

From the Sea to P 12,300

WALTER R. GOVE *and* WILLIAM PILLING

APPROACHED FROM THE WEST, the northern Fairweather Range rises out of the Pacific Ocean. Paralleling the shoreline is an old terminal moraine which acts as a natural dam that forms a large lake at the foot of the Grand Plateau Glacier. Covered with a rain forest, the moraine is rich in wildlife. The lake, which has a surface elevation of 85 feet, is the home of large icebergs. From the lake it is possible to wend one's way 35 miles on foot up a complex glaciation system to the top of the Grand Plateau at 8000 feet. The ice on the east side of the plateau flows to Glacier Bay via the Ferris and Margerie Glaciers. On the south side, Mounts Fairweather (4663 meters, 15,300 feet) and Quincy Adams (4133 meters, 13,560 feet) jut up, posing a formidable barrier. To the west is P 11,105 (3355 meters), with a high ridge connecting it to Fairweather. Because of the tremendous snowfall and the northern exposure produced by Fairweather and its flanking peaks, few environments in North America are more arctic than that of the Grand Plateau.

Gove commences: The northeast border of the Grand Plateau is formed by three major peaks. Mount Watson (3815 meters, 12,516 feet) is on the western end and Mount Root (3920 meters, 12,860 feet) on the southeastern end. P 12,300 (3749 meters) is nestled in between, at the head of an impressive cirque. I originally saw these peaks in 1968 while making the first ascent of the west ridge of Fairweather (*AAJ*, 1969, pages 304-7). In 1974 seven of us landed on the lake at the foot of the Grand Plateau Glacier. We climbed to the plateau and made the first ascents of Watson and P 11,105 (*AAJ*, 1975, pages 43-46). In 1977, Loren Adkins, two others and I used the same approach to make the first ascent of Root and new routes on P 11,105 and Fairweather. However, we failed in our attempt on P 12,300. The day before our pick-up, we walked to the ocean (*AAJ*, 1978, pages 397-402).

Loren and I returned in 1990. Our intent was to make the first ascents of P 12,300 and the east-northeast ridge of Quincy Adams. Landing on the lake was now prohibited and the importance of experiencing the environment through which we passed was much clearer. On the morning of May 28, 1990, Mike Ivers landed us at low tide at the point on the beach to which we had walked in 1977. The rain forest had changed little, but the four miles of shoreline, which had been open gravel bars and small hummocks, had become a tangle of alders interspersed with an occasional cliff. The signs of bear, moose and wolf were everywhere. As we pushed our way through the alders on a bear trail, we met a Brown Bear. Fortunately, he chose not to confront us.

We reached the plateau on schedule. However, it slowly became clear that we could not make our summits, for Loren could not muster the inner drive and determination so essential for such a serious climb. Twice we reached the bergschrund on P 12,300. It was an intimidating place. Loren would not go on. Finally, he said, "Walt, what is friendship and mountaineering about?" My answer was to begin the descent. My frustration was strong and my anger discernible, but I knew the core of my frustration was my ego and I slowly let it go. And we had a glorious time. Free from the pressure to make a summit, we took the time to watch the colors of the sunset hours merge into the colors of the dawn. We explored the boundaries of the plateau, climbing the nunatak separating the Ferris and Margerie Glaciers (P 9000) and the one separating the north and south forks of the Grand Plateau Glacier (P 8880).

The desire for summits dies hard, and I was back in 1992 with Bill Pilling. The previous year, we had made a kayak-mountaineering ascent of Mount Abbe (*AAJ*, 1992, pages 81-9). We were to be out 23 nights. Although our time was limited, I felt it sufficient for our basic goals as the weather on the plateau tends to be better than at lower elevations.

Two issues had to be addressed. As my feet had been badly damaged by frostbite, they needed special protection. This was solved by adapting Foot Fangs to fit bunny boots. And, we had to have a better approach. Following the climb of Abbe, I had camped with my family on the wilderness beach south of Yakutat and my son had made his way to the lake at its outlet. A kayak approach looked plausible.

On May 19, Mike Ivers deposited us on the last section of sandy beach north of the outlet. One can land only at low tide and because of the tides, he left us off after ten at night. There were only two campsites available, one on a bear trail and the one we chose, which was ten feet from the trail.

The next day, we ferried our loads to the lake. We followed the moraine to the outlet of the lake, about two-thirds of a mile, and then went upstream two-tenths of a mile to the lake. On the moraine we walked along a bear trail expressway. The bushwhack to the lake was nasty. There we assembled my kayak. Having loaded it, we set forth. It was a cloudless day. The Fairweather Range was magnificent and we took pleasure in being the first to paddle across the lake. At the end of our ten-mile paddle, darkness was upon us.

