

Totally Ruthless: Ruth Gorge 2007

Expedition Report

SUMMARY

This two-person expedition had designs on the East face of Mt Wake and the London/Werewolf Tower. However, an open bergshrund on the approach to Mt Wake necessitated a change of plan and the team looked for objectives on the east side of the Gorge. The team climbed a new route up the couloir between the Werewolf (6,700ft) and Hut Tower (6,200ft).

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Original Objectives of the Expedition

1. East Face of Mt. Wake (see attached map and image). Large (approx 4000ft glacier to summit) granite face rising from the Ruth Glacier. In character the East face is reminiscent of classic winter alpine north faces (e.g. Les Droites). The central line was climbed in 2002 by Lowry and Teale. The proposed line follows the glacier to the narrows. Then, avoiding the obvious righthand bowl (serac danger), we planned to exit by following ice runnels through mixed ground to a point on the south east ridge. This shall then be followed to the summit. Descent will be to the North West to the col between Mt. Wake and Bradley.

2. Werewolf and London Towers. See attached map. Guy Willett was on an MEF supported trip to the Ruth in 2003. In his report he notes: "it is not just the big faces that offer outstanding lines. There are many lines (600-1000m high) on lesser peaks and cols which would offer hard mixed / ice climbing, often up gully / gashes in big walls. It was our intention to investigate the potential for mixed/ice climbing on the Werewolf and London Towers.

MOUNT HUT COULOIR

Without a doubt what we were experiencing at was some of the most unpleasant climbing conditions that either of us had ever seen. On 13 April at 8am, myself and James Mehigan were at the foot of a narrow couloir that snaked up the side of Mt Hut (ca 6.200ft). We had recced the route while skiing the previous day and seen a line of white that fired up the entire length of the couloir. We'd bailed off a route further north the previous day when our chosen line turned out to consist of unconsolidated steep snow.

The line we hoped to climb was spotted from a trip to look at Mt Church and we hoped to find a line of steep gully ice. Already having been warned about what the Alaskan mountains can throw at you we had to be prepared for anything. Inspecting the line through the binos we could make out a line of white that ran all the way up the gully. We just had to hope that it would be solid enough to climb.

When we started the route we could not believe that such a stunning looking line was still unclimbed. As I (Oliver) left the ground and began slamming my axe into the neve the snow squeaked like fresh styrofoam as I punched my axes into it. The terrain steepened and my axe hit something soft. Something very soft. In fact, it was air. I had punched through the snow into a black cave, and I realised, to my dismay, that this line of white was a far cry from the pleasant, Chamonix style gully bashing that we had been hoping for. With my brow furrowed, I realised, that our chosen route was in fact just a curtain of unconsolidated snow that veiled a spectacular, and sometimes overhanging fault.

But it wasn't all bad. Running through the powder were these octopus-like tentacles of semi-hardened snow. 'There HAS to be a way around this' I thought. Then I remembered watching Mick Fowler making an ascent of an overhanging gully in Scotland. 'If you're going to climb ice.' he quipped, 'You have to use your head'. He then started smashing down the overhang by head butting the ice. Inspired by this creative technique, I lifted my hood over my lid and started headbutting the veil of snow-ice.

A few thousand brain cells later, I had created a kind of chimney in the veil. Delicately, I back, and footed my way up to a rest. Here I could remove my rucsac. By now I was looking at a 20 footer onto a ledge so I punched a hole through the veil and threaded it. Then I took off my rucsac and put it under the thread to 'strengthen' my 'protection'. Ahead of me was the stopper move. I had to swing onto the veil, standing on snow of uncertain strength and then make my way to the top of the veil on snow ice of dubious quality. I reached up, hoping for a good placement. The sound the axe made as I drove it home brought back memories of home.

The sound it made as it smacked into the Alaskan Granite was very much like the chimes of Big Ben on the News at 10: 'CHONNNG'. I tried again. 'CHONNNNG'. Three hours later, my clothing damp with snow and sweat, I had completed the first pitch.

Now pushed for time, we rushed the changeover and I didn't eat anything at the belay. 25 feet of steep climbing later and I had the low blood sugar level blues. I hung exhausted on the steep ice, feeling about as effective as a clapped out Made In England Mini duelling on a hill-climb with an American Ford Hemi V8. I looked down at my climbing partner.

He was 25 feet below me... 'James, I am just completely knackered', I shouted down to the Irishman. "Fraid I'm going to have to come back down and eat something." Some sketchy down climbing, two GU's and a big gulp of water later I was back at the highpoint and feeling completely re-energised. This pitch was another test of your ability to climb in marginal conditions and both me and James were thankful for the high resistance to suffering we had developed at the age of twelve when we were encouraged to go 'Lightweight Camping' with Primus stoves and 5 kilogram Force Ten's strapped to our backs at scout camp.

