

# British Yukon Expedition 2011: Walsh - Denis Glacier, Kluane Icefields. Expedition Report

**MEF Reference 11/12**

**13<sup>th</sup> May 11 to 4<sup>th</sup> June 11**



Supported by: The Mount Everest Foundation



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## **INTRODUCTION**

This is an expedition report of the British climbing expedition to the Yukon, Canada. The expedition was called "British Yukon Expedition 2011: Walsh - Denis Glacier, Kluane Icefields".

The objective of the expedition was to make the first ascents of a number of unclimbed peaks situated around the head of the Walsh Denis Glacier confluence in the Yukon. Owing to poor weather the expedition relocated to a spur of the Stairway Glacier which had previously been visited in 2009 and which in the circumstances for successful climbing could be a possibility.

The report describes the first ascents of one peak adjacent to the glacier

The team members were:-

Glenn Wilks. British. Based in Cumbria.

Jonathon Wakefield. British. Based in Cumbria.

The expedition took place between May 13<sup>th</sup> 2011 and June 4<sup>th</sup> 2011.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Our sincere thanks go to the Mount Everest Foundation for their most generous help and support of this expedition.

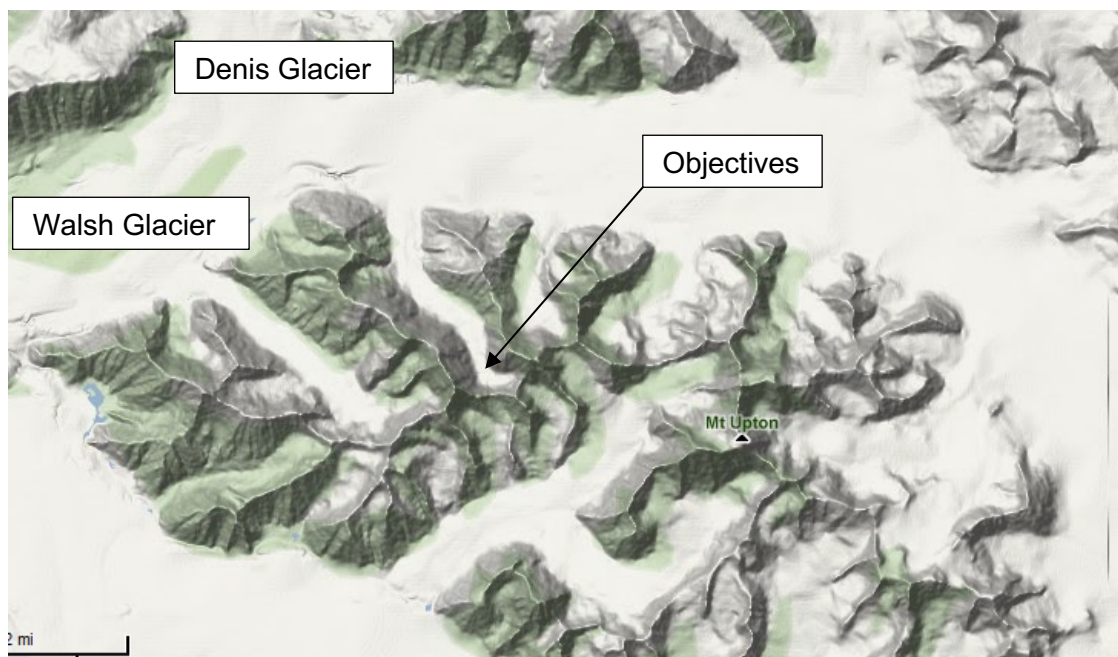


## OBJECTIVES

The objective of the expedition was to make as many first ascents of the known unclimbed peaks in the area.

Walsh - Denis glacier confluence is in the Kluane National Park Icefields and is part of the St Elias range.

The area was chosen as an objective following discussions with Andy Williams the Glacier Pilot. He had flown to the upper Walsh Glacier giving access to Mount Lucania. An ascent of Mt Upton took place some years ago, but the remainder of the area remained unclimbed.



Satellite photo of Northern side of Kluane National Park Icefields range.

## ACCESS

Access to the Yukon was by International flights from Manchester via Heathrow to Calgary. From there we took an internal flight to Whitehorse, which is the capital of the Yukon.

Access to Walsh - Denis glacier in the Kluane National Park Icefields is via light aircraft. The plane service is run by Welshman Andy Williams flying from an air strip at the southern end of Kluane Lake at a place called Silver City.

We arranged transport from Whitehorse to Silver City. The road is the Alaskan Highway and passes through Haines junction. Here is the headquarters of the Kluane National Park Authority.

We were required to stop at the Park Rangers office to sign for our authorisation to access the Icefields. This is a requirement of all climbing parties. I had pre arranged

the permit from the UK. We were required to watch an instruction video, fill out a check list of kit and confirm contact numbers including our satellite phone and emergency addresses.

