

Brady Icefield Expedition 2014

Fairweather Range, SE Alaska

Final Report



South side of Pk 8290ft from the high bowl overlooking the Johns Hopkins glacier. We reached the summit pyramid via the extended southeast ridge on the right skyline, and on the granite top climbed the arête dividing light and shade.

Supported by: Mount Everest Foundation; Canterbury Mountaineering Club

The compiler of this report and the members of the expedition agree that any or all of this report may be copied for the purposes of private research.

Photos and content by Paul Knott except where indicated.

Summary

We were fortunate to make the first ascents of three summits. The most exciting of these was Pk 8290ft, which sports a pyramid of clean granite on its summit.

Our original plan to attempt the east ridge of Mt Crillon was thwarted after heavy snowfall, high winds and unseasonably warm temperatures made the approach to the ridge too avalanche-threatened. Hence, we made a 20km traverse on the Brady Icefield to the area north of Mt Bertha, where we climbed to a col at 6190ft and hence a high bowl overlooking the Johns Hopkins glacier.

On 6 May, we made the first ascents of two snow summits on the south side of the bowl: Pk 7507ft via its snowy northern arête, and Pk 7274ft via its west ridge. The view from these peaks convinced us that the most direct approach to the granite top of Pk 8290ft, the snowy southeast face, was not viable because its ice cliff was too threatening and the face ran with wet slides each afternoon.

Instead, early on 7 May we set off on the 2km-long southeast ridge from a camp by the 6190ft col. We had noted the potential for time-consuming difficulties along this ridge, and beyond Pt 6706ft we found ourselves tackling a series of knife-edge corniced mushrooms and towers. It took us nearly three hours to negotiate a few hundred metres of ridge. Above, easier snow arête took us to the base of the granite pyramid. The only way up this was on steep rock, but the granite was superb, providing secure climbing with juggy holds and plentiful protection. We climbed close to the crest, in three pitches up to about 5.7 or New Zealand grade 15.

In the afternoon warmth, we found the difficulties on the approach ridge transformed from mostly snow to mostly rock. Collapsing cornices, sodden snow and disintegrating rock concentrated our minds and forced us to make two awkward diagonal abseils. Equally, it was hard to ignore the ominous clouds gathering over the ocean south of us. We finally ploughed our way to the tent in mist and light snow at 6:30pm, fearful that any oncoming storm would load the avalanche-prone slopes we still had to descend.

Fortunately, high pressure held off the worst of the weather, and early next morning we post-holed down from the col, finding our footprints obliterated by wet slides. Towards the bottom of the slope, we noticed a huge cone of ice blocks extending out over the glacier, and realised that our stashed snowshoes lay just within the cone. This made the 20km walk back to base camp a distinctly unappealing prospect. Luckily, by the afternoon the weather had cleared and our ski plane pilot, Paul Swanstrom, was able to pick us up directly. After such a vivid experience, the spring shoots, fragrance and birdsong back in Haines were simply exquisite.

