

PAUL KNOTT

Fairweather Friends

Blue skies exploring in Alaska

The Fairweather range is one that climbers often pass on their way to more frequented mountains. I did just that on my first visit to south-east Alaska in 1993, but from the summit of Mt Augusta the distant view of Mt Fairweather somehow left a lasting impression. Despite this, for more than 15 years this compact range remained a remote prospect as I struggled to persuade first myself, then a suitable climbing partner, to brave its notorious maritime storms. The potential for prolonged storms makes climbing here a high-commitment activity, as the mountains can only be reached by ski plane or by undertaking sea-to-summit adventures.



81. Paul Swannstrom (left) and Paul Knott arrive at base camp on the west shoulder of Mt Abbe. (Paul Knott collection)

When I looked for suitable unclimbed objectives in the range, it didn't take long to find the striking north ridge of Mt Crillon (3879m). This summit stands proud in the west arm of Glacier Bay, well south of the main Fairweather massif. It was the venue for two of Brad Washburn's early exploits in 1933 and 1934, which culminated in its first ascent. Amazingly, the 1934 route has yet to be repeated, and the only additional route on Mt Crillon is



82. Above: Mt Bertha from the descent to the Johns Hopkins glacier. The north-west ridge faces the camera, dividing light and shade.

83. Below: Pre-summit plateau of Mt Bertha at sunrise on summit day, looking towards Mt Fairweather. (Paul Knott)



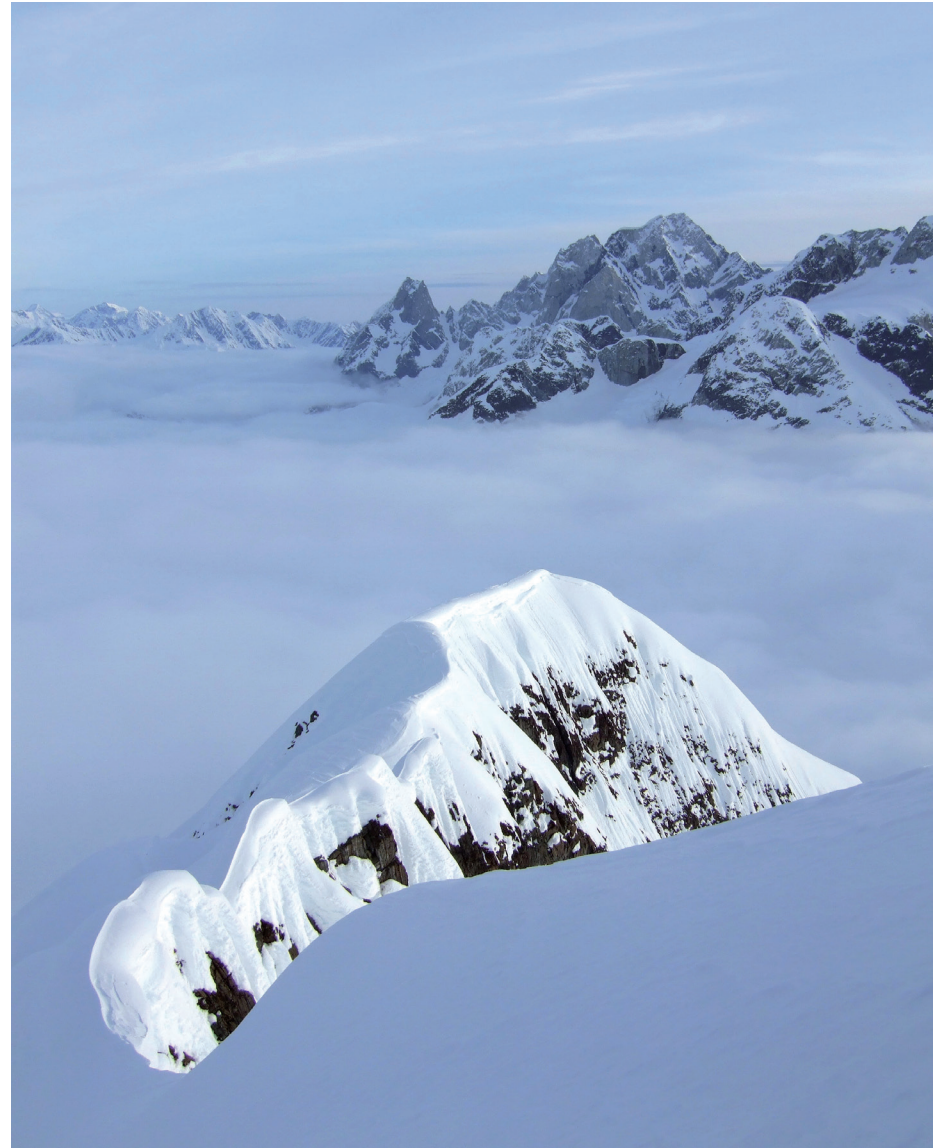
the west ridge. A number of parties had attempted the north ridge, but had either been unable to get near it or had retreated low down. What potentially gave us a good chance was an offer by Haines-based ski plane pilot Paul Swanstrom to land us inside the Johns Hopkins glacier basin, which looked from maps and photos to provide more promising access. I became rather excited about this possibility when it became apparent that despite being one of the major glaciers of the west arm of Glacier Bay, the Johns Hopkins was essentially unexplored from a climbing perspective.

