

ARCTIC RAGE

Pushing through the storm on the east face of the Moose's Tooth, Alaska.

BEN GILMORE



The Moose's Tooth, showing Arctic Rage. Kevin Mahoney

“Ben, come out quick! You’re missing sun hour!” Kevin’s voice was muffled, as I was down in the snow cave chowing hot dogs, tortillas, and Nutella. Inertia was strong down in our subterranean home where gluttony and vices prevailed, but I couldn’t miss the precious 50 minutes each day when the sun briefly shone on our camp. We were dug into a tight cirque on the Buckskin Glacier in late March, and only one small gap in the huge walls surrounding us allowed the sun’s brief peek. It was turning out to be a bitterly cold and snowy trip.

I ducked out of the hole, groaning from a stiff back and squinting at the weak, cloud-filtered sunbeams reflecting everywhere on fresh powder. The awesome east face of Moose’s Tooth

loomed directly above us, and the line of our failed attempt a few days earlier was looking snowy and spindrifted.

"Man, we should get back up there," Kevin said. "We could be climbing right now!" This was Kevin's usual sun hour pep talk. He was driven on this trip. We were feeling some extra motivational angst for this climb after coming away empty-handed from three prior expeditions. Now we were three-quarters of the way through our sixteen days out here and morale was at a low point. We had been battered back once already, and it looked like we would have time for only one more go. Looking up at the massive face, I felt the familiar bowel flutter of intimidation.

"Don't you think it's a little too cold?" came my feeble response. "Maybe we should let the face shed a bit after all that new snow. I already had some whisky today. Let's wait another day and see if it warms up." This had been my voice-of-reason response for four days. But the subtext really said, "I'm not sure I want to go back up there, Kevin. Can't I just make you another hot dog?"

Kevin Mahoney and I had met in the mountains while we were both working as instructors for NOLS. We started climbing together in 1998 on a trip to Mt. Combatant in British Columbia's Waddington Range. I wasn't much of an ice climber back then, but our shared NOLS expedition training, love for classic rock, and taste for cheap beer made it obvious on that first trip that we had a good thing going. We've been on seven expeditions together since then and have had some surprising successes on big Alaskan routes. We're a good team, and Kevin has Jedi powers on ice. It's been one of those magical climbing partnerships that drives us both to climb above our best when we're tied in together. Besides, Kevin is always game to lead the hardest pitches, and I can shovel snow and break trail with the best of them.

We'd stood beneath the east face of the Moose's Tooth before, in September 2001, with Scott DeCapio, Steve House, and Mike Wood. On that trip the huge face just looked too difficult, so instead we climbed a great new route with House on the southeast face. But Kevin and I had looked at each other with raised eyebrows, and we stored the east-face potential in our memories. The face was no longer one of Alaska's "last great problems," as it was known in the 1970s and 80s, but there had only been two routes done on the immense wall. The first was the Dance of the Woo-Li Masters (VI 5.9 WI4+ A4), put up alpine style in 1981 by Jim Bridwell and Mugs Stump. Bridwell came back in 2001 with Spencer Pfinsten to add a variation called the Beast Pillar (VII A5 5.10b WI4+ M6).

It was a photo by Paul Roderick in *Alpinist* 4 that brought the idea back to us. It was exactly what we were looking for: a big unclimbed ice route in a beautiful remote setting right next to a fat base camp with no acclimatization necessary. The idea of climbing hard alpine routes has always been thrilling back in a warm house looking at photos over a few beers. That's how we have always picked climbing objectives; Kevin usually lures me in with ideas for some sick and challenging climbs, and then we look at photos and pick the one that looks the most compelling. In the comfort of home, with beer in my bloodstream, I'm always psyched to go along on anything. With the help of a Mugs Stump Award we were on our way.

Upon landing on the glacier on March 19, we immediately put in six hours of hard labor digging a huge snow cave for our base camp. It became the perfect kitchen/party room for decadent base-camp living. We styled it out with wide standing counters, bench seating, shelving, and a well-stocked entertainment center. The next morning we woke up amped with clear weather and frosty mixed big walls all around us, so we skied around on the glacier scoping



Ben Gilmore entering the Chimney Pitch, which marks the start of their new route after it branches off from Dance of the Woo-Li Masters.
Kevin Mahoney

different angles of the route we wanted to try. The line looked huge and amazing. We could see ice in the back of dark chimneys that we hoped would connect all the way. I felt a stomach-churning mix of excitement and dread as I looked up through my binoculars. Strong forces told me to run back and hide in the cave for the duration, but a stronger pull toward the adventure and unknown kept me smiling. We skied back to camp to spend the rest of the afternoon racking gear, listening to music, and generally partying. That night I lay awake with a nervous racing pulse, listening to Kevin snore comfortably.