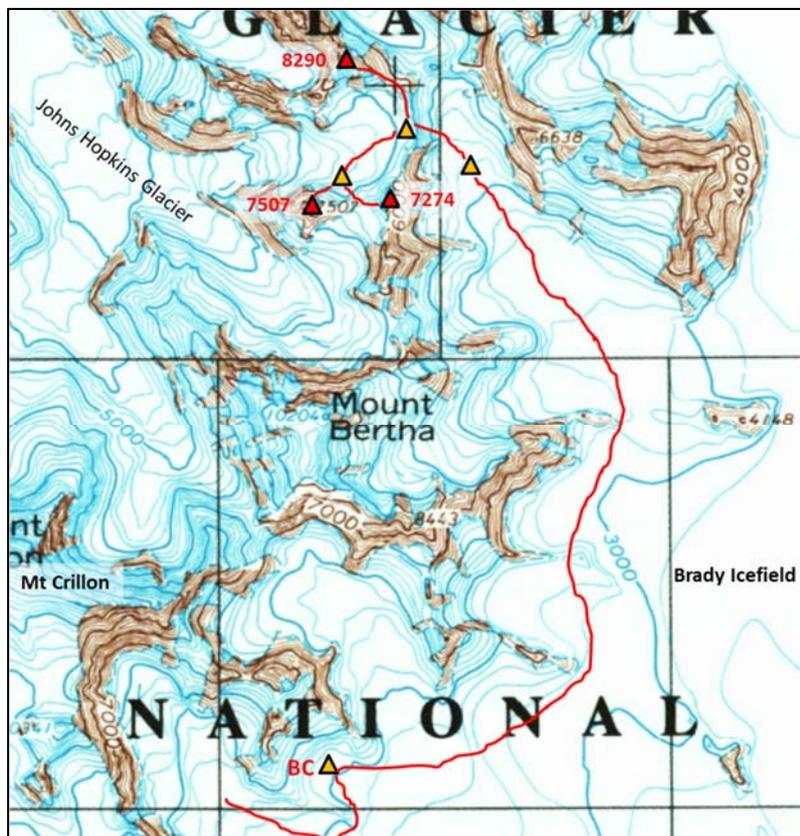
- MEF Reference:** 14/20
- Area visited:** Brady Icefield, Glacier Bay National Park, southeast Alaska.
- Climbers:** Paul Knott, Kieran Parsons.
- Contact:** Paul Knott, College of Business and Law, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch, New Zealand.
Tel: +64 3 364 2941 (work).
EMail: paul.knott@canterbury.ac.nz
- Objectives:** First ascent of the east ridge of Mt Crillon (12,726ft or 3979m).
Secondary objectives – first ascents in Mt Abbe area.

Diary of events

19 April 2014	Fly to Seattle
20 April	Fly Seattle - Juneau; food shopping in Fred Meyer, near Juneau airport.
21 April	Marine Highway Juneau - Haines; buy fuel in Haines; Fly by ski plane to base camp at 3922ft on the Brady glacier.
22 April	Rest at base camp and prepare supplies for climbing.
23-24 April	Abortive attempts to approach Mt Crillon east ridge (detailed below)
25 April - 2 May	First attempt to access Abbe peaks (detailed below)
3 May	Rest at base camp and prepare supplies for climbing.
4-8 May	Access and climbing on Abbe peaks: first ascents of Pks 8290ft, 7507ft, & 7274ft. (detailed below)
8 May	Ski plane flight to Haines
9-10 May	Drying gear and recuperating in Haines
11-12 May	Fly Haines - Juneau - Seattle
17 May	Depart Seattle.

Background to the area

Climbers usually know the Glacier Bay National Park for Mt Fairweather (4663m). However, there is another striking group of peaks further south on the 'west arm' peninsula. South again is the huge expanse of the Brady Icefield. Of these, the most prominent is Mt Crillon (3879m), which rises 2500m from the glaciers below. The scale of Mt Crillon is such that it makes for an imposing view even from the park headquarters at Bartlett Cove, some 50 miles away.



Extract from USGS 1:250k map showing our base camp and climbing routes

Mt Crillon has received three ascents: the Washburn party in 1934 via the south flank, and ascents of the west ridge in 1972 and 1978. All these parties descended by their route of ascent. There have been at least six unsuccessful attempts, including several serious teams (Williams/Faulkner/Haberl 1992 and Pilling/Diedrich 1998) aiming at the north ridge. The north ridge makes a striking sight and arguably represents a 'last great problem' in Alaskan mountaineering.

Mt Crillon has seen no routes originating from the Brady Icefield on its east side. The literature mentions only one attempt on the east ridge, by Loren Adkins and Paul Barnes in 1988. There is no report on this attempt, and it seems likely they did not proceed since they instead climbed two easier (and somewhat distant) summits that season.

Background to the peaks south of Mt Abbe is given in final report MEF 11/20 on Paul's trip to the Hopkins side of this sub-range, and in the associated write-up in the 2012 AAJ. Peak 8290 has received one prior attempt, in June 2009 by the US-based party of Matt Farmer, Dawn Glanc, Kevin Mahoney and Bayard Russell. They approached slopes on the northeast side via the col between the Brady and Gilman glaciers, turning back at 7800ft due to unstable wet snow.

