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Grand Descents: A Half Century of Ski Alpinism in the Tetons

Wyoming, Teton Range

Words that might be blasphemy in the AAJ: Climbing season is the shoulder season, at least for insatiable human-powered skiers and snowboarders in the Tetons. The summer and fall—with their slow pitching out of climbs and knee-pounding descents—are periods to endure until snow sticks to frozen ground and the mountainscape becomes a snow slider's paradise.

Although they are a magnet for North American alpinists, the Tetons offer a short climbing season—and ambitious alpinists don't like sitting around. Fortunately, the Tetons also are snow-draped sirens for alpinists who also like to ski or ride. The Grand Teton and the broader Teton Range have been focal points for ski mountaineers for decades, and remain so today for a cadre of locals, travelers, and dreamers. These mountains capture the imaginations of skiers gazing up from the valley floor the way El Capitan enthalls climbers entering Yosemite Valley for the first time.

Snow is a requirement for cutting-edge ski mountaineering, and the Tetons' gift of geography means there's plenty of it. Moist air flows unimpeded off the Pacific Ocean through a gap between the Sierra and the Cascades, then streams through the high desert's Snake River Plain, until the Tetons' orographic lift wrings heaps of snow from the sky. These mountains have sustained steepness, glacier-carved cirques, committing couloirs, and fine aesthetics. And the mountain gods blessed the region with another gift: Generally, access is relatively "easy."

This article isn't a guide to ski mountaineering in the Tetons, nor is it a comprehensive history. As with most things, there were those who came before, and even before that. Teton Pass and some zones in the high peaks were explored on skis by the likes of Fred Brown, Jack Durrance, and Paul Petzoldt. Nor is this story all about the Grand Teton, the high point of the range at 13,770 feet (4,197m). It hopscotches around the range to capture some—again, not all—of the progression of Tetons ski alpinism.

In fact, the Grand is not even where our story begins. But it does start with the man who first skied the Grand: Bill Briggs.

Shouldn't or Couldn't?

As an apathetic East Coast college student in the 1950s, succumbing to the gravitational pull of wide-open spaces, Bill Briggs bolted west to find home. As a skier who climbed, Briggs had the ability to puzzle-piece mountain passes together. In 1958, Briggs, along with Barry Corbet, Bob French, and Sterling Neale, linked the now-storied Bugaboos to Rogers Pass ski traverse in British Columbia. Traveling through heavily glaciated terrain, the nine-day forging of the line was proof of concept for Briggs' mountain skills and audacity, with which he'd eventually open up the Tetons as a ski mountaineering promised land.

Briggs ticked an early ski descent of Mt. Rainier in 1961 and eventually settled in as a climbing guide in Jackson Hole. In the mid-'60s, he purchased—and ran for decades—the ski school at Snow King, a steep hill that sits just above the town of Jackson. Any big-descent dreams Briggs harbored would have been provoked by Snow King's full south-to-north view of the Teton Range. In a 1995 article published in *Ski*, titled "The Man of First Descents," Briggs stated, "Skiing mountains is such an

appropriate thing to do—it's part of the sport. If there was a feeling that a mountain or a run shouldn't or couldn't be skied, and I could eliminate that inhibition, that's what I really enjoyed."

Prior to Briggs' arrival in the range, there had been exploratory descents on some of the range's lesser, yet still formidable, peaks. In 1961, Corbet, Anna LaFarge, and Eliot Goss made the first descent of any of the Tetons' high peaks, the east face of Buck Mountain. Lore has Corbet skiing with his leather boots unfastened. However, into the late '60s, the Tetons' prominent skyline remained open for interpretation by skiers—the ethos of "shouldn't or couldn't" still reigned.

Briggs' first stamp on the high peaks ski scene came on Mt. Moran. When you gaze at the Teton Range from the northeast, Moran, at 12,610 feet, dominates the viewshed. A large massif with a plateau-like summit, Moran offers many walls and slabs to ascend, and an aesthetic skier's line called the Skillet that plunges from the summit—intimidating but alluring, with a dreamy, uninterrupted fall line.

