stopped for the night a few hundred feet from the top of the Sugar Tooth. A quietness filled the tent despite the endlessly clear weather. Something was off. In the morning, we rappelled to the start of the Talkeetna Standard and returned to base camp. Our effort felt less like a failure than like a false start. However, after identifying the bodies of two climbers killed in an avalanche the following day, we had little desire for another Tooth Traverse attempt. But there was no question that we'd be back.

March 2011

Just weeks before our scheduled rematch with the Tooth, Renan was skiing and fell, flipped over a short line of cliffs, and pinballed down a tree-spiked face. He was found unconscious. A deep gash peeled back his head to his skull. Zack and I debated going as a team of two without him. We all obsessed over the likelihood that another team might scoop the project from us. I admitted to Zack, "I guess I'd rather do the second ascent of the Tooth Traverse with Renan than the first ascent without him."

In July, Zack wrote to say he was considering going to the Ruth in September without us: I love you guys but I want to see other people. Meanwhile, Renan had embarked on a crazy mission to cure himself, and now he felt hurt. I thought Zack's decision was fair, since Renan and I were both leaving on other trips. He was hungry for the line. I understood. "Go for it," I told him. That autumn, the

weather was shitty. Zack and his new partner reserved tickets, but they never left Colorado.

May 2012

Anchorage greeted us with gray skies and rain. Our arrival in Talkeetna corresponded with the first flyable weather in a week. Colby Coombs's eyes lit up like a jack-o'-lantern and his lips puckered with sarcastic glee when he saw we'd returned. "It's gonna be some gnarly snow—New Hampsha' style, all right. You're gonna have a fun time, oh, boy!" Over beers and smoldering cigarettes, we talked with one team that had recently returned and heard the worst of it: bottomless snow, sketchy avalanche conditions, impossible corniced ridges. I asked one refugee what aspect might have the most stable conditions. "Hawaii," he responded.

Renan and I tried to counter the reports with a relentless, optimistic plan that bordered on delusion. This year, we hoped to have a helicopter fly by to film us en route—no sponsors or production teams involved, just Renan and I scheming on laptop computers, trying to coordinate a camera and helicopter for a bargain price. Renan's dream was to turn the entire Ruth Gorge into a dolly shot, with us, in the midst of a first ascent, as the subjects, set against one of the most breathtaking vistas we'd ever known. Somehow, this idea had evolved to the point that we both felt the art was as important as the climb.

Zack seemed removed from our banter as he fidgeted with gear. Finally, he broke his silence. His heart was no longer in the Tooth Traverse. He couldn't tell us precisely why. Maybe it was personal. Maybe it was all the talk of helicopters and camera angles. Maybe it was the bad weather, the fear of failure. Maybe he just fell out of love with alpine climbing. There was not much we could say. We hugged him and told him we understood. He told us we had to give the traverse our best effort. A couple of hours later, Renan and I got on a plane for the gorge while Zack boarded an airport shuttle back to Anchorage. Bottled in the overcrowded fuselage, Renan and I soon watched as the pocketed surface of the lower Ruth Glacier slipped past.

Renan and I leave base camp at 4 a.m. It's a relief to be under way. The approach feels shorter than I remember, the glacier's easy curves friendly and familiar. We cache our skis and immediately sink to our knees. I plow a trough to the bergschrund below the Sugar Tooth. In 2009, Zack and Renan climbed over the Sugar Tooth and up the Eye Tooth, hardly ever taking off their rock shoes. In 2010 there were low-angle snowfields, but also dry pitches and plenty of convenient ledges. This year, everything less than 60 degrees is snow.

I punch up a shallow snow feature toward what I recall was an indented slab. Now it's swabbed in verglas with a thin crack I'll have to drytool. I take a breath: the first real move in miles of climbing to come. For a moment, I'm almost crushed by a sense of improbability. The Coffee Glacier slithers away from me past the Broken Tooth. I'm with a great friend at low altitude on a ridge-crest line, with little to hit us. The climbing is tricky but the rock's generally good. We're in no hurry: We have a tent and sleeping bag, a few days' food and fuel. Why not at least go alpine camping? I can think of no other place in the world I'd rather be.

"This is a pain, but it's climbable," I shout to Renan. "We may as well camp for the night on top of the Sugar, and bail the next morning if we have to. This is our vacation, after all." We stop at 5:45 p.m. only a few meters from where we'd bivied two years ago. This snowfield is broad enough that we can unrope for the evening—there's nothing this comfy for many pitches to come.