Although we worked at a hard, steady pace, it took us five days from the beach to reach 3400 feet. We had fallen behind our optimistic schedule. I felt some frustration, Bill more. Our need to be in the mountains was similar, but Bill was in a stage of life when summits were more important. And at times, I had caused modest delays due to my relative inefficiency.

The next camp was at 5300 feet. The route meandered through serious crevasses and then up a snow chute where there was risk of avalanche. Instead of sledding our gear, it was now on our backs and, even with two carries, our loads were heavy. To get back on schedule, Bill wanted to do two carries in one day. I was skeptical but said little. I led through the crevasses and Bill led the entire chute. Breaking trail, he was working harder than I, but I slowly became



PLATE 32

Photo by Walter Gove

P 12,300 from Mount Watson.
The route ascended the lighted snow ridge, rising from the lower right to the summit.

exhausted by my effort to keep up. It was clear that I was unable to do what Bill wanted. In a safe place, I insisted that we talk. I told him that he would have to adapt to the limits of my ability. Tears ran down my cheeks as I spoke. Bill is a kind and sympathetic person, and seeing my anguish, he comforted me. But his frustration was clear. We talked that night about life and mountains, about the ways climbing enriched one's life and the social costs incurred. This conversation became a dialogue that continued throughout the climb. The next day, we made the second carry to the camp at 5300 feet.

Pilling continues: The next day, Walt saved my life when I fired through a snow bridge and fell thirty feet into a hidden crevasse. His prompt belay kept me from slamming into the ice ten feet below my stopping point. Covered with ice water and buzzed with adrenalin, I chimneyed out, without bothering to take off my snowshoes. Prusiking just seemed too slow. Our trip was not turning out as planned. I had to accept that we would have time enough on the plateau to attempt only P 12,300. It was time to let go of my overachiever's alpinism and learn just to be in the mountains.

In the next few days, we moved our equipment across a long, easy traverse between 5300 and 6500 feet and up a steep snow couloir to 7000 feet. After the hard carries up the couloir, postholing the whole way, I felt stoked and ready to go all the way to the plateau that day. But Walt did not want to push on much farther. My muscles themselves seemed angry at being held back. To deal with my frustration, I focused on the fact that in the mountains there is no sin in having limits, only in denying them. I added some weight to my sled and pulled harder.

Camped on the north side of the nunatak which partially blocks the entrance to the plateau, we weathered a storm with 50-mile-per-hour winds. Our weather radio reported 14 inches of rain in Yakutat during the first day of the storm. Late on the second day of bad weather, Walt insisted that we start out for the plateau. Visibility was a fiction, and I whined about avalanche conditions. But Walt knew the way, was confident that the slope angles would be safe. He led us to the edge of the plateau by dark.

We spent another day waiting out the weather, listening to the wind thunder on the lower buttresses of Mount Watson. Thick clouds threatened to keep us in camp for a third night, but Walt had a feeling the weather would clear. His persistence and feel for the mountains paid off, for the clouds moved out just before sunset and the peaks surrounding the plateau appeared. In silence, we sledged our loads in the blue and gold light to a camp at 9000 feet on the arm of the plateau between Watson and Root.

From our high camp we could at last see P 12,300, a fine steep pyramid. The steep corniced ice arêtes which form the skyline were quickly ruled out as routes. The safest and most direct route to the top was the west face. This appeared to be in the same category as the north face of Robson in length and technical difficulty.

The next day we watched as avalanches cleared the face. It snowed again that night and it was late in the afternoon when the sun was fully on the face before

the new snow sloughed off. By eight A.M. of the following day, we were over the schrund wall. We climbed hard, frozen 55° snow to the crest of a rib in mid face. Above, we headed up eight pitches of 55° ice to a point just right of the apex of the face. One exposed pitch along the corniced ridge put us on top in the late afternoon.

Our summit was the size of a small kitchen floor, situated in the wildest alpine panorama I have ever seen. In comparison, the view from Denali is tame. To the north, we could see St. Elias, Augusta, Cook, Vancouver and Logan. To the east, there were uncountable ranges and glacier systems. Glacier Bay dominated the southeast, and Root and Fairweather bulked gigantically to the south. The west ridge of Fairweather fell steeply into the sea. The sea: it defined the whole western horizon. P 11,105 looked like a ship under sail against the water. Only 15 air miles from us, we could see the individual waves breaking on the beach where we had been dropped off. Somehow, this spot was suspended between the awful, immense simplicity of the sea and the infinite articulations of rock and ice.

