

the SCREE

Mountaineering Club of Alaska

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Climbing is as close as we can come to flying.

- Margaret Young

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Peak of the Month: Peak 3520

Monthly meeting:

6:30 p.m., Wednesday,

December 18

Annual MCA potluck at UAA.

**See page 2 for location and
parking information.**

"Shark's Fin" on Peak Number 1

Text and photos by Kai Cuerette; map by Ben Weiler

Ben Weiler and I left McCarthy in the morning hours of the 3rd of September. A Wrangell Mountain Air bush pilot flew us in a small Cessna to Skolai Pass, a tiny airstrip in the wilderness of Wrangell-Saint Elias National Park, about 30 miles from the nearest village.

As the plane took off again without us, it was the first time we really realized that we were now, and in the next days, completely on our own – a scary and exciting feeling at the same time. Here we were now . . . from now in case of failure, there would be great consequences. . . we knew.

We first explored the area, looking for a suitable campsite, hid our food in various depots from bears (underwater, in trees, or on rocks) and camped. The next two days it was raining

incessantly. In addition, an extremely strong wind blew constantly, so it seemed to us to be a wind tunnel. On those days, we were practically always wet and cold. Only after we had completed our daily route march, we were able to get out of the wet clothes and spend the rest of the day admiring the tent walls from the inside. Only on the fourth morning did it eventually clear up a little bit. This fact raised our spirits tremendously – the first days of continuous rain neatly pressed on the mind. On the first day of the tour we had to overcome our first river crossing. After a failed attempt – quite funny in the muddy ground – the second test on a stony place succeeded re-

markably well. What followed was a three-hour "bushwhack" of the worst kind; the huge backpacks and the additional bag with climbing equipment did their best to make our progress even more difficult. In the evening we pitched our tent completely exhausted at the foot of Castle Mountain and slept in our sleeping bags quite well. The next day we continued in eastward toward the Russell Glacier, which we reached late in the afternoon. Despite the poor visibility we were able to marvel at the enormous size of the Russell Glacier. We got first doubts

whether it would be a good idea to go on this icy giant with huge crevasses the next day. In the evening we pitched our tent on the edge of the glacier. It had started to rain again, it was a downpour.

The concerns of the glacier were mostly

in the overnight hours. Thanks to some better weather, the whole thing looked less intimidating in the morning than in the gloomy fog of the previous day. We were now focused on our precise planning and our wide range of equipment (GPS, maps, and compass). We wanted to knit to advance through the labyrinth of crevasses; a retreat seemed possible. So we had a healthy dose of respect on the ice.

Initially somewhat skeptical and unsure, the procedure soon played: abseiling into a crevasse, pull the rope, climb the wall on the other side with the help of crampons and ice axes aloft,



Ben Weiler crossing the creek at Skolai Pass.



Ben Weiler crossing the RUSSELL GLACIER.

and pull up luggage. Smaller crevasses we simply skipped. Despite the incredible dimension of the glacier we always had a feeling of control in the situation – fortunately, the entire glacier was still visible, so we saw all the crevasses.

After a busy, busy day in the ice, we set up Camp 3 on the glacier in the evening; the second half would be crossed on the following day.

On Day 4 we finally reached the "mainland." Unfortunately, we still didn't see "our" mountain because the mountain chain that was indeed only a few miles ahead of us, however, was enveloped in a dense cloud cover. So, we just followed the map and marched blindly out. Our schedule was extremely tight, so we had no reserves. The next day, we would have to reach the summit and begin our way back. We could not risk missing the plane that was supposed to pick us up at Skolai Pass; we had no satellite phone. With such thoughts in mind, we finally crawled into our sleeping bags early.

We set the alarm clock to 5:00 a.m., hoping that the weather improved by then. When we woke up, we realized that we had cherished this hope in vain. It was still raining and the wind swept over our tent so that the poles were bending powerfully. After a short analysis of the situation, it was clear to both of us

that we had to start in spite of the adverse conditions to at least attempt to realize our project. We had breakfast, packed up our three energy bars and a bottle of water as a viaticum, put on our climbing gear, and were on our way. The first 300 meters we traveled on large boulders. It was raining lightly and it was windy, but we were motivated and stepped quickly forward. We approached the mountain through a small valley from the north. When we reached the smaller rocks, our progress became much more difficult, because with every step loose gravel slipped under our shoes.

