

Scottish Alaska Expedition 2012

Introduction

The objective of this three man expedition was to climb the route 'Ham and Eggs' on the Mooses Tooth in Alaska and, if conditions permitted, attempt an ascent of Bear Tooth. If time and weather were suitable an alternative option was the Japanese Couloir on Mount Barrill. Although the whole trip would take 16 days with 10 days in the mountains, the minimal approach times meant that if the weather was reasonable, then two routes should be attainable.

Members

Iain Peter
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The Objectives

The main objective was the route 'Ham and Eggs' on the Mooses Tooth (10,300ft) in the Alaska Range. This is described as an 'ultra classic' 18 pitch Alaskan snow and ice route graded V, 5.9 AI4. It can be climbed and descended in a very long day or with a bivouac on the col at 9,750ft, four pitches below the summit. Many teams elect not to summit but only do the route itself. While it can be done from the landing strip in the Ruth Gorge, the usual way is to fly in to the Root Canal Glacier (7,350ft) landing strip. This avoids the somewhat unpleasant and potentially dangerous approach up the hanging glacier leading from the Ruth to below the route and means it is easier to make use of suitable weather. The fact that this means you are camping about 20 minutes from the start of the climbing is also an attraction. A second objective was a route on Bear Tooth or the Japanese Couloir on Mount Barrill (7,650ft). The latter would mean shifting base camp from Root Canal Glacier down into the Ruth Gorge (c,4,500ft). However, Bear Tooth did not look very attractive with a long, easy couloir of deep snow to the col, part of which was threatened by seracs, and limited technical interest above.

Expedition Diary

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| April 23 | Fly to Anchorage |
| April 24 | Food shop in Anchorage and travel to Talkeetna |
| April 25 | Give route card to National Park office then fly from Talkeetna to Root Canal glacier and camp |
| April 26 | Rest and organise at camp |

- April 27 Climb 'Ham and Eggs' couloir on Moose's Tooth to col and bivi
- April 28 Descend route by abseil
- April 29 Rest day in good weather/ organise flight to Ruth Gorge landing strip
- April 30 Break camp and move to pick up point with all the gear. Take tent and some gear back when bad weather prevents flight
- May 1 Wait out bad weather – snow for 36 hours, low cloud and very low temperatures
- May 2 Fly down to Ruth Gorge landing strip, establish camp and break trail to foot of Japanese Couloir on Mount Barrill
- May 3 Climb the route to summit and descend the same way
- May 4 Fly out to Talkeetna
- May 5 Rest and organisation day in Talkeetna
- May 6 Travel back to Anchorage
- May 7 Fly from Anchorage
- May 8 Arrive back in Glasgow

Expedition Account

The reasons for choosing to visit Alaska were fairly simple – we could go for a short time, get in to some big mountains with little time spend on logistics and the time of year available for a trip fitted the best time to go there. While the routes are of Alpine length the peaks themselves are not high enough to present altitude problems thus no delays for acclimatisation. The initial objective that drew our attention was the route 'Ham and Eggs' on the Mooses Tooth. At 2,900ft long and described an 'Alaskan ultra classic' and graded V 5.9 AI4 it seemed to be a suitably challenging yet achievable objective. The fact that by taking a ski plane into the Root Canal Glacier the approach time in the guide was given as 5 minutes was certainly an added attraction especially for those with bad knees – the majority of the team as it happens.

Iain and Allen flew out together while Mark got a separate flights to Anchorage, collected the hire car at the airport and all went to a pre-booked B&B that night. The next morning we bought food and few items of equipment such as pots and pans. Anchorage is a typical large American city with the usual range of stores so shopping was very routine and only took a few hours. In the afternoon we got a shuttle to Talkeetna, booked in with Talkeetna Air Taxis (TAT) and were taken to their bunk-house for the night (this was basic but free). The next morning we registered with the National Park, collected our Clean Mountain Cans (CMCs) and made up our loads for the flight. In the afternoon we went to the airfield, got the loads and ourselves

weighed up and flew into the mountain. 40 minutes later we landed on the Root Canal glacier below the Mooses Tooth after a memorable flight. Three days from home we were under our route.



