



AAC Publications

No Weak Shit

A Ten-Year Obsession with the Mooses Tooth

It all started with a mistake, as some things do. I was with my friend James Stover, somewhere near the summit of the Mooses Tooth. We had just finished the last of our food: a little can of Vienna sausages. I was cold from nearly 24 hours on the go without many calories. Belaying that last pitch in a funnel of spindrift hadn't helped. I had been packed in snow up to my chest for what seemed like a long time.

It was late May of 2004, our first trip to the Alaska Range. We weren't too excited about it at the time, but we had just climbed a direct new route up the south face of the Mooses Tooth, to the right of the classic Ham and Eggs ice couloir (AAJ 2005). If getting lost on a corniced ridge in a whiteout had been the norm for me, I might have had a slightly bigger grin.

After topping out the headwall, we shortened the rope and traversed the Tooth's infamous wavy ridgeline. Our plan had been to rappel Ham and Eggs, which we'd done a week earlier; there were fixed anchors the whole way down. But now we couldn't see much farther than our nose, and we headed the wrong way on the ridge, traversing to the east. After hours of wallowing, the ridge dropped off drastically. That couldn't be right.

We had carried only a single, very light pack between us, with no bivy gear, not even a stove. Our plan had worked well, as far as it went. We'd blasted up that steep face, feeling so comfortable with our speed that we allowed ourselves a nap in the sun atop a rock pillar. But now we were shivering and almost out of gas, and blindly trying to navigate a convoluted cornice in a whiteout at night.

We ate those little weenies. I slurped the last bit of gelatin slime out of the can just to get the last bit of fat. I could feel some warmth inside, but it wasn't much. We decided to backtrack and rap the new route we'd just climbed.

Our tracks along the ridge had vanished. We climbed back to what we thought was our top-out, built a snow anchor, and threw the ropes into the white void. I made it about three-quarters of the way down the ropes before it started to feel very wrong. By now it had gotten light and stopped snowing, and I was looking down at a glacier that didn't seem familiar. This definitely wasn't the Ruth or the Root Canal. It must have been the Buckskin, below the east face. The clouds wisped by, and I kept getting little glimpses of the face below me. Even in the state we were in, the face looked very attractive. Really quite sexy. By the time I'd climbed back up to James, the clouds had parted in a Hollywood ending. We got our bearings back, traversed over the summit, and rapped Ham and Eggs.

Back home, I couldn't stop thinking about our wrong turn on the Mooses Tooth. That radical-looking face, half-seen from above. We had used one point of aid for a tension traverse on Levitation and Hail Marys, our new route on the south face, and now I wanted madly to go back and do another new line, all free. Over the next couple of years I dabbled in the Ruth, but I couldn't stop thinking about the Mooses Tooth.

In 2008, I talked my brother Tom into flying onto the Buckskin to sink our tools into the east face. In

photos I had eyeballed a couple of options, all of which looked steep and challenging. In mid-April our bags sat on the runway as Paul Roderick from Talkeetna Air Taxi pulled our ride around and dropped off two British climbers, fresh out the range. Jon Bracey and Matt Helliker stepped out of the plane sunburned and sporting grins. They had fired up some new ground to the right of Arctic Rage (Gilmore-Mahoney, 2004) on the Mooses Tooth. They said it was steep, with not much ice. Damn! I thought. That was one of our options!

With our gear loaded on the plane, I thought for a second about flying to the Kichatna instead, but something told me we should still head to the Buckskin. Not counting the British ascent (which hadn't quite topped out), there were still only two full-length routes up the broad east face, and no route had gone free.

As soon as we landed, a few miles down the glacier from the Mooses Tooth, Tom and I threw our bags out and skied to the base of the wall. The skies were clear, and we could see the line the Brits had followed. A distinct ribbon cut down the face between their line and Arctic Rage. I couldn't tell if it was ice or snow. When we got to camp, my brother said, "Have you seen that thing to the...." "Yup," I said, cutting him off. We quickly agreed to try it.

Now it was time to sit and watch, getting to know the face's moods. The Buckskin was quiet other than the rumble of falling ice from a huge serac on the north face, named the Menace by the late Seth Shaw. A few times a day, you could faintly recognize the low hum of an aircraft flying sightseers or climbers into the Ruth, on the other side of the mountain. I lay in the tent with my brother, listening to Rage Against the Machine. "Know Your Enemy" reverberated in my brain. I thought about the looming axe these mountains hold above our necks. We train hard, develop our skills, and become as indestructible as we can. We get to know our enemy. That becomes our ticket to trespass.