I cleared snow and my axe went light as it went into empty space behind the snow. I dug away some more. Behind was this huge dark space, like knocking a hole into a cathedral.

According to James, there was a lot of snow pouring down the gully. Both from spindrift avalanches (light snowfall had commenced), and the gallons of snow that I was tearing out from the Gully to try and find something solid 'Most of it,' said James, 'Was express to my neck'. The climbing didn't really fit in with the paradigm of anything we'd ever experienced before. But there were occasional good runners in the side of the gully, so we continued.

At the top of the hard climbing on pitch two, the line kicked back and I ran out an entire ropelength to what we later named 'The A2 belay'. This consisted of a 'Will I? Wont I?' mobile rock 8, two tied off pegs and two axes to back things up. The terrain ahead looked challenging. Above our heads, a huge snow mushroom bloomed out of the right side of the gully like a big wart. And to the left of it, another veil of overhanging snow.

I punched back the veil of the snow to reveal a perfect box-shaped cave that sloped back into the cliff. 'Look,' I said, hardly able to believe my luck, 'This is a gift; we can belay in here'. Sitting in the cave, things felt a lot better. Okay, so it was already quarter to six, but the col, we were sure, was just above our heads. 'At seven o'clock', I said. 'We turn around.' I punched out more snow and I began to feel a bit more at home. It was just like a Richardson/Cartright route on The Ben: An overhanging chimney capped with big blocks; a carbon copy of the the exit from the cave pitch on the crux of Darth Vader. I hammered in a good peg and James took in red tight. I then placed a rock 4 above my head. Green was snapped into the extender and with some help from James I pulleyed up to the rope. I took a deep breath and hoped for neve at the top of the overhang. 'Okay James' I said. I'm free climbing NOW. Weight back on my arms. Back and foot off the chimney. Reach up with the axe. Slam right axe down. THWOCK. Good Neve. Yes. Slam left axe down. THWOCK Big pull now, this is what you did all those pull ups for. And YES, I can see the Col...

A bombproof belay in the side of the gully and I'm off again. The gully reverts to type with some truly awful climbing. Polystyrene ball bearing snow on granite slabs. Just one runner in sixty metres. But at least it is not too steep. I blaze a trench that is two feet deep and four feet wide. I hear James shout out; 'Olly, It's getting late...' but we are so close now, and I just can't let it go. An hour and a half later, soaked to the skin from all the snow clearing and and I'm at the Col.

As the light fades from the sky I start to shiver. The landscape slides by like a scene from an Imax movie. A scene of winter Alaskan desolation. As I look at it a thought flashes through my mind: 'People aren't really meant to be in this place'. A carapace of ice is forming over my wet clothing and the way down looks awful. A steep gully that plummets into a maze of crevasses. 'Better the devil you know' I think to myself. We're going back the way we came.' Slamming in a Hex 8. I tie the rope to my harness in case I drop it and try to untie the ropes from myself so I can rap off them. The knots are frozen solid so I slice the ropes from my harness with my knife.

I fly back down the rope back to James and he's already got our escape planned. 'Back into the cave', he says, 'We'll brew up there'. It may be dark outside, but it feels great to be in the cave necking hot sweet tea and munching on chocolate. I change clothes and put my hands into dry mitts and the world starts to feel a warmer place. With James organising the descent we are back on the ground a few hours later. The final trek back to glacier into the brutal arctic wind seems to take forever. As we unzip the tent we hear the electronic bleep of the alarm clock. It's 3.30 in the morning... We've been on the go for 24 hours.

Hut Tower Couloir, Oliver Metherell and James Mehigan, 13th April 2007, 1500ft, Scottish Grade VII, ED, A1

GENERAL LAYOUT AND TOPOGRAPHY

The Ruth Gorge is a half hour flight from town of Talkeetna. The mountains are below 10,000ft high with over a vertical mile from glacier to summit on the highest peaks. Well known routes include Snow Patrol, Ham and Eggs (on the Mooses Tooth), Blood from the Stone and The Gift. The glacier is popular with climbers in the spring and is frequented by light aircraft, making access to the Gorge relatively easy as long as the weather is good.

Guidebooks

The latest **Supertopo guide** 'Alaska Climbing' by Joseph Puryear is an excellent guide to the area and its logistics and history. Though we never did any routes in it, the book appears to be excellent and was highly regarded by any climbers we met who had used it.

There is also a guidebook to Alaska by **Coombs and Colby**, published by the Mountaineers Press. It is a bit general and covers only a couple of routes in the Ruth. If you are buying one guidebook, get the Supertopo one.

Maps

We bought a custom printed map of the Ruth in REI in Anchorage for \$9.95. It's an allright map but not exactly an IGN 1:25,000 meisterwerk.

