

Hummingbird Ridge's Thunderbird Variation

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The Logan Effect: A phenomenon whereby everything you see is actually four times longer, steeper and more difficult than it appears. See also: The Hummingbird Ridge.

STANDING BY THE PLANE and our pile of duffels like a couple of gawking tourists, we traced the spectacular line of the Hummingbird Ridge with our eager gaze. Ever since I first thumbed through *Fifty Classic Climbs in North America* as a young and impressionable alpinist, the Hummingbird Ridge seemed to be an unfathomable challenge. Now, a decade after those black-and-white photos of endless ridgeline and tsunami-sized cornices had first fired my imagination, the real thing rose before me.

Geoff Creighton and I began to boost each other's optimism as we sized up the route and pointed out features. So much myth and legend surrounded the ridge that we expected to be overwhelmed by its presence. We were relieved to find that the ridge, although extremely impressive, did not appear as long, steep or difficult as we had anticipated.

Before leaving us, our pilot Andy Williams stared up at the ridge as well and, perhaps sensing the odds against collecting his money later, shuffled over and asked, "I don't suppose you fellows would mind paying the plane fare in advance, would you?" The sight of Geoff squatting on a duffel, huddled over a stack of travelers checks prompted me to chuckle, and launch into "If your checks are ever lost, stolen, buried in an avalanche or blown off a ridge while still in your pocket, we'll replace them fast! So don't leave home without them, and pilots, don't leave the glacier before collecting the checks first!"

As the last whining of Andy's plane faded into silence, the sense of our commitment and isolation began to sink in. Despite our confidence, there was no getting around the fact that we were alone with over 13,000 vertical feet of virtually unknown ridge to contend with.

The next morning, after packing and securing Base Camp, we skied up the glacier to the head of the cirque beneath the south face. The ridge took on a far more intimidating air when we were directly under it. We hoped to avoid the mile-long horizontal section of corniced ridge that gave the original route its fearsome reputation. Although tempted to gain the ridge via a straightforward

mixed gully and to deal with these easy but questionable cornices, we spent the afternoon scoping options.

That evening we agreed instead on a direct start up a narrow and broken icefall that led to a steep ice face. The upper face was divided by a wide band of rock that appeared to have a series of ice fingers running through it. Above the rock band, the face continued to steepen before joining the main Hummingbird Ridge at 14,000 feet. We tagged our proposed start the "Thunderbird Variation" because of its direct nature and likely thundering results, should an avalanche sweep onto the exposed route. Although the climbing on the upper ice face looked technically demanding, we would avoid most of the treacherous cornices.

At first we hauled about forty pounds of ropes, pins and ice screws to the base of the route, figuring there was a direct relationship between the bulk of hardware and the degree of confidence it provided. Ultimately, we took only one 8mm superlight rope, six ice screws, six pins and two snow pickets. Having trimmed the fat off our rack, we committed ourselves to a fast, light ascent that we felt was essential for success.

The next morning we started up the icefall with a very lean seven-day supply of food, two liters of fuel and our streamlined rack. The plan was to move fast, descend the route and most likely lose some weight. We left a cache of food, fuel and skis at the base of the ridge for our return.

The climbing in the icefall was moderate but extremely complicated as we wound our way up the crevasses and séracs in a light snow flurry. At one point, Geoff belly-crawled across a paper-thin snow bridge above a yawning crevasse. I enjoyed a great side view where I was belaying and watched as his foot broke through and dangled in space.

"Watch me, Dave!" knowing my eyes were glued to his shaky progress.

"I got you, man! You're looking great!" knowing my belay consisted of sitting in powder snow with no anchors and he looked dubious at best.

"OK, I'm going for it!" knowing he was scared stiff and barely moving. "All right! Way to motor!" knowing he wasn't going anywhere until he pulled his foot out of the void.

"Jeez, these funky crevasses suck!" knowing he really had no choice at this point.

"Yeah, but would you rather be tightrope walking those cornices?"

Silence, then a few desperate bursts of power and we were back on easier ground.

