

British Ruth Gorge Expedition 2009



Final Report by Gavin Pike

This report provides an account of a lightweight two-person climbing expedition to the Ruth Glacier and Kahiltna Glacier areas of the Central Alaska Range in the United States from April 2 - June 12 2009

Expedition members

Gavin Pike and James Clapham

Introduction

After several years of climbing together in the Alps and a memorable 2007 trip to Alaska where we climbed the classic Cassin Ridge on Denali (20,320ft), James and I planned a more exploratory trip to the Ruth Glacier area for 2009. Despite becoming relatively popular (by Alaskan standards) in recent years, we knew that there remained much potential for developing new routes in the Ruth. As we researched the area, our ambition grew, and we eventually decided on a 11-week expedition, including a stay on the neighbouring Kahiltna Glacier in the latter part of the trip.



The great rift of the Ruth Gorge from the summit of Mount Church

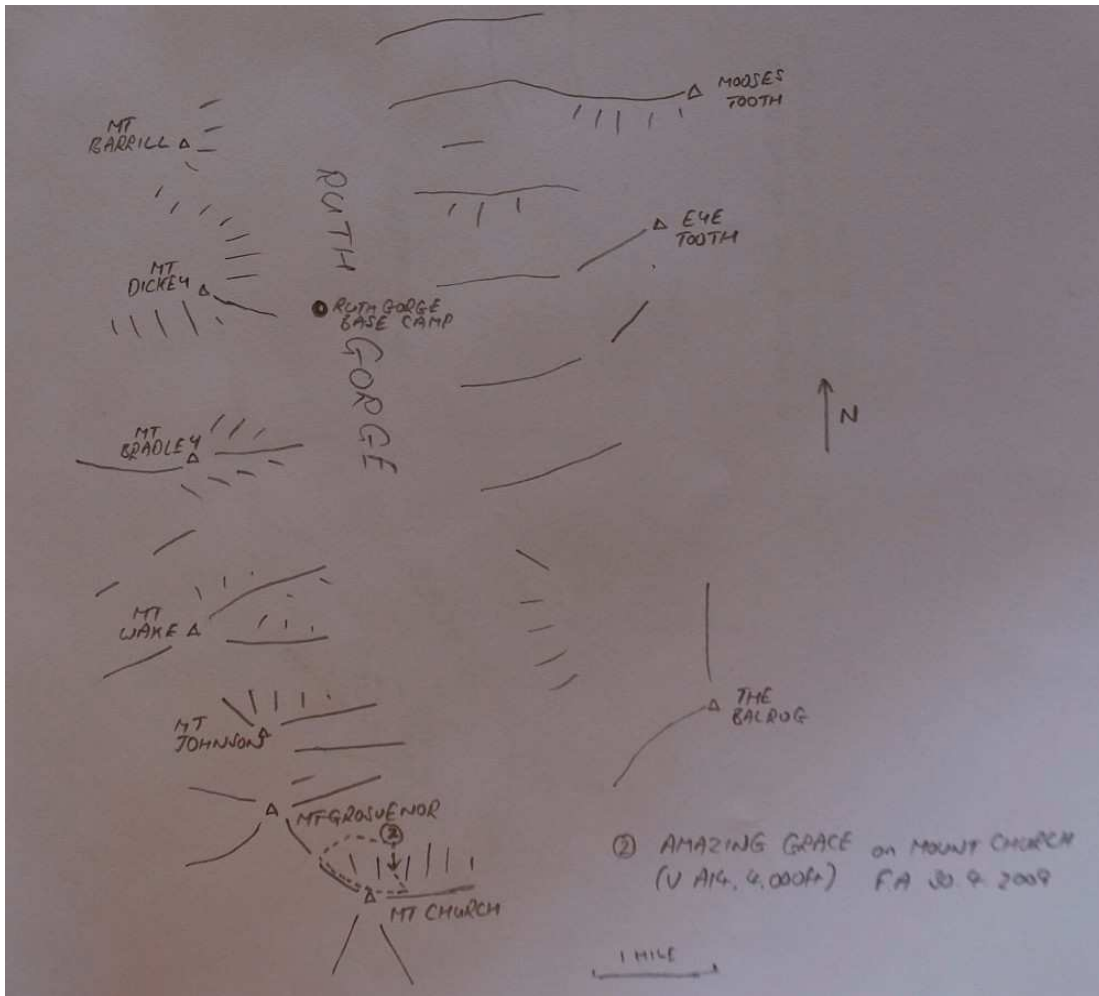


From the left, Mounts Church, Grosvenor, Johnson, Wake and Bradley

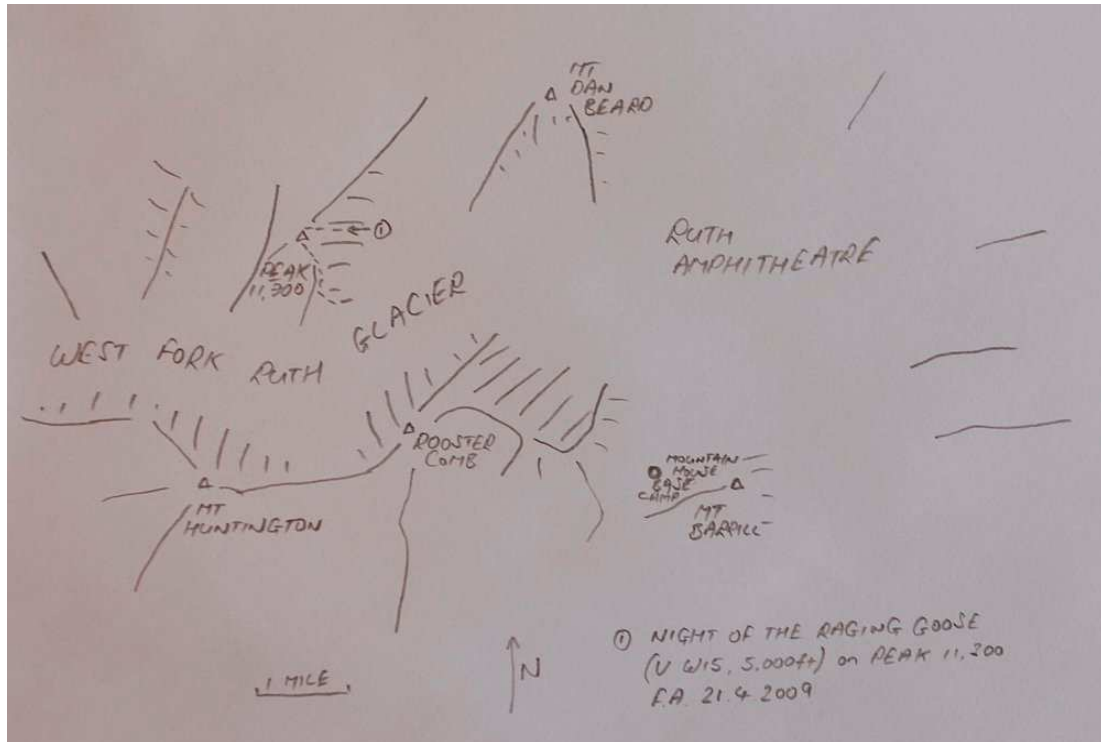
The Area

The Ruth Gorge in the Central Alaska Range is a spectacular glacial rift with huge walls of rock and ice rising on both sides. The Ruth Glacier runs north-

to-south as it squeezes through the mile-wide Gorge. Despite being constricted, the glacier is as flat as a football field. The great monoliths on the western side of the Gorge are perhaps its most impressive feature, presenting an imposing line of vast east faces soaring 3 - 5,000ft above the glacier. The more distant but equally impressive Moose's Tooth (10,300ft) lies on the eastern side of the Gorge. With relatively straightforward access by air from nearby Talkeetna, the Ruth Gorge is now surprisingly popular, with approximately 90 routes now established.



To the north, the Ruth Glacier opens out into the wide expanse of the Amphitheatre, which is flanked by mountains such as Silverthrone (13,220ft), Mount Dan Beard and Peak 11,300 (11,300ft), and overlooked to the north by the great mass of Denali (20,300ft). To the west, the glacier again narrows into the West Fork, which leads past the spectacular ramparts of the Rooster Comb and the north face of Mount Huntington (12,240ft). This area is perhaps more remote, and certainly less developed than the Gorge.