The next day by sunrise we had soloed 1,000 feet of snow and were pulling out the ropes for the first steep ground we would share with the Dance of the Woo-Li Masters. The weather was warm, and we labored on a Stairmaster workout from hell, post-holing and dragging ropes through deep, sticky snow. Just above the area where Bridwell and Stump's route traversed left, our wall reared up at steep angles broken by deep chimneys and smears of ice. I was still drooling and hyperventilating from the approach pitches, so thankfully I handed Kevin the first block of the real deal. He was soon

out of sight, burrowed deeply into a tight, icy chimney. Occasionally, groans of despair would echo from the chimney, but the rope moved steadily. I judged that it was a hard lead by Kevin's constant grunting and sounds of crampons and picks sparking on rock. I was happy to top rope the pitch. This was serious stuff, and the climbing was fantastic with mixed stemming and just barely enough thin ice and protection. Kevin had found some protection in the rock, but most of it was the kind that you clip with a screamer and try to forget about. The ice was great for tool placements but generally too airy and snowy for decent screws. It often required serious mind control and careful weight distribution over four points to prevent shearing out one tool or crampon.



Ben Gilmore in the Duplex Bivy (the first bivy). *Kevin Mahoney*

Kevin's next pitch offered delicate and unconsolidated snow-ice leading up to a stance underneath a massive snow mushroom. Cold shadows had enveloped us 2,000 feet up the wall, and it was time to find something flat enough to lie down on. Kevin was frantically digging to find protection when suddenly one of his tools sheared into an empty void. We couldn't believe our incredible luck. After two more hours Kevin had hollowed out the snow mushroom, and we were brewing up in a spacious two-chambered bivy we dubbed the Duplex. That night I lay awake again all jumpy with nervous anticipation of leading out on the first block the next day. Kevin slept peacefully.

As we cooked and got ready in the morning, our bivy was a steamy orb brilliantly lit up by a red alpenglow that illuminated the thin walls of the snow mushroom. Blue skies outside gave me confidence to explore above, so I put the rack on and tunneled through to stand on the roof of our cave. Stretching from the roof of the mushroom, I was able to get a good stick in squeaky névé. Grateful that I'd opted to haul the pack on this pitch, I pulled onto the steep smear and carefully picked my way up to the base of a thinly iced corner. My picks bottomed out on rock all the way up the corner. I screamed two or three times, on the micro-edge of falling, but somehow I whimpered my way through and finished what we named the Balcony Exit Pitch (WI6+R) at a good stance. Kevin followed it quickly with his pack on.

Everything was getting drippy on us in the direct sun and warm temps. I debated with myself about asking Kevin to lead the next pitch, but I decided it would be just too chicken to do only one pitch for my "block." So I headed up onto the slushy vertical wall toward a dark off-width looming above. From the outside the off-width looked like it was filled with ice, but when I got a view from underneath I could see that it was only a thin film of frozen snow bridging the gap with fully formed cavity hoar crystals growing inside.

"Oh shit," I thought.

I got a sling around a chockstone in the base of the off-width for protection and stemmed

up to see if any ice would hold my weight. Four or five times I flailed a bit higher, but my tools only sheared through into nothing. Rock climbing the verglassed foot-wide crack was out of the question, and I didn't fully trust the chockstone, so I had Kevin lower me back to the belay. It was still early with nice weather holding, so I convinced Kevin to go up and give it a try. He made many valiant attempts, hooking micro-edges and reaching higher in the crack only to slice through more loose crystals.

I lowered him down. We were both bummed. We'd never been shut down by something we couldn't at least aid. Suddenly, the day felt late and we thought of how little fuel was left for this limited progress. We noticed a vague line to the right of the off-width that might go with some aid, but we had already committed to going down. Four hours of rappelling and down-climbing to the glacier below brought us into a cold hell of failure and despair.

Down and out in base camp. Our decision to retreat proved to be a good one the next day when we woke up to heavy snow and much colder temperatures. The next six days were a blur of bad weather and cave time. Temperatures were in the negative numbers. The walls around us were plastered with snow, and the whole cirque remained clouded with a mist of spindrift. Kevin was like a caged animal, pacing back and forth in camp. We packed the runway each day to keep our chances for a pick-up alive. The angst-meter was reading extreme. I almost had to slip Percocet into Kevin's food to keep him down for a few days.

