**Stikine Icefield 2018 – Unnamed First Ascents Attempts**

**Alaska Mountain Women**

***Beth Loudon, Julie Tullis Memorial Award***

*I would like to extend a significant thank you to the British Mountaineering Council for their support of our expedition. While we were not able to achieve our initial objectives, we were thankful to have had such a significant and transformative experience in the Alaskan Wilderness. We were met with a series humbling challenges while in the field – freestanding serac walls, avalanches, and poor weather conditions. Yet all members of the group remained safe, calm, and logical, as past experience informed respect for the magnitude and power of the mountains. I look forward to many more adventures with the British Mountaineering Council community. I am ever thankful.*

Alaska Mountain Women was an all female 21.04 mile ski mountaineering climbing

project with two first ascents objectives (UTM coordinates 0662272E 6327803N and 0659830E

6316386N) of unnamed, unclimbed peaks on the remote Stikine Icefield in Southeast Alaska.

The route incorporated snow covered glacial travel, icefall navigation, and travel on steeper

30-50 degree slopes. The goal of the climb was to cultivate a strong community of local women

dedicated to challenging and educating others and ourselves about alpine glacial

mountaineering and remote mountains. We shared our story and planning process along the

way in hopes to spark a desire for exploration amongst other outdoor enthusiasts.

To prepare for the expedition the team members met bi-weekly since October 2017.

One meeting was dedicated to route planning, fundraising, outreach, logistics, and grant

writing. The other meeting’s purpose was to review skills such as knot/rope handling, building

anchors, belaying, fixed rope ascension, ski travel communication on a rope team, ascending a

fixed rope, 2:1 and 3:1 crevasse rescue systems, self arresting, technical movement on snow

and ice, snow step-kicking, rope snow travel management in crevasse terrain, route finding on

glacier, snow protection, probing techniques, avalanche knowledge, crampon technique,

transceiver use, off-trail navigation, and map reading. All expedition members were required to

have a current Wilderness First Responder certification, have taken an Avalanche I course, have

at least one winter of backcountry skiing experience, and at least one summer season of snow

covered glacial travel experience. The skills practice, mandatory prior experience, individual

certifications, along with the group planning meetings tremendously contributed the

expedition’s overall success. In the seven months leading up to the trip, the group learned how

to work together for a common goal, practiced skills, read incident reports, and learned from

each other’s diverse backgrounds and skill sets.

The expedition occurred between April 30th, 2018 to May 8th, 2018 with Beth Loudon

(Mountaineering Fellowship grant recipient), Hannah Rosenkrans, Rebekah King, Mary

Gianotti, Katie McCaffrey, and Auri Clark. The group ferried to Petersburg from Juneau on the

morning of April 30th. The original plan was to fly onto the Stikine Icefield that day if the

weather permitted. Weather was not permitting until the afternoon of May 2nd.

Poor weather conditions on the helicopter flights over caused the helicopter to land at

an unplanned location on the East Fork of the Patterson Glacier, seven miles to the west of

where we had originally planned to be dropped off on a medial moraine right above the

exposed blue ice of a lower icefall (coordinates 56 57ˈ35. 98ˈN, 132 32ˈ36. 98ˈ W at 2380

feet of elevation). Limited visibility prevented the helicopter pilot from landing above the

second snow covered icefall or from flying close enough to determine if there was a potential

route through it. That night the group camped at the drop off location.



*Our first camp and drop off location. Photo by Beth Loudon.*

The next day the group skied roughly 2.5 miles up glacier to a camp in the middle of the

snow covered glacier approximately a quarter mile from the base of the snow covered icefall at

coordinates 56 57ˈ13. 35ˈN, 132 28ˈ59. 30ˈ W at 3230 feet elevation.

*Photo of the snow covered icefall, taken from our second camp. Photo by Beth Loudon.*

The next three days were spent base camping at the second campsite and attempting to

scout a route on the icefall. Each day two members of the expedition would stay in camp in

case of emergency and a rope team of four members would search for a route. Both the

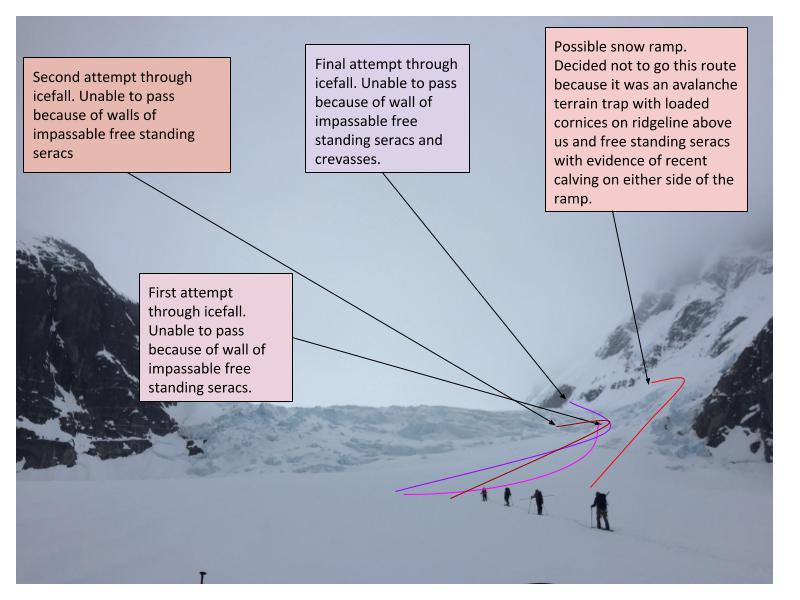
members in camp and the members scouting the icefall had emergency communication

