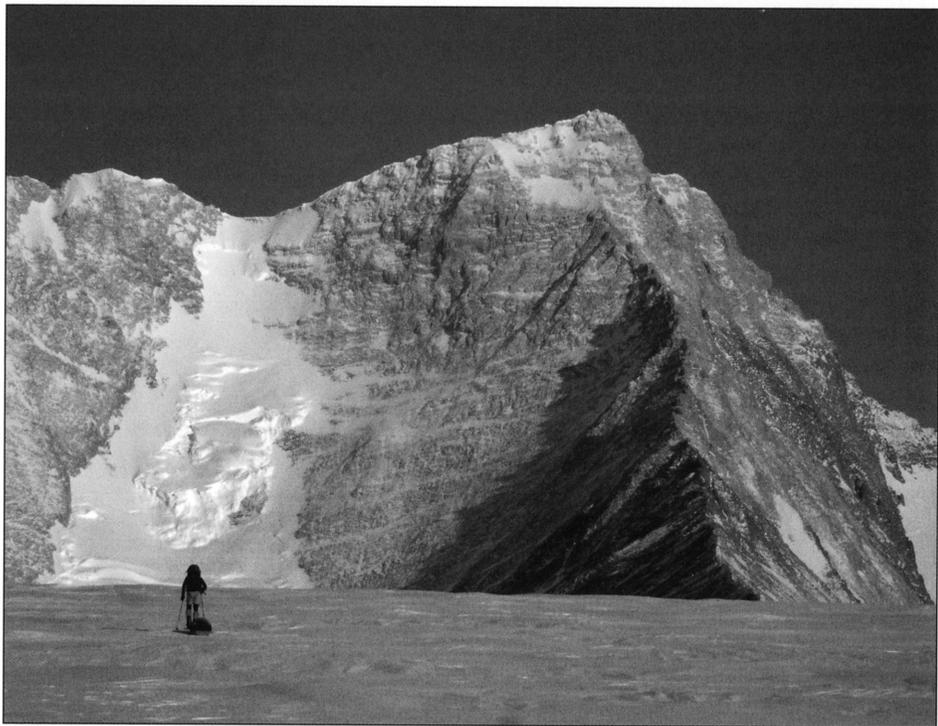


# INFORMATION ON ICE

*Seven years of first ascents and data collection in Antarctica.*

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DAMIEN GILDEA



Jed Brown sledging toward Mt. Anderson (4,144m), then the highest unclimbed peak in the Sentinel Range. Brown and Damien Gildea climbed Anderson's west face, right of the steep glacier. *Damien Gildea*

I love The Information. I don't know why, I just do; it's the way I am. I also love mountains and climbing, and for 15 years I've felt compelled to give in to this love. Put all these attributes together, turn them loose on the little-known mountains of Antarctica, and you have a passion that is, for me, pretty much all-consuming, for better or worse.

Coming from a dry, flat country (Australia), my alpine climbing started with The Information, and if I'm lucky enough to achieve old age it might end that way. Like a junkie, I long ago sucked dry the innards of the old books, magazines, and journals like this one, needing a fix of the info drug. Facts and figures, names and dates, details and debates—I need it all.