Guy McKinnon and I arrived in Haines in mid-April 2009. This is early in the season, and snow lay around the town and even on the beach in places. Amazingly, the weather maps promised prolonged stable conditions, and after a couple of days a crisp and calm morning created a great sense of anticipation. The next couple of hours would be crucial to where we could land and what we could climb.

As Mt Crillon emerged from the haze, my fears about the descent ridge were realised as a series of large séracs loomed up. At least one of these looked as though it would have to be tackled directly, and made a fearsome sight when we flew past at close range. Equally concerning was the lower access to both the route and descent ridges, which featured an icefall with at best only a tortuous way through. The ridge, too, looked sporting, with a rocky crux high up and avalanche-prone lower slopes linked by a sustained corniced section. A back-up plan was needed, and fortunately the long and unclimbed northwest ridge of Mt Bertha presented itself as a more accessible option. But only if we could land in the Hopkins basin. The options for this are limited as the upper névés are very broken and the lower glacier undulates and is prone to melting out. Instead, Paul (our pilot) had scoped out the possibility of landing on the west shoulder of Mt Abbe. As well as being a rather inconvenient 650m above the glacier, this felt like a small target as Paul scoped out the landing. It was cause for celebration for all of us as we set down on this elusive prize.

Our elevated campsite formed a superb vantage point. The main Fairweather massif was surprisingly close, with Mts Quincy Adams, Fairweather, Salisbury and Lituya set out before us. Below to the north was the Johns Hopkins Inlet, a popular destination for tour boats. Despite its proximity, several parties, including the teams of Wickwire/Givler/Jagersky/Marts in 1977 and Haberl/Haberl/Mair/Blackwell in 1983, had found that it does not provide access to the main glacier, which is very broken below about 300m. Only on the far side of Mt Abbe has a team climbed from the Inlet, namely Walter Gove and Bill Pilling on their 1991 ascent of Mt Abbe via the Gillman glacier. Opposite us lay the cirque formed by the north sides of Mts Bertha and Crillon, and this too had previously eluded attempts at access, not only from the Inlet but also via cols between Mts Abbe and Bertha. For us, these difficulties were now all but circumvented.

Keen to take advantage of the stable weather forecast, we prepared ourselves to tackle the north-west ridge of Mt Bertha (3110m). Our first challenge was to find our way onto the main glacier. From the air, we had



84. Summit and rock spires of Mt Abbe from 6300ft on the north-west ridge of Mt Bertha. (Paul Knott)

spotted a crucial snow ramp through a lower set of bluffs, but the convex slopes hid it from view. Once we found it, the ramp was straightforward, but below us on the glacier loomed a crevassed area we had to cross. This took on added significance due to the low elevation of 650m and our reliance on snow bridges. Reaching the benign-looking glacier beyond represented something of a milestone.

A short distance up the glacier, we crossed a distinct set of bear prints. Apparently the bears have found an access route, even if people cannot.

As we continued towards Mt Bertha, views unfolded of a series of steep, monolithic rock pillars on the south and west sides of the Mt Abbe chain. This light-coloured, featured granite was completely unlike the dark, poor rock we saw elsewhere. The 1977 Wickwire party climbed this side of Mt Abbe and the striking rocky peaks to the south-east, having approached from the Brady glacier via two linked cols. As with many other potential climbs in this area, access may be a problem as the hanging glacier below these peaks looks quite broken. The 1977 route to the north summit of Mt Abbe looked as if it might no longer be viable.

