



## Double Dickey: A New Route and Second Ascent on the East Face—In the Same Month

Alaska, Central Alaska Range, Ruth Gorge

Mt. Dickey's 5,000-foot east face, showing (1) Aim for the Bushes (Cornell-Marvell-Rousseau, 2023) and (2) Blood from the Stone (Easton-Steck, 2002). Other routes not shown. Photo by Matt Cornell.

**I kept my head down and stared into the 'schrund.** I couldn't watch. Alan Rousseau, 150 feet above, was digging into an overhanging tube of powdery snow, as he had for the last hour and a half. Jackson Marvell, the third member of our party, was climbing up and down the 'schrund in various locations to keep occupied. He and I hadn't even left the ground, and already the route was demanding, stressful, and dangerous.

Alan kept peering down, as if preparing to aim for the bushes if he fell, à la Dwayne Johnson in *The Other Guys*. The two screws he'd placed below in rotten, patchy ice were only for his sanity. Another hour passed. Today had been meant as a quick recon for a potential first ascent up one of the many chimney systems on the 5,000-foot east face of Mt. Dickey, but it had turned into something else.

Finally, with a cave excavated, Alan pulled through the lip of the overhang, his feet skating off granite and tools placed in soft névé. As the angle eased, he built an anchor and brought us up. Jackson ran 250 feet up the next pitch, a tight chimney filled with névé. I led more of the same, encountering an old anchor that the legendary alpinist Jack Tackle had left during an exploratory foray in 2007. (This had been the high point of previous attempts by several parties.) The chimney opened up. Snow and ice were plastered to the right wall, sprayed there by avalanches ripping down the gully and firing over a large mess of mushrooms that capped the slot. This feature had shut down all prior attempts. Jackson, always curious, wanted a closer look. He climbed to the end of our rope, level with the mushrooms, took some photos, then downclimbed vertical sn'ice back to the belay.

"It'll go—with some digging," Jackson murmured as he fiddled with a rap anchor.

Six hours after it had begun, our recon was over. We rappelled, pulled our ropes, and returned to camp.

**Mt. Dickey (9,545') is a monster.** When you look down the Ruth Gorge from any aspect, it captures the eye, especially its mile-high easterly wall, which destroys vertical perception in this gorge of giants. The east face's prominent buttress rounds to the south, where pillars of granite rise through an otherwise blank wall as the peak tapers down to 747 Pass. Above the granite walls, the summit slopes are capped with a final barrier of loose diorite and steep snow flutings.

These formidable features have long garnered attention from climbers. In 1974, David Roberts, Galen Rowell, and Ed Ward climbed the southeast face (NCCS VI F9 A3) big-wall style, fixing the first 900 feet and then climbing the rest in a three-day push. Since then, the buttresses and ridges have slowly been ticked off, but it wasn't until 2002 that climbers began to explore the deep clefts and chimneys that fracture the vertical granite. That year, Sean Easton and Ueli Steck, looking for an ice line up the center of the east face, established Blood from the Stone (5,000', WI6+ X M7+ A1), arguably one of the most striking ice-choked chimneys in the world. Two years later, in 2004, Sam Chinnery and Andy Sharpe again followed an ice chimney—this one to the right of the 1974 southeast face route—to establish Snowpatrol (1,600m, VI WI5+).

These ascents highlighted the shift in how Dickey was being approached, from big-wall tactics along protected ridges and pillars to fast-and-light alpinism that seeks out technical ice and mixed terrain deep within the mountain. In 2019, Jackson and Alan put up Ruth Gorge Grinder (5,000', AI6+ M7 A1) on the east face after finding their initial objective, Blood from the Stone, devoid of ice. It was on this trip that they saw the ongoing potential for new routes on Dickey's eastern aspect—Snowpatrol's bigger, badder brothers—especially a striking independent chimney system less than 400 feet to its right. On March 28, the three of us flew into the Ruth Gorge to attempt the unclimbed line.