In June 1968, a party of four—Briggs, Peter Koedt, Fletcher Manley, and Dick Pearson—skied the Skillet, Moran's most obvious line, top to bottom. The upper few hundred feet of this east-facing line pitch to nearly 50°, while the remaining slope backs off in difficulty and unfolds into 6,000 vertical feet of turns to Jackson Lake. The 1968 descent was notable for embracing Moran's wilderness—depending on the time of year, a mandatory six-mile ski or paddle across Jackson Lake guards the mountain from the east, and skinning and climbing the Skillet involves glaciated terrain.

Opening the Grand

As the tallest peak in the range, the Grand Teton was the prize for skiers, just as it was for early mountaineers in the West. Briggs set his eyes on a ski descent and began chasing the fleeting circumstances of snow stability and a band of willing partners. Describing his mindset at the time in a 2020 Wyoming PBS video interview, Briggs recalled with an emphatic sigh, "No one is going to do this unless I do this."

There were several false starts. In the spring of 1969, Briggs was unable to secure partners. A year later, during the 1969-70 season, insufficient snow coupled with snow instabilities snuffed plans. Three winters out from Briggs' Moran ski, the conditions and partners aligned. He was supported by John Bolton, Jorge Colon, and Robbie Garrett. On June 16, 1971, Briggs climbed the Stettner Couloir on the mountain's south face with Garrett, reached the Underhill Ridge, then ascended solo up the east face to the top.

"From the summit the skis were then used to descend to the top of the Underhill ridge," reads the 1972 AAJ entry (original language and punctuation retained). "A rappel over the rock pitch [climbed on the way up] permitted an uninterrupted ski descent of the mountain, first down the couloir to the Black Dike, then over to the Teepe Snowfield and down to within 1000 feet of the valley floor where the snow ended."

"Wonderful, fun skiing, for me," Briggs told "Live and Play Jackson Hole," a local video program. "I cannot imagine having anything as varied in one ski run as [I] got in that."

Although Briggs had to convince locals he'd skied the Grand— it was verified the following day with aerial photos of his tracks taken by Virginia Huidekoper—his descent by the east face and Stettner Couloir, then down the Teepe Glacier, is considered by many to be the beginning of technical steep skiing outside of Europe. Skiers refer to this as the Briggs Route.

Briggs' gear—in particular, his skis—is worth a mention. He skied on long planks (30cm to 40cm longer than today's standard for steep skiing), equipped with the alpine bindings of the day, and he carried them up the mountain. In an interview with ski

writer Lou Dawson, Briggs said of his ski choice for the Grand, "It was a K2 Elite. Very soft, light, 210cm, fiberglass ski. I added damping strips to both skis to reduce vibration, which worked very well, making it a very versatile (an all-conditions cheater) ski for its day."

A Grand Classic: The Ford

In July 1978, Pocatello, Idaho, locals Brad Peck and Jeff Rhoads cast their eyes in the direction of the Grand Teton's most elegant ski line, the Ford Couloir. This couloir is a fall-line descent dropping 1,000 feet directly off the Grand's summit. From a high camp, the duo ascended and then skied the Briggs Route on July 2, making the second ski descent of the peak. Then, on July 4, Rhoads and Peck climbed the Stettner to the Chevy Couloir (which usually has some ice climbing) to the Ford and onward to the summit.

On top, the team transitioned to skis, arced down the east face into the Ford's iconic fall line, and continued down into the Chevy. By downclimbing and rappelling, they eventually accessed their high camp near Glencoe Col. There, atop the Teepe Glacier, they clicked back into their skis and made turns down to the Platforms at roughly 9,000 feet. Nowadays, ski mountaineers regard the link-up of the Stettner, Chevy, and Ford couloirs as the standard ascent and descent path for skiing the Grand Teton.