Day Two

We tiptoe across the summit ridge of the Sugar Tooth at dawn and rappel into the jagged notch at the beginning of the Talkeetna Standard. Thin snowfields and cornices smother the rocky ridge overhead. I glower as I search for an anchor and wait for Renan. Boots and crampons will stay on our feet for a

while. Like it or not, the Tooth Traverse is a mixed route this season.

When we bailed two years ago, we'd optimistically cached two days of food and fuel inside a hollow in a rock gendarme here, recorded down to the gel in Zack's meticulous notes. Now, a slight six-foot fin of snow completely covers the ridge. It's fragile enough that I place an extra piece of gear. Renan belays me while I dig. If we don't find that extra fuel canister, it will be another reason to retreat. A half hour passes. I'm almost ready to abandon the effort...and then, there it is.

The next six to eight pitches are a surprise: thin snowfields, pegboard drytooling, and incut slabs. A short chimney bubbles with water ice. And all along, there's just enough gear to keep things reasonable. At the upper headwall, Renan puts on rock shoes. I watch as he puzzles over runout flakes, his movements as deliberate and powerful as those of a praying mantis. We traverse under a dollop cornice and dig another tent site in the deepening twilight blue, one pitch below the summit of the Eye Tooth. It's as if we've unexpectedly caught an updraft, and are just beginning to soar.

Day Three

Ahead, the Missing Tooth waits. The surreal architecture of snow, wind, and ridge is both mesmerizing and scary. The Missing Tooth isn't much. Like the Eye and the Sugar, it's more of a bump on a long, serpentine ridge than an independent mountain. The farther we trace our line above the Ruth Gorge, the more I feel as if we're climbing a singular route with its own simplicity, rather than a contrived enchainment. But if it has little geographic importance, this tiny, untouched summit has personal meaning.

A line of sallow cornices leans first one way and then the other, like the individual teeth on a bread knife. The snowpack is translucent, revealing the reddish, toothy granite beneath the mountain's skin. This was Zack and Renan's highpoint from 2009. It's the last truly unknown part of the entire traverse. I downclimb over the first cornice lip, and pause. One foot swings idly in air. I lower myself a little more and, to my surprise, my crampon catches consolidated snow. The sun has baked the mountain into finite, concrete proportions. I shuffle right and begin following the east side of the ridge. We bivvy below the summit of the Bear Tooth. The corrugated Coffee Glacier watches far below.

Day Four

Renan and I simulclimb to the summit of the Bear Tooth through an ethereal specter of cascading, cream-colored clouds. Rappelling becomes a time-consuming exercise in one-piece anchors. Finally, we coil the ropes and solo toward the south face of the Mooses Tooth. It's afternoon when Renan starts up the first rock pitch. He takes off his crampons and hangs his pack. He tries to fudge in more gear. His breaths rattle when he speaks: "I don't know if this will go." For the last week, we've indulged in this mild fantasy that the Tooth Traverse would be possible. Renan's breaths relax, and he makes another move. Now he's swimming up a steep patch of snow. A fall would be inconceivable. I don't let myself relax until I hear the words: "I'm off, Freddie."

I take over the lead for the Bleeder Pitch. The bolt I placed two years ago flexes, once more, under my weight. Shadows deepen, as if Mt. Dickey were reaching across the gorge to grab us. Two more pitches in rock shoes, and then I switch to boots and crampons and head toward the summit ridge. We summit the Mooses Tooth at 11 p.m. I raise my hands, let out a primitive cry, and continue on. Renan follows. The west ridge, our descent route, rolls toward Denali, a narrow strip of snow suspended in the purple-blue twilight sky.

Day Five

It's after midnight when we brew at the top of Ham and Eggs. The mountains are cloaked in a monochrome dusk. There's light enough to carry on. We trudge across the west ridge's curling

swales. At first it's easy walking, then we round a dome and a vertical step hovers in the half-light. I cuss my way up it, unable to interpret my footwork in the gloom, scratching and manteling from vertical rock onto punchy snow. We drop steeply toward Shaken Not Stirred. This is the first north-facing terrain we've encountered on the entire traverse. It's impossible to downclimb, so we rappel. More sweat and swear words get us to the top of the gully.

I take the lead again, committing to a blunted crampon point on silky stone and then a long runout across hollow snow. How many pitches like this have we climbed over the past five days? Too many for me to count. We stop and brew the last of our instant coffee near the west summit of the Mooses Tooth. The sun is rising to our left. The morning light singes the ridge crest in sharp relief. From the summit of the Eye Tooth, I can trace our line: I know each cornice, every rock and spine and swirl on this long and whimsical path we've followed. It's probably familiar to more pilots than climbers.

At last, we rappel toward the west shoulder, the long snow ramp that will guide us home. I'm reminded how far we've come, and how far we still have to go.