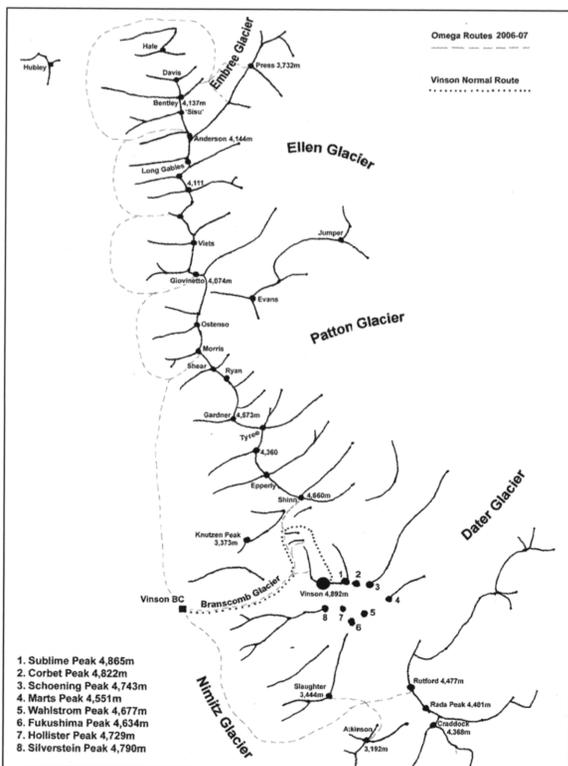
Brown places a GPS unit on the rocky lower summit of Peak 3,368m, above the Embree Glacier. *Damien Gildea*

Nearly 10 years ago, I wrote *The Antarctic Mountaineering Chronology*, which, aside from being the first and only reference book on climbing down south, was pretty much my way of standing up in front of the group and saying, “Hi, my name is Damien and I’m an infoholic.” (“Hi, Damien!”) Seeing that, and no doubt acting purely out of human compassion, the *AAJ* let me work through my info addiction in its pages, a treatment I repeat annually. This in turn led to a relationship with the Omega Foundation, a not-for-profit body dedicated to supporting scientific, environmental, educational, and literary projects in the Antarctic region. That after nearly a decade of climbing and scientific work in the high mountains of Antarctica the Omega Foundation still confounds people with its extensive support of these projects, with no desire for profit or publicity of any kind, really says more about those people and society in general than it does about the foundation. We think it’s a good thing to do, so we do it.

When the foundation first approached me with an offer of support, I immediately saw an opportunity to solve a problem with Mt. Shinn, which sits right next to Mt. Vinson. All the Vinsonites see it from their high camp, but the USGS map gave it no height. I’d already noted this while writing the *Chronology*. Looking back through older records, journals, magazines, and the USGS Gazetteer, I kept coming across references to Shinn being “over 4,800 meters.” Given the revision of heights for the highest peaks that had occurred over the years at the USGS, I thought this unlikely. I also thought it inappropriate, if not downright strange, that Shinn might be the continent’s third-highest mountain and we didn’t know just how high it was. I set out to rectify this.

On my first attempt, in December 2001, Mike Roberts and I were the first climbers up Vinson that season; we went to its summit to acclimatize for a seven-hour sit-in on the sum-

mit of Shinn. Because fewer satellites orbit over Antarctica than the more populated parts of the world, it takes a while to collect enough data with a single GPS unit to pinpoint elevation and position. We had to turn back high on the southwest face of Shinn due to slab avalanche danger, and when Mike had to leave I had no partner for a rematch with Shinn, nor for the second part of the plan that year, a 45-kilometer ski north to climb Mt. Anderson, then considered the highest unclimbed mountain in the Sentinel Range. Though we didn't achieve our aims that year, the trip did give me valuable experience climbing in the area, along with the assurance that simply climbing the highest and most popular mountain in an area—Vinson by the regular route, in this case—held no interest for me. I needed something with a bit of the unknown, and preferably with some interesting climbing involved. Antarctica is a special place, its mountains are treasures, and if you're lucky enough to visit them you should do something special—ideally something meaningful to others as well as to your own ego or website. The place deserves nothing less.



Damien Gildea



I returned the next season with Chilean climber Rodrigo Fica, and we made a safe and successful ascent of Shinn, climbing the steep upper southwest face. Then we sat in a tent just below the summit for seven hours while a GPS unit ran on top. Down at base camp, we processed the data by sending it from our laptop, via Iridium satellite phone, to the Australian government's AUS-POS website. We got a reply within an hour, saying that Shinn was 4,660 meters above sea level. It felt like all our effort had been worth it and that we had actually made a contribution, rather than just doing a climb, as enjoyable as that climb was.