Of note, Rick Wyatt made the second descent of the Ford-Chevy-Stettner route solo, in June 1982—and with his mind free, since he was descending on telemark skis.

This was also the line of the first female ski descent of the Grand, when Kristen Ulmer descended the Ford in June 1997. Ulmer was part of the day's "extreme" ski scene and already a ski film star. With a small group, she made an initial attempt on the Grand in May of 1997—the party pivoted after encountering snow instabilities while ascending. "I had heard a rumor that nobody's ever skied the Grand Teton on their first try," she said, "and the second I got up there, I realized why: Because you get up there and you're like, *What the actual heck is that? It is so exposed.*"

Ulmer returned a few weeks later. "It wasn't on my radar that I'd be the first woman when I made my first attempt," added Ulmer. She just got motivated by the challenge. Her second attempt was successful, as she and her team navigated sluffing snow on the descent.

A decade later, in 2007, the first all-female team, consisting of Julia Niles and Lisa Van Sciver, onsighted their ascent and descent of the Grand.

Kit DesLauriers completed another women's first when she soloed the Grand Teton climb and ski in 2013. According to DesLauriers, "I did feel like it was a significant accomplishment and barrier breaking, though I did it only because I wondered if I could do it...without a rope yet with enough of a safety margin to ensure success. It was a mental exercise as much as a physical one."

Bigger and Bolder Lines

The Tetons truly shine when viewed from the north, with the sheer and imposing north face of the Grand and the picture-perfect skyline of the Cathedral Group. The skier's eye is drawn to the Hossack-MacGowan Couloir, an incut series of couloirs and ramps just to viewer's left of the mountain's iconic north face, instilling both inspiration and fear. The Hossack-MacGowan and its 100 percent don't-slip, no-fall skiing demanded a leap in commitment from Briggs' descent of the Grand. The Hossack combines challenging climbing with steep skiing—everything a proper ski alpinism adventure needs.

On several occasions in spring conditions—traditionally considered the safe and predictable season to ski steep, technical terrain—various local climbers and skiers were repelled by the route. In 1996,

Hans Johnstone and Mark Newcomb, two local alpinists-skiers, tried a different strategy. Instead of waiting for the firm-then-soft snow of spring, they took advantage of a few weeks of midwinter high pressure and hit this king line in mid- February—the snow was very firm for their descent.

Johnstone and Newcomb carried mountaineering gear, including a rope and protection, but theirs was a fast-and-light affair. They made the approach on lighter touring skis, then swapped into more robust alpine ski gear for the climb and descent. After departing the trailhead at 3:30 a.m. and soloing up the entire route, Johnstone and Newcomb primed for some iconic steep turns just below the rocky summit at around 1:30 p.m.

“The descent back across the east face and down the upper couloir offered incomparable skiing amidst spectacular exposure,” Newcomb recalled in the 1997 AAJ. “The steady 50- to 55-degree pitch of the couloir kept our attention, though its width and the perfect snow enabled us to link turns the entire distance to its termination above a 1,500-foot cliff. From there we traversed (skier’s right) around two corners and across an apron of snow just about steep enough to keep our up-hill knee within biting distance of our chins.”

By early evening, the understated Johnstone and Newcomb were homeward bound. Although this was over 25 years after Briggs’ ski descent, it was the first one-day ascent and descent of the Grand Teton with skis. It was also the first winter ascent of the Hossack-MacGowan.

The Otter Body

To looker’s right of the Ford Couloir, positioned low on the Grand’s precipitous east face, is the Otter Body, a hanging snowfield suspended on the underlying slabs, with somewhat of a resemblance to the mammal. A choke, often rappelled— but successfully skied twice—links the east face with the Otter Body’s midsection. Enter the body, make some turns, maybe some sideslipping, then work toward the otter’s tail, more rappels down the Otter Chimney and to the Teepee Glacier, where the turns continue.