**On March 31—two days after that hairball recon—we skied out of camp, the Ruth's katabatic winds nibbling at any exposed skin as the sun lit the sky.** We didn't say a word until we had crossed through a band of crevasses and arrived at the toe of Dickey's east face. We looked into the depths of the mountain, gauging our prospective line. A massive chockstone, visible without magnification, seemed to guard the last of the difficulties, 4,000 feet above us.

Jackson took the first block, firing through the pitch Alan had previously excavated. We were quickly back to our high point, 800 feet off the glacier. Alan and I hung from two screws on near-vertical terrain, directly below the billowing mushrooms. Jackson worked upward, digging underneath one mushroom while traversing on top of another—his tools hitting the rock below, his progress protected by beaks—and depositing all of the debris he removed straight onto the belay. Our minds wandered toward disaster. Alan had lost nearly all of the vision in his left eye in 2019 while attempting a new route with Jackson on nearby Mt. Bradley's north face, after Jackson kicked off ice that hit Alan in the face, forcing a retreat. Today, we kept our heads down and took our beating.

Four hours later, Jackson pulled through the final bit of overhanging snow by thrusting his arms deep and manteling out of the mushroom tunnel. We followed, admiring the effort it had taken to lead through such questionable terrain. Thin clouds hung high, the sun hidden as snow worked its way deep into our layers. Our gloves, soaked from digging, froze stiff with our hands inside. We shivered.

I took the rack. The chimney opened up, revealing vertical snow stepped with easier névé. We simul-climbed to stay warm, letting the rhythm of our progress consume us. I stopped below an intimidating wall of overhanging snow and mushrooms, then moved slowly and cautiously, placing a single picket as I committed to the shell of snow. The pitch ended with easier terrain above, where I belayed.

By late afternoon, we had rambled onto a snowfield and easier terrain. Cold, tired, and wet, we stomped out our first bivy site underneath a protruding boulder. We brewed as the light faded, watching the raunchy buddy comedy *The Hangover* on my phone. The movie provided a great distraction from thoughts of the next day's obstacles, in particular the looming chockstone. We hardly said a word to each other—or during the entire climb, for that matter—as it was just too cold to do much more than shiver.

Ice feathered the inside of the tent in the morning. Everything was soaked, from base layers to sleeping bags. It was past 9 a.m. by the time we were packed, a much later start than anticipated; the sun was already high but cloaked by clouds, delivering little warmth.

Immediately, we encountered a narrow tube of sugar snow with more mushrooms guarding the exit. It was Alan's block, and he wiggled and stemmed, looking for gear. There was next to none. He dug into the sugar, tunneling behind the plastered snow and then re-emerging below the mushrooms. Two hours went by.

Down at the belay, Jackson and I debated retreating into Snowpatrol, just to our left. However, after another hour of digging, Alan had masterfully pulled through the steepest snow climbing of the entire route. He continued to lead, squeezing and excavating. The rope was fixed; we followed.

Up at the belay, we found Alan unroped and shivering just above the anchor, attempting to catch the

last bit of sun. It still felt like winter in the central Alaska Range. Almost everything exposed to water—like the snow that had penetrated Alan’s outer layers and melted—would freeze instantly. We weighed our options. A potential bivy at this stance to dry out? Rappel back to a spot where we could link into Snowpatrol? Or just keep climbing? We looked above—the third option seemed like the best. A flake jutted out of the main chimney with a thin strip of ice behind. It looked reasonable. We continued.

Jackson took the lead, stemming and squeezing within the frozen maw—the quality of the ice was improving. Another steep pitch and we were below the chockstone. We stared into a deep cave capped by mushrooms that would have to be cleared, the cracks on either side of the chockstone looking way too wide for our cams. The pitch would have to go free.

Jackson climbed underneath, sizing up the crux, ready to go to war. Then he noticed light in the back of the cave. Moving up and behind the chockstone, he climbed a corkscrew of pure ice through a tunnel—the key to the route. We were filled with relief, fortunate to have had easy passage through what could have been an insurmountable obstacle. I led one more mixed pitch, and we exited the 4,000-foot tube that had enclosed us and dominated our lives for the last two days. As the pressure lifted from our chests, we howled with excitement.