With some variations, this has been our system over the last five seasons. Sending the data home for nearly instantaneous processing allows us to verify that our GPS work was successful while we're still on the continent, where we can redo it if necessary. Coming back is expensive.

The next year, in December 2003, we took a break from inland Antarctica and climbed and measured Mt. Friesland, the highest peak on Livingston Island. Livingston is one of the

South Shetland Islands and sits just off the northwestern tip of the Antarctic Peninsula; it gets some of the world's worst weather. Of our 23 days on the island, 20 were too bad to climb, but we eventually climbed Friesland and established not only that was it the highest point on the island, but also that it was a bit higher than everyone thought, at exactly 1,700 meters.

Our view from Shinn toward Vinson had left something stuck in my brain. All those summits up high on Vinson, near the main one, looked pretty high—how high were they really? Only one had been climbed, leaving another eight or so unvisited. So Rodrigo, Camilo Rada, and I returned in 2004 and spent over a month at high camp on Vinson, at 3,700 meters. To measure Vinson's summit elevation, we slept on top in  $-46^{\circ}\text{C}$  temperatures without sleeping bags, huddling in down suits inside a small tent. We repeated this exercise a month later, finding Vinson to be 4,892 meters—five meters lower than the official height, but within the range given by the USGS.

During the month between our Vinson summits, we made the first ascent of eight of the Vinson subpeaks and the second ascent of another, plus some other climbing. This established that the highest of these subpeaks, Sublime Peak, is only 27 meters lower than the main summit (now officially called Mt. Vinson). While we initially gave, and published, some interim names for these subpeaks, the USGS recently accepted my proposal to name them after the 1966–1967 first ascensionists of Vinson. So now Nick Clinch, Barry Corbet, Eiichi Fukushima, Charles Hollister, Brian Marts, Pete Schoening, Sam Silverstein, and Dick Wahlstrom are all commemorated on the mountain first climbed by them. John Evans and Bill Long already had other significant peaks in the range named for them.

Though our climbing on these virgin subpeaks was never technically difficult, spending so much time up so high there was like walking across another planet. Often we had the whole massif to ourselves and experienced it from several different angles, developing an intimacy with Antarctica's highest mountain that few others have.



I always want to climb high, see a bit farther, and then go climb there too. From the summit of Vinson in November 2004, Rodrigo, Camilo, and I looked south to Mt. Craddock. We felt that the unnamed point that we called "Sharp Peak," between Craddock and us, might be higher than Craddock, but eventually we decided it probably wasn't. The next year, in December 2005, Steve Chaplin, Manuel Bugueno, Camilo, and I all climbed a new route on Mt. Craddock and