Within the arcane world of visioning bold ski lines, the idea of skiing the Otter Body route is attributed to local Jeff Zell. His vision was realized in June 1996, just a few months after the Hossack-MacGowan descent, again by Mark Newcomb, accompanied by legend-status skier Doug Coombs.

In looking over notes and correspondence about the Otter Body, this is clear: Repeat descents of the Otter Body are rare. The face is kissed by the sun at dawn and prone to large temperature fluctuations; signs of avalanches strafing the face, deep crowns, and hangfire are visible for miles—all evidence of gravity’s wickedness.

The well-known Wasatch skier Andrew McLean, who made the second descent of the Hossack-MacGowan (with Hans Saari), had unsuccessful attempts on the Otter Body. He later summarized the conundrum posed by the Grand Teton: “I hadn’t been back to ski on the Grand Teton for about ten years in part because I was still quaking in fear from my last descent...on the Hossack- MacGowan,” he wrote. “Perhaps ‘respect’ is a better word than fear in this case, as after nine skiing trips to the Grand, it became apparent that picking a line, setting a date, and then traveling from out of state to try it was a dicey strategy. The Grand favors local knowledge over luck, and a combination of both is better yet.”

Boldness is often premised on location- specific intimacy, not on throwing oneself at a problem over and over. Newcomb and Coombs, both Jackson Hole residents, eyed the Otter Body for years prior to their descent. Kim Havell, another Jackson Hole local, was the first woman to ski the Otter Body, in 2013, along with a strong team. Consider efforts like these tactical strikes.

The North Face

In 1949, 11 years after the first ascent of the Eiger Nordwand, the north face of the Grand was climbed by Ray Garner, Art Gilkey, and Dick Pownall. The route rises 3,000 feet off the Teton Glacier, ascending a combination of rock pitches and snow ramps.

More than six decades later, in 2013, mountain guides Greg Collins and Brendan O'Neill skied the north face. O'Neill and Collins made this a top-down affair, after ascending the more straightforward Stettner-Ford to the summit.

To start the descent, the duo rappelled onto the north face's Third Ledge and clicked into skis. They linked the Third and Second Ledges on skis, then rappelled onto First Ledge. After 1,000 feet of skiable terrain, which terminated atop a rock climbing pitch (Guano Chimney), they pivoted, cramponed back up First Ledge, and rapped to a point partway down the Grandstand, at the head of the Teton Glacier. From there, they continued the steep skiing onto the glacier and completed their 7,000-foot descent back to the flatlands. In total, O'Neill and Collins made ten single-rope rappels, bracketed by relentless exposed skiing. The ascent and descent were completed trailhead-to-trailhead in 14 hours.

In a 2013 Jackson Hole News & Guide story on the north face descent, O'Neill is quoted as saying the line is as "technical a ski descent as there probably is."

The second descent of the north face was completed very recently, in March 2024, by Adam Fabrikant and Sam Hennessey. According to Hennessey, the team did not necessarily improve on the 2013 descent's style in any way, aside from ascending to the top of the Grandstand before skiing down it, rather than skiing that section from two-thirds height. Their day was ten hours car-to-car. Hennessey said, "Some people have dismissed this route as a contrived rappelling route. But, honestly, the north face has some amazing skiing in an outrageous position. We thought it was an excellent day of skiing."

Beyond the Grand

Mt. Owen is the second-highest peak in the range, at 12,933 feet, and was the last of the major Teton peaks summited, due to a complex approach and technical challenges. A few years after the Grand Teton's first descent, in 1974, Bill Briggs—that man again—climbed Mt. Owen and authored perhaps his most visionary line.

At a terse 91 words, let's allow the 1975 *AAJ* to do the documentation: "One more of the major Teton summits has been descended on skis, this time Mount Owen by Bill Briggs and Rob McClure on June 21. Putting on skis on the east ridge about 150 feet below the summit, they descended to the East Prong Col (a.k.a. Koven Col) and from there down the remaining part of the Northeast Snowfields. A rope and belay were used on the 60-foot pitch during this section. The snow finally gave out about 500 feet above Cascade Creek, about three hours and 5000 feet after they left the summit."

