



AAC Publications

Cemetery Spire, Gold Rush

Alaska, Alaska Range, Kichatna Mountains

Silvia Loreggian and I arrived in Alaska in mid-May for our first expedition to the Alaska Range, unsure what lay in store. At the first opportunity that weather allowed, we flew into the Kichatna Mountains and established a base camp on the Cul-de-sac Glacier.

For seven days, we were tentbound due to snowy nights followed by warm—and avalanche-prone—days. Our main goal had been Kichatna Spire, but its faces were full of snow. During our days in base camp, we used binoculars to scope nearby possibilities that we might be able to climb during a small weather window. Giacomo Poletti, our friend and meteorologist in Italy, texted us on our GPS device on June 4: “You have 30–33 hrs with no precipitation but high winds.” Not a long window, but long enough. The southwest face of Cemetery Spire looked like the driest option.

We set off that same afternoon. The approach to Cemetery Spire’s southwest face went fast: 20 minutes on flat glacier, 200 vertical meters of skinning up a snow couloir, and finally another 200m of easy terrain (UIAA III M3). At the end of this easy part, we came to a steep rock face with a big dihedral (which had been visible from our base camp). We climbed two pitches up beautiful rock, 5.11 and 5.10, with nice finger and hand cracks, then fixed ropes and returned to base camp.

The next day, we started at 6 a.m. and, after jugging up the fixed lines, started up new terrain.

The great rock continued for another three pitches. We free climbed as much as possible, swinging leads. Then the climbing and route-finding got more complicated. The cold at the belays increased, too, forcing the follower to put on mountain boots and jumar. Two pitches with particularly grainy and crumbly rock were psychologically trying, but fortunately the rock improved. Next came another long, spectacular dihedral; a large roof in the corner forced us into aid-climbing mode, made trickier by ice stalactites clogging the cracks. When we came to a second roof, we found a way to exit the dihedral to the right. After three more moderate pitches, including some ice-choked offwidths, we were at the top of the wall.

About 200m below the summit, we came across an old, destroyed belay anchor, most likely from a previous attempt. We later spoke with other climbers, rangers, and Alaska climbing historian Steve Gruhn—no one had firm details on who might have left the anchor or when. [The only known complete route up Cemetery Spire was the first ascent of the formation, in 1978, by Bryan Becker, Andrew Embick, Rob Milne, and Andy Tuthill, who climbed the north ridge, which they called Gargoyle Ridge. In 2006, Katherine Fraser and Jen Olson climbed 450m of a couloir on the west face, retreating 50m short of the summit.]

We reached the top around 10 p.m. and immediately began the descent. The cold and wind were intense. At about 3 a.m., we bivouacked briefly, sitting in our sleeping bags on a small ledge. Three hours later, we were on the move again. Things got dicey as the rope snagged on the rough granite, and we had to chop off 30m. Thankfully, we were only around 200m above the ground. After six shorter rappels and some easy downclimbing, we were back at the base of the spire. During the descent, we left seven hand-drilled 8mm bolts, two pitons, and two nuts for rappel anchors; our descent route did not follow the exact line of ascent. We finally got back to our skis at 10 a.m.

Our new line is called Gold Rush (600m, 5.12a A1+). It was exactly the adventure that Silvia and I were looking for.

– **Stefano Ragazzo, Italy**

Images



Silvia Loreggian cruising the opening of pitch three (5.12 A0), a “fantastic headwall with good rock quality,” writes Stefano Ragazzo.



Stefano Ragazzo on pitch nine (5.11 A1+) of Gold Rush (600m, 5.12a A1+) on Cemetery Spire.



Silvia Loreggian at the start of pitch four (5.12 A0) of Gold Rush (600m, 5.12a A1+) on Cemetery Spire.



Silvia Loreggian exploring the Cul-de-Sac Glacier, with the east face of Mt. Jeffers behind her.



Gold Rush (600m, 5.12a A1+) on the southwest face of Cemetery Spire in the Kichatna Mountains. The obvious couloir to the left was climbed to within 50 meters of the summit in 2006 by Katherine Fraser and Jen Olson.

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