At 12,000 feet, we carved a spot for the tent beneath a sérac and dove for shelter as a sizable storm rolled in and hammered the ridge. The 3000-foot day pretty much punched the spunk out of us and so it was with some relief that we took the next day off while the storm passed through. Anticipating some down-time on the route, we justified the extra weight of one book each to escape the grim reality of the climb. Somehow I ended with a collection of Stephen King short stories that hardly created a soothing diversion.

Refreshed after our rest day, we continued up the icefall to the huge double bergschrund that blocked access to the ice face above. Our choices of places to

cross were limited to steep, powdery cones of debris that barely bridged the 30-foot gaps. The only method that worked to ascend these cones of misery was an exhausting technique that resembled Michael Jackson's moonwalk.

The upper face turned out to be relentless 60° ice broken by equally steep mixed rock sections beneath a few inches of powder snow. We climbed simultaneously for hours, popping in a screw or pin every rope-length or so, always hoping to find enough of a ledge to rest our calves, but to no avail.

By eight P.M. we joined the crest of the Hummingbird Ridge and our confidence bolstered with the hope that we would finally locate a suitable bivouac spot. A fierce wind that had been chopping us all day relentlessly drove in a blinding snow storm. With no ledge in sight by ten P.M., things began to get dicey. We climbed with flagging spirits while darkness and the storm closed in.

At eleven P.M., with a blood-red sunset dissolving into whirling darkness, there was still no resting place in sight. We desperately fixed the rope and rappelled down to a tiny section of the ridge that offered the only hope for a bivouac. By the time we had chopped a spot big enough for the two of us to sit in the tent bivy-sack style, the storm was raging and we looked like popsicles.

Midway through the night, a miserable survival looked possible. Suddenly the tiny cornice we had partially burrowed into collapsed with a sickening roar.

"Geoff! We've got to move! Half the ledge just disappeared!"

Geoff calmly suggested, "Just squeeze a little tighter!"

An all too familiar Hummingbird Ridge scenario came to mind as my half of the tent began to slide over the edge. I was frantic to get off the rapidly disappearing real estate, but the pounding wind and frozen tent-door zipper made exiting a time-consuming ordeal. Cold and fatigue welded Geoff into an apathetic lump and since his half of the perch seemed intact at the moment, he was indifferent to my desperate exodus. As the tent continued to migrate off the ledge with most of our gear tossed loosely in it, Geoff merely muttered.

After clawing my way out of the flapping tent into the midst of the full-scale blizzard, I chopped another seat and cranked in all the slack on the rope going to Geoff until his moans assured me it was tight. Battling the incessant wind, I wrapped myself in my sleeping bag and gritted out the balance of the night. At some point in my haze between surreal dreaming and the reality of fighting for fingers and toes, a raging gust of wind was followed by a scream of terror from Geoff. He had been blown off the ridge, but the tight rope yanked him away from the void and onto the 50° ice slope below me. Hanging off his harness and imprisoned in frozen gear, spindrift and knotted tent, he moaned up through the shrieking wind, "Dave! I'm OK, but I'll just stay put here for the night." His statement of the absurdly obvious made me smile despite the circumstances.

Apparently, whoever orchestrated the epic figured that one night of punishment would be enough, for the next day dawned windy but clear. While slowly regrouping for the ascent, we discussed what our chances would be if we had been forced to retreat from this point. With minimal gear, one rope and 5000 feet of steep ice to reverse, we realized that descending the Hummingbird Ridge looked bleak. With going up the only reasonable option, we were not only

PLATE 28

Photo by Bradford Washburn

**MOUNT LOGAN'S
HUMMINGBIRD RIDGE rises from
the lower right corner.**



committed to reaching the summit but our secondary plan to go down the east ridge had just gone into effect. Although we knew very little about the east ridge, being aware that we were not descending the Hummingbird Ridge made our future appear somewhat brighter.

All things considered, we fared the night of living hell pretty well. Four of Geoff's fingers were frostbitten enough to discourage him from sport climbing on crimper edges for a while, but his tender fingertips didn't seem to interfere with his eating or swinging an axe. Miraculously, we lost only two ice screws and the shovel handle despite our open bivouac, which resembled a yard sale.