A few weeks before this descent, McClure skied from Mt. Owen's Koven Col, a precarious run that begins at just below 12,000 feet and descends the south-facing Koven Couloir. No doubt, this experience was of substantial benefit to his and Briggs' subsequent descent on Owen. Modern skiers refer to their line as The Diagonal.

Briggs and McClure's visionary project became a blueprint for progress in the range: Descents should aspire to making continuous turns toward the valley bottom, downclimbing or rappelling as little as possible. A May 1998 solo descent of Mt. Moran stands out as embracing this continuous-turns ethic. Stephen Koch made a 6,000-foot non-stop snowboard descent of Moran's northeast ridge. He wrote in the 1999 *AAJ* that he took a minimalist approach, leaving the axes and crampons at home. Perhaps as a result, Koch was able to move super efficiently: 14 hours car-to-car on this remote peak.

The ideals of style in the Tetons are complex, however. At the simplest level, rappelling is not skiing and downclimbing is not skiing, but the use of mountaineering skills allows skiers to make turns and have experiences in wild places. And on many Teton routes, there's an X factor that compounds the difficulties and complicates choices on which tactics to use. Those long rock slabs that make for enjoyable, moderate summer climbs in the Tetons can be the crux on ski descents, vastly different from the steep, firm snow or glacial ice that often presents as the crux in the central Alps. In the Tetons, ski descents require knowledge of the precise snow cover over rocks and/or the ability to descend safely regardless of how little snow blankets the granite slabs.

The slabby CMC Route on Moran's southeast face is a classic example, with a bit of fifth-class climbing and extensive third and fourth class in summer. The line has been skied twice, with the first descent in May 2002—involving some rappels—going to Doug Coombs, Bill Dyer, Hans Johnstone, and Kent McBride.

Given the craggy and unrelenting terrain of the Tetons, keeping the rope coiled and in the pack will only be aspirational for some lines. But it remains the "in good style" ideal. Among the current vanguard of skiers helping to define these ideals is the co-author of this article, Adam Fabrikant. He and a close-knit group have been involved in so many interesting descents in recent years that, at this point, we'll switch to first person and let Adam tell the story directly.

Modern Ski Alpinism

"Without style and ethics in the mountains, what do we really have?" That's as basic a question as can be asked if you're an AAJ reader. And the basic answer to this perhaps rhetorical query is an unequivocal "not much."

I raised the question in an AAJ 2021 report describing a few recent ski lines on Mt. Owen. In 2017, Beau Fredlund and I made a ten-meter rappel off the summit blocks, then continued all the way down the storied Northeast Snowfields on skis, making a variation (the Freddy-Fab) to bypass the traditional 60-meter rappel over the lower choke. The hour was later than we wanted, given the strong sun in May, and the threat of wet snow avalanches haunts me to this day.

In March 2019, Brian Johnson, Brendan O'Neill, I were able to safely descend Owen's Run-Don't-Walk Couloir, a line that skiers had discussed many a night as a potential descent. I was pretty apprehensive about giving it a go. First climbed in 1972, the couloir was an ice and mixed route rated WI4 M4. Our approach was to ski much of the Northeast Snowfields, pivot and climb with spikes up to the north ridge, transition again, then point skis down the Run-Don't-Walk. We made spicy jump turns, three rappels over the ice pitches, more jump turns, another ten-meter rappel, some "dry skiing" through a rock band (read Ptex on rock and no rope), and some fine powder turns. The technical sections of Run-Don't-Walk add up to about 2,000 feet of descent.

In 2021, Billy Haas joined Beau Fredlund and me in opening up the Pika Buttress Couloir on Mt. Moran. In Beau's elegant short film on the first descent, *Brother Crow*, I say, "The goal is not to just be risky, but to be in these wild, wild places, ideally with a pair of skis." A new line was born just across the six-mile frozen expanse of Jackson Lake: a fine position, close to where this all began in 1968 with Briggs' vision of the Skillet.