At the base of Mt Bertha, we navigated around a crevassed area and camped. Above us was an undulating four miles of ridge rising 2165m to the summit. This was soon to become a trial of stamina as we found ourselves first wallowing in unconsolidated winter powder, and then breaking through melt-freeze crust. The 900m of height we gained that day was a struggle, and our camp seemed low on the mountain with much unseen ground above. We were travelling light on food, and the next day would be crucial to the attempt. It was a beautiful morning with an inversion, and we quickly crossed a 'schrund, regained the ridge, and topped a fore-summit. At last it felt as though we had left behind the lower slopes and were tackling the upper mountain. Still, the long ridge ahead of us was an intimidating sight as it sharpened and I feared narrow cornices and awkward drop-offs would slow our progress. As we continued, these typical south-east Alaskan features added interest, but not technicality, and sustained trail-breaking from Guy late in the day took us through compressible wind deposits to a camp high on the upper snow dome. With only the final cone to negotiate, we reached the summit on our fourth climbing day, 26 April. The view over to the south was exquisite, as the sun glinted on the expansive Brady icecap and the ocean beyond. The contrast was striking with the narrow valleys and mixed alpine faces of the Mt Fairweather group to the north. We were the fifth party to stand on this summit, the first being Bradford Washburn's party in 1940. All the previous ascents had been from the Brady glacier to the east. Having virtually exhausted our supplies, we descended rapidly, retracing our steps. Towards the base of the ridge, we found that the winter powder on the shady side had turned into deep slush.

After two days refuelling our bodies at base camp, we were spurred into action by a forecast promising several more days of stable weather. This gave us time to tackle the unclimbed 2621m peak north of Mt Crillon and east of Mt Orville, which was a particularly striking sight from our camp. We had seen an expedient route on this from Mt Bertha, taking the shallow east rib to the south face of the summit triangle. In warm conditions, we waded up the isothermic snow on the rib, and by 8am on our second day had reached 2304m in the bowl below the upper south face. We put the tent up and spent the day watching avalanches let loose on the face. Early on 2 May, we crossed the bergschrund above the bowl and continued up the south face via a frozen couloir and snowed-up rock rib to reach the summit in pre-dawn light. I had already thought of a name – somewhat



85. North and east faces of Peak 8599ft ('Fifty Years of Alaskan Statehood'). (Paul Knott)

tongue-in-cheek – based on commemorations we had seen on our travels: 'Fifty Years of Alaskan Statehood'. Mindful of the weather, we packed our high camp and continued our descent. The day warmed so rapidly that when we descended the lower east rib in mid-morning, we left a one metre trench through soaking wet snow that threatened to slide. The prospect of crossing major snow bridges at 650m in these conditions did not appeal, so we stopped on the glacier in the hope of an overnight freeze.

Early next day, warm air flowed ominously down the glacier. Our south-west facing re-ascend to base camp started up a collapsing snow tongue over an increasingly exposed and meltwater-covered rock band. A sense of impending reversion to stormy southerly conditions continued that afternoon with cloud caps over the summits followed by flattening light and snow flurries. The barometric pressure had fallen 22mb. Amazingly, the storm held off, and we decided to fly out while we still could. Within an hour of landing we were aboard the ferry down the Lynn Canal. As I stood in the rear deck watching the sunset over the retreating hills, I already knew I wanted to return. I like the sustained adventurous immersion these mountains provide, which is nowadays easily missed in the pursuit of short, sharp experiences and a quick return to the city – and today's technology makes fly-in, glacier-based expeditions more civilised than ever before. Back in Juneau, the next day dawned cold, wet and windy, while the *Juneau Empire* reported the passing of record high temperatures.



86. Guy McKinnon on the summit of Peak 8599ft at sunrise, with Mt Bertha behind (north-west ridge facing camera). (Paul Knott)

Summary: An account of two climbs in the Fairweather range, south-east Alaska by Paul Knott and Guy McKinnon – the north-west ridge of Mt Bertha (3110m), a new route, 23-27 April 2009; and the first ascent of Pk 8599ft (2621m) via east rib and south face, 30 April - 3 May.

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BOB SHEPTON

Greenland With The Wild Bunch

The Skipper's Tale



87. Straight off the deck of *Dodo's Delight* and onto *Seagulls' Garden* (E5 6a). (All photos from the Team Collection)

The email read, 'Bob, do you know where there are any big walls to climb in Greenland? We did some on Mt Asgard in Baffin last summer and would like to do some in Greenland in 2011.'

'Well yes' I do know where there are some big walls on the west coast of Greenland but I am not going to tell you where they are as I want them for