Accessing the Brady Icefield

The Brady Icefield is relatively well travelled by the standards of these mountains. A number of parties have accessed it by kayak or boat via Reid Inlet at its northern end. This appears to be a reliable route with no difficult terrain around the terminus. However, it requires parties to haul loads some distance before reaching the snowline, which in turn is a considerable distance from most of the peaks.

For us, ski plane access was more suitable, because we were keen to use any good weather windows for climbing rather than load hauling. We flew in with Paul Swanstrom of Mountain Flying Service, Haines, who knows this range intimately and provides excellent service. He now operates a Beaver aircraft – in exemplary condition – which has the potential to handle larger parties than ours as well as having a margin of power and sturdiness. We landed and made base camp at 3922ft (but close to the 4000ft contour in terms of position on the map), in a small bay just southeast of Pk 7950ft.

As always, Paul and Amy Swanstrom were fantastic hosts for us in Haines. We travelled to Haines up the Lynn Canal via the Alaska Marine Highway (ferry) after food shopping in Juneau - thus reducing increasingly punitive airline baggage charges. Flying into these mountains depends on fickle weather, but local knowledge and an array of webcams and weather data help mitigate the problem. We flew in late on the same day we arrived in Haines, despite low-pressure weather and significant cloud cover. We were able to return to Haines the day we descended from our climbs. Crucial to the latter was being able to confirm by satellite phone that the visibility had sufficiently improved.

Attempt to access Mt Crillon east ridge

Our initial intention for the morning of 23 April was to set off for the east ridge of Mt Crillon either for a reconnaissance or for a full ascent if conditions permitted. We had packed seven-plus days' of supplies. Our intended route led to a col behind Peak 7950ft, avoiding seracs by climbing close to rock buttresses. Higher on the route, the most likely line traversed east-facing snow below an area of rock, presenting further susceptibility to conditions.

In the event, 23 April dawned cloudy with flat light and oncoming light snow. When conditions cleared on 24th, we took the opportunity to mark waypoints on the approach from base camp around the toe of an intervening ridge to our chosen route. This we did to a height of 3944ft (but close to the 4000ft contour in terms of position). Ahead of us, cloud obscured the route. After obtaining a forecast that these mediocre conditions were likely to continue, we decided it would be more productive to head to the smaller Abbe peaks. As noted below under 'conditions and weather', subsequent conditions prevented us from switching our objective back to Mt Crillon.

First attempt to access Abbe peaks

In light of continuing low pressure and a mediocre forecast, on 25 April we left for an attempt on the mountains south of Mt Abbe. Being smaller than Mt Crillon, these peaks are more amenable to climbing in short or imperfect weather windows. As many climbers do in Alaska, we pulled our packs on plastic sleds. It took us around 8 hours to cover the 20km distance around the east side of Mt Bertha to about 4035ft on a glacier northeast of Mt Bertha. Unfortunately, poor weather confined us to the tent for the four days 26-29 April, during which time snowfall amounted to 1.5m. At one point, we faced burial and had to re-pitch the tent on top. After this, due to deep snow it took us three days to return to base camp. Progress was especially slow on 30 April, as we ploughed a deep trench through breakable crust. Conditions subsequently improved.

Ascents amongst Abbe peaks

On 4 May, we followed our tracks over the 20km or so back around Mt Bertha, this time taking only 6 hours to a slightly higher camp at 4184ft. From here, we continued early on 5 May, stashing our snowshoes and ski sticks before taking a line up and right, below ice cliffs and rocky outcrops and above a series of schrunds, to a 6190ft col and hence a high bowl overlooking the Johns Hopkins glacier basin. This is the same approach as that taken by the 1977 party, the only other to have accessed any of the Abbe peaks from this direction.

On 6 May, we made the first ascents of two snow summits on the south side of the bowl: Pk 7507ft via its snowy northern arête, and Pk 7274ft via its west ridge. The view from these peaks convinced us that the most direct approach to the granite top of Pk 8290ft, the snowy southeast face, was not viable because its ice cliff was too threatening and the face ran with wet slides each afternoon.