The weather improved slightly on March 29, so we skied out to try another objective, this one on the Bear's Tooth. We were pushing it going out so soon after the new snowfall, but with time short we went anyway. As we started up the snow cone underneath the face a cracking explosion sounded high above. An avalanche was coming down on us, but we couldn't tell how big yet. Our attempts to run out of its path were ludicrous. I tangled in my sled and fell down. Luckily, we were hit only by a powder blast, and we skied back to camp with our tail between our legs.

Now it was really getting down to the wire. The weather was better, but still snowy. I couldn't keep Kevin at bay with hot dogs any longer, so we decided to go up no matter what the next day, March 31. We would try our original objective and attempt to aid around the off-width.

In the morning we broke trail through two feet of fresh powder to reach the wall. There was still a mist of spindrift in the cirque, but it didn't seem to be snowing hard any more. Temps were much colder this time around, and our hands froze climbing the snow on the first 1,500 feet. There were advantages to going back up into now-familiar terrain, but it also meant that we had to re-lead each other's pitches. They had been hard enough following on a top rope already!

I completely lost my shit trying to find an anchor after leading Kevin's first chimney. I was cold, stressed out, had low blood sugar, and the constant spindrift made it hard to find the thin cracks we had used earlier for an anchor. Kevin waited patiently below while I screamed through every obscenity I knew until I was hoarse. Finally, an hour later, I had an anchor in place and Kevin was on his way up. I was so shamed by my psychotic raging breakdown that I managed to dig deep and lead Kevin's next delicate pitch up to the Duplex bivy.

That night was bitterly cold. I hung my wristwatch computer in the cave to record the temperature, but it soon faded and stopped working in the cold. Twenty-degree down sleeping bags were not cutting it. Kevin's side of the bivy had sustained major damage to the roof, so it was open to constantly pouring spindrift. Peeking out from my sleeping bag in the morning, I could

see that he had been completely buried in snow overnight. As I started to get up to dig him out, the mound he was under cracked, and he butted his way out, gasping for air. He had been sleeping packed under two feet of spindrift!

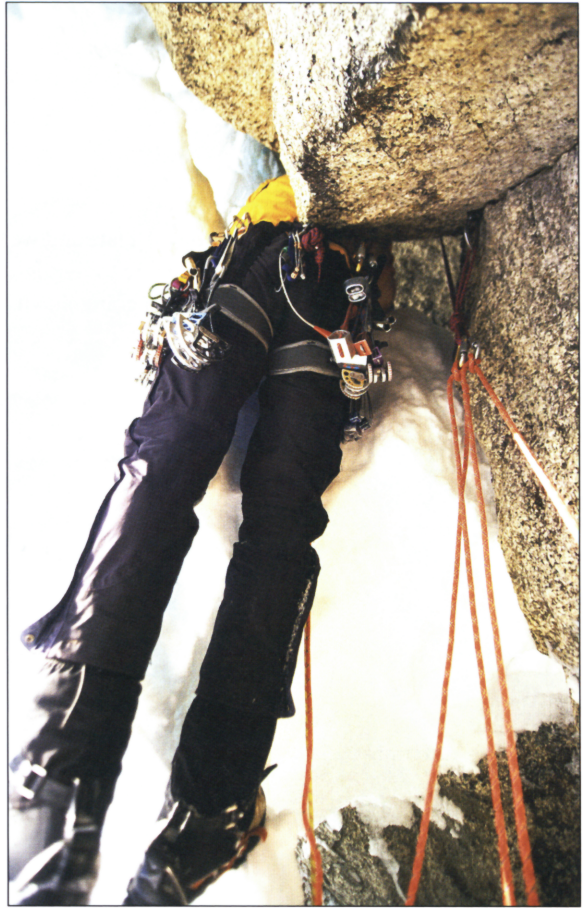
We were both glad to leave that bivy but concerned about whether the aid around the off-width would go. Kevin fired off the Balcony Exit pitch without a problem in the brittle conditions. He was determined to do anything necessary on the Off-width Bypass Pitch. Forty feet of initial steep mixed climbing led to another 40 feet of gear-pulling and A2. We were elated. We had pulled around the off-width section and now moved on above, into new terrain.

I followed the pitch freestyle, hooking gear with my tools and taking tension with the rope. At the anchor we high-fived and reveled in climbing past our previous high point. Above us, a perfect runnel of WI 5 ice dripping out of a tight chimney tapered out of sight far above. Luckily, it was my lead since there was nowhere for the belayer to get protected under this pitch.

