

2011 Mount Baker's North Ridge

Hey All,

I'm back in Washington State for work during the Congressional recess, and the weekend before last I managed to work in a quick, two-day climb of Mount Baker's North Ridge. Two months ago I was out here for a week-long ice climbing course that was to include an ascent of Baker's North Ridge, but unfortunately we didn't have a weather window to even attempt the summit, so this was my return attempt. I hired a guide with the American Alpine Institute for a private, one-on-one climb. Baker stands at 10,781 feet above sea-level and is the second most heavily glaciated peak in the lower 48. The North Ridge lived up to its reputation, and proved to be an amazing climb, involving monster crevasses, circuitous route-finding across the Coleman on our traverse, some rocky-volcanic scree, 50-degree snow slopes, and the crux of the route is a couple pitches of 60-70 degree ice at 9,500 feet. With a 5,000 foot summit day and an immediate hike out, it was certainly the most strenuous climb I've done yet, while also undoubtedly being the most amazing and exhilarating climb as well.

August 20th

I met up with my guide, Dustin Byrne, at the AAI shop in Bellingham, WA at 7am. There was a large group getting ready to go out, so we went upstairs to get things situated and go through my pack and the gear list. We went through everything and he pointed out a few things I could get away with leaving behind for the two-day ascent in order to save some weight. The drive from Bellingham to the trailhead is about an hour and half, and after getting a few things situated we set off on the trail at about 10am. The Heliotrope Trail is also the approach for the Coleman-Deming route, the most popular route to the summit, and is located at 3,600 feet above sea level. The trail was entirely melted out, so I opted to strap my boots to my pack and hike in wearing my trail runners. The lack of snow was a welcomed change from my last two climbs in the Northwest (Baker in June, and Rainier in July) which were both snow covered from the get-go. The hike up to the Hogsback Camp was pretty leisurely, with a few rock hop river crossings, and a nice grade with a number of switchbacks. We stopped for a quick break at one point but the bugs were so bad that we just decided to continue on. Just as you start to break out of the tree line, you hit the climber's trail, which is a fairly steep, rocky, and loose trail. The total hike in was about 2 miles, 2,000 vertical feet, and took about 2 hours. We arrived just before noon to find a number of choice flat camp sites scattered around at about 5,700 ft. (our early departure gave us a jump start on the crowds coming up from Seattle).

After setting up our tents (we both had our own tents, cooking gear, etc), we set out on an adjacent snowfield in order to do some skills review. This was my first time climbing with Dustin, so I think it was more of a way to assess skill level and experience and ensure that I'm up to par for the route. We also went over the crevasse rescue technique/system he prefers, which was great because it was the same method the guys at IMG showed me on the Rainier climb. The guides at IMG didn't know a name for it, but that it's the method they employ for guiding and that you won't find it in a book, while Dustin referred to it as the Canadian Drop C. Not sure what it is officially, or if it is indeed in a book, but it is definitely a quicker and easier way to get to a simple 2:1 pulley, which you can then beef up. Anyways, at about 3pm we wrapped up, headed back to camp and then lounged around and napped. I set my alarm for 6pm so I could get up and have some dinner and we could go over logistics for the morning. There were two other parties at the Hogsback planning to ascend via the North Ridge in the morning so they all got together and coordinated staggered departure times to minimize any bottleneaking while on the route. Dustin and I were set to go in the middle slot and were planning to wake up at 2:30am, half an hour after the other two-man team lead by Forest McBrian with Pro Guiding Service. After dinner and gathering food and gear for the summit attempt, I was back in bed by 7:30pm. There was a pretty decent wind throughout the night, and my tent fly was making a somewhat annoying and consistent fluttering noise, but my earplugs helped and I was soon asleep, and actually slept pretty solidly throughout the night.

August 21st

My watch alarm went off at 2:30 that morning, and while I had a good seven hours of sleep (plus some light napping earlier that afternoon), I was still somewhat groggy. I opened the tent fly and got the JetBoil going for morning coffee, while I ate a quick Bobo's Oat Bar for breakfast and readied the remainder of my gear. We were roped up and on our way at 3:30am. Initially we set off on a gradual ascent to about 6,700 feet where we began our traverse of the mountain to the east. We had to cross the Coleman glacier which is wildly jumbled further down below, and was heavily crevassed at our elevation. We had to step over, end run, and weave our way around some pretty huge crevasses in the dark of night. At some point in our traverse we heard a big serac fall tumbling down the upper mountain. Within a few hours we approached the base of the hour glass, a steep snow section, which initially required some finagling around a large moat at the base before ascending the steep snow gully and then crossing over a section of loose volcanic rock. In the light of day we saw a pretty huge serac collapse on the upper Coleman, with the ice pouring over a cliff face. It was an impressive and humbling sight. We continued our ascent, gradually gaining on the party in front of us. We waited at the base of a steep snow pitch for the party of two ahead of us as they set out on the first ice pitch. After a brief wait and a good opportunity to eat, hydrate, and layer up, Dustin pitched out the steep snow section and we arrived at the base of the ice around 9,500 feet. I got him on belay and he set out with a short traverse to the left and then out of sight for the full rope length. The wind had picked up by this time and made it a little difficult to hear, but in the end communication wasn't too bad.