Weather

There had been a prolonged stable clear spell before we arrived which meant that many of the avalanche prone slopes were stable. However, needless to say, the weather changed when we arrived and began to snow with reasonable regularity. Of the 12 days we were on the glacier it snowed most nights. We had two spells of 48 hours without snowfall when we were able to leave 24 hours for snow to settle and then go climbing.

It seems that if the high wind is coming from the north it is usually bringing some good clear weather and if it is coming from the south it is bringing in something horrendous from the Pacific; batten down the hatches. The wind on the level of the glacier seems almost always to be coming from the north (and filling your tent hole with spindrift each night). The pilots' weather forecasts were almost always right. Though the one time they were wrong they predicted 'clearing in the Ruth' and there was an overnight deluge. So perhaps it is worth remembering the old saying: 'There are two types of cloud in Alaska. Serious, and accumulating.'

Sunlight

There is a good graph in the Puryear guidebook explaining how much sunlight to expect in the Alaska range in a given month. We were on the glacier from 4-16 April and found that the sun rose around 5.30-6am and set about 9.30-10pm. We were camped on the east side of the glacier so our tent got direct sunlight somewhat later in the day and the sun hit the tent at about 11.15am.

TRAVEL

UK to Anchorage

We used STA Travel. However, for reasons that are explained below we suggest you avoid them. Oliver flew United Airlines who charged over £800. James flew Continental Airlines through Houston for about the same price. Other expeditions have used Expedia and Thomsons **0800 000747**. On the outward and return journey our bags were overweight and we were charged for excess baggage. James was charged \$120 to change the date of the flight. Oliver's flight was originally via San Francisco. This leg of the journey was not possible and he was re-routed via Seattle with an overnight stay there. On the return journey Oliver discovered that the ticket he'd been sold by STA was a 'Bulk' ticket. This is a completely non-changeable, non-transferable ticket. His return journey took 60 hours and cost \$1900.

Anchorage to Talkeetna

We used Tom Waite of **Denali Overland** (www.denalioverland.com). The rate from Anchorage to Denali was \$300 and he was happy to stop at the supermarket and climbing shop so we could load our food & gear into his van. Please be aware that March and early April trips are outside the tourist season and it is best to arrange transportation in advance at these times. The \$300 is for the whole journey that Tom makes (Talkeetna – Anchorage – Talkeetna). So if there are other climbers booked to travel on the other leg, the price is halved.

On our return journey we hitched back. **Hitching** was relatively easy, we had our thumbs out by about 8am and were in the airport by about 11.30am. So it wasn't much slower than getting a transfer. We got a lift from a guy called Dirk who runs a light aircraft service outside Fairbanks servicing the Brooks Range. If you ever go there look him up, he's a great guy. His company is called Coyote Air (<http://www.flycoyote.com/>).

The other option would be to get the Alaska **railroad** which goes to Talkeetna from Anchorage. However in winter (ie before June) there is only one journey each way a week (North on Saturday, South on Sunday) so it may be too inflexible for most parties, though it would be cheaper than a taxi at about \$45 each way.

Talkeetna to Ruth Gorge

We flew with Talkeetna Air Taxi (TAT, <http://www.flytalkeetna.com>) and found them to be really helpful and knowledgeable. There is a baggage allowance of 125 lbs each, after that, it's a dollar a pound. All our kit weighed 396 lbs so we'd to pay an extra \$146. We tipped our pilots \$40 on the way in and \$20 on the way out. They seem to keep a reasonably good eye on what's going on. Paul Roderick, the owner of TAT knew we had climbed the Hut Couloir because he had seen our tracks while flying over so that is some reassurance.

ACCOMODATION, FOOD/PROVISIONS, EQUIPMENT

The above topics have been covered in detail in previous reports written by Tom Spreyer, Guy Willett and Stu Macaleese. We found Stu Macaleese's account of the 2003 ascent of Supa Dupa Couloir particularly helpful when planning our trip.

Shopping

We did the big shop at Carrs in Anchorage (\$660 for 24 days worth of food) where we were given a discount card (which amounted to 10% off) and found the service to be very helpful and friendly. The shops in Talkeetna are really basic and pricey so make sure you have everything you need before you head up.

We bought a load of gear at AMH (<http://www.alaskamountaineering.com/>) in Anchorage. They gave us a 10% discount and the salesman admitted that basically everyone gets a discount, so make sure you get it. Given the fact that the dollar is worth about as much as a rouble at the moment this was an effective way to top up our rack and also saved us having to run the risk of paying lots for excess luggage. We also bought some gear at REI (<http://www.rei.com>).

