



AAC Publications

Stikine Ice Cap, Mt. Burkett, Southeast Face, Coyote Calls, and Other Ascents

Alaska, Coast Mountains, Boundary Ranges

On September 11, Simon Frez-Albrecht and I flew into the Witches Cauldron below the Stikine Icecap. A day and a half of carrying backbreaking loads up 4,000' through the Witches Cauldron icefall had us at the base of the Devils Thumb. We climbed the classic east ridge (Beckey-Craig-Schmidtke, 1946) in a 12-hour round trip from camp. Moderate climbing with mind-boggling exposure and views make this dramatic ridge one of the most iconic routes in Alaska.

With the Devils Thumb complete only a couple of days into the trip, we began searching for new lines. Across from our camp was a symmetrical pyramid (7,600', 57.0764, -132.3463), and the morning after summiting Devils Thumb, Simon and I trekked across the glacier to its north face. [Editor's Note: This peak was named Rosemary's Baby by Dick Culbert in the 1972 Canadian Alpine Journal. The peak's first known ascent was by Greg Donaldson, Brad Fowler, Rich Mathies, and Craig McKibben in 1971.] **We climbed steep snow and névé to 85° to a short section of moderate mixed climbing, finally depositing us on the west ridge. There we unroped and blitzed to the summit. This peak has been climbed before via its east ridge by Dieter Klose (and probably others) as it's within close proximity to base camp for Devils Thumb. The line we climbed was likely a first ascent.**

A high-pressure system was forecasted for another week—almost unheard of in these mountains. Simon and I shouldered packs and marched into the heart of the Stikine Icefield toward Mt. Burkett (9,730'), another fabled mountain with very few ascents. We crossed into British Columbia on a perfect crust, moving efficiently, but soon reached another sinister icefall. Simon and I rappelled through icy blocks, listening to seracs topple and ice snap. A stressful day brought us through the Burkett Icefall with our lives intact, and we made camp along a lateral moraine across from Mt. Burkett.

Simon and I spent the following day scoping the mountain for a passage to the snow-capped summit. The Golden Gully (5.8, Bearzi-Klose, 1980, see AAJ 1981), a couloir on the southwest face that leads to the northwest ridge, was on the itinerary, but the glacial access to this classic line has disintegrated into a dangerous, exfoliating rock band with hanging seracs looming above. We shifted attention to the southeast face, identifying several distinct couloirs braiding up to the east ridge.

The following morning, we navigated another icefall by headlamp, traversing onto a hanging glacier and arriving at the base of the first distinct couloir as the sun rose. We tied in and simul-climbed perfect snow and névé to 80°. At each fork in the couloir systems, we headed left to stay on the face and avoid the ridge. At a choke point we found 80° water ice and solid granite that went at 5.7. We gained a prominent notch on the ridge and wrapped around to the northeast face. Sustained steep snow, moderate mixed climbing, and sparse rock protection continued for another 1,500' to the rarely trodden summit. We named the route in loving memory of Kalley Rittman, my girlfriend who had recently died in an ice climbing accident on the Valdez Glacier: Coyote Calls (5,700' climbing distance, IV 5.7 and steep snow). **On September 21, we flew out from the Baird Glacier.** [Editor's Note: The southeast face of Burkett was climbed directly in 1994 by Dan Cauthorn and Greg Collum (see AAJ 1995). The peak's first ascent in 1965 was by the east ridge (described as the southeast ridge in AAJ 1966), and the 2020 team climbed to the right of the 1994 route, likely sharing some of the same terrain high on the peak.]

– August Franzen

Images



Big views from the summit of Mt. Burkett after making the first ascent of Coyote Calls (5,700' climbing distance, IV 5.7 Steep Snow) on the southeast face.



Simon Frez-Albrecht at base camp below Mt. Burkett on the Stikine Icefield. Burkett Needle is the pointy summit to the left.



Sunrise on Burkett Needle and Mt. Burkett.



Simon Frez-Albrecht climbing steep snow on the southeast face of Mt. Burkett during the first ascent of Coyote Calls (5,700' climbing distance, IV 5.7 Steep Snow). The Devils Thumb, Cat's Ears, and the Witches Tits are visible just behind his head.



August Frazen manages a huge pack through sketchy terrain while traveling between the Devils Thumb and Mt. Burkett on the Stikine Ice Cap.



August Franzen at a belay on the east ridge of the Devils Thumb. Mt. Burkett is visible in the background.



August Franzen just below the summit of the Devils Thumb.



Simon Frez-Albrecht enjoys the massive exposure on the upper section of the east ridge of the Devils Thumb.



Mixed ground leads to steep névé during the first ascent of Coyote Calls (5,700' climbing distance, IV 5.7 steep snow) on the southeast face of Mt. Burkett.

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