A steep snow traverse leftward brought us into the upper drainage of Snowpatrol, where we encountered the first of the upper mountain’s diorite bands. We simul-climbed up and right, out of the drainage and onto traversing snowfields that led to a flat cornice. It was nearly dark. Unwilling to push through the night, we set up the tent, crawled into our frozen down bags, ate the last of our food, and shivered until dawn.

Hazy clouds and falling snow kept us in the tent till midmorning. Summits occasionally poked through, parting the clouds to reveal the glacier a mile below. I broke trail in this dreamworld to the summit plateau. The three of us stood on top at 10:52 a.m. on April 2. We felt empty, lucky to have survived. We’d found our threshold for risk on this ascent, and we also wondered if it had been worth it.

The descent by the west face took two hours and 45 minutes, completing the first ascent of Aim for the Bushes. This route embodies the “Alaska factor”: The wall is foreshortened and steeper than it looks, and the route has many pitches of snow climbing and a high level of commitment.

**After five stormy days at camp in the Ruth, the three of us parted ways.** Jackson returned home to Salt Lake City, and Alan zipped down to Anchorage to meet a client whom he was to guide in the coming weeks. While I was back in Talkeetna on weather hold, it dumped three feet of snow in town and more in the range. I passed the time by digging out the Talkeetna Air Taxi bunkhouse and drinking beer at the Fairview.

Eventually, I was able to fly into the Tokositna Glacier below Mt. Huntington, with eyes set on soloing the West Face Couloir. I sat in poor weather for another week. During this time, Sam Hennessey, a friend and hardman alpinist, arrived on the Tok with a client. He had flown by Dickey’s east face and noticed that Blood from the Stone was still holding ice. Together, we formulated a plan to attempt the second ascent of this spectacular feature after we left Huntington; eventually, we enlisted the alpine connoisseur and mountain guide Rob Smith, who, with Sam and Michael Gardner, had done the fastest-ever ascent of the Slovak Direct route on Denali the previous year (see *AAJ 2023*). Good weather arrived on April 19, and Sam guided the Harvard Route as I soloed the West Face Couloir. Sam then returned to Talkeetna with his client, while I—too broke to afford another flight—festered on the Tok. Four days later, Rob, who had bought a last-minute ticket from Colorado, flew into the Tokositna with Sam in Paul Roderick’s air taxi, so Paul could pick me up and ferry us all to the Ruth.

In the early afternoon of April 23, I stood below the massive east face of Mt. Dickey for the second time in a month. In a frenzy, Sam, Rob, and I sorted gear, pitched a single tent, and threw our duffels

inside. Only an hour and a half after touching down, we were already booting to the base. The wall looked conspicuously dry, and we wondered if the ice in the lower chimneys had melted during the week since Sam had flown by.

At 3 p.m., we arrived at the broken 'schrund, shaded yet still warm. The snow was soft; conditions were changing quickly as the face melted. Sam, leading the first pitch, worked his way through a steep maze of crevasses. Suddenly, the snow gave way under his feet; tumbling downward, Sam disappeared into the 'schrund, his tools still in the snow where he'd fallen—an eerie sight and an inauspicious start, even though he immediately popped back out and finished the pitch.

We climbed snow to the first rock step, which accesses a hanging snowfield—this marks the start of Blood from the Stone. Here, we encountered a steep ice pitch where Ueli Steck had climbed hard mixed. The meat of the climbing was hidden just above, and we wondered if—as on Alan and Jackson's 2019 attempt—we'd find the lower chimney dry and unclimbable. Sam stomped out a bivy below the El Cap-sized headwall while Rob and I fixed the entrance pitch, a steep, broad curtain of thin névé where I found Jackson's bail nut. The ice barely clung to the chimney's water-polished granite. It would be just enough. We rapped back to the bivy and crawled into the tent, sharing a single sleeping bag.

