

THRILLER

Four major routes in two weeks on Alaska's Stikine Ice Cap.

JENS HOLSTEN



Burkett Needle (left) and Mt. Burkett, from Silly Wizard Peak to the east. Max Hasson and Jens Holsten did the first free ascent of Burkett Needle's South Pillar, generally following the left skyline. Their route National Public Ridge (5,700', 5.10R AI3) takes the longest line on the south face of Mt. Burkett. Previous ascents (Cauthorn-Collum, 1994; Hoyt, 2005) followed straightforward glaciers on either side of the ridge to approximately the elevation of the Hasson-Holsten bivouac site (marked) before climbing the upper southeast face. Hasson and Holsten descended their route to the bivy site, then rappelled to the glacier to the east and followed this down to the top of the steep rockband below their line; they descended these rocks and a snow couloir to reach the glacier. *Max Hasson*

Millions of stars stabbed through the darkness; a dusty ledge was our bed, stones our pillows. Inadequate bivy gear and general gumbiness were turning my first Yosemite climb with Max Hasson into an epic. Up with the dawn, Max threw himself at the Kor Roof, the crux lead on Washington Column's South Face. I floundered with my jumars as I tried to clean the overhang, and soon I lowered in a sweaty haze of itchy pain. (A few days

before, I'd wiped my ass with poison oak.) As we rappelled toward the Valley floor I wondered, "Will Max ever climb with me again?"

He let my shortcomings slide, and soon we were back on the rock. My fevered motivation seemed to complement Max's analytical style. It was the summer of 2002, and as our skills grew we climbed a stack of walls, including our first El Cap route, a 24-hour sufferfest on the Zodiac. Hanging at a belay with a sea of granite all around and a sickle moon overhead, I sensed greater adventures ahead.

For the next several years, Max and I traveled the American West, our program built around solos in Joshua Tree, splitters in Utah, and the iconic walls of Yosemite. Inspired by California's Stonemasters, we traced a learning curve that emphasized a simple climbing style dependent upon movement skills and mental strength rather than equipment. When we started to put the pieces together high in the mountains, we realized a passion. The combination of adventure and athleticism in the world's wildest places seemed to us like the perfect game.

Long before that first trip to Yosemite, I'd seen a photo of a freshly rimed spike of granite in southeast Alaska called Burkett Needle. The image had burned in my mind for years, an ember of inspiration that still held heat when Max and I finally felt ready for Alaska in 2007. Then life threw me some curveballs, stalling our trip for two years. When we finally touched down on the "Burkett Glacier"—the south arm of the Baird Glacier—on June 9, we were like two monkeys let out of a cage. It had been a long time coming.



The splitter weather at base camp did not give us time to sit nervously under misty peaks, endless cups of tea clutched between sweaty palms. Immediately we began preparing for a free effort on the magnificent South Pillar of Burkett Needle. Established in 1995 by Dan Cauthorn, Greg Collum, and Greg Foweraker, this classic ridge featured moderate yet steep climbing, with a single overhanging pitch of modern A3. Our plan was to approach the climb like we would any other: a lead line, a tag line, a small rack of cams and nuts, and some shoulder-length slings with biners. We would try to use only our hands and feet for upward movement.

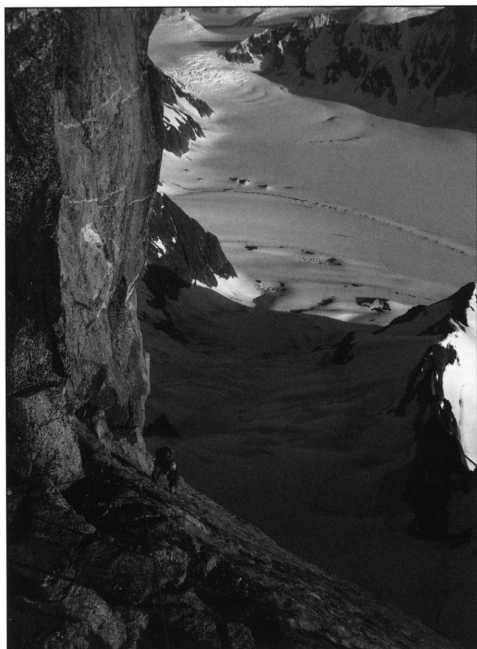
A hurried ascent through a disintegrating ice cliff was the first order of business. The moderate terrain passed quickly below my boots; Max swung up behind me. Past all the difficulties, I began to mantel onto the glacier but never finished the move, a portable blade of névé sending me for a 50-foot tumble. Sixty feet to my right, a gripped Max shouted, "What's keeping us on?"

