



AAC Publications

Kichatna Spire, Northwest Face, The Pace of Comfort

Alaska, Alaska Range, Kichatna Mountains

From May 23–27, David Allfrey, Whit Magro, and I established a new alpine big-wall route on the northwest face of Kichatna Spire (8,985') in the Alaska Range.

The Kichatna Mountains are a small clutch of exceptionally steep peaks 70 miles west of Denali. In his 1967 report on these spires, David Roberts stated that "no other area combines heavy glaciation, remoteness and bad weather with such an abundance of vertical walls, pinnacles, and obelisks." During his 1966 expedition to the area, two of his teammates made the first ascent of the highest peak in the range via its east ridge and named the mountain Kichatna Spire.

In the years since, the new routes made on the peak have represented some of the most technical ascents in the Alaska Range, and only one has successfully ascended the peak's dramatic northwest face. This ascent of the Ships Prow by Jim Bridwell and Andrew Embick in 1979 was on the cutting edge of applying Yosemite big-wall tactics to the big mountains.

The other routes on the north side of the peak (off the Cul-de-Sac Glacier) are the Voice of Unreason (AAJ 2006), which did not reach the summit, and the Wharton-Smith Couloir (AAJ 2009), joining the 1966 route to the top, both on the left side of the face. Many other attempts had been made on the peak's northwestern wall, including one in 2008 by myself alongside Ian Nicholson and Ryan O'Connell.

Our 2022 team, including videographer Oliver Rye, flew into the Cul-de-Sac Glacier on May 22 in clear weather with an excellent forecast. After setting up base camp and scoping the wall, we got to work on initial pitches of our route, starting well to the left of the Bridwell-Embick route. On May 23, Magro led two 70m pitches of sustained rock climbing (C2 and 5.10). That evening we returned to camp with two ropes fixed on the wall. The following day, Allfrey led a 68m pitch of technical A3+ beaks followed by a stunning 50m C3 leaning corner. Above this, I led a 45m mixed corner (C2, M6). At this point, we reached the snow ledge, the "Triple Ledges." Again, we fixed lines through these initial pitches and returned to camp.

Due to the arc of the arctic summer sun, we climbed late in the day, departing base camp at noon and reaching the base of the wall at 1 p.m. to take advantage of the sunlight on the cliff that lasted from 3 p.m. to midnight.

After resting and packing on the 25th, we launched on the route at 10 a.m. on the 26th, ascending our ropes and pulling them up behind us. From Triple Ledges, Magro led a sustained 70m A3 pitch. Allfrey then led two 50m pitches of C3 to the top of the upper headwall. During the final moves stepping off the headwall, Allfrey took a 40' whipper when a cam placed in poor rock failed. Up to that point, the climbing had been on sustained vertical and overhanging terrain. Finally, after eight massive pitches, the terrain leaned back. Magro was able to climb around an M6 chockstone left of the final headwall to reach a small bivy chopped in a snow field, where we were able to sit out the bright Alaskan night.

The following morning (the 27th), I led five pitches of high-quality mixed climbing with difficulty up to M5 to reach the summit ridge under clear skies. Magro then led along the moderate and stunning summit ridge. We summited the peak at 4:17 p.m. on Friday the 27th.

Our descent via the route went quickly, and we arrived back at base camp with all of our equipment just before midnight.

The route required all of the skills gained from the team's numerous expeditions around the world. In Magro's words, "This climb was a culmination of 70 years of climbing experience between the three of us."

We named the 950m climb the Pace of Comfort (VI 5.10 A3+ M6 70° snow), which was inspired by a statement made by pilot Paul Roderick when he picked us up from the glacier. Looking at the clear, beautiful weather, he said, "With these kinds of conditions, we're able to fly at a pace of comfort." We felt the same way about their ascent.

— **Graham Zimmerman**

Images



Dave Allfrey and Graham Zimmerman, stoked to be back on the glacier after making the final rappel following the first ascent of the Pace of Comfort (950m VI 5.10 A3+ M6 70° snow), on the northwest face of Kichatna Spire.



Whit Magro kicking things off on pitch one during the first ascent of the Pace of Comfort (950m VI 5.10 A3+ M6 70° snow) on the northwest face of Kichatna Spire.



Dave Allfrey and Whit Magro re-rack below pitch four, a stunning corner, during the first ascent of the Pace of Comfort (950m VI 5.10 A3+ M6 70° snow) on the northwest face of Kichatna Spire.



Dave Allfrey leading the stunning pitch-four corner during the first ascent of the Pace of Comfort (950m VI 5.10 A3+ M6 70° snow) on the northwest face of Kichatna Spire.



Dave Allfrey partway up the pitch-four corner during the first ascent of the Pace of Comfort (950m VI 5.10 A3+ M6 70° snow) on the northwest face of Kichatna Spire



Dave Allfrey, Whit Magro and Graham Zimmerman on the summit of Kichatna Spire after making the first ascent of the Pace of Comfort (950m VI 5.10 A3+ M6 70° snow).



Dave Allfrey rappelling the northwest face of Kichatna Spire after the team made the first ascent of the Pace of Comfort (950m VI 5.10 A3+ M6 70° snow).



The northwest wall of Kichatna Spire, in the Kichatna Mountains of Alaska, showing the line of the Pace of Comfort (950m VI 5.10 A3+ M6 70° snow).



The northwest wall of Kichatna Spire, in the Kichatna Mountains of Alaska. The Pace of Comfort (950m VI 5.10 A3+ M6 70° snow) climbs the right side of the left hand buttress, to the left of the large hanging snowfield.



Whit Magro leading pitch two on the northwest face of Kichatna Spire. Several parties have attempted the large ice couloir to his right.



Dave Allfrey leading pitch eight of the Pace of Comfort (950m VI 5.10 A3+ M6 70° snow) on the northwest face of Kichatna Spire.



Above the difficulties of the rock wall, Dave Allfrey follows a mixed pitch high on the northwest face of Kichatna Spire, during the first ascent of the Pace of Comfort (950m VI 5.10 A3+ M6 70° snow).



Whit Magro on the summit of Kichatna Spire after completing the first ascent of the Pace of Comfort (950m VI 5.10 A3+ M6 70° snow) on the peak's northwest face.



The northwest wall of Kichatna Spire, showing (1) The Pace of Comfort (Allfrey-Magro-Zimmerman, 2022) and (2) the Bridwell-Embick Route (1979).

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