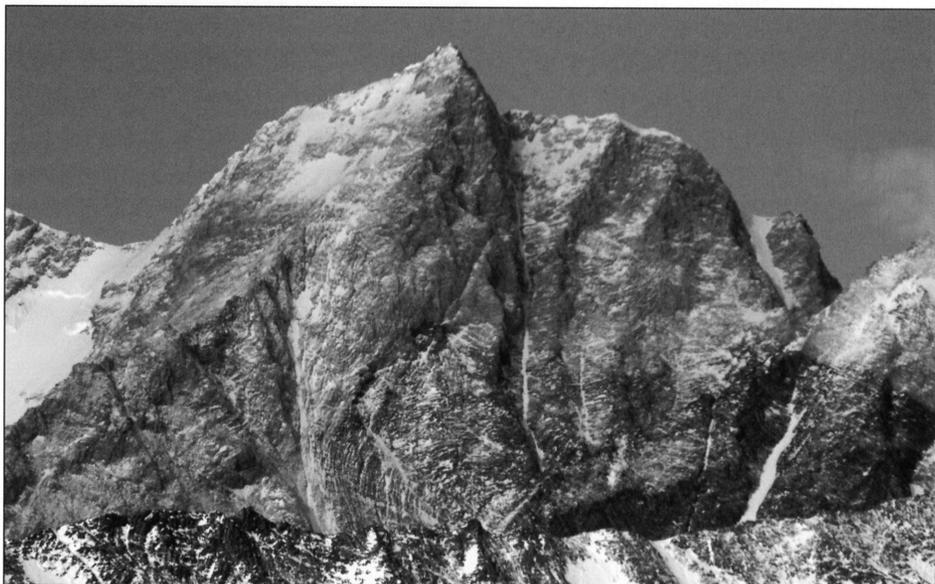


Antarctic jug haul: Maria Paz ("Pachi") Ibarra reaches the summit of Peak 3,119m, just to the north of Mt. Viets. *Jed Brown*

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## UNCLIMBED ANTARCTICA

The Sentinel Range is far from climbed out, as this selection of objectives clearly demonstrates.



The unclimbed south face of Mt. Anderson (4,144m). *Damien Gildea*



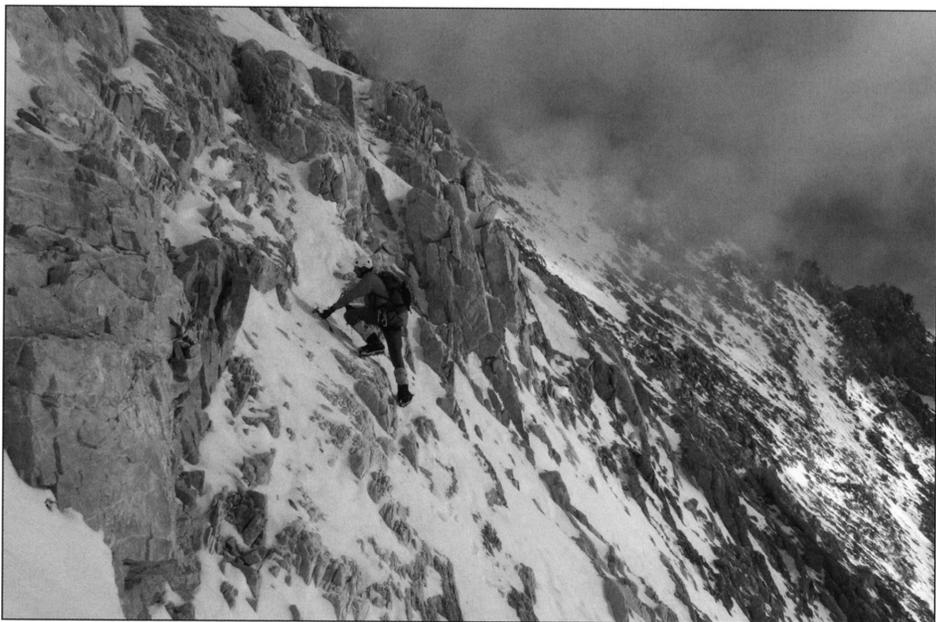
The southern aspect of unclimbed Mt. Goldthwait (3,815m), as seen from the Embree Glacier. *Damien Gildea*



The unclimbed, unvisited, and rarely seen north face of Mt. Shinn (4,660m), as seen from the base of the north-east ridge of Mt. Tyree. *Damien Gildea*



The unclimbed north face of Mt. Tyree, Antarctica's second-highest peak (4,852m). The obvious couloir running down to the east is the 1997 French "Grand Couloir" route. The right skyline is the northwest ridge (Corbet-Evans, 1967), the route of the first ascent.



Gildea climbs the mixed wall on the west face of Mt. Anderson. The team was surprised to discover running water and hard water ice on this face deep in the Antarctic interior. *Jed Brown*

saw Sharp Peak from the other direction. We'd gotten it wrong—that peak was clearly higher than everything around us, including us, but we did not have time to get to it. Again, the desire to solve the enigma was irresistible, and so we returned to the area this last season and made the first ascent of the peak now known as Mt. Rutford, finding it to be 4,477 meters—the highest peak of the Craddock Massif and probably the seventh-highest mountain in Antarctica.

