

British Hayes Range Expedition 2011



April/May 2011

Hayes Range Alaska

MEF Expedition Ref: 11/08

Introduction

The Hayes range is an unfrequented Alaskan mountain range about 100 miles South East of the city of Fairbanks. Off the beaten track from Denali National Park and the Wrangall, Chugach and St Elias mountains, not many mountaineering parties venture into the Hayes range. The Hayes range is host to relatively small mountains with relatively long routes. Mount Hayes itself is the 7th most prominent mountain in the world with a height difference on the West face of 6,500ft. From research of the recorded visits, the area was explored in the 70's but it has seen little interest until the last decade when there have been several groups visiting the range climbing various different first (and 'second-first') ascents. The range offers large faces, long ridges and some spectacular scenery. Like other areas of Alaska, the snow is steep, the cornices are big and the trip is not over until you are well and truly off the glacier. Welcome to the land of the 'Fairbanks Belay', 'Snice' and (R) ratings.

Summary

The idea of going on an expedition to the Hayes range was developed from some digging on the internet followed by a trip to the British Alpine Club library. We found some routes which were of interest and scoured previous expedition reports from the American Alpine Club and various other countries. We could not find a recorded ascent of the West Ridge of Mount Hayes and after discussing it with various people we decided this would be a great objective. It looked long, moderately difficult and committing - but possible. We were also aware that a party had been in the area the previous year achieving first ascents of the Direct West Face of Mount Hayes and also the NE Face of Mt Balchen. There looked like there was plenty of scope for other routes on both of these mountains. Information was particularly hard to come by. After discussing the routes with the local gurus we did discover that the West ridge had been climbed from the 'Turkey Glacier' in the 70's. Recorded ascents of this nature seem hard to come by with the locals

reporting to keep ascents to themselves allowing others the pleasure of the '2nd first ascent', a good way of keeping the adventure true!

We decided to stick to the plan; to complete the West Ridge from the Hayes glacier. It looked to be a full-on outing with about 11 miles of ridge and a lot of height gain if we were to descend the North ridge. We went out confident that we would find some adventure. With limited knowledge of what had been done in the range, we went out to enjoy climbing, skiing and to identify some good objectives upon arrival.

We succeeded in finding some great objectives and did our best to get stuck into exploratory mountaineering despite unseasonal amounts of snow. The full adventure is outlined below but we finished up the expedition with two significant outings. We summited Mount Skarland (10,315ft) from the South East Ridge. Hoping to ski from the summit we found some ice and skied from 9,200ft. Secondly we climbed what we believe (to our knowledge) to be a first ascent on the NE face of Mount Geist. The NE face had been climbed in the 70's via a snow/ice line on the left of the face. We opted for a direct line through the middle of the face taking in some sections of mixed and ice climbing. We estimate the route to be over 1000m in vertical length (not taking into account the ridge traverse to the summit) and graded at around TD+ alpine grade. The descent is also quite an undertaking. The route took us 22 hours in total.

The Team

Name: Guy Wilson

DoB: 04/07/1984

Experience: Guy has been climbing since about age 16, and now works as a Self Employed Mountaineering Instructor (MIA) for his own business, Pure Outdoor (www.pureoutdoor.co.uk). Prior to this he lived in Chamonix for 2 years where he did lots of climbing and skiing including the North Face of Les Courtes, the Aiguille Noire de Peuterey W Ridge, Frendo Spur, Matterhorn, Piz Badile, attempts on the Petit Dru and Aiguille Verte Bettembourg Thivierge and loads of mixed climbing around the Chamonix area. Guy is a keen skier and has ski'd several steep descents including the Barbey Couloir from the Aiguille d'Argentiere and the Cosmiques Couloir. Guy has recently returned from a Yosemite trip, learning to Big Wall and Aid Climb (Washington Column and others). He has previously been on the West Lancs Scouts mountaineering group expedition to Renland, Greenland in 2007.

