

Moose Antler Ascent: Moose's Tooth

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THE Moose's Tooth, which lies in a majestic setting near Mount McKinley, is one of Alaska's most spectacular mountains. It is a combination of Yosemite big walls, with heavily corniced ridges. "So convoluted is the topography of the Tooth, that from each side it appears a different mountain; so bizarre and alluring are its forms that climbers are still plotting new campaigns, new routes." (*Ascent* 1972). In June of 1964 the first and only previous ascent of the Moose's Tooth was accomplished by four Germans: Welsch, Bierl, Hasenkopf, and Reichegger. Their route went up the beautiful northwest ridge. Throughout the past ten years numerous attempts have been made on this mountain, with the east face being the most popular in recent years. The southwest face was untried, and it looked superb!

On June 7, Cliff Hudson flew Mike Clark, Charlie Porter, John Svenson and me into the Ruth Glacier area. We spent several days finding our way through the heavily crevassed Ruth Glacier and up a 1000-foot avalanche gully to the base of the southwest face. In less than a week we were at the base of the face; ready!

We began climbing as soon as possible (just after our last load carry). And we managed to fix four-and-a-half pitches in between spells of poor weather. On June 17 we began upwards, regardless of the weather.

It felt good to be on a rock face again. The climbing up to the end of the fixed lines had involved mostly free climbing. Sometimes we had to chop away ice that filled some of the cracks to allow placement of protection or feet. After leaving the ice corner, the climbing required more aid, but at least we were drier. At the top of the eighth pitch was to be our first bivouac on an assortment of insignificant sloping snow and sandy ledges. Some of us decided on hammocks.

Heavy rain and some falling ice woke us the next morning. By late afternoon the rain stopped and we made our way upward. John Svenson and Mike Clark, the lead team for this day, ended their day on top of Tea Party Pinnacle, one of the most spectacular bivy spots on the climb; it was even comfortable, for everything except sleeping.

Cloudless skies and a picturesque panorama rewarded us for opening our eyes before four A.M. We stuffed all our wet gear into the four haul bags, sorted hardware, untangled ropes and finally Charlie Porter and I began climbing upwards into the Slabs area. The Slabs, 500 feet

of some of the most outstanding free climbing on the route, consisted of crack systems that made their way through an enormous clean, smooth area. An added attraction of this section was the absence of any serious ice or rockfall, which had plagued us on the pitches below. But the loud noise was still with us.

During our wait in Talkeetna we had decided to do something irregular: haul, drag or carry a moose antler up the mountain. After three days on the face it was still with us. The antler actually gave us fewer problems than the haul bags. Another long day of climbing. Another storm. Another hammock bivy. Day three was over.

Poor sleeping accommodations forced an early start. Several pitches later Mike Clark yelled down that he saw a large snow patch, a pitch or so away, possibly the beginning of the upper snow field. So close, so soon? No, this snow was barely a patch, the summit snowfield was nowhere in sight, and the rock on the pitches ahead was the worst imaginable. We bivouacked just below the rotten section, and wondered.

The next day-and-a-half were the worst climbing of the route: rotten, crackless rock that resembled dirt rather than granite. Protection was unreliable. Free climbing was hazardous; aid climbing, insane. The leader's peel potential was extreme. The mountain was in total control. We made it through this rotten mess wondering if the whole east face was like this.

On June 22, at two A.M. we were all settled down in an assortment of "comfortable" bivy spots. We had just completed the last pitch of high-angle rock climbing (in the worst storm of the climb). Tomorrow?

By late morning the weather cleared and we made our way upwards. We wanted to get up today; we were almost out of food and fuel, and tired of dragging the moose antler. After numerous pitches of mixed cussing and swearing on mixed snow and rock with heavy packs, with visibility nearing zero, we found ourselves on top. Rather than descend in a white-out, we spent the night near the summit. As the storm abated we were treated to one of the most spectacular cloud displays imaginable. We were tired and thirsty, but the moose antler had made it!

Our descent route involved some exposed, steep snow and ice down-climbing. We had no ice screws. After two days of down-climbing, rappelling, post-holing and gully sliding we arrived at our Base Camp on the Ruth Glacier. We filled ourselves to overflowing with food and drink. Several days later in very wet snow conditions, Hudson heroically flew us out into the land of fresh food and greenness!

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Alaska Range, south of Mount McKinley.

NEW ROUTE: Moose's Tooth, Southwest Summit, via southwest face, c. 10,000 feet, June 22, 1974 (Gary Bocarde, Michael Clark, Charles Porter, John Svenson).