We decided on bankers' hours that day and to stop at the first possible site for the tent. After eight pitches of steep rock and ice steps, we parked on a horizontal stretch of ridge at 16,000 feet, well back from the suspect cornices.

The next day, the difficulties eased off with only an occasional ice step or two between moderate ridgelines. After climbing to 17,000 feet, we remembered that we hadn't bothered to acclimatize, and so we took a layover day in perfect weather to dry out and catch up with the altitude. The views from our perch were spectacular. Mounts Saint Elias, Augusta and Vancouver rose like fortresses above the Seward Glacier, while Fairweather and the hazy line of the Pacific Ocean could be seen in the distance.

With the layover day under our belts, we began kicking up the final crest with renewed energy. At 18,000 feet, we came on the only sign of previous passage: a single tubular snow picket with a tattered and faded sling. Seeing this lone piece of gear struck us as strangely out of place. Yet it was a tangible link to six fellow alpinists who passed by 25 years before. The final snowfield was endless. Not surprisingly, the slope ended up being four times longer, steeper and more difficult than it appeared. Late in the afternoon, we crested the top of the snowfield and began tackling the final summit pyramid against a furious, bone-chilling wind.

On most mountains we would summit and put as much elevation behind us as possible. However, since we had to traverse three miles along the summit plateau before losing altitude, we decided to bivouac fifty feet below the top and save the rest for the morning. Our first priority was eating, drinking and getting out of the wind. At eight P.M. we carved a tiny niche in the slope and settled down to a head-banging night at 19,500 feet. We awoke on April 29 to wind-sculpted skies and sub-zero temperatures. After seven days of climbing, our food was gone except for a few handfuls of oatmeal, making a grim start to our summit day. At seven A.M. we walked the final fifty feet to the summit of Mount Logan and shook hands.

Much of the relief and sense of accomplishment I felt was overshadowed by the magnitude of what still lay ahead. Our food was gone and we were virtually out of fuel. With 13,000 feet of unknown ridge to descend and 30 miles of glacier to travel, there was no doubt that we were on the threshold of an epic. A wave of anxiety washed over me as I watched Geoff slump over his axe in exhaustion. Even the summit view was distressing. Instead of a spectacular panorama, desolate wilderness seemed to mock our success on the Hummingbird and promised hardship ahead.

