



AAC Publications

Ptarmigan Spire, Wizard Sleeve; The Rook, Fresh Step

Alaska, Alaska Range, Kichatna Mountains

Zach Lovell on the summit ridge of Ptarmigan Spire, with the Citadel in the background. Photo by Mark Westman

On June 6, Zach Lovell, Tad McCrea, and I flew to the Cul-de-Sac Glacier in the Kichatna Mountains.

Six days later, we established a new route on the south face of Ptarmigan Spire. This tower is located along the ridge connecting Sunrise Spire with the Citadel, and had only one other known ascent, in 1979, by Jim Bridwell and Andy Embick, who climbed the huge snow couloir that separates Ptarmigan from the Citadel and then the east ridge of Ptarmigan (see AAJ 1980). Our line started up a deep couloir located two gullies to the left; the gully we followed has a towering, slender pinnacle flanking its right side about 500' above the glacier.

Easy snow and a short step of water ice led to two steps of about M4 mixed climbing with good protection. We had a loose plan to exit onto the rock face to the right of the couloir wherever it might look good, but the mediocre rock and lack of attractive crack systems kept us following the line of weakness. A series of gullies with snow and some thin ice, linked by occasional short traverses on rock, eventually brought us to the crest of the ridge at a spacious, sandy col. We turned right and simul-climbed a couple rope lengths of aesthetic mixed terrain along the ridge, with rock climbing difficulties up to 5.8. We surmounted the exposed summit block at 3 p.m., just eight hours after leaving camp.

After a bit of work establishing an initial rappel anchor, we made two long and very steep rappels—over some dangerously loose rock—down the northeast face and into the col between Citadel and Ptarmigan. All that remained was an easy downclimb of the couloir and a short ski back to camp, which we reached 12 hours after having left it that morning.

Back at the col, as Zach and I were retrieving our rappel ropes, Tad stepped around us to scout the gully below. The tip of his ice axe, protruding from his pack, snagged on my ultralight wind jacket and ripped an enormous hole in the sleeve. I now looked like an orange-clad wizard, and our route had a name: Wizard Sleeve (1,400', M4 5.8 70° snow).

Two days later, with nice weather holding, we started up a line we had picked out on Rook Spire, down the glacier from camp. Rook had only one known ascent, by Embick and Bryan Becker in 1978, accomplished by a ridgeline traverse from Bastion Spire to the north; they then continued south along the ridge to Cemetery Spire (see AAJ 1979). The west face of the Rook features complex topography, notably a sharp buttress extending down from the peak's final headwall, which appeared to have solid rock.

After a 10-minute ski approach from camp, we started up from the base at 6 a.m., climbing a large snow bowl between the Rook and Cemetery Spire. A few hundred feet up, we traversed leftward off the snow and began simul-climbing up broken rock terrain, intent on climbing until we could outflank a blank, sheer cliff band and make a leftward traverse to the toe of the principal rock buttress. About 800' of moderate but extremely loose, nasty climbing on rock that closely resembled cat litter brought us to a steeper step (fortunately more solid) of about 5.9 rock, which we belayed properly. Next, we made a long, undulating leftward traverse for a few hundred feet on snow and more crumbly rock that brought us to the foot of the main rock buttress beneath an obvious dihedral.

Here, we switched to rock shoes and climbed five steep and aesthetic pitches on much higher quality granite, starting in the dihedral and then continuing more or less directly up the prow or slightly to its right side. The climbing was exposed, sustained at 5.10 with good protection and belays, and followed very good cracks of all sizes. We reached the level crest of the buttress, where we had expected to find moderate ridge running to gain the final headwall of the Rook. Instead, the ridge was blocked by steep-sided gendarmes that lacked any cracks for protection and thwarted our attempts to proceed. Descending the way we'd come seemed unthinkable, given all the loose rock.

Calling an audible, we slung a horn on the ridge and made a committing vertical rappel into a deep gully rising along the opposite (north) side of the ridge, intent on using the gully to bypass the gendarmed crest. After the rappel, a pitch of moderate mixed climbing, a pitch of sloppy snow in the gully, and a final, fun rock chimney filled with ice brought us back to the ridge, above the section that had stopped us. An easy pitch along the crest led to the main ridge connecting Rook with Cemetery Spire, and an intersection with Embick and Becker's 1978 traverse. However, a pair of rock gendarmes flanked by steep isothermic snow blocked ready access to the col beneath the final 400' headwall of the Rook. From the glacier, this headwall had appeared low angle and with ample crack systems. Up close, however, only a very steep system of meandering offwidth cracks and flaky chimneys offered any reasonable hope of passage to the summit. With a rack that lacked wide-crack protection, we debated continuing, but in the end we found that sitting on this perch in the evening sun, absorbing the stunning views, eating snacks, and telling jokes, proved to be the more appealing course.

The snow was so unstable that going anywhere also would involve waiting for the cooler temperatures of the impending Alaskan twilight. Once the snow firmed up, we knew we could escape by descending a steep mixed ramp to the north which dropped into the bowl between Bastion and Rook, at which point we could simply walk down the remainder of the way. In addition, the weather was forecasted to shut down the following afternoon for an indefinite time, so we took a moment to send Paul Roderick an inReach message, asking for a morning pickup. At 11 p.m. we began the first of six rappels down steep snow that had been avalanching all afternoon, but which was rapidly firming. We made it back to camp at 5 a.m., and a few hours later Paul scooped us up for a beautiful flight back to Talkeetna.

Because our attempted route intersected a previously traveled ridge line, we're giving our line a name, although what we did here is decidedly a failed attempt on the Rook. While the block of five steep rock pitches on the buttress and the uppermost section of ridge were quite aesthetic and enjoyable, the lower portions of the route were memorable primarily for their disgusting rock quality. We're naming our effort after a popular brand of kitty litter: Fresh Step (2,000', 5.10 60° mixed).

With more stable snow conditions, the line of descent we used would provide a moderate way to regain our high point and find a passage up the final headwall, which would involve about four to five pitches, at most.

— Mark Westman

Images



Zach Lovell on the summit ridge of Ptarmigan Spire, with the Citadel in the background.



Tad McCrea and Zach Lovell on the summit of Ptarmigan Spire. In the far background is Tatina Spire. Near center-right is Sunrise Spire and the Riesenstein.



Mark Westman leading a traverse beneath the gendarmed ridge high on the Rook's west face. This

pitch led to a belay ledge on the ridge crest, from which point unprotectable terrain forced a committing rappel off the opposite side of the ridge.



Tad McCrea leads a mixed pitch after the rappel to bypass the gendarmed ridge atop the west face of the Rook.



The south face of Ptarmigan Spire in Alaska's Kichatna Mountains, showing the line of Wizard Sleeve (1,400', M4 5.8 70° snow). Zach Lovell, Tad McCrea, and Mark Westman climbed this new line in June 2021.



The west face of the Rook, in Alaska's Kichatna Mountains, showing the line of Fresh Step (2,000', 5.10 60° mixed), which was climbed to its intersection with a 1978 traverse (Becker-Embick) that included the first ascent of the Rook. From here, the 2021 party descended due to poor snow and lack of wide crack protection.

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