We packed three days of food, a small tent, and two sleeping bags. A little heavy, but I'd learned my lesson about going too light on the Mooses Tooth back in 2004. A year later, Tom and I had gotten backhanded on Kyzyl Asker in Asia with one bag between us and no tent. We'd retreated with our tail between our legs, Tom with frostbite and me with slight hypothermia. This time we planned to dig in and wait out any funk, rather than bail at the first sight of snowfall.

It was dark as we crossed the bergschrund. We simul-climbed until the horizon turned pink, then pitched out a steep roof with good pro as the light went from pink to orange. After a few more pitches of simul-climbing, we hit the first band of steep rock. It was blue sky and Tom's lead. He made multiple attempts to get past a dripping-wet, flaring offwidth, lowered off, and then found a way around to the right. In a full pitch he didn't find any pro. It was powder snow over 70-degree granite. When I pulled into the belay I found him giving me a body belay. "If you went winging off, I would have jumped down this other couloir," he said. Yeah, I guess that would have worked.

I got on the sharp end, swinging and torquing my tools up mixed ground. By the time we reached a big snow slope up above, it was snowing heavily. We postholed to a safe-looking bivy site under the main rock headwall and spent an hour chipping a flat spot for the tent. A quarter of the tent hung off the ledge. Inside, we clipped everything to the anchor.

When the sun came out nearly two full days later, we swam up rotten, snow-filled chimneys. You'd bounce-test and rip your tool through soft snow until finally it held body weight just long enough to do one move and repeat the process. If you chossled in too deep, looking for real ice, you'd hit dry rock. This would create a small bulge that you'd have to crawl over, feet scratching at the rock underneath.

Several pitches of this led us to a 15-foot roof. Through the binos it had seemed like there was a fang of ice dripping from the right corner of the roof, but now we saw it was just a sugary snow cone. If it had been pink or blue you could have called it cotton candy. When I tried to place a piton above the belay, the rock disintegrated and rained down on Tom like kitty litter. The crappy rock and free-hanging snow fang made for an easy decision. We bailed. A friend met us with warm food at camp.

He had seen the massive slides tearing down our line and thought we'd perished. As a result, he drank all the whiskey, so we had nothing left to help us swallow our failure.

I had carried a picture of the face, torn out of an Alpinist article, as a topo for our route. Back home in Utah, I folded it and put it on the shelf.

In 2010 I received the Mugs Stump Award for another try on the Mooses Tooth. I unfolded that photo from the Alpinist and applied a layer of climbing tape along the back of the weakened creases.

My brother couldn't get away from life's pull this time, and so Matt Tuttle signed up for the mission. He and I climb well together. We've spent winters training in the Wasatch.

Once again the plane's echoing hum faded away, leaving us alone on the Buckskin Glacier. We had flown in earlier this time, in late March. Colder sounded better for this route, and we thought we might catch some of the ice left over from the previous fall, making for better conditions.

A day later, with stable-looking weather, we skied with light packs toward the bergschrund. This time my plan was slightly different. We had four days of food, if rationed, two 15°F bags, but no tent, only a shovel head that we could use to dig in if we had to.

Above the 'schrund we chose a more direct line to access the headwall, and Matt gave it a go as the sun popped above the horizon. It was -10°F when we left camp, and I hadn't been warm since. Matt downclimbed to the belay. No ice, no gear. We juked around to the left, found a weakness, and burned a few rope lengths simul-climbing. At the headwall where Tom had started his sketchy traverse, we found a bit of thin ice leading directly into the main ribbon. Climbing ice where there hadn't been any in 2008 gave me hope for the roof pitch. I kept peering up and imagining myself pulling those moves. The sky turned gray and started to drop.

As I followed a sticky ice pitch that brought us to the same height as our two-day bivy in 2008, it started to snow. I told Matt I didn't want to commit to the headwall with the weather change. We decided to climb a steep ice pitch that led us away from the blow-out zone, and then spent a good hour digging a snow cave. It wasn't five-star, but it was home for the next 24 hours. On Easter morning I surprised Matt with some Peeps. We dunked those cute little marshmallow birds in delicious instant coffee, which made things better but not alright, and then rapped off as soon as we felt it was safe.

Back at camp we rested a couple of days. When the sky seemed to be clearing, we climbed to our high point in half the time. With a good feeling that we could blast the upper headwall and rap back to our snug cave in a push, we left a pack with extra food, our shovel, and sleeping bags, and we kept climbing. We had been keeping an eye on a peak maybe 15 miles away, and now it was getting hit hard with wind. We could see snow blowing thousands of feet from its summit. But the sky was still cloud-free, and we felt good about our progress.

