



AAC Publications

Mooses Tooth, East Face, Bird of Prey

Alaska, Buckskin Glacier

After the first ascent of the east face of the Mooses Tooth in 1982, Jim Bridwell wrote of his return to base camp: “The cards were played and we had drawn aces. Finally I collapsed into prone paralysis. Just before unconsciousness, the memorable words of the French climber Jean Afanassieff came to mind. ‘This is the fucking life! No?’” [AAJ 1982].

With their first ascent of the Dance of the Woo-Li Masters, Bridwell and Mugs Stump drew a line up the east face in impeccable style. Virtually no gear was left on the face, leaving a clear message on a cold and remote wall—one that would impact the approach to alpine big walls for decades to come.

Now, I am up on this wall. The morning sun is burning on my back, and still it’s brutally cold. For more than an hour, Dani Arnold has been fighting his way up an icy crack. I’m holding the ropes at my belay device with my right hand while I knead the fingers on my left hand to get the blood flowing again. I suddenly hear my Swiss friend yell from above: “You think we’ll get up this thing?” For a few seconds I have doubts as well. We have chosen a bold line, for sure. Still, I have the feeling that, like Bridwell and Stump, we can successfully put our ideas to the test on this wall. We’ll just have to stand on our toes, stretch, and grow with the difficulties.

Only a few clouds had veiled the mountains as we flew toward the Buckskin Glacier on April 10. That same evening, the fog disappeared and we saw the compact and steep heart of rock on the east face for the first time. So far, no one had managed to pull off a line through the center of the east face’s headwall. The next day, using a sled, we dragged our equipment to the bottom of the wall and analyzed our intended route with binoculars. The route, to be our first climb in Alaska, would climb a face notorious for Alaskan eccentricities, including huge snow mushrooms and enormous amounts of spindrift. On the other hand, we hoped our impartiality could provide the boldness that is always necessary for walls of this size. We planned to start the climb the following morning, April 12. [Editor’s note: Arnold and Lama’s route begins on **Arctic Rage (Gilmore-Mahoney, AAJ 2005)**, which shares the same start as Dance of the Woo-Li Masters. The duo followed Arctic Rage to below the headwall, then branched left and climbed 17 pitches of new terrain, reaching a subsidiary summit atop the wall.]

“We certainly won’t turn around on the first day!” I yell back to Dani. After another half-hour he finds a suitable anchor. Dani continues leading. It’s definitely not getting easier. With pendulums, vertical and extremely thin ice, and tricky mixed terrain, the climbing demands our full concentration. After two pitches, Dani is done and I take over the lead again. I’m tired from leading the first part of the route, but we still have to climb a couple more pitches if we’re to stand a reasonable chance of reaching the summit the next day.

At dusk, we put up our tent. More than half of it sticks out over the void, but it protects us from the icy wind and the annoying spindrift. The next morning greets us again with perfect weather. According to our forecast, it is not going to last long. We decide to leave our bivy gear behind. Like Bridwell, we hope to draw aces. After three pitches, we reach a large roof. Dani has led until here, but he can’t get past the huge snow mushrooms suspended menacingly above us. I lower him and we switch ends of the rope. With two pendulums, I manage to bypass the roof. We traverse rightward and can almost feel the icefields leading to the top. Between them and us is another roof.

Navigating difficult mixed terrain, I climb up until I’m under a big snow mushroom and then make a

rightward traverse for two or three meters. The snow formation looks extremely fragile. I'm almost above it when I finally get in good gear, which I hold onto as I place my ice tool on a small hold. As I weight the hold, part of it breaks. I immediately catch myself with my left hand but still touch the snow mushroom. It collapses and hundreds of kilograms of snow fall onto the ropes. The gear holds and Dani is fine too, even though a pin pulled from his anchor. Once Dani rehammers the pin, I climb on. Two more pitches bring us to the icefields leading to the top.

At 6 p.m., we both stand at the top of the wall on the upper plateau, hardly believing that we managed such a dreamy line so quickly. A couple of days earlier we'd been at home in Europe, and now we stand on top of this impressive face. A long descent with many rappels over our route ensues. Because we mostly use ice threads for anchors, we leave almost no gear on the face. It's 48 hours after starting when we finally arrive back in base camp, done, very much done. I can't help but think our new route Bird of Prey (1,500m, 6a A2 M7+ 90°) may be worthy of the idea Bridwell and Stump first had about climbing this wall. This is indeed the fucking life, Jim!

David Lama, Austria

Images



Dani Arnold and David Lama atop the wall on the plateau below the summit.



Dani Arnold seconding steep mixed terrain high on the east face of the Mooses Tooth. The Austrian-Swiss route was the first to breach the central headwall on the face.



David Lama leading thinly iced mixed terrain.



The line of Bird of Prey.



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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