Flying over the Alaskan mountains

Because of the danger of serac fall and avalanches onto the glacier from Bear Tooth it is safer to camp about 10 minutes up the other side of the landing strip on a bit of a ridge further north. There were already a few tent platforms prepared there and fortunately one was just vacated by a team leaving. All our gear now had to be transported to the site and the easiest way to do this was on sledges, available from TAT. This entailed a couple of trips following previous sledge tracks so it was not too difficult but stepping out of the tracks revealed knee deep snow which had been affected by the sun in way that was unfamiliar but still hard work – not thawed but rotted snow. Basically it was slow going and established that the snow shoes or skies are essential for travelling any distance.



Root Canal Landing Site and Camp (from high on 'Ham and Eggs')

We had plenty of time to get the tent pitched and a cooking area arranged on an existing tent site which was spotless with no sign of rubbish anywhere. Beside the tent platform there were kitchen and toilet areas flattened off which saved a lot of digging. We had arrived in a period of good settled weather and heard from other that 'Ham and Eggs' had had a couple of ascents and another pair were due to set off for the route the next day. It made sense for us to go the following day – the Friday - even though the forecast was for a change in the weather on the Friday or the Saturday. Unfortunately, the severity and nature of this change in the weather was not clear.

The next day there was no sign of anyone in the couloir and we discovered that the American team had abandoned their plans and were to fly out instead. This meant a day of frustration with good weather but too late a start to go on the climb so we sorted things out for an early start. Although it was light very early in the morning, our camp did not get the sun until about 11.00 but only lost it late in the evening. However, until in the sun, it was very cold. The one useful thing we did accomplish was a walk to the foot of the route to confirm that the walking was hard and unpleasant. We intended to take bivouac gear and stop on the col either before going to the summit or after returning from it.

The next morning we left the tent at about 6.30 and soloed to the start of the climbing – mostly Grade I to Grade II on open slopes but with sections of thin snow and ice lying over granite slabs leading to the start of the couloir. The first pitch started with a rude shock – some tricky 5.6 mixed climbing straight off the belay but leading to easier snow slopes and into the couloir proper. Each led three pitches before changing over and the two seconds climbed simultaneously but a short distance apart. Gradua



Steep ice on the first crux of 'Ham and Eggs'

Gradually the couloir narrowed and became steeper but usually with some relief between the steeper ice pitches which tended to be of extremely hard and, at times brittle, ice. This brittle ice meant that even with care, the lower of the seconds was sometimes hit by ice from the one above. At the crux section which is either ice or the mixed 5.9 section we found good but steep ice, not the thin and hollow pitch that is sometime there. Some type of anchor was usually in place but often needed backing up, however the potential for other rock protection was very limited. As the route description said, the belays were usually a full 60m apart. Ice screw protection was found on the ice pitches but the snow pitches were sometimes a full rope length with no runners at all. By afternoon the sun was shining into the couloir but there was no sign of melting although in summer many of the pitches would be very wet. The higher we climbed the less accommodating the rock became as far as protection was concerned and as the afternoon progressed, cloud gradually drifted in. Whether this was simply afternoon cloud or a significant change in the weather was impossible to say but by the time we reached the col, visibility was low and the final corniced ridge to the summit could only just be made out at time through the cloud. The decision was made to bivouac on the col and see what the morning would bring regarding going to the top.



Bivi site at the top of 'Ham and Eggs'

The col itself was quite large and a relatively flat site was easy to stamp out. After a meal of some soup, drinks and bars we settled down for the night which was fairly uncomfortable and the wind' combined with light snowfall, meant that we drifted over. The concern that large amounts of snow was being put down in the couloir remained a continual worry. Soon after dawn we got up and organised to consider our options. We were still in thick cloud and some blowing snow so the decision to abandon the summit was reluctantly taken and we headed to the first of the fixed anchors to abseil back down. This was relatively straightforward as most of the anchors were in place although a few needed further reinforcement and at some we used a back up until the last man left. The main concern was to try not to go past any of the anchors and have to construct others. After the first four of five 60m abseils we came below the cloud level and it appeared that this was quite localised and in general the weather was not too bad. Towards the foot of the couloir things got a bit more tricky as the abseil line goes straight down and the route is diagonally. This meant a couple of fairly serious abseils into the unknown down some steep rock buttresses. Fortunately the topo was accurate and the last abseil down over an overhanging rock shelf took us to the glacier and some really deep unpleasant snow slopes. The usual wade through this snow saw us back at a deserted camp site as all the other teams had left.