Matt led steep ice to a belay just below the crux. As he belayed me in, I noticed him fidgeting and cursing. He was holding up a large rock with his shoulder. The rock was still clipped to him with a sling, and now he was anchored only to a shabby, two-lobe cam. "This horn came loose! Put in a piece and clip me in!" I hammered in a semi-good Pecker, and with an ugly mess of slings we equalized the Pecker and the sketchy cam. Matt let the horn go whizzing off. I laughed as I told him that the cord he'd clipped was the anchor I had rapped off in 2008. *It must have been frozen in better then.*

It was getting dark. I could see some ice in the roof, but very little. I dry-tooled up about 30 feet, slung another horn for protection, and found a good stance before I had to start tapping into the verglas. Months of spindrift had formed a transparent windowpane contouring along the steep belly of the granite roof. There was no icicle hanging off the lip. This ice followed different rules than I was used

to.

I yelled "Watch me!" as if that was going to help. I was facing out, down the glacier toward base camp. My left tool stuck first swing. My stomach churned. I breathed deep and committed, swinging around on my left arm so I was facing the ice, feet scratching. A stick for my right tool. Still no ice for my feet. I pressed my crampons onto the granite, locked off with my right, and swung the left just as my feet skated. My crampons bit ice, and soon I put in a stubby that looked strong and moved up to a small stance. Feeling like I'd barely pulled it off, I let out a scream that echoed off the Broken Tooth. I couldn't tell if Matt was pissed off at the committing lead or stoked for our progress. Regardless, that was out of the way.

In the time it took me to belay Matt up, the chimney system had started to spindrift. It was still dark. After a couple more pitches, the spindrift was constant. As I belayed Matt up to what would be our high point, I could hear him yelling and cursing the snow slides. I was in a sheltered stance, but he was in the gut of it. When he came into the belay, I still couldn't see him. He swung his tool right between my legs. *Matt, I'm right here!* He had a lens of hard ice covering one side of his face. I had to chip it off with a carabiner. We were about three quarters of the way up the route, but it was time to get out of there. When our ropes got stuck we had to cut one of them, leaving us with 100-foot rappels. We rapped some more.

Seconds after Matt flopped into our bivy cave, the mountain rumbled and debris slammed all around us. At some point the next day the weather let up, and 100 feet at a time we rappelled to the glacier. It snowed for eight straight days before we flew back to the land of green.

In the fall of 2012, I moved into the basement of a buddy's place and pinned that topo photo of the Mooses Tooth above my bed. It's not that I had forgotten about the route—I just hadn't been ready to start thinking about it yet. Well, now I had all winter to think about it.

I had a great ice season, but as usual I was broke come February. The chances of a trip to Alaska were looking pretty slim. I was climbing in Vail when a friend invited me to do a local mixed-climbing comp. I had stood atop a lot of things but never on a podium. But I took second, and the \$1,200 prize was just enough to pay for an Alaska trip. It was on. I had a plan but no partner, only one "maybe" from Pete Tapley. I decided to fly out to the range alone, contemplating a solo attempt. But after four days of heavy snow, they couldn't fly me to the Buckskin. Alone on the Ruth, I skied around in -30° temps. I had plenty of time to think about that route and all the attempts. I knew my skills were well-tempered from six months of ice climbing. I was strong, I knew my enemy. It was time for another round. A week later, after a failed solo attempt on the Snow Patrol route on Mt. Dickey, Pete flew in and we caught a ride over to the Buckskin. A blue ribbon of ice flowed down the route. I could not have been more psyched to see it.

The temps at night were dropping to -20°F. I wore all my layers as we skied into a slight headwind and toward the face. The movement of skiing was methodical and calm. The weather was right. Every stride brought my dream closer to reality. We headed up the intro gully. The sun popped orange in the distance, and the ground dropped below us. After 1,500 feet of casual simul-soloing, we roped up and I led some stepped vertical s'nice. Our 70s came taut with only a few pieces between us. I pushed up to the base of the headwall with Pete as my moving belay. I put in a screw and clipped an old pin that I had left on rappel in 2010. I had lost sleep over the thought of this day. It was like reuniting with an old fling that had gone bad.

We switched leads. Tapley was out about 40 feet when he stopped, looked down, waved his ice tool, and yelled a few obscenities. His tool had broken off at the head! The disappointment was crushing, but there was nothing to do about it. We had to rap off.

Two days later we returned, making good time by soloing up to that old piton. The higher we climbed the better the ice got, as the line narrowed and steepened. We ditched our extra food and bivy gear at

a belay stance, planning on a single push with light packs. Knowing the terrain ahead, and having rappelled it a couple of times, I felt comfortable going light.

We were in the blue ribbon and burning off pitches. As I neared the crux roof a grin split my face. I was sure it would go. A solid pillar, the width of a bear hug, was touching down. The pillar was fractured at its foot, but after a few rock moves, a handful of good screws, and some pumpy climbing, we had unlocked the door to the upper face.