The Kahiltna Glacier, by contrast, is probably the most frequented glacier in Alaska. In addition to the 1,300 Denali hopefuls who arrive at the Kahiltna airstrip every May and June to attempt the West Buttress, a smaller number of teams from around the world come to attempt the hard Alaskan testpieces on neighbouring Mount Foraker (17,400ft) and Mount Hunter (14,570ft).

Access and regulations

An airstrip with the grandiose title of Talkeetna International Airport is the staging post for the Central Alaska Range. The village of Talkeetna itself is easily accessed in a 2.5 hour drive from Anchorage. We used the convenient shuttle service offered by Denali Overland. The range of supplies and equipment offered in Talkeetna is limited. Expedition food shopping and last-minute equipment purchases are best made in Anchorage.

A voluntary briefing at the National Park Service ranger station in Talkeetna is advised for all climbing teams before flying into the mountains. This briefing is mandatory for all teams attempting Mount Foraker and Denali. The \$10 National Park entrance fee is payable at the ranger station. In addition, all Foraker and Denali climbers must pay a \$250 per climber special-use fee, and registration, which can be done online, is required at least 60 days prior to arrival.

There are five licensed air operators that fly to the Alaska Range from Talkeetna. We used Talkeetna Air Taxi, and found the owner Paul Roderick to be both a great pilot and an invaluable source of information, having flown and climbed in the area for many years. Accessing the mountains by air is weather-dependent, and waits of several days or longer are possible if the

weather is bad. Some teams do make the long load-haul from the nearest road into the mountains, but this can often prove more of a challenge than climbing the mountain itself, and is usually only attempted by those making an adventurous traverse of Denali. For such a spectacular and potentially remote high mountain region, air access does make the logistics of an expedition easy and largely headache-free.

The main landing areas in the Ruth are at the Mountain House Hut on the south-western corner of the Amphitheatre, and in the Gorge itself, usually under the east face of Mount Dickey (9,545ft), although other landing areas can be used on request. Due to the lowly altitude of the majority of the mountains accessed from the Ruth Glacier, a team can be landed on the glacier one day and begin climbing the next. The Kahiltna Glacier airstrip underneath Mount Francis (10,450ft) is used to access the higher-altitude objectives on Mount Hunter, Mount Foraker and Denali.

Expedition objectives

Our main objectives for the expedition were attempting a number of possible new routes in the Ruth Glacier area.

At the entrance to the West Fork of the Ruth Glacier, the unclimbed 5,000ft east face of Peak 11,300 (11,300ft) was an obvious target, and seemed to offer a logical central line. In the centre of the Amphitheatre, we were also interested in a steep ice couloir on the east buttress of Mount Dan Beard that had been attempted by Gareth Hughes and Vivian Scott in 2007.

In the Ruth Gorge, we planned to have a look at three possible new lines on the 5,000ft east face of Mount Dickey (9,545ft), one of the biggest walls in North America and the subject of much attention in recent years. Next to this, an unclimbed gully in the centre of the east face of Mount Bradley (9,100ft) offered a compelling line if the steep gash cutting through the headwall provided ice. At the southern end of the Gorge, the aesthetic 4,000ft north face of Mount Church (8,233ft) had only received its first ascent in 2007, and much potential new ground existed to the left of this line.

In addition to this, we were also hoping to attempt one or more of the following routes:

Phantom Wall (ED, 5,900ft) on Mount Huntington (12,240ft)
Timeless Face (VI 5.9 WI5, 5,250ft) on Mount Huntington
North Buttress Couloir (6,000ft) on Mount Hunter (14,570ft)
Moonflower Buttress (5.8 A2 M5 AI6, 6,100ft) on Mount Hunter
Infinite Spur (5.9 M5 AI4, 9,400ft) on Mount Foraker (17,400ft)
Denali Diamond (AI5+ M6 A1 8,500ft) on Denali (20,320ft)