"One screw," I responded in disbelief.

"Well, are you OK?"

Upside down, my tools' umbilicals wrapped around me, I took inventory. My side was badly bruised, and at first I felt sure I had a concussion, but as the adrenaline wore off my thoughts were coherent and my motivation strong. Ten minutes later, on top of the ice cliff, I unbuckled my helmet and discovered it had split like a melon.

It took a few hours to put the fall behind us, but we regained our flow as we started up the rock pitches. I quickly sensed this would be one of the best climbs I had ever done. Max bypassed the route's single question mark, the pitch of A3, with a surprisingly moderate 5.10+ variation. Another 5.10 pitch and a sweeping arc over a golden slab put us back on the original route. The climb had exceeded years of building expectations: 2,000 feet of moderate climbing on flawless, gold-plated granite, with reasonable protection and magnificent views.



Holsten follows the third of three new pitches that bypass the A3 overhang on the original line of Burkett's South Pillar. *Max Hasson*

Clicking into cruise control, we raced up the summit tower, each lost in amazement, the never-ending alpenglow of Alaska twilight seeming like a big slice of heaven.



After our free ascent of the Needle we needed a rest day. The skies remained splitter and our spirits high. Climbing without guidebooks, it was exhilarating to imagine lines up castles of rock and ice that we knew nothing about.

At the head of the glacier, to the southeast of Mt. Burkett, a 3,000-foot face of complex ridges and gullies rose to several minor summits. We wanted nothing to do with such faces in mid-June, as tears of boulders and melting ice mourned the exit of spring. But on the right side of the wall a southwest-facing arête of gendarmes and snow patches shot upward. Choosing the safety of the ridge, we crossed the glacier, found an unlikely path through the icefall to the right of the peak, and carefully negotiated a rubbly 5.7X pitch onto the arête.

Steep slabs, fourth-class ground, and 50° snow slopes stretched for a couple of thousand feet; we ditched the ropes and hardware where a ledge would allow us to retrieve them from the glacier during our descent, and we made quick progress up the easy ground above. Alaska always dishes out a little extra, however, and from a false summit we could see that the next 800 feet would be no exception. The terrain was classic: a traverse in the sky at around 5.7, with delicate foot matches in mountain boots and the knife-edge ridge top in our hands. Calling on all of our free-solo experience, we enjoyed a sense of untethered freedom.

At the saddle beyond the summit, we tried to dial in a forecast on our radio. Mt. Burkett and the Needle hovered powerfully in the warm air. Between bites of summer sausage and cheese, we sat back and enjoyed our position, the music of Scotland's Silly Wizard band slipping among the towers and ice slopes around us. Heel-plunging down the backside, we decided on a name: Silly Wizard Peak. Later, we'd name our route the Thriller Arête, a tribute to its airy excitement and to Michael Jackson, who died while we were in the mountains.

The next morning, through the filtered light of a cloudy day, yet another peak begged for my attention: an obvious 3,000-foot fin of granite, directly across the glacier from Burkett, its northwest ridge slicing between steep snow slopes and somber rock walls.

Max emerged from the tent, rubbing puffy eyes. I booted up the stove, and within minutes he was sipping hot, oily coffee. "That peak across from us has a sweet ridge. I can't believe it didn't stand out to me before," I said. Max rummaged for his tobacco amid a heap of drying gear. He twisted up a cigarette before looking at the mountain. Exhaling smoke, he offered,

"Looks cool," and opened a rat-ravaged book he had found in the talus.

"Maybe one more rest day," I thought.



A day later, our psyche was so high that we set out despite deteriorating weather. Gone were the Yosemite skies, but the temperatures were reasonable and we thought we'd just continue upward as long as we could. The approach passed quickly, and after a quick brew we started up snow and mixed climbing that would lead to the spine of granite above. Although the climbing was not difficult, it was subject to significant objective hazards. Both of us clung to a protrusion of polished granite as a bouncing block the size of a TV sent snow sliding evilly around us. When the snow stopped moving, we literally sprinted for safer ground.