Summary

First complete ascent of the Tooth Traverse (8,000m, 5.10R M5 A2+) by Renan Ozturk and Freddie Wilkinson, May 17–May 21, 2012, after several years of attempts. During these efforts, the team of Ozturk, Wilkinson, and Zack Smith completed three first ascents—the Sugar Tooth's south ridge, the summit of the Missing Tooth [both AAJ 2010], and Swamp Donkey Express on the Mooses Tooth [AAJ 2011].

About the Author

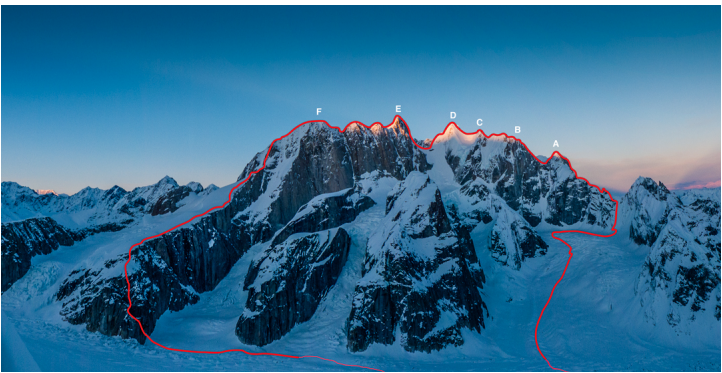
Freddie Wilkinson is a New England-based climber, mountain guide, and outdoor writer. He has made numerous first ascents on difficult peaks in Alaska, Patagonia, and the Himalaya.

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Images



An aerial photo of Renan Ozturk and Freddie Wilkinson on the summit of the Bear Tooth.



The Mooses Tooth massif, showing the Tooth Traverse from right to left: (A) Sugar Tooth, (B) Eye Tooth, (C) Missing Tooth, (D) Bear Tooth, (E) Mooses Tooth, east summit (F) Mooses Tooth, west summit.



Ozturk gets the middle finger on the team's 2010 attempt.



Ozturk leading a rock slab in crampons.



Ozturk switches to rock shoes on the Mooses Tooth.



Plenty of snow-meets-rockclimbing on the Tooth Traverse. Here, Ozturk welds the mediums.



Ozturk leaves his pack behind as things get steeper.



One of many bivies along the ridge.



Ozturk walking across the Ruth Glacier.



Endless traversing leads into dusk.



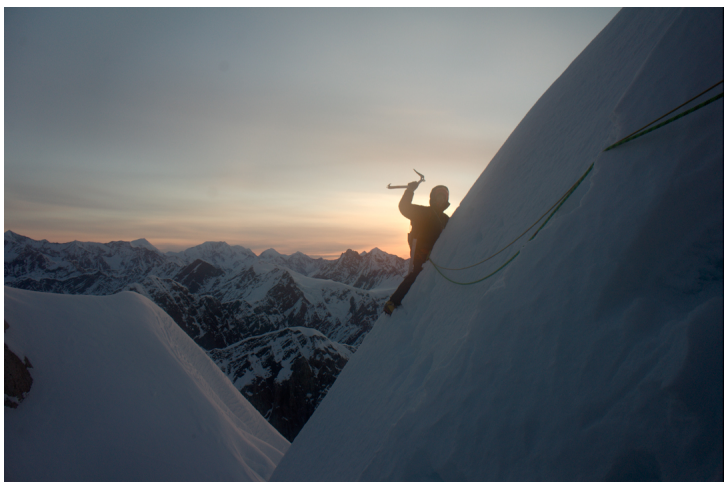
Ozturk embraces his position on the Swamp Donkey Express part of the traverse during the 2010 attempt.



Freddie Wilkinson on the summit of the Sugar Tooth at dawn on Day 2 of the traverse.



Wilkinson traversing the ridge from the Missing Tooth to the Bear Tooth. Wilkinson: "At first, snow climbing is rarely as puckering as you've built it up to be. As you approach a section of ridge, the horizontal space gets compressed, and features look steeper than they really are. But the exposure is guaranteed to be tremendous, protection is always a major concern, and the end of the rope always comes sooner than you're hoping. Then you're both climbing, and you spend most of your time wondering whether you'll be pulled to your death if the other guy falls."



Wilkinson rounding a snow ridge. Wilkinson: "Traversing this type of giant terrain is not, strictly speaking, logical—mainly because it involves a lot of transitioning from one style to another, across different mountain mediums: from ice to rock, from rappelling to post-holing. It therefore requires good conditions and time, days of bivouac-enforced commitment, rather than a pure, nonstop, single push."



An early morning start up to Cavity Gap on the FA of the Tooth Traverse.

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