Abseiling down 'Ham and Eggs'

That afternoon another American team arrived for 'Ham and Eggs' and had a 2.00am start the next day. We rested in the sun and used the satellite phone to arrange a transfer with TAT down to the Ruth Gorge to do the Japanese Couloir on Mount Barrill. Our other possible objective from Root Canal was a route on Bear Tooth but this did not look appealing with a long way in deep snow up an easy couloir before a heavily corniced ridge to the top. The option of descending one of the hanging glaciers to the Ruth appeared equally unattractive especially as we would have to sledge most of the gear down either a 50° gully or through some serious and threatening ice fall (there had been an accident there a few days before we arrived). The arrangement was made for a pick up the next day and we spent the afternoon watching the American team descending the route. In spite of the good weather they had elected not to summit either.

The next afternoon we packed up and transported our kit to the landing strip where we waited as the cloud rolled in making a pick up impossible. We then took some of the gear back to site and re-pitched the tent. After discussion with the American pair, they decided to transfer with us as well. That evening the cloud thickened, it started to snow and this continued the next day making any movement impossible. Temperatures dropped really low (it was recorded at 7° F at Talkeetna at 100m altitude making it at least -30°C by our calculations) and nothing but keeping fed and warm was an option. The next dawned clear and bitterly cold so we started down to the landing strip again where the next few hours were spend waiting and stamping out another landing strip for the ski plane which, after a number of touch downs and take offs, transferred us to the Ruth Gorge landing site below Mount Dickey.



Mount Barrill and the Japanese Couloir

Here on this huge flat glacier were some tent sites protected by snow block walls on the up-hill side. At night a continuous cold wind blows down the Ruth. In the afternoon we took a snow shoe trip up to the foot of our route on Mount Barrill. This was also our chance to dispose of the contents of the CMCs down one of the Ruth's many huge crevasses (the Ruth is meant to be 1,200m deep). The next morning we set off at first light in bitterly cold conditions towards the Japanese Couloir but at the foot of the route discovered a solo climber and another pair ahead of us. This turned

out to be no great hardship as the snow was in places extremely deep and unconsolidated and it definitely saved effort to use others' steps. Also, now in the sun, the temperatures rocketed from bitterly cold to extremely hot. Apart from when crossing the bergshund when the rope was used, we soloed the first part of the couloir but roped the final three pitches to a col where the route traverses a couple of pitches to a vague gully and the ridge leading to the summit where moving together was the best option. We reached the summit in early afternoon but did not linger long as there was constant light cloud drifting past and we wanted to be descending before the American pair who were not moving particularly quickly. The route up was reversed and the same rope techniques used as in the ascent and after three long abseils in the upper couloir we soloed down to where the angled eased, the snow got deeper and a bum slide to the bottom and our snow shoes was possible. Back at the tent by mid- afternoon the only thing to do was to prepare for a pick up by TAT the next day.



Climbing the summit ridge of Mount Barrill

In the morning the flight arrived and as an extra bonus it returned to Talkeetna by way of Denali base camp to pick up a frost-bitten American climber. A superb sight-seeing flight through an endless range of white peaks back to the airstrip followed by a couple of nights in town as the cheaper alternative to staying in Anchorage. In town we returned to Park office to book out and return the CMCs and sorted out the gear. Our shuttle picked us up on the Sunday afternoon and on Monday we flew back to Scotland.

Travel

Iain and Allen travelled flew from Glasgow to Heathrow to Seattle with British Airways then to Anchorage by Alaskan Airlines. Mark went to London by sleeper then flew KLM from Heathrow to Minneapolis then to Anchorage by Alaskan Airlines. All internal flights were with Talkeetna Air Taxis (TAT).

Equipment and Logistics

Travel

An important factor with all our equipment was the weight limit on the flights to America. Although we did take one extra bag at a cost of \$60 each way, we were still restricted in what we could take with the allowance of 23kg per person. On the flight to the glacier we were allowed 125lbs each, after which there was a price per pound. We managed this fairly comfortably.



Leaving the Ruth Glacier Base Camp

Base Camp

We took a Wild Country Hyperspace tent which was comfortable enough for three although having another shelter for cooking under would have been an advantage. The locals all seem to do this and by digging a hole in the snow and pitching a fly-sheet or cover over it, then cooking and eating either standing or sitting on benches is possible. Cooking in the tent porches when the weather was poor was somewhat fraught. A pair of camp boots which fitted all members was very useful for quick trips out of the tent. Three metal bladed snow shovels were taken and although we

were able to use existing tent sites, they were very useful although we could have managed with two. A snow saw could be useful in some situations.