Once on the ridge we found solid rock and parallel cracks. The climbing was no harder than 5.8, but tiptoeing in crampons through falling snow and fog kept things interesting. Finally, we could climb no further, even the impenetrable mist unable to disguise our location on the summit. Then, magically, the weather turned and bold beams of sunlight pushed back the angry clouds; rimed towers poked their heads into the pink light of evening. To the southwest, steep ice and rock fell 6,000 feet to the Devil's Cauldron, while across the Burkett Glacier we saw a huge, snaking granite arête splitting the snow climbs on Mt. Burkett's south face. A chord rang within me—the immensity and obvious difficulty of that feature demanded my attention. But for now I forced my eyes toward our descent route via the crevassed western slopes.

A faded green handkerchief on top suggested our route reached a previously climbed summit. However, the mountain was still unnamed (a fact we confirmed after discussing the climb back in Petersburg with Dieter Klose, the Stikine's most inspired and accomplished explorer). When Max suggested we call the peak Mt. Suzanne, I readily agreed. Two years earlier, as we had laid our initial plans to climb in Alaska, I was forced to stay home and scale a different kind of mountain, as my mother, Suzanne, died from ovarian cancer. Although she has left this Earth, I saw her beauty and spirit in that high sunset on Mt. Suzanne, and her guiding hand showing us the way toward a safe descent. Having struggled with my decision to dedicate my life to climbing, I felt at that moment as if she had blessed my choice. Now I was ready to see what Max and I were really capable of. I began to wonder about that huge ridge on Mt. Burkett's south face.



Two days later I was run-out on 5.10, the slammed-shut seams of Mt. Burkett forcing me to believe in my ability rather than my pro. Our single rack of cams seemed inadequate for the steep, steel-gray rock above. Just when I began to wonder about our chance of success, Max found an escape route through a band of loose diorite. Immediately, the angle eased and the terrain allowed us to blast another 1,000 feet up the ridge that evening.

By the time we had eaten, high, thin clouds were lazily swimming up valley. I knew the weather had plans and, sure enough, the next morning those high clouds had transformed into a smothering blanket of moisture. Max was experiencing shooting back pains, and so down



The Thriller Arête follows the right skyline about 3,000 vertical feet to Silly Wizard Peak, one of a cluster of summits east of Mt. Burkett. *Max Hasson*

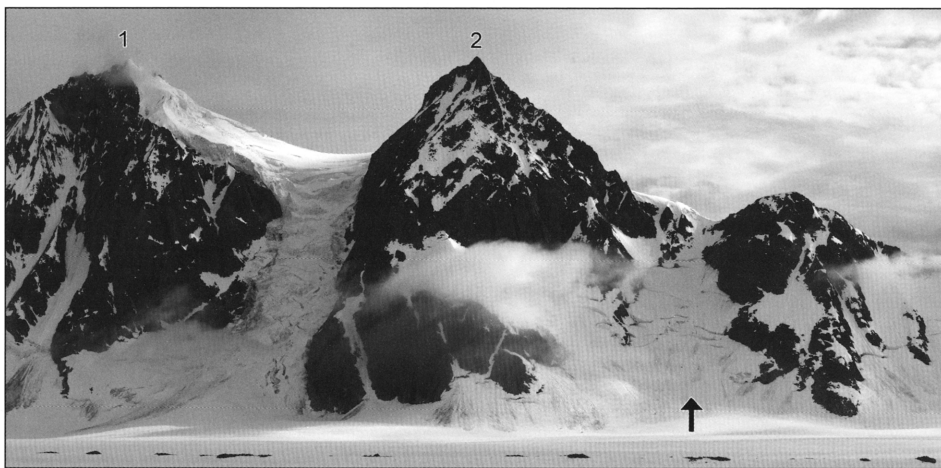
we went, Max wincing at the pain, and me at the double loads I carried. Many tense moments later, we snowshoed toward camp, feeling the weight of defeat more acutely than the sodden ropes we pulled through the snow. Despite all the great climbs we'd already done, this now seemed like the line we had come for.

Two days later, Max was feeling better than ever and the weather had improved. "Should we get up on the ridge again?" he asked. Within seconds I was shoving gear into my pack. Judging by the weather pattern of the last few days, the partly cloudy skies might give way to rain and snow within hours. We needed to use the window of good weather to reclimb the run-out 5.10 of the initial buttress. Above that, our plan was to climb upward regardless of weather.