The Pipeline Pitch, as we ended up calling it, turned out to be the best 200-foot stretch of ice either of us had ever climbed. The perfect natural feature tapered from a three-foot chimney to a three-inch crack before disappearing and crossing over into another crack. I was having a blast on the lead, but my icefall gave Kevin a bloody beating down at the unprotected Pummeling Station belay.

Three more WI 4 pitches and some simulclimbing brought us to a small snow fluting that we investigated for snow-cave potential. It was thick enough to hollow out a nice, low-ceilinged cave. Now we had a secure bivy site, the Cocoon Cave, 3,000 feet up the wall where we could rest before and after a summit bid. Our down sleeping bags were wet and filling with ice clumps, but we snuggled in for a decent sleep with a starry sky outside.

The weather had changed 180 degrees by morning, and we woke to a full blizzard outside. We were in a new world, completely engulfed in spindrift. I took one look out the cave door and thought for sure we'd either wait it out or go down. Kevin was already outside stacking ropes.



Ben Gilmore starting the first pitch in the morning by tunneling through the roof and climbing up above onto the Balcony Exit Pitch (WI 6+R). *Kevin Mahoney*



Kevin Mahoney leading Shotgun Alley in full conditions on summit day. *Ben Gilmore*

"Uh, Kevin, what do you think about this weather?" I called out meekly. "Maybe we should talk about this a little."

"We have to give it a try," Kevin yelled over the wind. "This could be my last trip for a long time!"

"No problem, I wasn't saying I wanted to go down or anything," I lied. "Just wanted to make it a conscious decision. I've never kept going up in anything like this before!"

Kevin had the critical drive and leadership at that moment to keep us going. I decided to commit, and we were off and running against the tide of spindrift flowing down the face. Kevin entered a narrow couloir we dubbed Shotgun Alley on the second pitch, and he disappeared into the raging whiteout above. Communication was impossible, and the spindrift was so intense that Kevin couldn't stop to place an anchor. An unspoken trust was between us, so I climbed when the rope came tight. We simulclimbed until the 90-degree alley widened and the spindrift eased off. The whole time we couldn't look up at our tools, and the spindrift pressed heavily on our heads and shoulders, so we just swung blindly and climbed by feel.

The route followed spindrift-polished 70- to 90-degree couloirs for eight more pitches, all the way up to the overhanging summit cornices. Kevin led the whole day, and I followed with the pack. He found a gap in the cornices, and we mantled onto a flat area we figured was the summit. The storm was gaining force. It was hard to stand up in the strong winds and vertigo created by the whiteout. We feared getting lost now that we were on horizontal ground. We screamed congratulations, celebrated with a few quick photos, then downclimbed through the cornices and started the long journey down the route.

After nine rappels we bivied in the Cocoon Cave. Our bags were full of ice, but our spirits were high and we didn't care. The next morning the storm had slowed, so I took the rack and started rappelling down the rest of the face. My mission was to find anchors as fast as I could, but the snow and bottoming cracks made it difficult. I kept one tool out for the descent and beat half an inch of metal off the pick scraping and chopping in the search for one decent piece of gear per anchor. Eight hours later, we finally crossed the bergschrund and pulled the ropes for the last time. We had stashed our skis nearby, but now they were buried under tons of new snow. An hour and a half of digging and searching uncovered nothing, so we gave up and waded in snow up to our waists back to base camp.

We dug out the tent and cave from under three feet of new powder. It was great to be down, even better to have succeeded on the new route, but we feared now that we would be stuck for a while if the plane couldn't land with all the soft snow. It would have been nice to sleep in that next morning, but we woke up with discipline and spent six hours boot-packing a runway with the hope that the weather would allow a pick-up. Luckily, the skies cleared and our efforts paid off. Later that day we were drinking beers in Talkeetna, basking in the afterglow.

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS:

AREA: Alaska Range

ASCENT: Arctic Rage (4,500 feet, VI WI6+R A2) on the east face of The Moose's Tooth (10,355 ft.), Ben Gilmore and Kevin Mahoney, March 31-April 3, 2004.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Ben Gilmore learned how to climb while attending college in Maine. After graduating he began working for NOLS in 1994. Currently he is AMGA certified and guides for Exum Alpine Ascents International, and International Mountain Climbing School. He has made first ascents from Fitz Roy to McKinley, climbed A5 on El Cap, and hiked the Lions Head Trail on Mt. Washington (20 laps in winter).



Kevin and Ben celebrating on the summit in a white out.
Ben Gilmore