Expedition timeline

April 2	Flight from London Heathrow to Anchorage
April 3	Arrive in Anchorage. Food and equipment shopping
April 4	Anchorage to Talkeetna transfer
April 5	National Park Service briefing. Flight to Mountain House, Ruth Amphitheatre. Establish base camp
April 12	Attempt on east face of Peak 11,300. Retreat from ca. 600ft up the face due to poor ice conditions
April 15	Relocate base camp to the Ruth Gorge
April 17	Ascent of Shaken, Not Stirred (V AI5, 2,200ft) on the south face of Moose's Tooth (10,300ft)
April 21	First ascent of Night of the Raging Goose (V WI5, 5,000ft) on the east face of Peak 11,300 (11,300ft)
April 30 - May 1	First ascent of Amazing Grace (V AI4, 4,000ft) on the north face of Mount Church (8,233ft)
May 8	Ascent of Japanese Couloir (III 55-70 degrees, 2,750ft) on the east face of Mount Barrill (7,650ft), solo by Pike
May 12	Flight from Ruth Gorge to Kahiltna Glacier. Re-establish base Camp
May 15	Attempt on Moonflower Buttress (5.8 A2 M5 AI6) on Mount Hunter (14,570ft). Retreat from low on the route due to lack of motivation
May 20 - 21	Second attempt at Moonflower Buttress. Retreat from ca.9,900ft due to deteriorating weather conditions
June 8	Fly from Kahiltna Glacier to Talkeetna
June 10 - 12	Travel from Talkeetna back to the UK

Account of expedition

Paul Roderick from Talkeetna Air Taxi flew us in to the Mountain House landing strip on April 5. We knew that a Norwegian team had arrived in the Ruth Gorge a few days previously, but other than that we expected to be alone in the area. It was therefore a bit of a surprise to see a family with three children sledging down the slope towards us. But the Mountain House, a private hut, is popular, and was constantly occupied throughout our stay. However, at \$170 a night, it was beyond our means.

After establishing base camp, on April 6 we went for a ski-tour reconnaissance of the unclimbed east face of Peak 11,300 (11,300ft), which lies at the entrance to the West Fork of The Ruth Glacier. Our hoped-for central couloir line looked to be threatened by a partially-detached serac, and we explored options further to the right. We decided on a line which linked a series of ramps and looked objectively safe.

The next few days brought bad weather, and a big dump of snow. On April 11, we skied back over to Peak 11,300 and set up a bivouac tent underneath the face. We planned to climb the route in a single push, descending an easier-angled couloir further to the right of the face, and we left the bivvy gear behind. The next day, we started climbing at dawn. It soon became apparent

that ice conditions were vary variable, and this combined with the lack of protection made for slow progress over the first few pitches. We arrived at what we though might provide the crux of the route - a steep slab, which looked from below to have a thin veneer of ice. This ice turned out to be blobs of powder snow. With poor conditions and no obvious way to make further progress, we retreated.

Disappointed with our initial attempt, we decided to move base camp down to the Ruth Gorge to explore the area further. Three other teams were camped there, and despite a similar lack of success, two of the teams had made an ascent of the classic couloir Shaken Not Stirred (V AI5, 2,200ft) on the south face of Moose's Tooth (10,300ft). On April 17, we completed a moral-boosting ascent of this fantastic route in an 18-hour roundtrip from the Gorge.

After this, we decided to go back for the objectively-threatened central couloir on Peak 11,300, but to climb it at night in an attempt to manage the risk. Climbers enjoy perpetual daylight from around mid-May onwards in the Central Alaska Range, but in mid-April, there is still six or seven hours of darkness to contend with. But the sun hits the east face of 11,300 very early, so we were determined to be above the fall-line of the serac by dawn.

Our attempt started with a 10pm alarm call in our bivvy tent underneath the south ridge descent route, and we started climbing at midnight. The lower face gave easy-angled climbing, and we moved quickly up to the narrows of the couloir at half-height on the face. In the narrows, we climbed a vertical 10m wall of good-quality ice at AI5, and a further pitch of AI4, before moving into the wider gullies of the upper face.

The top section of the face had a surprising number of seemingly loosely-adhered snow mushrooms which hadn't been visible from the glacier. The final pitch on the face was steep snow in poor condition. From here, we were only 100m away from the established terrain of the south ridge descent route, but progress over the steep seracs and snow mushrooms balanced on the ridge took several hours. After a final heart-in-mouth move with distant protection to climb the overhanging cornice, we were on the summit plateau and onto the long descent to the glacier 4,500ft below. We arrived back at our tent exhausted after a 25-hour push. After a couple of nights sitting out bad weather in the bivvy tent at the Mountain House, we skied back to our welcome base camp tent in the Gorge. The new route was named Night of the Raging Goose (V WI5 5,000ft).