Aided by the knowledge gleaned from our previous attempt, we passed our highpoint within a few hours, climbing into increasingly poor weather. A sidewalk of spongy moss and alpine flowers led around an enormous tower and onto a snow patch. Max was barely visible in the gloom. Snow, talus, and then blocky steps evolved into a monstrous knife-edge. We crawled carefully across this 800-foot ridge, the consequences of falling equally grotesque for leader and follower. Finally, the precarious shimmy ended against the mountain's upper bowels, tentacle-like couloirs squiggling everywhere. Using nuts and cams, we pinned our tent into an airy position, with steep cliffs on both sides.

We stared at the tent ceiling for two nights, as National Public Radio out of Petersburg kept us entertained. The storm shrieked, the mountain wearing its anger in a coat of rime ice and sugar snow. Closing my eyes that second evening, I accepted the notion of bailing. The food was nearly gone, and fresh snow pressed down on the tent. I slept soundly.

Cold air stung my face as I looked outside well before dawn. "*You won't believe it, man!*" Max sat up and cracked the door to see the stars for himself, rubbed his eyes, and zipped the door again. We readied ourselves to leave our cocoon. I rejoiced in the good fortune of unexpected clear skies, but also knew the suffering they would bring. The air was cold enough to consider frostbite, and the slopes were loaded with fresh snow. We moved humbly and quickly across mixed terrain, steep snow arcing like a bow, and up a couloir glistening with alpine ice.



Summits on the south side of the "Burkett Glacier," opposite Mt. Burkett. (1) Unnamed peak, ca 7,240'. (2) Mt. Suzanne, ca. 7,190'. The Hasson-Holsten route began with the steep glacier to the right of the peak (arrow) and then followed the rocky northwest ridge to the top. *Max Hasson*

Crystalline rime daggers shattered on the rocks as sun touched the upper face. I dragged our heavy rope as quickly as my burning calves would allow.

Topping the couloir brought a sobering view of the massive upper basin. We slipped under crushing ice cliffs, their stability waning in the warming air, and then blasted up never-ending 70° snow slopes toward the summit. Six hundred feet from the top, I dropped my head onto my axe. Saliva fell from a corner of my cracked lips. With no calories to fire up my empty muscles, I tried to scrape together what mental strength I had left. As Max approached I thought of all the friends and family pulling for us. "It's about time I kicked a few steps," he said. I gladly gave up the lead and watched as Max pushed ahead. When the rope came tight, I started moving again, following quickly in his steps. Near the summit, clouds began to spin around us. Through the fog I could barely see Max as he negotiated a tricky mixed step with no pro. I dug my tools deeply in the snow and prayed for my friend above.

"You're on!" Through the swirling clouds I could see Max had made the pointy, whipped-cream summit. I punched my way toward the top and joined him. Icy wind swept up Mt. Burkett's giant north face, but the sun-warmed slopes we had to descend were melting into a dangerous mush. For a few hundred feet, solid bollards facilitated quick retreat, but soon no ice could be found anywhere. More than a few times I gingerly tested an anchor only to have Max yell, "*Stop! That won't work!*" Like a knife through warm butter, our rope cut at every anchor we tried to build. In desperation I began to downclimb toward a vertical ice cliff, resigned to a solo mindset. Then I noticed a ramp that allowed us to slip down and around the cliff, leading us to easier ground.

We had a long, tedious descent ahead, but it was nothing compared to the danger of that last stretch. Racing down the final bowling alley of a couloir and onto the flats of the glacier was sweet release. Fear and anxiety crumbled away, leaving only tired awe.

SUMMARY:

Area: Stikine Ice Cap, Alaska Coast Mountains

Ascents: First free ascent of the 2,500' South Pillar of Burkett Needle (ca 8,500') by a three-pitch 5.10+ variation, June 10, 2009; likely the fourth ascent of the peak. First ascent of Silly Wizard Peak (ca 7,350') via the Thriller Arête (southwest arête, 3,000', 5.7X 50°), June 13, 2009. First ascent of the northwest ridge (3,000', 5.8 M4 60°) of Mt. Suzanne (ca 7,190'), June 16-17, 2009. First ascent of National Public Ridge (direct south ridge, 5,700', 5.10R AI3) on Mt. Burkett (9,730'), June 22-24, 2009. All climbs by Max Hasson and Jens Holsten.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Born in 1982, Jens Holsten has been enjoying the mountains for nearly 20 years, thanks to a father who took his kids on long climbs and hikes in the Cascades rather than to Hawaii or Disneyland. He works at a small, family-owned winery in central Washington when he's not climbing locally or abroad.