



AAC Publications

West Kahiltna Peak, Southwest Face, Ride the Bullet

Alaska, Alaska Range

On April 13, Kurt Ross, Steven Van Sickle, and I flew into Kahiltna International and skied to a point near Camp 1 on Denali's West Buttress route to scope out the southwest face of West Kahiltna Peak (12,835'), between the east fork and northeast fork of the Kahiltna Glacier. We woke early the next morning and made our way to the base of our intended route.

Steven began the first block, climbing two pitches of ice runnels and snow. On the third pitch, unfortunately, he took a bad leader fall as an ice bulge failed and collapsed above him. He was caught by a screw, but we determined he had broken his leg and texted Talkeetna Air Taxi (TAT) and the park service via inReach. A couple of hours later, rescuers were able to long-line him off the face and down to the glacier, and eventually fly him back to Talkeetna.

After a lot of deliberation and certainly some mixed feelings, Kurt and I decided to go back up the face the next day. We quickly reached our high point, where Steven had fallen. That section of ice proved to be the most rotten and dangerous of the route, and the rest of the pitch ended up being the technical crux, including a few points of aid. We climbed several more pitches of sustained ice and mixed, including an amazing 200-foot-plus steep ice hose, before traversing left to a small snowfield and chopping out a bivy ledge. The next day we climbed three more quite good pitches to the top of the technical climbing, where we unroped for 500' or so of easier climbing to reach a shoulder on the west ridge. From there we roped up for crevasse hazard on the upper snow slopes leading to the summit, reaching the top 36 hours after leaving camp.

We descended eastward toward East Kahiltna Peak and then rappelled and downclimbed the south face to reach a pocket glacier above the east fork of the Kahiltna. Although this descent is quick, I would not recommend it, as it is quite exposed to serac hazard that we hadn't been able to see from the top. A safer but much longer option would be to traverse to the east peak and descend its south ridge. Once on the pocket glacier, we had some trouble finding a way back into the main east fork. Kurt managed to find a sneaky way around an icefall in the dark, which led us back to our camp.

Our route follows an amazing system of ice chimneys and runnels, and we feel it could become a very classic hard route in the range, due to its easy access from base camp. We're calling it Ride the Bullet(4,000', AI5+ R M6+ C1). I'd like to thank TAT and its awesome crew of pilots and office staff for flying us around and maintaining communication during the rescue, as well as the park service and its rescue helicopter crew for a very quick rescue. I never want to have to use search and rescue, but it's nice to know that Denali NPS rangers are rock solid. Also, thanks to Steven for encouraging us to go back—and for being a tough SOB.

– Nik Mirhashemi

West Kahiltna Climbing History: West Kahiltna Peak was first climbed in May 1967 by a five-man German-American team that ascended an icefall directly from the Kahiltna Glacier to reach the upper south face, where rock climbing and the "hardest ice we had ever seen" slowed them down. Peter Hennig, Bernhard Segger, and Lowell Smith reached the top around 8 p.m., and the full team endured a sitting bivouac during their all-night descent (AAJ 1968).

In 1983, Ned Lewis and Stacy Taniguchi climbed a steeper icefall (the "southwest buttress") to reach a col below the upper south face; they then followed the 1967 route to the top (AAJ 1984).

Previously, in 2008, Japanese climbers Yuto Inoue and Tatsuhiro Yamada climbed West Kahiltna to start their planned enchainment of the two Kahiltna Peaks and the Cassin Ridge on Denali. They disappeared during this climb (their bodies were identified a year later in an inaccessible location at around 19,800 feet on Denali), and the exact line they followed up West Kahiltna remains a mystery. The two Kahiltna peaks previously had been linked by German climbers Bertl Breyer and Udo Knittel, who, in 1980, climbed West Kahiltna's north face, directly above the Kahiltna's northeast fork, then traversed over East Kahiltna before descending from Kahiltna Notch at the base of the Cassin (AAJ 2009).

In 2011, Italian climbers Diego Giovannini and Fabio Meraldi climbed the west ridge of West Kahiltna (Alaska Grade 4, 5.8 75°), bounding the left side of the big southwest face (AAJ 2012).

Images



The southwest face of West Kahiltna Peak, showing the line of Ride the Bullet (4,000', AI5+ R M6+ C1). Nik Mirahshemi and Kurt Ross completed the route over two days in mid-April.



Steven Van Sickle leading up the lower wall on West Kahiltna Peak's southwest face on the first attempt of what would become Ride the Bullet (4,000', AI5+ R M6+ C1). Soon after, Sickle later took a bad leader fall and had to be rescued off the face.



Kurt Ross following thin ice and mixed terrain on one of the crux pitches of Ride the Bullet (4,000', AI5+ R M6+ C1) on West Kahiltna Peak. Ross and Nik Mirhashemi completed the new route over two days in mid-April.



Kurt Ross climbing into one of the many chimney pitches on Ride the Bullet (4,000', AI5+ R M6+ C1) on West Kahiltna Peak.

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