



AAC Publications

Bluebell: Freeing the North Norwegian Buttress of Mt. Index

Washington, Cascades

I didn't expect to feel so elated and relieved as I scrambled up the final stretch of Mt. Index's North Norwegian Buttress (NNB) for the first time on July 28. Although plenty of work lay ahead—days of cleaning, trundling, and bolting—the element of uncertainty had vanished. Navigating 2,000' of steep, sometimes treacherous rock with scarce reliable protection had demanded nearly all my mental fortitude.

The NNB has never been a popular climbing destination in spite of its prominent stature and location, plainly visible from busy Highway 2, just an hour east of Seattle. No one had made a serious effort to establish a free route since the 1980s, when Pete Doorish soloed the original aid line. In the years since, only two other routes had been climbed—both as aid routes: the Voodoo Proj (2002) and Jo tnar (Boyce-Chapko-Willis, 2020). To my knowledge, none of these lines has been repeated. The NNB, shrouded in mystery due to rumors of loose gabbro rock and detached blocks, has mostly been left alone.

In spite of the rumors and the fear they instilled in me, the draw of the wall was irresistible. It's hard to pinpoint exactly when I began seriously considering a free route on the NNB—perhaps as far back as 2017 when I climbed Vanishing Point (1,400', 5.12b R), a creation of Bryan Burdo's on the Dolomite Tower of Mt. Baring, which is also in the Skykomish Valley and has a similar rock type to Mt. Index. A couple of years later, my experience on Sonnie Trotter's Canadian Alpine Trilogy—three 5.14 multi-pitch routes in the Rockies—deepened my interest. I saw the potential for a similar style of alpine route: namely, bolted face climbing on rock deemed too loose or unprotectable for trad climbs.

As I planned for an attempt in the summer of 2023, finding the right partner posed a significant challenge. Unbeknownst to me, the local Index phenom Michal Rynkiewicz had for years had a similar project in mind. I learned this in the spring of 2023 through our mutual friend Stamati Anagnostou, who put Michal and me in touch after we both sent Stamati photos of the NNB with nearly identical route lines drawn! Michal and I decided to team up, and after pushing the route above pitch 12, we convinced Stamati to join.

As an expectant father, my preference would have been to develop this new route from the top down so that any loose rock could be dealt with safely. Despite ethical considerations, it's hard to dispute this approach often leads to a more thoughtful route for future climbers. However, hiking all the way to the summit of Mt. Index, then traversing technical terrain to the top of Middle Index, and finally descending further technical terrain down to the top of the NNB—all with 2,000' of static rope in tow—was an impractical endeavor. Ground-up was the only option.

We planned our route using high-definition photos that I took from Lake Serene in early May. We aimed to take the most central line up the buttress, going directly up clean faces and confronting head-on the big roofs at midheight and the headwall near the top, which the earlier routes had avoided. Our route would be completely independent of those routes, joining them only for the short heather scramble to the summit.

The inaugural day on the climb ranked among the most terrifying—at least for me. At a precarious point on the first pitch, I reached far above a questionable cam to screw a hanger onto a rusting bolt stud, left from an unknown earlier attempt. Then I committed myself to some steep 5.11 climbing,

with an alder as one handhold, praying that if I fell, neither the rusty bolt nor the cam would fail. The lead that later became pitch three was rife with unstable stacks of loose blocks. I tiptoed around them, strategically placing protection to avoid a catastrophic chain reaction. Later, while aiding through the massive roofs at midheight, I began to weight a small cam set in a flake, only for the flake to start expanding from the wall. I hastily transferred my weight back onto the beak below.

From May to mid-August, we worked tirelessly on the climb, with at least one of us on the NNB for 25-plus days. Our approaches to advancing the route included free climbing, drilling on lead, and aid. Since the gabbro is both hard and brittle—providing numerous face holds but few cracks for gear—we made the decision to protect the entire route with bolts, using a power drill. (The NNB is outside any wilderness area or park.) We consciously drilled only about half the bolts on lead, allowing for more intentional placements once the line was established.

