



## AAC Publications

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### **Mt. Johnson, east face, Fire Escape**

Alaska, Ruth Gorge

In May, Todd Tumolo and I completed a new route on Mt. Johnson (8,460'). We first saw the new line, the Fire Escape (4,000', V 5.6 AI4 65°), while scouting conditions in the lower gorge.

We began on May 6 at 5:30 a.m., climbing up a 70m smear of low-angle ice on the east face. The smear led to the broad snow bowl that eventually funnels into the Escalator (Shaw-Wagner, AAJ 2001) a route that is growing in popularity. Where this snow bowl narrowed, instead of continuing up the Escalator, we cut right and ascended an enjoyable 70m pitch of alpine ice. This proved to be the crux of the route. From atop the crux, Todd led up, zigzagging through steep snow and short ice steps. When the rope came tight, I began simul-climbing and eventually met Todd at an anchor about three rope-lengths higher.

From there, I led out on a steep snow traverse that led to a long couloir we dubbed the Fire Hose. The Fire Hose lies adjacent to the infamous east buttress, and finding adequate protection in this area is challenging at best. We simul-climbed about 350m of 45–65° snow, finding only about five pieces of questionable protection. Near the top of the Fire Hose, Todd took over the lead and ascended an ice smear plastered into a tight corner, which exited onto the upper snow slopes. Here, snow conditions deteriorated into bottomless facets, and our pace slowed considerably as Todd swam his way upward toward a steep, rocky ridge that looked like it might hold protection. The climbing on the ridge was very enjoyable, with short steps of fun 5.6 climbing. From the top of the rocks, Todd led the last 70m toward the top over dangerous and unprotectable, wind-loaded snow. We dubbed this the Emergency Exit due to the tenuous conditions. The exit brought us to the summit of Mt. Johnson at 8:45 p.m., after about 15 hours of climbing.

There was little to no information about the descent other than: Follow the ridge down to the Johnson-Grosvenor col. This summit ridge is very narrow and heavily corniced to the east. There is occasional protection in the rocks that jut from the west side. We continued along to where the ridge splits and steepens, and downclimbed about 10 feet in the middle of the split into a rocky gully system. From there we slung a block and made one 70m rappel into a broad snow bowl, which we descended to the Johnson-Grosvenor col. The objective hazards in the descent couloir below the col are very high due to the near perfect avalanche angle and looming seracs. We chose to wait and descend in the coldest part of the night, and from the col we downclimbed until reaching some ice on climber's right. At the ice we made four 70m rappels to mellower snow slopes. Below, we downclimbed and negotiated two bergschrunds to the exit. It was only a short walk back to the base of the route, where we had left our skis. Our total time on the mountain, including descent, was 22 hours, and we were back in camp around 24 hours after starting.

Josh Hoeschen

## Images



The upper east face of Mt. Johnson showing the Escalator on the left and the significant new variation, the Fire Escape, to the right. The Johnson-Grosvenor col is the obvious saddle left of Mt. Johnson.

## Article Details

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