After having a look at the east face of Mount Dickey (9,545ft), which appeared in relatively poor condition, and hearing of an attempt on Snowpatrol (WI5+ 5,000ft) on the south-east face being stopped low down by overhanging snow, we turned our attention to the north face of Mount Church (8,233ft). Our reconnaissance provided no view into the deep gash on the left side of the face, so we plumped for the elegant central line, to the left of the original route of the face, Memorial Gate (AI4+, 4,000ft).

On April 30, we set off before dawn from our Gorge base camp, planning to

climb the route and descend the north ridge in a single push. Progress was quick with good snow and ice conditions, and we simul-climbed through the narrows in the centre of the face. Within five hours of starting, we were within 500ft of the top of the face. Unfortunately, snow conditions suddenly became abysmal, and the top four pitches took over six hours.

The east ridge, which we also believed to be unclimbed, proved to have some highly unstable cornicing. James took a 30ft fall down the north face when a bus-sized section collapsed underneath him. The fall bruised his leg and his coccyx, but he was able to continue. Dropping further down the south side of the mountain away from the dangerous cornicing only exposed us to more time-consuming bad snow conditions, and after a final pitch back up to the final summit ridge and the onset of darkness, we decided a bivouac would be prudent.

Despite only having a Bothy Bag for shelter, the night proved to be eminently bearable, with surprisingly mild temperatures of only -2C, positively tropical for April in Alaska. The next day, after another close encounter with a collapsing cornice, we dropped down the more straightforward north ridge to a col, then downclimbed the wide couloir which drops to the east, back to our skis at the base of the north face. The long ski back up the glacier was tiring and thirsty after over 20 hours without food or water. We named the new route Amazing Grace (V AI4, 4,000ft).

James's injuries were mild, but necessitated two weeks of recovery. In this time, I soloed the Japanese Couloir (III 55-70 degrees, 2,750ft) on Mount Barrill, and we both made serious inroads into the expedition food supplies. During this period in early May, the weather was excellent but temperatures were extremely warm. We realised that by the time James recovered, good ice conditions would be gone. So we caught a flight over to the Kahiltna Glacier.

Here, we made two attempts at Moonflower Buttress (5.8 A2 M5 AI6, 6,100ft) on Mount Hunter (14,570ft). The first attempt fizzled out in the Twin Runnels low on the route when a combination of a route-finding error, too-heavy packs, slow progress and lack of motivation led to retreat. We returned several days later with much more psyche and much lighter packs. May in the Alaska Range was proving to be very mild, and we packed light sleeping bags, hoping to make the top of the Buttress in two days. We made much better progress, and after some hard climbing in the Twin Runnels and the Shaft, we hit our planned bivouac site on the first ice field.

By 6am the next morning, it had started to snow. We waited for several hours, hoping for the weather to clear, before making the painful decision to go down. The choice proved to be correct however, and conditions deteriorated on the rappel descent, with heavy spindrift avalanches. We made it back to base camp in a white-out.

I had aggravated a shoulder injury on the Moonflower attempt, and we watched as spring-like temperatures caused deteriorating climbing conditions.

My recovery took nearly two weeks, and by the first week of June, unsettled weather became prevalent. After a disappointing final month to the trip, we decided to fly out a week early.

Weather and conditions

The weather during our nine-week stay on the glacier was generally excellent.

There were two or three stormy periods in April, which lasted no more than two or three days each. The weather either sides of these storms was good, with blue skies and settled conditions. Temperatures were fairly cold in early April, perhaps dipping below -20C at night. By late April, temperatures were extremely mild in the daytime, and approaches to many routes were becoming dangerous with avalanche risk. On Peak 11,300, we recorded a low of -12C whilst climbing the route; on our bivouac on the summit of Mount Church, the temperature was barely freezing.

May continued in similar fashion, with mild temperatures but generally good weather. An unsettled period towards the end of the month continued into June, and gave a day of rainfall to 10,000ft. This signalled the end of any hopes of further technical climbing on anything but Denali, and we left the mountains at this point.