We now turned to the east

and slowly, but steadily, climbed the north ridge of gravelly stones. When we reached the first fore-summit at about 7200 feet, we saw the summit for the first time through the clouds as they ripped open for a moment. The higher we ascended, the worse the weather became. Rain and wind steadily increased. After just half of the ascent, we were completely soaked despite our excellent rain gear. When we reached the first fore-summit, we saw an ice patch, which we now had to cross. We did so without major problems, using the crampons. Now we had reached the snow line. The ground was now about equal parts of rock and snow – extremely slippery rock. After we had also put this passage behind us, we reached the summit region. From the last fore-summit we had to follow a very steep ridge. The ridge was covered with snow; at the last moment we realized that we had reached a cornice. We decided to protect ourselves using the rope and went, one on each side of the ridge, along to the actual summit block. We had to take our ice axes to help – a real help to secure our kicks. Arriving at the summit block, there was finally some climbing. We used our acquired climbing skills for the first time in remote Alaska. Ben went first as usual; I went after Ben and belayed. We climbed the last 150 meters with an average level of difficulty of 5.4. The rock was wet and extremely compact, but very brittle. This fact made the hedging with Friends and nuts extremely difficult and impossible on some routes. After an almost nine-hour

Kai Cürette on the 2nd icefield.



climb, we finally stood on the summit of Peak Number 1 (8268) at 3 p.m. – our first ascent was successful. [Ed. note: *The name Peak Number 1 was used in the International Boundary Commission's "Joint Report upon the Survey and Demarcation of the International Boundary between the United States and Canada along the 141st Meridian from the Arctic Ocean to Mount St. Elias."*] There blew up a storm of a magnitude that we previously knew only from books and documentaries – there prevailed wind speeds of up to 75 kilometers per hour (wind force 9). The massively bad weather dampened a little the pleasure of our summit, but above all it limited the time on the summit to a few minutes. A few quick summit photos and then we began the descent almost frantically. We first abseiled back to the narrow, steep ridge, traveled the ridge in the same fashion, and came to the gravel heaps. We initially advanced quickly. As it grew later, the rain and the wind continued to increase. After we had done about two-thirds of the descent, a sudden dense fog moved in. We immediately had a bad feeling and decided to continue without breaks, despite being significantly fatigued. Our disorientation grew heavier every minute. During the ascent we had mentally imprinted striking rocks, which were now no longer visible due to heavy fog. Visibility was only about 10 meters around 6:00 p.m. We proceeded in the general direction, but were not sure whether we were headed to Camp 4. We did have a GPS unit in our equipment there, but foolishly we left this, for reasons of weight, in the tent, and took only the most necessary climbing equipment, a bottle of water per man, and three bars with us. The lack of food was also noticeable now, our legs were heavy, and our concentration got weaker. About 7 p.m. the sun began to go down. We were visibly nervous and made independent explorations – but within sight of each other. When we had almost given up hope and had visions of a very uncomfortable night without accommodation and soaked at about 23 °F, finally I saw by accident while exploring the tip of a storage bag that we had hidden under stones from animals. We now cheered more extensively than at our summit and, with our last strength, ran to the tent. We immediately put on dry clothes and climbed directly into our sleeping bags without food. We had survived a critical situation due to our good sense, mountain-climbing experience, and a good dose of luck. It rained all night unceasingly and we expected that it would go all the way back, too, but that did not matter to us anymore; we had made it. With a deep inner satisfaction we fell into a restful sleep that, however, turned out much too short.

The next day we began our way back and returned to the Russell Glacier. Due to the forecasted premature onset of winter Wrangell Mountain Air had strongly discouraged us



to stay longer than 10 days in the park. We also had our meals tightly calculated, so we decided to be picked up again with a plane, rather than as originally planned to cover the entire distance to McCarthy by foot. In retrospect, we are very grateful for this development, for we are confident that such a venture would have gone terribly.

On September 12, we reached the agreed pickup point in time and were glad when we heard the hum of the small Cessna in the distance. The flight back was just as exciting as the outward. In the evening we treated ourselves to only a few exquisite beers at the Golden Saloon in McCarthy, warmed up thoroughly, and camped again on the airfield. It was a great adventure with impressive experiences for us.

We decided to name our route "Shark's Fin" because of the sharp north ridge.