We started our descent in the early evening, and the sun had set by the time we finished our last rappel down the ice. The wind had been rising all day, and the final half of the descent was unpleasant and scary in the dark, as we moved without headlamps in the sloughing and blowing spindrift. My night vision is poor, and Walt saved the night by leading the descent and finding our filled-in steps. By the time we reached camp, it was morning again. After a full day's rest, we leisurely broke camp and headed back to the beach.

Three days later, we stepped off the bare ice of the glacier and onto the dry till of the lakeshore. There was life everywhere. Walt and I couldn't have been happier—we had let go of our petty ambitions on our way into the range and were connected to what was important to climbing and to our lives.

As we packed camp the next morning, I injured my back and was unable to stand or walk because of the pain. As Walt assembled the kayak, I stretched to alleviate the pain. Paddling actually helped my back, and by the time the kayak was disassembled, I was able to carry a pack. We spent the night relaying loads to the landing site. I remember little of the night except pain, the sea breeze blowing through the Sitka spruce and my fear of walking at night on a bear's trail. As Walt returned for the final load, I sat on a log on the beach. The sand was laced with fresh wolf, bird and bear tracks. A huge orange moon was sinking into the Gulf of Alaska. A fox walked up and began pulling equipment out of Walt's pack. I softly asked the fox to be more considerate. He looked at me with interest, walked up, sniffed my parka pocket and then returned to foraging on the beach.

Gove concludes: In the Fairweather Range, one engages in serious mountaineering in a rugged wilderness environment. For me, and for Loren and Bill, those who reach the summits of the mountains surrounding the plateau after having been flown there have not climbed those mountains. To truly climb a mountain, one starts at its base. In the Fairweather Range, this means the ocean. Starting there means that the arctic zone of the plateau brings forth an intensity

of awareness, for it differs so from what has come before. The transition on the return is even greater, for one is returning to the life of spring. The sight of leaves and flowers, the rich odors in the air, and the song of the birds, particularly the trilling of the variate thrush, which goes on hour after hour, are forever imprinted on one's mind.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Fairweather Range, Southeastern Alaska.

FIRST ASCENTS: P 9000+, 2743 meters, June 9, 1990 (Loren Adkins, Walter Gove).

P 8880, 2707 meters, June 12, 1990 (Loren Adkins, Walter Gove).

P 12,300, 3749 meters, June 4, 1992 (Walter Gove, William Pilling).

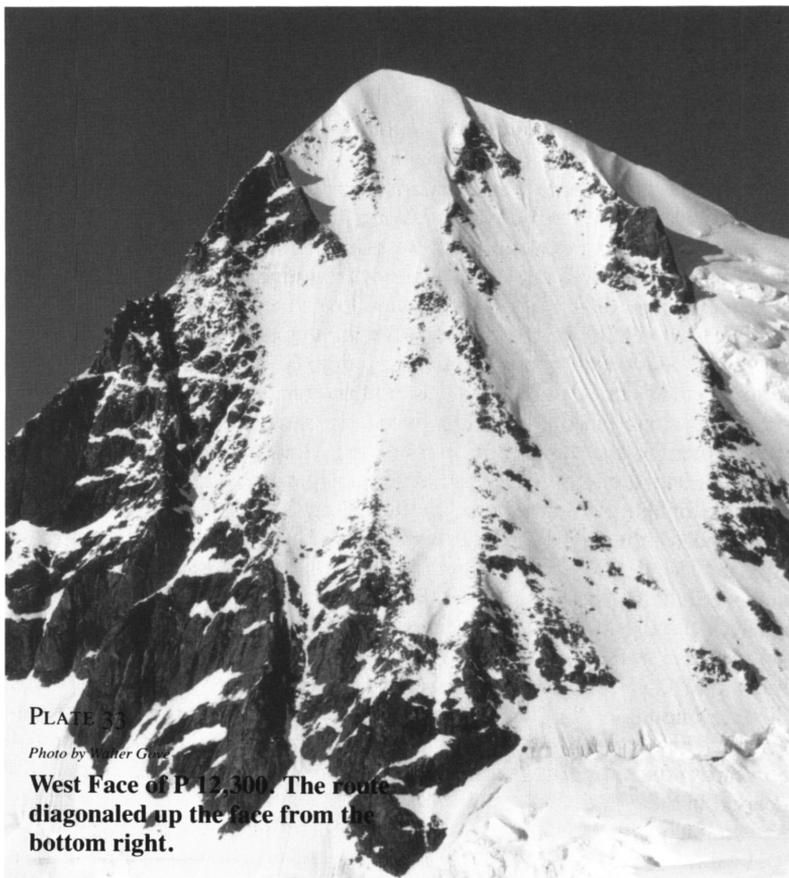


PLATE 33

Photo by Walter Gove

West Face of P-12,300. The route diagonaled up the face from the bottom right.