Fuel

We used about a gallon of Coleman for every ten days on the glacier and the best price for this is found at TAT (\$8/gallon at TAT rather than \$11.50/gallon at Carrs). That said, we budgeted about a gallon a week for the two of us. TAT and the guidebooks estimate about 8 fluid ounces per person per day.

Tents

We used one large mountain tent and were dropped off at a spectacular snow hole that had just been vacated by a mountain guide and his client. It had a large area for gearing up, a semi-enclosed area for the CMCs and a large storage area for gear.

We recommend a snow saw for building a wall to protect the camp from the constant wind that blows down the Gorge. The locals we met in the Gorge used down boots and a specialised cooking tent with a central pole. Their strategy is to pitch the tent and then dig a deep channel around the pole so that they can prepare food standing up.

There is an almost constant wind coming down the glacier from the north and it is really advantageous to have dug in a good hole for your tent and a place out of the wind to use the Clean Mountain Can (CMC). We would have had difficulty building a decent wall with only shovels and cannot recommend a snow saw enough. Having a square snow hole and well constructed 'palace' for living in was a huge boost to quality of life in base camp.

Carpenters saws have been recommended as snow saws.

Stoves

We took a Primus Himalaya Multifuel for BC and an MSR Simmerlite for the route. The stoves were running on Coleman and the Primus needed frequent pricking.

Stuff

Other things to consider bringing;

- Antiseptic handwash gel
- Vitamin pills
- Full fat cream for porridge / tea
- String
- Stuff Sacs filled with snow for securing the camp
- Short Wave radio. We had an AM/FM radio and could get 2 FM stations on the glacier, but a SW radio might be better.
- Cans of veg

We also took a **GPS** which might be useful for locating base camp in bad weather.

We also carried a small **first aid kit**. This contained large wound dressings, tape, steristrips, and a mouthpiece for resuscitation and was carried in a ziplok bag.

Clean Mountain Cans (CMCs)

Not exactly dinner party conversation but the National Park Service (NPS) in Talkeetna provide you with black plastic cans that are to be brought out containing solid human waste. They gave us 2 for 24 days and the two were full when we left after 12 days, so it seems that their estimate might have been a little light. Either that or we are full of s**t.

The NPS give you a little talk about how to use them, so we'll spare the details here. You can drop them back outside office hours if you are leaving Talkeetna in a hurry.

COMMUNICATIONS

A **satellite phone** is considered the best way to communicate with the outside world from the glacier. It was way too expensive for us, so we didn't bother. Apparently they work well on the glacier.

We rented line of sight **radios** from TAT. Passing aircraft can relay messages to Talkeetna using this equipment. The radio cost \$5 a day. They are supposed to be strictly for emergencies and pick-ups, but it seems standard practice to get a weather report from the pilots as they are flying by during the day.

INSURANCE

The team took out insurance with the BMC.

FINANCIAL DETAILS

Income	£	Expenditure	£
Personal Contribution	1740 each	International flight	1600
		Internal Flight	580
		Internal Transport	160
		Food / BC hardware	200
		Misc Expenses	520
		Equipment	500
		TOTAL	3480

OTHER OBJECTIVES

From the Gorge, plenty of routes have been climbed, but by no means all possible routes. The latest **Supertopo guide** 'Alaska Climbing' by Joseph Puryear includes a list of possible objectives. The book is an excellent guide to the area and its logistics and history. Though we never did any routes in it, the book appears to be excellent and was highly regarded by any climbers we met who had used it.

See also the **2006 American Alpine Journal** for a full round up of activity in the Gorge to date.

While we were in the Gorge a British team climbed a new route on Mt Dan Beard. A Japanese team attempted a new route on Peak 7400 and some Coloradan climbers attempted a previously climbed route on London Bridge. Both parties were turned back by bad conditions.

Mt. Church has an appealing north face with an obvious and inspiring gully slashing it almost like a directissima from the summit. Both the Coloradan and Japanese teams hoped to attempt it. Mt Church has never been climbed by a technical route and the Coloradans felt that it had not in fact had a second ascent, even by it's relatively straightforward *voie normale*, which was climbed in 1977. Accessing Mt Church from the Ruth appeared challenging, but possible for a team of three. The crevasses at the bottom are quite complex. However, be aware that the unclimbed gully on Mt Church has a reputation for flushing every 24 hours. We didn't see this ourselves as this year was considered a dry year.

On the 24th April Lara Karena Kellog was killed while descending from the NE ridge on Mt Wake. She abseiled off the end of a single 8.5mm rope while using the larger version of the Reversino. Her climbing partner, Jed Brown wrote a report that can be seen at: <http://59a2.org/lara/lara.html>

CONTACTS

Contacts we have used for climbing in this area include Ian Parnell, Sam Chinnery, and Dougald MacDonald.

We are more than happy to help and answer questions

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