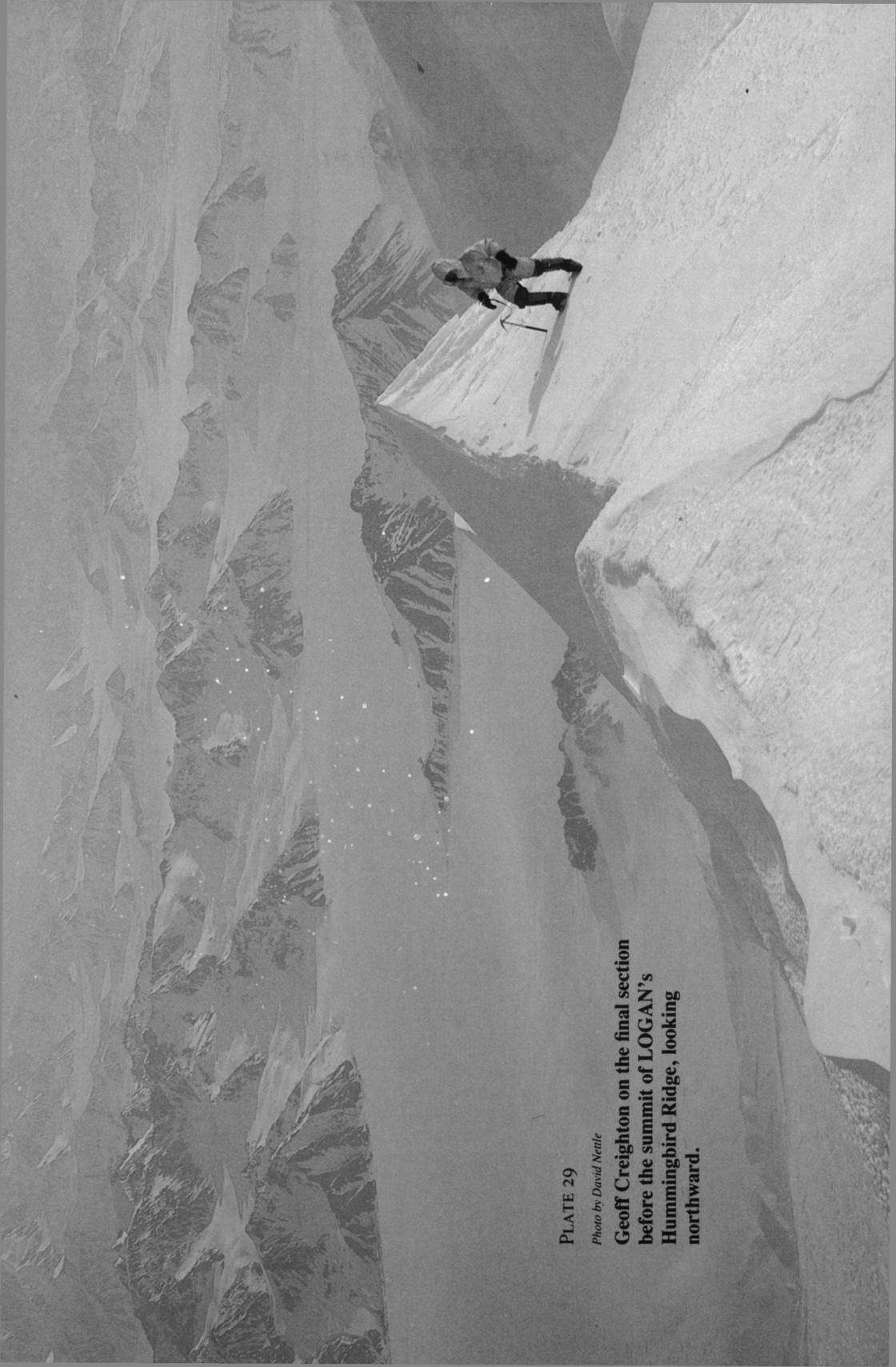


PLATE 29

Photo by David Neittle

**Geoff Creighton on the final section
before the summit of LOGAN's
Hummingbird Ridge, looking
northward.**

From the summit, we traversed the southern rim of the plateau for three miles of ankle-wrenching windslab to the top of the east ridge. At first the ridge was broad and gently sloping, but soon it began to steepen through increasingly broken séracs and crevasses. As fatigue and downhill pounding worked us over, I began to feel like a green guy named Gumby. We reached a level stretch that evening and a good tent site at 14,000 feet. The howling winds that had tormented us for the past few days subsided, allowing us to bask in the relatively mild temperature and thick air. The evening was perfect until our stove coughed on its last drop of fuel and we found ourselves solemnly sharing our final liter of water.

The next morning we set out early. With no food or fuel, our morning ritual of 'chew and brew' consisted of staring briefly at the empty water bottles before packing. "Well," I ventured in a positive tone, "think of all the time we're saving by not having to eat or melt snow." The humor was short-lived as our growling stomachs and parched throats reminded us of the reality of our situation.

Immediately below the bivy, the east ridge descended in an abrupt arête of ice. The technical nature of the route was far more difficult than we had expected. We found ourselves down-climbing boiler plate ice where old, useless fixed rope taunted us from under several inches of transparent deep freeze. Route-finding became a slow-motion nightmare as snow flurries and thick clouds reduced visibility. That evening, we reached the glacier, but white-out conditions made walking through the maze of crevasses impossible. We stopped at seven P.M., completely haggard. We spent a thirsty, hungry night.