Name: Neil Warren

DoB: 05/07/1983

Experience: Neil has completed two winter seasons climbing and skiing around Chamonix, France. Neil has made winter ascents of the Swiss Route on Les Courtes, Gabarrou-Albononi and Lafaille Goulotte on the Tacul East face and Gran Paradiso North Face amongst others. Neil has skied numerous descents such as the Barbey Couloir from the summit of the Aiguille d'Argentiere, Cosmiques Couloir on the Aiguille du Midi and Mont Blanc. Previous to living in Chamonix, Neil has a history of climbing across the UK summer and winter and has been on expedition to New Zealand climbing Mt Earnslaw, Mt Sefton and Mt Tazman.

Name: Chris Johnson

DoB: 21/10/1983

Experience: Since the age of 14 Chris has been climbing and skiing in the mountains of UK, Europe and Australasia and now lives and works in Chamonix Mont Blanc. Prior to and during his time at university Chris spent 4 summers working and living in the Italian Dolomites during which time he climbed routes on many of the major peaks including Tofana di Mezzo, Marmolada, Mont Pelmo and Monte Civetta. Since moving to Chamonix Chris has focused predominantly on ski mountaineering and has completed many day and multi day tours including routes on the Aiguille D'Argentiere, Aiguille du Midi, Domes de Miage, Grosses Fiescherhorn and Gross Wannenhorn.

Expedition Diary

April

26th Early departure from Heathrow. Due to time zone change arrived in Fairbanks late on the same day. London - Detroit, Detroit - Seattle, Seattle - Fairbanks. Met Robert Wing, pilot and host for our trip.

27th Re-Pack, Food shop, last minute gear shop.

28th Windy but clear. Loaded 'Super Cub'. 3 x shuttles from Fairbanks/Delta to the Hayes Glacier. Guy fell in a crevasse with ski's on pulling sled. Sled saved Guy's ass wedged in at the top.

29th Dug out base camp on moraine. Went for a recce ski to base of Mt Geist.

30th Strong winds. Finished off base camp

May

1st Mt Skarland summited by the South East ridge with a ski descent from 9200ft.

2nd 15cm snow unsettled weather, tent day.

3rd Powder Skiing from the East Ridge of Mt Geist. 2 x 45° couloirs.

4th Recce trip to access West Ridge of Hayes from Hayes glacier. Good quality glacier tinkering. Route established up and over but intense to take loads over to the col and to access peak 10910ft.

5th Heavy snow overnight. Forced rest day. 30cm+ snow drifting into base camp.

6th More skiing from the East Ridge of Mt Geist. 45+* couloir 800ft. Skiing a big slough!

7th Destined for another 'digging day' more snow and strong winds.

8th Approach to 'Curving Couloir', on the West Face of Mount Hayes. A potential first ascent. Unfortunately the depth of snow made the approach difficult so the route was not attempted.

9th Ski exploration to the out of sight east side of Mt Skarland.

10th Poor weather so repeated approach to Mt Skarland for the ski descent. Good descent but no visibility.

11th More snow. Very unseasonal. Around a metre of snow around this time. Made a break for more skiing on Geist East ridge to keep sane. Great skiing.

12th Blue sky day! Unfortunately very unstable snow on all aspects. Rest day

13th Just when we thought it was coming good... More snow.

14th Another sunny day but the 15th through to the 16th looked to be even better so prepared for climbing. Leaving snow to consolidate but running out of time.

15th 5.15am depart to climb NE face of Mt Geist. Made good progress until the final 300ft. Made very slow progress across 'harrowing ridge' and summit cornice. Made more slow progress on descent.

16th 3:15am arrived back at base camp to meet Chris with lots of Gatorade! 22 hours camp to camp. Slept, rested, Spoke to Robert about pick-up.

17th 8am packed up glacier camp and picked up and shipped out. Fairbanks by 3pm.

18th - 22nd Glacier pickup 'bad weather buffer'; waiting and eating in Fairbanks.

23rd Depart to UK. Fairbanks - Minneapolis, Minneapolis - London.

25th Arrive UK (after epic Minneapolis layover).

The Expedition

Base Camp

The map shown in the supplementary section shows our base camp (BC). We managed to camp on the lower moraine on the lower section of the Hayes Glacier. Strong winds blew in from all directions but frequently from the West Ridge of Hayes (from the south). Base camp was comfortable enough and we had plenty of shelter. There was quite a lot of snow this year so we needed to melt snow for water. The location of the camp was useful for access to Geist and Skarland and also for skiing opportunities.

