

Sim/Griffith Mount Deborah expedition

Climbers

Will Sim (25) and Jon Griffith (32). We have climbed a lot together in the Alps over about seven years. We have also been on trips to Alaska, Pakistan and Patagonia together

Intro

It was while scouring the world on Google Earth for big cool looking faces that I discovered there were some huge looking unclimbed mountain aspects in Alaska's "Hayes" range. After reading the remarkable accounts of the first ascents of the NE ridge and N face of Mount Deborah, I became inspired by the Hayes range and the stunning looking (if Google earth was anything to go by) unclimbed NW face of Deborah.



Getting to the mountain

We were originally told by Paul Roderick - a pilot from Talkeetna both Jon and myself have flown with multiple times before - that he could land us on the upper Gillam glacier, beneath the NW face. However, when meeting Paul in person it became clear that he had either miss - read or not read an email, and it wouldn't be possible to land his plain anywhere near our desired landing place.

After some research, we concluded that approaching the northern side of the Hayes range would be much easier from Fairbanks if we could find a pilot up there with the time and the will. We got hold of Rob Wing, a pilot from Fairbanks with a supercub ski plane, and Alex Shapiro, a helicopter pilot with a Robinson 44.

Several days later on the 17th of April Alex landed us on the Gillam glacier in his R 44, doing two flights with us and gear.

Base camp

In the early hours of the 18th, during our first night on the glacier our basecamp was catastrophically destroyed by winds stronger than either of us have experienced in any other basecamp. Within a matter of minutes our tent was ripped apart and we managed to grab sleeping bags, a stove and a bit of food and bundle into our single skin bivi tent behind a boulder. Our main tent with all equipment inside was buried under a lot of snow and we sheltered in our bivi tent for some hours pondering our options.

Over the next two days while the storm raged on we focused our efforts on building a snow cave. By the 21st the storm had abated and we recovered our gear after much digging.

During the storm we had felt very vulnerable and believe we were in a very serious survival situation. The value of a snow cave could not have been demonstrated better.

The climb

The two days since the end of the storm were spent assessing the face, snow conditions and getting weather forecasts over sat phone from Alex.

On the 23rd of April we started our climb. We climbed a thousand metres of snow field, 85 degree neve, and insecure loose and hard to protect mixed ground to the NW ridge. We exited the face to the ridge lower than expected due to avalanche activity on the central line, which none other than fortuitous timing had allowed us to avoid.

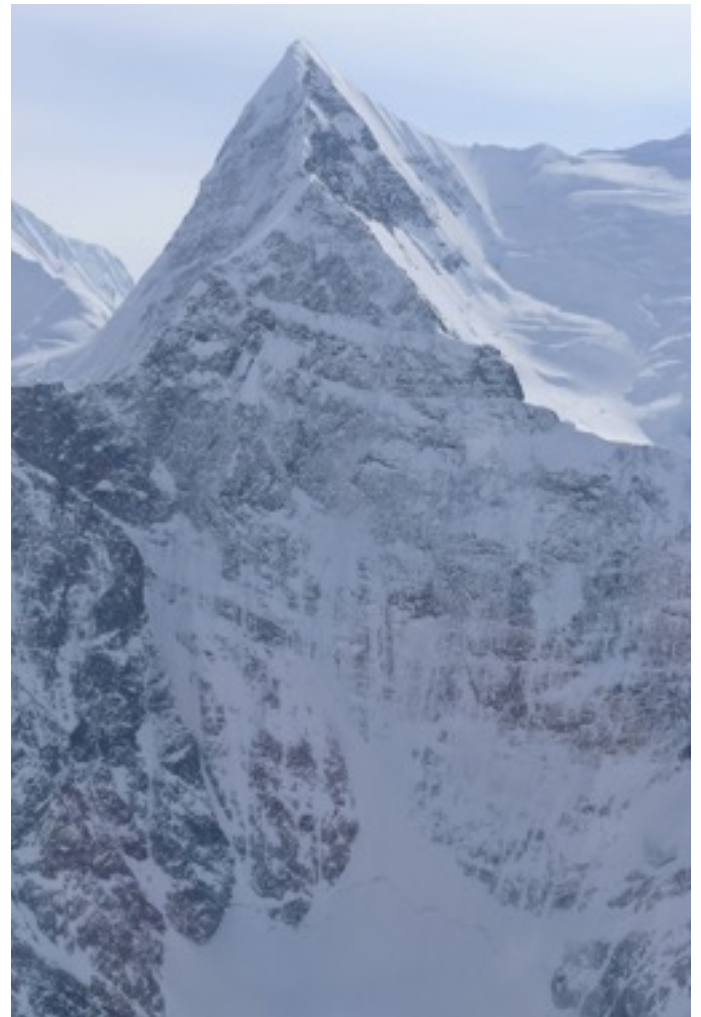
A bivi on the NW ridge in strong winds was followed by a clear morning. We left our bivi gear and continued along the NW ridge for another circa 1000 metres of height gain and much lateral distance to the summit of Deborah. The ridge had been long, knife edge, cold and windy.

We descended the south face on abalakovs, bollards and some down climbing to the Yanert glacier. After negotiating an ice fall we re - ascended to our bivi on the NW ridge for a second night.

The next morning we traversed a very loose lower NW ridge for about a mile before making around 10 abbs back to the Gilliam glacier and our BC.

Thoughts on the Hayes

The Hayes range is a more remote, obscure neighbour to the Denali range, and situated to the East. Most of the significant ridges of the highest mountains have now been climbed, but many large faces remain untouched. The rock (schist) is of terrible quality, therefore the range is only really good for icy objectives, and early spring.



The southern draining glaciers are most easily accessed via ski plane from Talkeetna, when the northerly glaciers lend themselves to access from Fairbanks to the North.

Equipment

We had one 3 man tent at basecamp. This only lasted around eight hours before being destroyed in the storm. We had food and fuel enough for up to a month. Standard Alaskan gear of two liquid stoves, reactor msr for routes, a large ice and mixed rack, a bivi tent, lots of clothes, big sleeping bags, inflatable mats, enough goose down to clothe an army etc.

We hired a sat phone which was very important for receiving weather in formation from Alex the pilot, and to call our pick up.

Weather

We experienced a severe storm with very strong winds, followed by a large high pressure that seemed to dominate central Alaska for up to two weeks. Like ever where in AK, the Hayes is notorious for bad weather and high winds. During the storm the air temperature was thankfully not too cold, (early -'s). When we were on the route however it was very cold. We both wore thick thermal layers, under down pants under hardshells, which means it must have been very cold even by Alaskan standards.

Costs

800 sterling for international flight pp.

1800 sterling helicopter.

200 sterling food pp.

100 sterling other AK transport

300 sterling sat phone.

*costs are very approximate.

A detailed account of the club was published in Climb magazine. There were also news reports on websites such as - Alpinist, Grippid, UKC, Climbing, Planet Mountain.

A short film was made about the trip that can be seen here - <https://vimeo.com/128711279>

Many thanks!