We woke as the sun began to light the sky. I took the first block, squeezing up a six-to-12-inch-wide strip of ice in the tight slot for several rope lengths before entering a body-width chimney. The ice here was perfect. Less-than-vertical terrain allowed for simul blocks; I occasionally stopped to belay to avoid shelling my partners from high above. As the sun warmed the rock, the ice grew soft and wet. Then the wall steepened and the rock turned red; the ice was so soft it was melting in front of our eyes. This had been one of the M7+ crux pitches on the first ascent, and now it was fully covered in ice—though my tools were melting out as I led!

We climbed quickly and with elation, despite mounting concern over objective hazards, especially after watching a snow mushroom collapse over a pitch we had just climbed. Wondering how much more would fall, we sprinted for the top of the chimney system, eager to escape. Sam tiptoed through slabs sheathed in thin ice into a steep, left-facing corner. Above, vertical thin ice led into overhanging snow—the hardest pitch we'd encounter and where Sam's flawless technique got us to the deteriorating diorite bands below the summit ridge.

Rob took the sharp end on a pitch of steep black rock striped with white dikes and enclosed by flutings—the only mixed pitch we encountered. The way was cryptic, but he managed to link solid, juggy features on what looked to be utter garbage. One more short but intensely steep pitch of ice and we had surmounted the technicalities. We stood on the summit at 8:07 p.m. on April 24, full of disbelief. We'd climbed so quickly on such a serious route, yet it had felt almost casual. I was astonished to have climbed Dickey's east face for a second time so soon—I noticed my crampon impressions from weeks earlier still cast in the windblown snow, glowing red-orange in the fiery light of the setting sun. I owe these experiences, and success, to my partners who shared the rope and the vision.

After seven springs climbing around the Alaska Range, I have never seen a season so conducive to producing good conditions for such a prolonged period. When Alan, Jackson, and I arrived in the Ruth Gorge in late March, it was bitterly cold. The sun hid behind cirrostratus clouds, never raising the ambient temperature significantly, creating a very slow melt-freeze cycle at the lower elevations. There was also no significant warm front that melted all the snow and ice at once, which kept Dickey's garbage chutes fairly "safe" and free of falling debris. This cycle continued through the month, with only one significant snowstorm, between April 8 and 15. After the storm cycle, it remained cold and windy, which quickly cleared the mountains of fresh snow, plus the sun never poked out for more than a day or two before it hid behind clouds again. These were the perfect conditions to transform snow into ice.

As Sam, Rob, and I approached Blood from the Stone on April 23, it was the first truly warm day of the season—and clearly the last window to attempt a major route at lower elevations. The morning after returning from our ascent, we noticed that the route's bottom chimney pitches had fully melted out, one day after we climbed them. Given that we'd only encountered one pitch of mixed climbing and had placed mostly ice screws for gear, it was strange to know that Sean and Ueli had climbed M7+, with some bolts, on multiple pitches. For them, conditions had been drastically different.

I can quite easily say that Blood from the Stone is the best route I have had the opportunity to climb.

**SUMMARY:** First ascent of Aim for the Bushes (5,000', AI6 X M6) on the east face of Mt. Dickey in the Ruth Gorge of the Alaska Range, by Matt Cornell, Jackson Marvell, and Alan Rousseau, March 31–April 2, 2023. Second ascent of Blood from the Stone (5,000', WI6+ X M7+ A1, Easton-Steck, 2002) on Dickey's east face, by Matt Cornell, Sam Hennessey, and Rob Smith, April 23–24, 2023. Their ascent took about 29 hours.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Matt Cornell, 29, lives seasonally between Bozeman, Montana, and Yosemite, California. He made his first climbing trip to the central Alaska Range in 2016. Since then, he has been chasing new routes around the world.

## Images



Mt. Dickey's 5,000-foot east face, showing (1) Aim for the Bushes (Cornell-Marvell-Rousseau, 2023) and (2) Blood from the Stone (Easton-Steck, 2002). Ruth Gorge Grinder (Marvell-Rousseau, 2019) takes the deep gash to the right of Blood from the Stone. Other routes not shown.

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