The cloud layer lifted just enough by eight A.M. to allow tentative progress down the glacier. Our pace was frustratingly slow and tiring from postholing through the crusty top layer of snow. After five miles, in as many hours, we joined the main Hubbard Glacier. For hours we skirted along the divide that separates the Hubbard and Seward Glaciers. Somewhere along the sheer wall of rock and ice there was supposed to be a pass, but the cloud ceiling was only a hundred feet, making it impossible to tell where the gap might be. Several times we angled up a promising slope only to be turned back by a wall of rock which was hidden in the clouds. Our pace gradually slowed to a crawl and the first seeds of true despair grew.

Our relatively heavy packs became an increasingly noticeable burden. The load of technical equipment we were hauling might as well have been a bag of rocks for all the good it was doing us. Despite the overwhelming instinct never to part with gear, we threw crampons, extra axe, screws, cook kit, sleeping pads and any extra accessories into a pile. Even the rope was left behind except for a 40-foot chunk. The only things we took pleasure in tossing were our water bottles which had been nothing but an empty reminder for the past two days. Trudging away from the stack of gear was a symbolic defeat, but our lighter loads made continuing possible.

As evening crept in, the wind began to rise and swirling snow enveloped us. We struggled up what we hoped would be the pass to the Seward Glacier into the blinding blizzard. At the crest of the gap, I glanced at an outcrop a hundred feet away. Through the driving snow, I caught a glimpse of blue. "Geoff! I could've sworn I just saw a can or something on that rock."

"Man, I think you're seeing things. Let's just get off this. . . . Wait! I think I see it too!"

Our curiosity prevailed over fatigue and we plodded over to the rock to investigate. Buried in snow and rock except for the tiny corner of blue I had seen, was an old cache left over from the 1953 Cook-Logan expedition. Shaking with excitement, we pulled the rusty cans out. There were two quarts of kerosene in a blue can and three 5-gallon flour tins. The first two tins we pried open were full of rancid trash, but the third was packed with perfectly preserved food. After three days without food or water, the cache was manna from Heaven.

We set up the tent and crawled in out of the raging wind. After lining the floor with rocks, we forced kerosene into our poor white-gas stove and used the rusty tin as a cook pot. The stove barely worked, but we were able to maintain a sort of fire by constantly adjusting the control valve. Huge flames and plumes of black smoke turned the tent into a toxic hazard zone, but we exchanged sooty smiles as the snow slowly melted to water. From the food tin we tore into sugary Jello and dried apples. There were about 20 packs of Wrigley's gum that we wadded, a pack at a time, into incredulous grins. Five years before I was born, someone carefully packed this food and hauled it into the middle of nowhere where it had sat for 37 years before bailing our dehydrated and starving butts out of trouble. The stove finally gave up the ghost in a clogged gasp of soot, but we had managed to melt a gallon and a half of water. Taking turns, we each drank two cups at a time, lifting the mug to our mouths in reverence until the tin was empty.

In the morning we definitely felt a few squares further away from checkmate but still had 18 miles of hateful glacier to slog back to Base Camp. The first eight hours were in a complete white-out. The guy in front shuffled along, head down, looking constantly at the compass. We took one-hour shifts, flying by instrument, before collapsing in a nerve-racked heap. By two P.M., the clouds began to lift and an hour later we moaned under the blazing sun we had prayed for all morning. At nine o'clock that night, we crested the final rise and saw our tent a half-mile away. Well beyond having any kick left, we just kept plodding along, anticipating the abundant stack of food and fuel ahead.

As a fiery sunset gave way to a brilliant night, we found ourselves at Base Camp, staring up at the Hummingbird Ridge the same way we had twelve days earlier, but with far greater respect. The inevitable excitement and feelings of accomplishment would gradually dawn on us over the next few days, but, at the moment, having climbed the Hummingbird Ridge simply meant we could crawl into the tent and fall asleep, knowing the route was over.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Icefield Ranges, Yukon Territory, Canada.

NEW VARIANT: Mount Logan, 5951 meters, 19,525 feet, via a new route on the south face which joined the Hummingbird Ridge at 14,000 feet; summit reached on April 29, 1990 after an eight-day ascent; descent completed after 12 days.

PERSONNEL: Geoffrey Creighton, David Nettle.