Mount Skarland (3145m - Our GPS read higher by over 50m)

As a warm up during the first week we went to attempt to ski from the summit of Mount Skarland which looked like a fantastic opportunity. We skinned up to the South East Ridge where we then skirted round the bergschrund to the right and boot packed up a 40 degree slope to the ridge proper. Here we continued to climb but found some hard ice, making the skiing option unsuitable. We left skis and continued on foot to the summit. The ridge was easy climbing but on very poor snow with insecure downclimbing to reach the skis. Great ski descent from 9200ft as marked on the supplementary photos.

Mount Geist East Ridge Skiing

We ski'd lots of lines starting from the east ridge of Geist. Some were quite technical with some interesting rock dodging and unstable snow but nice skiing nonetheless.

Mount Hayes West Ridge approach

We were interested in researching options to get over to Mount '10910ft' as part of our trip. We thought there could be a possibility of getting to it from the west ridge col. According to Jed Brown's website this has been accessed via a rock rib which looked good. We decided to go to the base of the col to see if we could find an easy way up to ferry gear over. We did find a suitable route which ventured through a heavily crevassed area but did not complete the route as we decided we had enough objectives to go at on the north side of the range and that '10910' would probably be a separate expedition on its own.

'Curving Couloir' Mount Hayes

Another good-looking line. We went to the West face of Mount Hayes to have a look at a curving couloir on a subsidiary rock triangle that descends from the summit plateau. Unfortunately due to the amount of snow we were not in a fit state to do the route after the walk in!

Mt Geist NE Face Central/Direct (3268m - Our GPS read higher by over 50m)

This NE face was climbed in 1976 (according to the American Alpine Club) and then several recorded times since along with several more probable unrecorded ascents. The original route went up the obvious snow slope to the left of the face. Wanting to take in some varied climbing we took a different and direct line going up the centre of the face that linked several ice slopes with mixed sections. We started the route at 5am and it took us a couple of hours to ski to the base where we left our ski's and changed our outer boots for climbing outers (Spantik's). We then wallowed around through deep snow to the foot of the face and a small ramp line to the left. We simul climbed on straight forward neve slopes up to about 55-60 degrees up to about ½ height. At this time we had made good progress and things were looking good. It was a particularly hot day and there was frequent small rock fall on the face as it is made up of particularly loose schist like rock. Eventually we made it to the mixed traverse section that we had named the ribs. Here we knew we would have to traverse through two ribs to access the final gully which leads to the summit. We

found a poor belay and then completed the mixed pitch that consisted of loose snow on poor rock, we did however find some ice and placed an ice screw in halfway. Chris, from basecamp (Neil and Guy were climbing) radioed in to give us directions. Once we had finally made it into the base of the final gully, time had got on top of us somewhat and we were slowing down. We were climbing the steepest snow I have ever come across. Not too hard to make life easy and with no ice behind to find good ice screws. There were a couple of ice pitches (3 max) during the final 6 pitches to the summit ridge which provided good protection. We got to the summit ridge at about 4pm as the top section was time consuming due to poor snow and protection. From the map we expected a whale back ridge...we didn't get it. The final axe placements on the route were not a steady 'thud' into the summit but more of a 'poof' as the axe went straight through the mountain onto the south face. We discovered the 'Fairbanks Belay' or 'a cheval' manoeuvre at this point. Some very scary traversing and cornice tinkering led us up and over the summit. This took a very long time as there was no way of protecting a lot of this. We found our way round to the north ridge of Mt Geist and then proceeded to abseil on snow bollards (on 60-70 degree snow) and then on several abakalov anchors to the col on the north ridge. From here we walked and abseiled down to the skis before returning to camp, 22 hours later! Next time we would take a stove as 1litre of water is not enough. We tried to research the route to see if it had been climbed before and we can only find reference to the other route on the face so presume it to be a first ascent.

Observations & Future Objectives

Equipment

Most equipment is self-explanatory. Here are some specifics.