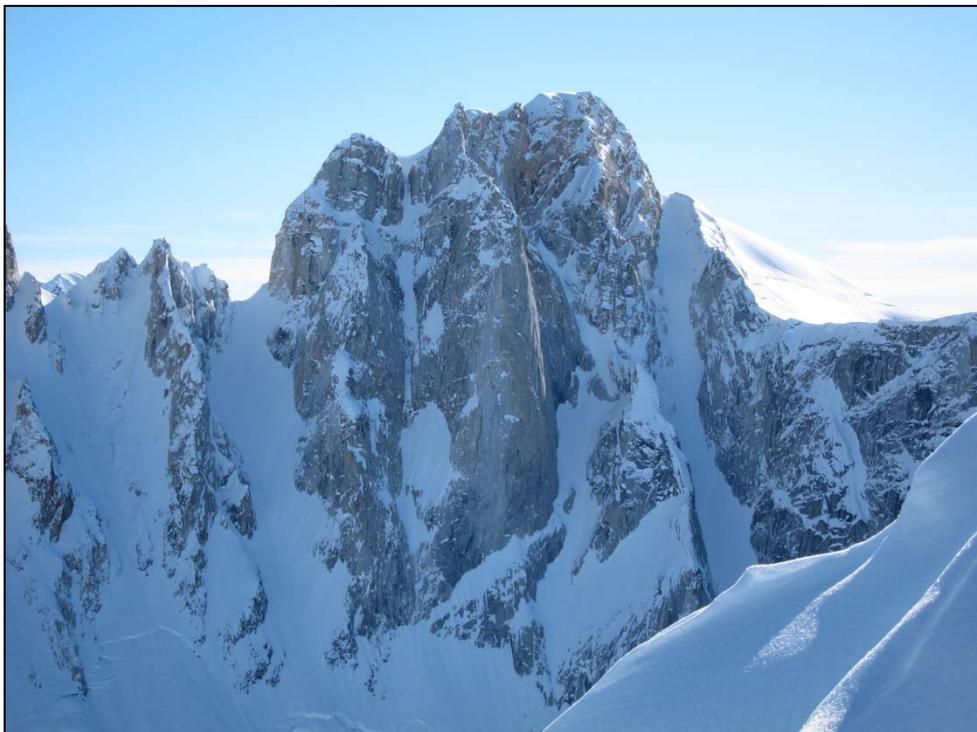
Pk 7274ft (L) and Pk 7507ft (R) from the high bowl overlooking the Johns Hopkins glacier

Instead, early on 7 May we set off on the 2km-long southeast ridge from a camp by the 6190ft col. We had noted the potential for time-consuming difficulties along this ridge, and beyond Pt 6706ft we found ourselves tackling a series of knife-edge corniced mushrooms and towers. It took us nearly three hours to negotiate a few hundred metres of ridge. Above, easier snow arête took us to the base of the granite pyramid at c.8030ft. The only way up this was on steep rock, but the granite was superb, providing secure climbing with juggy holds and plentiful protection. We climbed close to the crest, in three pitches up to about 5.7 or New Zealand grade 15. We descended to the snow arête in four abseils (with one 60m rope).

As we descended in the afternoon warmth, we found the difficulties on the approach ridge transformed from mostly snow to mostly rock. Collapsing cornices, sodden snow and disintegrating rock concentrated our minds and forced us to make two awkward diagonal abseils. Equally, it was hard to ignore the ominous clouds gathering over the ocean south of us. We finally ploughed our way to the tent in mist and light snow at 6:30pm, fearful that any oncoming storm would load the avalanche-prone slopes we still had to descend. Mindful of this possibility, we considered descending later that evening, despite reservations about wet slide-prone snow. Fortunately, the forecast indicated the storm would stay offshore. We descended early next morning, without incident other than finding our snowshoes buried by debris travelling onto the glacier from a huge ice-cliff collapse.

Climbing opportunities in the area

The most striking features in this area are the granite pillars on the west sides of the Abbe peaks. Amazingly, the knot of granite in this area has been virtually untouched since Alan Givler, Dusan Jagersky, Steve Marts and James Wickwire climbed here in 1977. The west side of Pk 8290ft sports a continuous 1500ft pillar, and other summits in the Mt Abbe group sport similar monolithic pillars up to 2500ft in height. If our experience of excellent granite on the summit of Pk 8290 is anything to go by, these pillars could represent outstanding, if serious, unexplored alpine walls.