Climbing conditions seemed very variable, which perhaps is normal in the Ruth Gorge. We found good conditions on one route on Peak 11,300, poor conditions on our attempt at another. Ice conditions on Shaken Not Stirred were excellent.

An unusual feature of the climbing seemed to be the adherence of snow to impossibly steep angles. Snow conditions at the tops of faces and on narrow ridges was often unconsolidated and poor.

On Moonflower Buttress, the lower face was thin, with some dry sections in the Twin Runnels and above. Ice conditions in the Shaft and above looked better.

Despite the late-March eruption of the Mount Redoubt volcano depositing a thin layer of ash in the mountains, glacier conditions were good. A winter of heavy snow had filled in many of the crevasses, and made glacial travel in most areas that we visited relatively safe.

Suggestions for new routes

The climbing in the Ruth Gorge is relatively well documented, and the big lines that remain unclimbed are well known. These include the very aesthetic east buttress of Mount Johnson, which reportedly has appalling-quality granite in its upper sections, as well as the direct north face, which would seem to require a plastering of neve to render possible. Late summer/early autumn

may be the time when such conditions might exist for the latter route, but this is conjecture.

Despite Mount Church (8,233ft) now having three routes on its north face, the area on the left side of the face still has potential for some hard mixed climbing.

On Mount Bradley (9,100ft), the central line on the east face remains unclimbed, but the steep section through a deep gash in the headwall was devoid of ice when we were there.

The last great problem on Mount Dickey is the so-called 'Laser-Line', the very steep and deep ice (or snow?) couloir to the right of Blood from the Stone. One attempt this season resulted in retreat from low on the route due to unclimbable snow. Other possible routes are a steep ice couloir on the south face, which would probably require early March temperatures to render it safe, and the line to the right of Snowpatrol.

In the Ruth Amphitheatre, we were very surprised that the east face of Peak 11,300 was unclimbed, and there remains much potential on the face to the right of this.

Equipment

We used a Mountain Hardwear Trango 4 tent for base camp, and a Black Diamond Firstlight as a bivouac tent, both of which worked well. A separate single-skin kitchen tent seemed popular with other teams. Warm sleeping bags are obligatory in Alaska, but even they seemed redundant at moderate altitudes from late April onwards. But I suspect it was an unusually mild spring. On Denali in May 2007, we experienced much colder conditions than anything on this trip.

Snow protection such as stakes and deadmen can be very useful, and proved invaluable on the steep, unconsolidated conditions we found high on the north face of Mount Church.

Although snow shoes can be used, skis are by far the best way to get around on the glaciers.

Useful information

The Supertopo Alaska Climbing (2006) by Joseph Puryear is an selective guidebook to area. It is an invaluable source of information for the Central Alaska Range, even for those who are seeking unclimbed lines.

Alaska: A Climbing Guide (2001) by Michael Wood and Colby Coombs is less comprehensive and informative, but useful nonetheless.

The 2006 American Alpine Journal has a chapter detailing existing routes in the Ruth Gorge, written by Joseph Puryear.

Talkeetna Air Taxi - www.talkeetnaair.com

Denali Overland - www.denalioverland.com

Expedition income and expenditure

Expenditure:

International flights from London Heathrow to Anchorage (including a transfer flight from Manchester to Heathrow)	£1,614
Expedition food	£715
Hotel in Anchorage	£60
Car hire in Anchorage	£35
Transfer from Anchorage to Talkeetna	£240
National Park Service entrance fee	£14
Talkeetna Air Taxi glacier flights	£1,152
Expedition equipment	£960
General costs in Anchorage, Talkeetna and en route	£260
Total	£5,050

Income:

Mount Everest Foundation grant	£550
British Mountaineering Council grant	£600
Personal contributions	£3,900

Summary

Despite the injuries, failed attempts and frustrations of the final month of our expedition, we thoroughly enjoyed our time in Alaska, and indeed, are planning a third trip there for 2010! We were very happy to come away from our time in the Ruth with two new routes and a rich climbing experience.

We would like to thank the Mount Everest Foundation and the British Mountaineering for their invaluable support to our expedition. We would also like to thank Marmot for supplying clothing and equipment.

The compilers 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.