It had been two months since the last (and first) time I had climbed ice, and by this point in the day we had already climbed almost 4,000 feet, made a long traverse, and been going for four to five hours. I could definitely already feel it in my legs, so I was a little nervous setting out. First pitch: short traverse to the left around the corner and then up some 60-70 degree alpine ice. Didn't have any problems getting good purchase with each swing of my Black Diamond Cobras, but the feet need a little work. I don't have enough experience to speak with any authority on the varying qualities of ice, but obviously it isn't waterfall ice, and I'd find my crampon points skate occasionally on some crummier sections. The exposure here was pretty huge. While we approached from a steep snow ridge, the side we traversed to essentially just dropped off a few thousand feet with super steep ice down to the Roosevelt Glacier. A pretty exhilarating sight, but I mostly kept myself focused on each kick and each swing above me. Dustin placed relatively few ice screws, perhaps two or three, but I enjoyed cleaning each piece for the brief break it provided. I arrived at a nice belay ledge where Dustin was and we quickly transitioned back to belaying him and he was on his way. He pitched out another full rope length, and at a slightly quicker pace than the first pitch it seemed. This second ice pitch was much like the first, but it was more of direct shot without any traverses. Still 60-70 degree ice, and nothing significantly different, although my right leg started cramping up, which was very annoying. After the second pitch, the slope began to mellow. I think we had an additional two or three pitches of steep snow or neve, and a couple ice patches here and there, traveling most of it in mid-dagger position. The slope finally mellowed enough to go back to regular glacier travel and we had to navigate some pretty huge crevasses below the summit plateau. Finally, at a little after eleven, almost seven hours after leaving camp, we arrived at the broad summit plateau and made the hike across to the small mound that makes up the true summit (10,781). There were two other guys on top when we arrived on the plateau (I'm guessing the guys before us on the North Ridge) but they set off on the descent as we approached. The true summit was even windier than the plateau (which is odd, because it's only a small 30 foot tall mound or so) with sustained winds of maybe 30mph? We snapped a few quick pictures and briefly enjoyed the views of Mount Shuksan, Glacier Peak, Mount Rainier, the Puget Sound, and then quickly set off via the standard approach, the Coleman-Deming by 11:30 am. The trickiest portion of the descent is right of the bat when you head down the Roman Wall. You hit the saddle between Baker and Colfax Peak before too long and then you just follow the mellow boot pack down. We hit one more steep downhill section right above camp and the snow had softened considerably by this time and at that elevation... My crampons kept balling up (Black Diamond Cyborgs) and I went down on my butt twice. Taking off the crampons at that point was much better for that last little stretch.

We made it back to camp two hours after leaving the summit and I was pretty beat at this point. It would have been nice to crawl into my tent for a short nap, but instead we started packing up immediately, with the goal of leaving camp again in half an hour. It took me a little longer than that to break camp, and fiddle with my new backpack. I used my CiloGear 60L pack for the first time, and it was an awesome, awesome pack. It was a little too big for a quick two-day ascent, and if I were a rich man I would also get the 45L pack, which would have been ideal. But the ingenious part of the CiloGear packs are the versatility of the straps. I had removed the foam pad, aluminium stay, and brain on the pack for the summit

attempt, while also scrunching it down to a minimal carrying capacity, and had to reset all of this to carry a large load again, and also change back into my trail runners. For some reason I got a third or fourth wind as we set out, and we hiked out super fast. Made it back to the car at 3:30, exactly 12 hours after we set out from camp.

All-in-all a really, really great trip. Coolest climb that I've done to date, and I really enjoyed the challenge, the variability in terrain, and the views. I wish I had been in a little better shape, this climb was kind of an impulse trip that I signed up for the week beforehand... I hadn't been climbing, running, backpacking or working out whatsoever since my Rainier trip last month, so I wasn't at the top of my game, and could have been in a little better shape. But I made it. It was great to get to the summit (I had been 0/2 in the Cascades this year), even if I've been to that summit before, this was a whole new route and a big step up from the Easton Glacier route I did last year.

Gear likes: CiloGear 60L pack - just an amazingly well designed pack for mountaineering. JetBoil Sol Ti - Doesn't get much better. Feathered Friends Jackorack - this is the best little windshirt ever, and has become such a go to piece in my wardrobe. Patagonia Nano Puff Pullover - sweet insulating layer, and proved to be the only insulation I needed for these conditions. Black Diamond Cobras - great axes for the vertical stuff, although not as handy for regular glacier travel. Honestly no gear dislikes or big problems this trip, I kept things pretty minimal... I'm not sure of my final pack weight with group gear, food, water, etc -- but I think my personal gear base weight was around 26lbs.

More photos and details are available at <http://www.desktodirtbag.com/mount-baker-north-ridge/>