



Beyond the guidebooks

North Cascades, Washington

"No, you shouldn't complain. It's supposed to be cold, wet, and snowy in the Northwest, so quit whining." This was my mantra. I am 37 years old, tired, dripping wet, and struggling up the 5.11 dihedral on *Liberty Crack* on Liberty Bell Spire. "Fletch, it looks like you could knit a sweater with that sewing machine leg," my partner yells up. "Be careful."

Meanwhile, my rain gear isn't passing the field test. Rivulets of ice water run down my armpits and into my shorts. Once again, fun has become work. Sucking wind like the flatlander I am, I finally roll onto a sloping belay ledge and heave off my pack. "Piece of cake," I lie, as I watch the clouds roll away to reveal the jungle-green forests of the North Cascades.

Later at basecamp, I look up past the deep green meadows and the dazzling hanging glaciers, to the magnificent Early Winter Spires backlit by the azure sky. This beautiful alpine setting may explain the local enthusiasm for climbing in the notoriously wet climate of the Pacific Northwest. Indeed, spring finds pale Washingtonians staggering around in woolens, smelling of wood-burning stoves, and sniffing the wind blowing in from the backcountry. These weekend warriors race to the mountains every Friday afternoon to avoid the crowded — and often wet — sport climbing areas.

My comrades and I, who fall into this pale category, have put together a list of our favorite discoveries in the Washington Pass area of the North Cascades. They are all well-protected, easily-accessible climbs, perfect for a weekend excursion. The approach to each will give you a sense of adventure as you pass the thickets of alder and devils club common to the jungles of the North-

west. But you'll be rewarded with sound rock, spectacular views, and new routes that have only begun to be tapped.

The approach to *Four Sheets to the Wind* (V 5.8+) leads you through deep forests and verdant meadows in hanging valleys with vertical granite walls leading to rugged peaks. The route traverses four such peaks just north of Washington Pass, working its way from the Molar Tooth, to North Peak, to Cutthroat Peak, and finally to Whistler Peak.

The idea to climb all four in one trip began as a bet between several buccaneers and me as to whether it could be done. Several beers later, the route's name was clinched as we left our drinks behind to go do it. The route is really one big ridge climb, on coarse granite, often steep, with vertical jointing providing ample handholds and protection — even some of the steep sections can be simul-climbed. The rock is sound where it needs to be, on the technical sections, and the ridges, though often of poor quality rock, provide wild exposure. Though this is a long climb, there are many bail-off opportunities, making this a relatively non-committing Grade V.

From the base of the Tooth, climb the north ridge on sound rock for two or three pitches (5.7 with a short 5.8 layback) to the summit. From the south end, work southwest down a shoulder to an 80-foot rappel that meets a ridge running south toward North Peak. Hike this scenic ridge (up to fourth class) to the north face of North Peak, and ascend the talus-filled couloir to a left-slanting ramp.

Work left up the ramp (fourth class) past a huge cave called the Brig. Then, climb up and around a corner to the peak's east face. Cross a couloir and ascend the left side on steep, sound rock (up to 5.6, four pitches)

to the east summit. Traverse to the north face of the true summit along a wildly exposed ridge called the Gangplank. The 40-foot-long knifeblade formation can be hand traversed, or walked if it isn't too windy and you're feeling bold. Continue traversing below the summit on a sloping ledge until you encounter a steep rock face at the true summit. Face climb (5.8) up and slightly left on clean granite for about 85 feet to the top of North Peak.

Rappel the same face one rope length to a horizontal ledge, and traverse 100 feet west to a ridge with a platform perched above an easy chimney. Descend the chimney (third and fourth class) and work south again toward the north ridge of Cutthroat. The ridge begins at a deep notch, and after a cruxy 50-foot layback (5.7 to 5.8), it continues on easy, clean rock to the top. From Cutthroat's summit, descend the *West Ridge* (fourth class), to Whistler. An easy half-mile traverse puts you at a notch below the north ridge of Whistler, and four pitches of third and fourth class later, you're on the summit. Walk off the west flank back to the road at Rainy Pass.

In addition to providing a good ridge climb, the Molar Tooth sports several steep, long routes on its 1000-foot vertical east face. Though only 300 feet lower than popular Cutthroat Peak, its obscurity and intimidating look may account for its low mountaineering traffic. The original route is the Northeast Ridge, an airy climb done by Alex Bertulis in the early 1970s, but the Tooth didn't see new routes until 1991 when the *North Ridge* (continued on page 46)

Early Winter Spires, North Cascades, Washington; Glacier Peak and Dome Peak are the prominent mountains in the distance.

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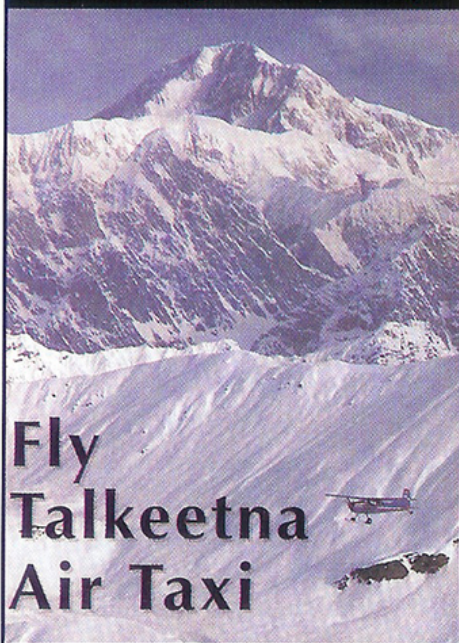


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(5.8), *Issue 119* (5.7), and the *Linear Accelerator* (Grade II 5.9) — all fine, well protected routes — were added.