The Future Is Now

Let's think about climbing for a moment, specifically big link-ups in Yosemite Valley. There was the Nose in a Day, then El Cap and Half Dome in 24 hours. Add Mt. Watkins and there's a trifecta—the three biggest Yosemite walls, all scaled in a day. As with climbing in Yosemite, once the challenges are minimized by training, repetition, and familiarity, big and speedy Teton link-ups are possible, too.

The Tetons have a rich history of summer link-ups, most notably the Cloudveil, Cathedral, and Grand Traverses. It follows that Teton winter traverses, where gravity is optimized by skiing or boarding, are a natural extension of the summertime tradition—using a different set of tools for efficient movement through the mountains.

For Teton snow sliders, there's a tick similar to the Yosemite triple crown known as the Teton Trifecta: a single-push effort ascending and skiing/riding the Grand, Middle, and South Tetons. In the 1990s, Koch and Newcomb completed the first in-a-day enchainment of the Teton Trifecta. The link-up has since become a seasonal tick for some, yet remains a cruxy, conditions-dependent fitness test.

Eventually, some in the community began talking about a ski link-up involving even more technical terrain. I first became aware of this vision in 2017, when I heard a talk where several prominent local skiers spoke about the history of ski mountaineering in the Tetons and where it all might be going. I recall Mark Newcomb offhandedly stating that one day it would be cool if somebody skied the Hossack-MacGowan on the Grand, then climbed Mt. Owen and skied the Northeast Snowfields, then climbed up to the summit of Teewinot and descended the east face to the valley floor. If you're a Teton climber, you know the link-up of these peaks as the Cathedral Traverse, moving north to south—Teewinot, Owen, and then the Grand. From the skier's point of view, it's more seamless to trend south to north.

Progress is usually the result of small steps rather than a quantum leap, and we embrace that ethos while imagining new Teton ski adventures. The incremental steps include repeating and becoming comfortable with ascent and descent routes. We closely follow weather and snow stability. We maintain sharp-end fitness and experiment with gear and nutrition. The end goal is to move fast and securely by removing the traditional challenges associated with moving through the mountains: things like route-finding, unknown sequences of moves, or how to protect certain pitches. We normalize the process by gaining intimate knowledge of a few mountains. As a result, attempting the link-up Newcomb imagined in 2017 becomes an endurance challenge. But, know this: The endeavor had our full attention.

In 2021, Sam Hennessey and I completed the Cathedral Traverse on skis—but by less committing lines, as we didn't include the Hossack-MacGowan or the Northeast Snowfields.

By March 18, 2023, Brendan O'Neill, Hennessey, and I felt we had the skill set and the gathered knowledge to commit to and complete Newcomb's proposed link-up. After efficiently summiting the Grand Teton, we descended the east face and traversed into the Hossack-MacGowan, which went with three rappels. We then flowed toward the Koven Couloir on the south side of Mt. Owen and began booting up. The group topped out on Owen, downclimbed the summit pyramid, and clicked into skis roughly 100 feet below the top before skiing down the Northeast Snowfields. At roughly the 10,000-foot level, we contoured toward and into Teewinot's North Couloir, summited, and skied that peak's east face to the valley. The effort totaled roughly 13,500 feet of climbing (and descent) over 16 miles.

As in any famed and heavily climbed arena—again, think Yosemite Valley—things aren't necessarily as older generations think they are. The idea of someplace being climbed out can be considered nonsense. The same can be said of ski alpinism. Styles become more refined, skills more honed. Yes, the future is now, but it's also tomorrow for those who can vision a cleaner descent or imagine there's more light in a day and push even farther across the Tetons in good style, linking up classic lines.

In short, "skied out" isn't part of the vocabulary here.

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Images

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