Cooking

Two MSR stoves burning white gas were used at base and fuel requirements calculated from information given in the guide book. Fuel in cans was purchased from TAT. As all water must be melted from snow running out of fuel would be a real problem and we purchased some more fuel from a group who were leaving before us and had excess. Our excess we passed on to another team on our departure. The stoves worked well and caused no problems. Pots and pans were bought in Anchorage to save on weight and donated to the TAT bunkhouse on the way out.

We also took a gas stove for use on the bivouac and this also worked well.

Food

All base camp and climbing food was purchased in Anchorage there being no large stores in Talkeetna. The food taken was pretty standard with a preponderance of quickly cooked meals such as pasta, tins of meat, fish and vegetables. We took quite a lot of fresh vegetables and bagels which frozen solid on the glacier and lasted the length of the trip as did the fresh eggs. Many teams take in large amounts of supplies as nothing really needs carried any distance and if you can afford to pay for it, weight is little of a problem. Beer and wine are not uncommon luxuries at many camps. Food for the climb was the usual mixture of trail mix and bars with packets of soup and drinks for the bivouac.

Personal Equipment

All used very warm sleeping bags and combination of Karrimat and Thermarests, one of which punctured. Extra matting for sitting platforms and cooking on was extremely useful. For personal clothing we had what we use in normal Scottish winter conditions – a combination of fleece, soft – shell and Goretex jackets. All took a pair of warm mitts and a heavier, warmer than normal, belay jacket. Some gear was supplied by Mountain Equipment. Footwear was a mix of plastic boots with high altitude inners and well insulated single boots. Little extra clothing was taken to base camp and virtually nothing taken was unused. For general moving about snow shoes were used and these or skis are more or less essential for glacier travel because of the generally deep and unconsolidated snow. While skis may have been the better option, the weight restriction on the international flight was the limiting factor. Snowshoes had the distinct advantage of working with mountaineering boots. The majority of American groups used skis and skins with additional ski mountaineering boots. For transporting loads sledges were supplied by TAT. Again these were extremely useful, even essential, as were trekking poles.



High on 'Ham and Eggs'

Climbing Equipment

The gear for route was based on the equipment given in 'Alaska Climbing' the Supertopo guide by Joseph Puryear. This contains a wealth of useful information about all aspects of climbing in the Alaska Range – travel, equipment, weather, conditions, medical problems and similar along with good route descriptions, photos, topos and maps. For 'Ham and Eggs' we took the suggested rack – 8 ice screws, 6 cams up to 3 inch, a set of stoppers and two 60m ropes. In addition we took some snow stakes which were not used on the climbs but were handy for pegging out the tent. A range of slings and extensions were taken and also a number of 7mm rope slings which could be used at abseil stations if needed. Each climber had two axes, some leashless and others with wrist loops and clip-on crampons, both mono and two pointed. For the bivouac we took a sleeping bag, mat and bivi bag each along with a gas stove and some soup and drinks.

First Aid

A normal sized first aid kit was taken and a smaller, emergency kit carried on the route.

Communications

A satellite phone was hired from the UK. Although this was expensive, when it came to communicating with TAT regarding air transfer and pick up times, it definitely removed the uncertainty and allowed us to make maximum use of our time in the mountains.

Sanitation and Waste

At the National Park base in Talkeetna where park visitors sign in, Clean Mountain Canisters (CMCs) are given out along with biodegradable plastic bags for solid human waste. These plastic liners for the can either be deposited in deep crevasses when full or brought back out for disposal in Talkeetna at the end of a trip. Fortunately, low temperatures in the Spring means that this waste is frozen solid for most of the time. A pee bottle each saves a lot of trouble and discomfort and could be considered essential, especially in periods of bad weather.

All other waste was flown back to Talkeetna for disposal. TAT handled that rubbish. The tent sites that we occupied were all extremely clean with no sign of any rubbish what so ever.

Income and Expenditure

These figures are for the team of three but do not include UK expenses such as travel to airports. Rate of exchange taken as \$1 equals £0.62

Expenditure

International flights	£2,475
Alaskan flights	£1,400
Accommodation and food	£815
Mountain Supplies	£340
Alaskan travel	£348
Satellite phone hire	£240
TOTAL	£5,618
PER PERSON	£1,873

Income

MCofS Grant for AF and IP	£800
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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Mountaineering Council of Scotland for the grant of £800 and Mountain Equipment for the equipment supplied.