devices- either a satellite phone or an InReach. Additionally, one member of the rope team had

a beacon on. We did not have everyone on the rope team turn their beacon on because of the

rope team. The first two days navigating the icefall were 30-40 F temperature days in rainy

snowy white out conditions.

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*Diagram of three days of scouting a route through the icefall. Photo by Auri Clark.*

Looking at the icefall from camp, there appeared to be two snow ramps on the south

side of the icefall that looked like they could go. When closer to icefall, the group realized that

the ramp farthest south was beneath loaded cornices, several free standing serac walls with

recent calving activity, and additionally was on a slope of over 30 degrees. Because of these high

risk factors, the team decided to not attempt the farthest south snow ramp and decided to focus

on a route through the other southern snow ramp. Each day the group made it closer up the

icefall. First day the team traveled ~75% up the icefall, the second day ~80% up the icefall, and

the final day the group traveled ~90% up the icefall. However, each scout ended because of

the inability to get through free-standing seracs and deep crevasses.

On the final day of icefall navigation, the weather increased drastically overnight to over

60 F with blue skies. This quick change in temperature after several days of wet heavy snow

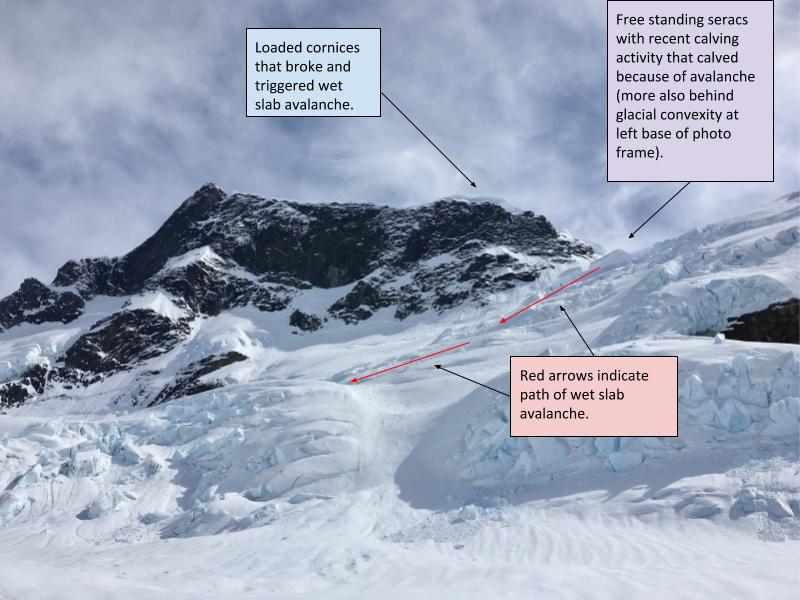
loading caused the snowpack to become unstable. A loaded cornice on the ridge to our south

broke. The avalanche cascaded down to several free standing serac walls. The snow caused the

serac walls to collapse and begin moving towards the rope team. The avalanche stopped roughly

50 meters away from the rope team. The rope team was outside of the terrain trap and too far

north to be affected by that particular avalanche.

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*Diagram of wet slab avalanche that occurred on the north facing slope directly south of the*

*snow covered icefall on the east fork of the Patterson Glacier. Photo by Auri Clark.*

However, after the close encounter with the avalanche, the group decided to be back to camp.

The camp was situated over 100 meters west of the icefall in the center of the snow covered

glacier on a less than five degree slope. The campsite was in a safe zone from avalanches. After

the day of bluebird weather the team accessed the weather forecast. The weather was

forecasted to have another two days of flyable helicopter weather until another storm system

moved in. The storm system moving in was predicted to be in the area for over a week. Because

of uncertainty of how long the storm system was going to last, the expedition decided to have

the helicopter pilot fly us out while we still had the weather window. The following morning the

crew skied back to the original helicopter drop off spot. The next afternoon the pilot came to

pick the group up.

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*Ski back to the original helicopter drop off point. Photo by Beth Loudon.*

Because of the high avalanche risk, poor weather conditions, and impassable icefall we

were unable to reach our original starting point of the traverse or find another way to reach the

desired peaks. Even though our initial objects were not achieved, it was incredible to be able to

challenge ourselves, alongside other individuals who have a love of Alaska.

Everyone on the expedition pushed themselves, while simultaneously respecting the power of

The mountains. When the mountains speak it is important to listen. One of the biggest lessons

one can learn from the mountains is how to allow yourself to be humbled by them.