Tents: We used 1 x Mounain Hardwear Trango 4 and 1 x Mountain Hardwear Trango 2. We planned to use the Trango 2 as an advance base should this be necessary. We ended up living in the Trango 4 and using the Trango 2 as a useful storage and gearing up tent.

Stoves: We took 2 x MSR Dragonfly stoves and we only ended up using one of them. The second would have been useful incase of failure or setting up the advance base camp.

Sleds: Proved essential for lugging gear around on the glacier. We managed to borrow some from Robert Wing. Lightweight plastic sleds suited well.

Skiing: We travelled around on skis where possible. Light weight ski mountaineering gear useful for glacier travel and route approach.

Mountaineering Kit: Standard mountaineering rack. We found the rock very friable in (most) places so rock protection not that useful. Bulldog type protection adequate and ice screws generally useful though ice often thin. Light weight snow pickets could have been useful. We used our heavy ones as tent pegs to keep the weight down.

Food

We purchased 18 days (36 packs) of dehydrated 'Mountain House' dinners from REI online and got them sent to Robs (pilot). This proved to be great value and meant we were mostly ready upon arrival in Fairbanks. We also purchased 8 desserts and a couple of breakfasts to supplement other food supplies.

Due to weight restrictions we unfortunately had to travel light and were not quite consuming optimum calories each day. About 4000 max rather than the 6000 or so we really needed. A large shop in the local supermarket was enough for all of the other things we needed including bagels, cheese, rice, pasta, cereal bars, granola etc. We also purchased Coleman fuel from the local supermarket. We worked on about 1 gallon per week which was easily sufficient.

Resources

The American alpine club journals provided us with information about the area. Also Sam Johnson's Blog <http://www.alpineessence.com/> (Alpine Essence) had some good photos and videos of the area. Jed Brown has had some great trips in the area according to his website <http://59a2.org/>. Rob Wing the pilot also provided us with some knowledge and logistics of the area. The Alaskan Alpine Club is also worth an email as they have local knowledge of the area and their HQ is in Fairbanks.

Finances

Expenditure

International Flights : £2500

Equipment : £1225

Insurance (IHI) : £547

Internal Flights : £1000

Excess Baggage : £200

Food & Accommodation (Fairbanks) : £800
Expedition Food : £650
Total £6922

Income

Personal Contributions : £1500
BMC: £1250
MEF:£1150
Alpine Club:£750
Eldin:£1000
Judes Cup Cakes:£250
Berghaus (Competition Prize):£1000
Total £6900

Sponsors

Iridium: A global satellite communication company who kindly provided an 'Iridium 9555 Satellite Phone' along with unlimited free calls, emails and text messages. The satellite phone was an invaluable piece of equipment allowing us to contact our pilot, Rob, check the latest weather information, communicate with family members and update our expedition blog through an email to website function. Iridium also provided a 'Global Position Tracker' which automatically tracked our position and broadcast our location automatically every 4 hours to a dynamically updating Google map.

Berghaus: Through the 'Berghaus Adventure Challenge' we were provided with £1000 cash which was used to purchase group equipment, such as the tents, and £1000 worth of Berghaus technical clothing.

The British Mountaineering Council: Provided £1150 which was put towards our travels costs within the United States.

The Mount Everest Foundation: Provided £1250 which was put towards group equipment costs.

The Alpine Club: £750 which was put towards group equipment costs.

Eldin: Provided £1000 sponsorship which was put towards our travel costs to and from the UK.

Judes Cupcakes: Gave 300 Euros which was put towards our travel costs within the United States.

Thanks

We would like to thank Iridium, Berghaus, The British Mountaineering Council, The Mount Everest Foundation, The Alpine Club, Eldin and Judes Cupcakes for their financial support towards our expedition without which the financial burden on each member of the expedition team would have been considerably greater.

Big thanks must go to our highly skilled pilot Rob Wing <http://www.wingsairservice.com/> who successfully transported us on and off the Hayes glacier, with the departure providing particularly testing conditions. His local knowledge was also invaluable and we would not hesitate in recommending his services to any future expedition to the Mount Hayes area of Alaska.

Finally we would like to thank all of our family and friends for their unwavering support and encouragement during the expedition.