We were astonished to find this wall surpassed even the infamously good Dolomite Tower in terms of steepness, length, and variety of climbing. While the rock may not be as solid as on Dolomite Tower, we found the pitches to be far more diverse in flavor, offering an adventure reminiscent of the Canadian Rockies. Each pitch offered pleasant surprises—the “3D Dike” on pitch six, for example, or a key pinch on pitch nine that provides passage through a roof. The rock overall is quite smooth, but on several pitches we found incut and textured, limestone-esque holds.

We believe our route to be one of the steepest long free climbs in North America, with approximately one-third of the 21 pitches overhanging. Imagine two of Yosemite’s Leaning Towers, with sections of slab before, in between, and after. Most of the route is consistently rated 5.11–5.12, with pitches six and 14 just crossing into the 5.13 range.

Due to its length and sustained difficulty, many climbers may choose to tackle the route over multiple days. (A portaledge is recommended.) The entire route can be descended with a single, uncut 70m rope.

Michal, Stamati, and I finished working the pitches on August 8. I freed the route on August 11, with Luke Stefurak’s support. Michal and Stamati then both freed the route over two days, August 21–22. Afterward, they derigged the rest of our fixed lines and gear on the way down. Thanks go to Austin Siadak for joining on the initial push, Mike Kerzhner for leading the last headwall pitch on the initial ascent and supporting my final summit push, and Luke for his help finalizing details, including rap anchors and late-addition bolts.

Michal, who had a fondness for birds and flowers, proposed the name Harebell for the route, inspired by the resilient flowers that could be found in unexpected locations along the wall. Another name for this flower is the Scottish bluebell or simply bluebell, which led us to settle on the name Bluebell for the route.

Just two short months after freeing the NNB, on October 27, Michal died in a rappelling accident at the Index Town Walls. His death was a devastating loss to his new wife, Sara, his family, his friends, and the larger Washington climbing community.

Michal and I had plans for many more climbs in the Skykomish Valley. His passion for finding and creating new climbing experiences was unmatched. Despite this, he managed to maintain a balance between his time with Sara, his friends and family, his work, and personal training. Earlier in 2023, he and Sara had made the decision to move to Index, a decision that only served to amplify his accomplishments. In an impressive display of energy and dedication, over the course of a single summer he established numerous routes on Index’s Upper Town Wall and a new bouldering area, and spent nearly every weekend between early June and late August on the NNB with me.

I am immensely grateful to have had the opportunity to meet and work alongside Michal, and I am

certain that Bluebell will stand as a lasting testament to his genius and his impact on the climbing community.

– **Nathan Hadley**

Images



Luke Stefurak following the crux of pitch 13 on Bluebell.



Michal Rynkiewicz at the bivy above pitch 12 during his and Stamati Anagnostou's redpoint push on Bluebell. Tragically, Rynkiewicz died in a rappelling accident later in the year.



The North Norwegian Buttress of Mt. Index above Lake Serene.



Luke Stefurak leading the first headwall pitch on Bluebell, a 45-meter 5.13-.



Luke Stefurak following pitch 15 of Bluebell (2,000', 21 pitches, 5.13-) in Washington's Skykomish Valley.

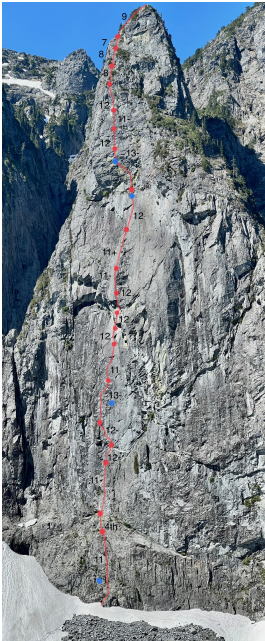


Photo-topo of the route Bluebell on the North Norwegian Buttress.



Michal Rynkiewicz aiding pitch ten of Bluebell during the route's initial ascent.



Mt. Index's North Norwegian Buttress, with the line of Bluebell (21 pitches, 5.13-). See AAJ 2021 for lines of the prior routes on the buttress.

Article Details

Author	Nathan Hadley
Publication	AAJ
Volume	65
Issue	98
Page	120
Copyright Date	2024
Article Type	Feature article