Likewise, that previous year, a couple of weeks after climbing Craddock, Steve and I were descending from the summit of Mt. Gardner in the early morning light, and when we looked north along the beautiful raw spine of the northern Sentinels, we saw that a peak on the eastern wall of the Embree Glacier looked higher than we thought it “should,” and it looked pretty steep, too. Last season we returned to climb it. It was Mt. Press, a fact we guessed from the map, and it is both steep and beautiful, but we now know for sure, having climbed and measured it, that unlike Rutford it is not really higher than everyone thought.

This year, from the summit of Press, the guys looked farther north and saw more sharp, high virgin peaks that looked good to climb, and no doubt someone will go there and climb them.

Yes, of course, this is a seemingly endless process of desire and consumption, but it has plenty of positives, I believe. It gives more than it takes. We've established new, more accurate heights for most of the high peaks, clarified classification and naming issues, and, in cooperation with the USGS, produced the definitive topographical map for the range. But the process is the thing. Discovery, desire, planning, climbing, knowledge, communication, progression. That's what it's about. Antarctica's highest mountains are among the continent's most significant features, and people now know a lot more about the Sentinel Range than they did before we visited. The Information leads to new climbing, which adds to the mass of The Information, which will in turn lead to more new climbing.

So, for now at least, the list of Antarctica's highest mountains, not including subpeaks, looks like this:

1. Mt. Vinson 4,892m
2. Mt. Tyree 4,852m\*
3. Mt. Shinn 4,660m
4. Mt. Gardner 4,573m
5. Mt. Kirkpatrick 4,528m\*
6. Mt. Elizabeth 4,480m\*
7. Mt. Rutford 4,477m
8. Mt. Craddock 4,368m
9. Peak 4,360m 4,360m\*
10. Mt. Epperly 4,359m\*



Damien Gildea in icy camouflage on the Gildea Glacier, with the Nimitz Glacier and Bastien Range behind him. *Damien Gildea*

Along the way, I also have gotten my own little bits of closure. Mt. Anderson had been on my mind since Mike and I weren't able to get to it back in 2001. This last season, after finding a way out of the Embree Glacier, Camilo Rada, Maria Paz Ibarra, Jed Brown, and I sledged south toward Vinson, and in the process made the first ascents of Anderson, Mt. Giovinetto, and Mt. Morris. Climbing Anderson was the highlight—the first ascent of a high, steep, unclimbed peak by an aesthetic route that is not the easiest way up. A week later, Jed, Maria, and Camilo made the first ascent of Giovinetto, and thus brought another form of closure: The last unclimbed mountain in the Sentinel Range over 4,000 meters had been climbed.

There are still dozens and dozens of big, unclimbed faces and ridges in the Sentinel Range, great natural lines in an awesome setting with easy approaches, 24-hour daylight, and pretty good weather. Sure, it's expensive to get there, but plenty of people spend the same or more money to repeat the normal routes on various 8,000-meter peaks. To each his own, of course—it's just a matter of priorities. I know mine.

SUMMARY:

AREA: Sentinel Range, Antarctica

ASCENTS: Jed Brown, Damien Gildea, Maria Paz Ibarra, and Camilo Rada spent more than two months in the Sentinel Range in 2006–2007. Various members of the team made 12 ascents, each of them either the first ascent of a peak or a new route. See Climbs and Expeditions for a complete account of these climbs.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

*Damien Gildea, 38, lives near Goulburn, New South Wales, Australia, where, he says, "I don't work—I'm independently unwealthy, a real self-made pauper, who through sheer perseverance cornered the market on sloth." He has done five expeditions to the Sentinel Range.*

*\*Denotes heights not measured by the Omega Foundation. Most of these summits would probably be slightly lower than indicated here.*