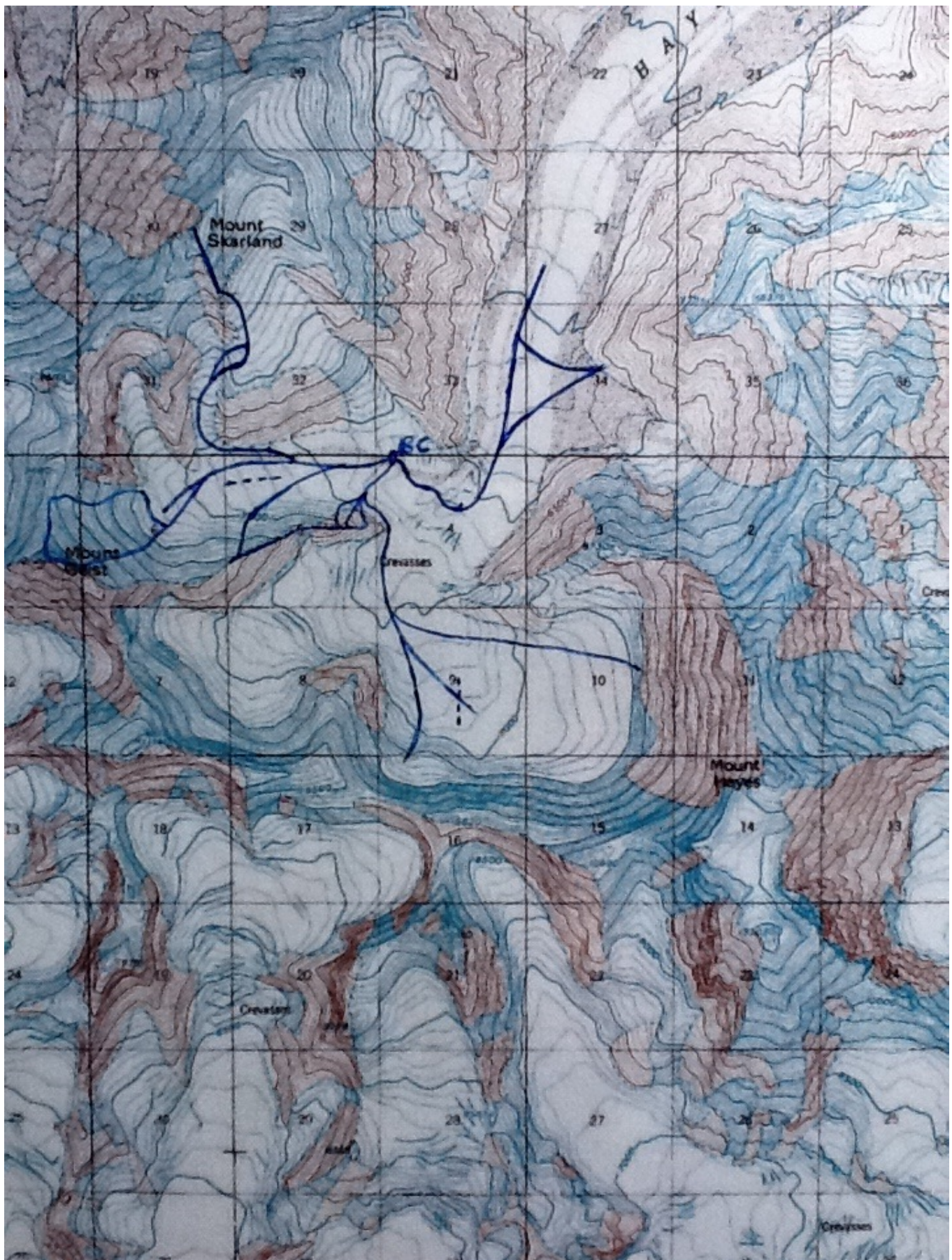
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Maps and Supplementary photos





Mount Skarland South East Ridge and Ski
Descent (from 9200ft)



Mount Geist NE Face Direct
1000m-1200m plus Summit traverse



Mt Geist Summit Traverse (1/3rd into traverse) Summit cornice at very back of photo



Panorama from foot of Skarland SE Ridge. From left to right: Mount Hayes, Pt 10910, Balchen, Geist