All routes are doable from the road in a casual day. Although all three new climbs are aesthetic, perhaps the most interesting is the *Linear Accelerator*, a perennial ice climb in a steep, 600-foot couloir splitting the left side of the east face. This route isn't visible until you are almost on top of Cutthroat Pass. You can imagine our surprise when, in late August, we found an ice route (65 degrees at its steepest point) that we had never heard about.

Begin at the obvious chimney on the left side of the face and climb up to a notch. The climb is so shadowed that the ice stays hard most of the day. The ice climbing ends at the notch; begin rock climbing on south face to your left. Follow a crack and dihedral system (5.7) for 100 feet, aiming for a lone pine tree. Pitch two follows a discontinuous crack system to a wide chimney (5.9). The last pitch follows a 5.6 chimney to the summit. To descend, do three 70-foot rappels down the North Ridge route.

Silver Star looks like an immense sculpted castle of granodiorite. Besides being a geological wonder, it is a rock climber's dream, with solid, vertical spires and fins. The 1200-foot Northeast Ridge (III 5.9) of the west peak is reminiscent of the Bugaboos, with a scenic glacier approach followed by long, moderate rock climbing.

Approach via the Silver Star Glacier route. The climbing begins 50 feet to the right of the ridge toe, on easy blocks and crack systems in a clean gully. On your left you will notice an aesthetic system of hand and finger cracks. Follow these, aiming for a large flake below an awkward 5.8 chimney. Then, work up an easy, discontinuous crack system aiming for a saddle below a headwall. As you straddle the ridge, your palms may begin to sweat at the prospect of the gently overhanging bombay chimney to the left.

Snort and curse your way up the chimney (hard 5.8, but protectable with a #4 Camalot) until you gain the more reasonable finger crack inside the chimney. An exposed rising traverse with another short chimney finds a large ledge two lanes wide — the "I-5 Corridor." To the right, an improbable finger traverse leads to the spacious summit area. An easy fourth-class romp follows the ridge to the West Peak summit.

Descend from the top of pitch nine, and do two 85-foot rappels to the glacier. The first ascent took 14 hours.

If you're looking for a more challenging

day, on your way back from Silver Star you can climb the three-pitch route on Vasiliki Tower, one of the nine interesting towers strung out to the north of Silver Star. The South Face Direct (5.9), though short, is an aesthetic and well-protected crack climb. The rock is solid, and often fine-grained, with many positive handholds. The route begins at the col between Vasiliki and Bergundy Spires.

Begin from the col bivy sites with Class 4 or 5 scrambling leading to the right-facing dihedral system on the south face. Instead of following the normal dihedral route, step left into easy fifth-class crack systems and up to a single hand crack (5.7), which narrows to fingers (5.8+). Belay where the crack pinches to a seam. The second pitch begins with a 15-foot traverse left (the 5.9 crux) then heads up to a widening hand crack. Follow the crack system right (5.7) aiming for a large dihedral. Follow its crack (5.7) to the top.

The summit offers unique views of the spires and breathtaking views of the Silver Star Creek basin. To descend, rappel just right of the ascent route.

Of all the ranges in the Washington Pass area, none captures the imagination quite like the five peaks of the Early Winter Spires. Their 1000-foot faces are plainly visible from the hairpin turn just east of Washington Pass. Steep, sound granite, long vertical crack systems, and an accessible alpine setting explain the popularity of the Early Winter Spires. The most popular climbs are the Southwest Face (II 5.6) on Liberty Bell Spire and the *Liberty Crack* (V 5.9 A2 or 5.13b) also on Liberty Bell, but two more routes of similar quality — the recently freed West Face (III 5.11) on North Early Winter Spire and Direct East Buttress (V 5.11) on South Early Winter Spire — are less crowded alternatives to the older routes.

The Direct East Buttress was first climbed by Fred Becky and Doug Leen in a three-day push. The exposure is exceptional and the direct line lacks the route-finding difficulties of nearby circuitous routes. The route begins just left of the base of the east buttress. The first two pitches (up to 5.8) aim for a left-facing dihedral just left of the crest. The next two pitches (5.9+) follow the corner to a large triangular ledge. The fifth pitch involves 5.8 moves up, then a bolt ladder (5.11) to the ridge crest. Continue up a short flake, past several bolts and through a thin crack (5.9) to a small belay ledge. The sixth pitch continues up a crack (5.8) to a large sloping ledge. Pitch seven follows a second bolt ladder (5.11). Pitch eight (5.6) finds a sandy ledge. The last pitch begins on the right side of the ledge and angles left (5.6) to the summit scramble.

— Fletcher Taylor