The sun winked its last bit of warmth, and we climbed to a safe spot and stopped to brew up. After what seemed like hours of fiddling with a stubborn stove, we began to rehydrate. Pete stashed a warm packet of mac and cheese inside his coat before we ate, and then managed to dump much of it into the gloves he was drying on his chest. He had a look of disbelief like a kid on a hot summer day whose chocolate ice cream has just toppled onto the pavement. But we got some much-needed calories into us and headed up again.

We climbed on intuition through shrouded snow mushrooms until the sun splashed orange and showed us the way. We stretched the rope and simulated to find sheltered belays. The ice was bulletproof and our calves burned. At the overhanging cornice, we traversed a few feet and popped onto the top in the sun. We had climbed the 5,000-foot face in 27 hours, with no aid. We took off our boots to give our feet some fresh air and pondered the descent. The highest point of the massif was about 40 minutes away, along that corniced ridge Stover and I had wandered out 10 years earlier. I didn't feel the need to return.

The descent went as smoothly as the climbing had. We were like the marionettes in a dream I'd had many times—like we were just playing out a script that had already been written. My obsession was gone. We put in a blur of V-threads, and within six hours we were skiing back to camp. We called the route NWS, after a phrase coined by my climbing posse back in Utah, when we were all young: No weak shit. In all those tries on the east face, I had never given it a weak effort.

Editor's note: Two days after descending from NWS, the author began a three-day ascent of the new route **Terror**, on the left side of the face, with Chris Wright. This time they continued to the highest point of the Mooses Tooth.

Summary

First ascent of NWS (1,500m, V WI6 M5) on the east face of the Mooses Tooth, April 13-14, 2013, by Scott Adamson and Pete Tapley. The route joined Arctic Rage (Gilmore-Mahoney, 2004) for the final three pitches and ended atop the east face. The two men climbed and descended the route in a 34.5-hour round trip.

About the Author

Scott Adamson, 33, is based in Utah but says home is where he lays his head, "which is usually my 2002 Toyota Tacoma." In the fall of 2013, he did the first ascent of two peaks in Nepal, an expedition featured in an article by Chris Wright in the 2014 edition.

Images



The Adamson brothers, bivying, 2008.



Scott Adamson points the way.



Scott Adamson revels in the thick ice along the crux pitch of NWS during the 2013 first ascent.

Previous attempts had found little or no ice.



The author high on NWS.



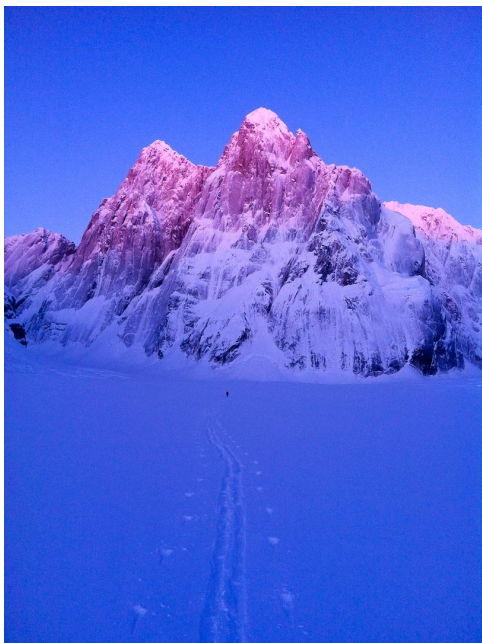
James Stover high on the 2004 route Levitation and Hail Marys.



The author about to get very lost on the summit ridge of the Mooses Tooth, 2004.



Scott Adamson and core shot, Levitation and Hail Marys.



The east faces of the Mooses Tooth (right) and Bears Tooth in April 2013.



The author enjoying flat ground after climbing NWS.



The author airs his feet on top.



Scott Adamson checks his well-worn topo from Alpinist magazine.



Tom Adamson traverses back onto the route from the bivy in 2008.



Pete Tapley leading high on NWS.



The impressive east face of the Mooses Tooth: (1) Southeast face [approximate location, Gilmore-House-Mahoney, 2000]. (2) The Beast Pillar [direct start to Dance of the Woo Li Masters. Bridwell-Pfinsten, 2001]. (3) Dance of the Woo Li Masters [Bridwell, Stump, 1981]. (4) Terror [Adamson-Wright, 2013]. (5) Bird of Prey [Arnold-Lama, 2013]. (6) Arctic Rage [Gilmore-Mahoney, 2004]. (7) NWS [Adamson-Tapley, 2013]. (8) There's a Moose Loose About This Hoose [Bracey-Helliker, 2008, not to summit]. (9) Magic Mushrooms [Bonniot-Dall'Agnol-Moulin-Revest, 2012].

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