West face of Peak 8290ft showing one of a number of granite pillars on this side of the Abbe massif

The other obvious target for future parties would be to take a more ski-oriented approach. The peaks on the southeast side of the Brady Icefield would be conducive to such a trip and have likely been visited rather seldom.

Our original objective, the east ridge of Mt Crillon, would require a good settled period because the only apparent approach to the main upper ridge involves avalanche-exposed slopes facing both southeast and northeast. A much longer traverse from the Crillon-Bertha col would avoid these, but involve more sustained exposure on the ridge, including a steep-looking section at the eastern end.

Permits and bureaucracy

There is no permit system for climbing on the Alaskan side of this range. However, we did register our details with the headquarters of the Glacier Bay National Park in Gustavus.

Conditions and weather

The most notable aspect of the weather during this trip is the record high temperatures that prevailed during the period starting 2 May. The temperature in our tent at 4am that morning was 9°C. That day, nearby Yakutat reported a record temperature for the time of year of 73°F (23°C). This period corresponded with building high pressure, which generated unusually high winds across the Brady Icefield. The winds were strong enough that to seriously threaten the integrity of our lightweight mountain tent, and blew plumes of snow across the Crillon plateau. As a result, we were concerned about the potential for wind deposits on the approach to Mt Crillon. The risk seemed heightened by subsequent poor or non-existent night-time freeze, and by the existence of two different-facing threatened areas on our proposed route. Instead, we headed towards the Abbe peaks. This time, we had excellent weather for three days of climbing. Ominous cloud built during 7th, but continuing high pressure held off the worst, and by the afternoon of 8th visibility was sufficient for a ski plane pick-up.

Equipment notes

The following summarises the most notable points about our equipment choices:

- Away from base camp, we used a new Rab Latok Mountain tent, which performed well both in snow burial and in high winds. The eVent fabric was impressively breathable.
- We used an XGK stove away from base camp, which performed flawlessly and continued to be usable in lulls in the heavy snowstorm. The other MSR stove we used at base camp did less well. These stoves are reliable only if operated and maintained as the manufacturer recommends. We used just under 1 gallon (3.78 litres) of white gas over the 17 nights we spent in the mountains.
- We used MSR snowshoes for glacier travel. These provided efficient travel except after heavy snowfall on our journey back to base camp on 30 April - 2 May, when we found ourselves trenching through breakable crust. Skis might have alleviated this to an undetermined extent. Previous experience in this area suggests that snowshoe-supportive crust usually forms quite quickly after heavy spring snowfall.

Environmental notes

We were diligent as always in complying with environmental commitments, including transporting all litter back to Haines for proper disposal, burying human waste deeply in the snowpack, and avoiding the use of marker wands on our travels. The only items we did not take back with us were our snowshoes and ski sticks, which unfortunately were buried under huge ice blocks from a serac collapse, and the abseil slings we used on Pk 8290ft.

During our return to base camp on 1 May, we came across an area of snow at least 10m diameter that had been heavily trampled by geese. Presumably, it had formed a roost for one of the flocks we frequently heard and saw heading north.

Finances

INCOME

	GBP	Totals (GBP)
Mount Everest Foundation	£1650.00	
Canterbury Mountaineering Club	£750.00	
Individual contributions	£3744.48	
Total income		£6144.48

EXPENDITURE

	GBP	Totals (GBP)
Travel		
Seattle return flights from Christchurch	£2500.00	
Alaska Airlines Flights Seattle-Juneau return (incl. ancillaries)	£1091.45	
Seattle airport transfers	£47.04	
Travel Juneau-Haines return	£89.14	
Ski plane flights	£898.30	
Accommodation	£132.64	
Meals and other travel expenses	£217.29	£4975.86
Food and supplies		
Mountain food	£381.03	
Coleman fuel and other supplies	£60.05	£441.08
Insurance	£580.00	£580.00
Other items		
Satellite phone rental and expenses	£147.54	£147.54
Total expenditure		£6144.48

Exchange rates applied: USD/GBP 0.588; NZD/GBP 0.50.