The permit costs \$200. This included the aircraft landing fee based on 2 glacier landings and costs. Details of the glacier pilot are also required.

We continued our journey with our arranged transport to Kluane.

The journey to Haines Junction is about 2.5 hours, and a further hour to Silver City.

## **GLACIER PILOT**

Andy Williams runs the business of glacier flights. The mainstay of his business during April, May and June is flying climbers in the Icefields. The majority of climbers head for Mt Logan.

I had flown with Andy Williams in May 2005 and 2009. He was aware of our objective and was able to quote flight costs for the trip. I had sent a map showing our objectives during 2010 to ensure it was acceptable, owing to the glacier not being on his normal routine. I had to be sure he was happy to land us on the glacier.

We arrived on the air strip to be met by Andy. We were able to fly on to the glacier within 1.5 hours of arriving at Kluane.

The pilot is now a local man called Donjek. He has been a glacier pilot for the past 3 years.

## DIARY

Saturday May 14 11	Fly from Manchester to London Heathrow and on to Calgary (Glenn Wilks, Jonathon Wakefield)
Sunday May 15 11	Arrive late Saturday in Whitehorse, Yukon. Shopping for provisions and arranged local transport to take us to Kluane
Monday May 16 11	Travelled to Kluane inc visit to Rangers Headquarters to obtain permit and pay fees. Arrived at Kluane at 13.00. Flew to possible landing place but strong wind in a clear sky prevented us reaching our destination. Turned back mid-flight on the Pilots decision and landed back at Kluane.
Tuesday May 17 11	Attempted to fly again to landing site on Walsh or Denis Glacier. Did over fly of area but buffeting winds prevented landing. Pilot refused to land. On way back to Kluane we scouted a side glacier to the Staircase Glacier, visited in 2009. Returned to Kluane. Took off again after refuelling having decided to land on the subsidiary glacier of Staircase. See below for reasons. Landed on unnamed glacier. Bad weather set in.
Wednesday May 18 11	Bad weather prevented movement from Camp
Thursday May 19 0911	Bad weather prevented climbing but explored glacier in dense fog
Friday May 20 11	Bad weather prevented climbing. Further exploration of glacier.
Saturday May 21 11	Bad weather. Confined to camp. Very dense fog.
<b>Sunday May 22 11</b>	<b>Fine weather. Climbed peak height 3450m</b>
Monday May 23 11	Attempted to climb peak. Very warm and all avalanche prone slopes.
Tuesday May 24 11	Hot and misty conditions prevented climbing
Wednesday May 25 11	Low cloud and mist. Attempted to climb another peak but dense fog reduced visibility to 5m.
Thursday May 26 11	Attempted to climb peak, backed off with avalanche risk. Made decision to fly out. Flew back to Kluane.
Friday May 27 11	Drove to Haines Junction
Saturday May 28 11	Drove from Haines Junction to Whitehorse
Sunday May 29 11 to	Time spent on Whitehorse, walking and mountain biking
Monday May 30 11	Time spent on Whitehorse, walking and mountain biking
Tuesday May 31 11	Time spent on Whitehorse, walking and mountain biking
Wednesday June 01 11	Time spent on Whitehorse, walking and mountain biking
Thursday June 02 11	Time spent on Whitehorse, walking and mountain biking
Friday June 03 11	Time spent on Whitehorse, walking and mountain biking
Saturday June 04 11	Flew to UK

## THE ROUTES

Plan of glacier with marked peak and routes



- Peak climbed during period May 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2011
- Peaks attempted, remains unclimbed
- ▲ Camp
- Peak successful climb
- Peaks unsuccessfully attempted

## THE EXPEDITION

We arrived on the air strip at Silver City on the shores of Kluane Lake on May 16<sup>th</sup> 2011 to be met by Andy Williams of The Icefields Discovery Centre. Although Andy runs the show, Donjek is now the regular Glacier Pilot. We were able to fly within 1.5 hours of arriving at Kluane as the weather, low down was perfect for flying. However as we approached half way to our objectives, the winds were over 22 knots direct onto the plane's nose. Donjek made the decision to abort the flight and turn back. We landed and decided to wait until next day to try again.

Next day, Tuesday May 17 we again flew and reached the area but buffeting winds prevented us landing. We flew over the area, the plane being tossed around a bit too erratically for us all, so Donjek had no alternative but to abort again. We had a good look and saw some exciting prospects. We made the decision to return via Stairway Glacier where I had been in 2009, and scope out a subsidiary glacier which I had spotted in 2009. There seemed to be possibilities and stable wind conditions as we circled around. One of the joys of exploration in this area is the flying. Awesome.

We returned to Kluane and had a major discussion about waiting for more favourable conditions of go to the subsidiary glacier. However a known party of 9 climbers was due at Kluane the next day bound for Mt Logan, we didn't want to fit into a queue which could see us waiting at Kluane for a few days more so decided on the Staircase Glacier side glacier option. With hindsight this may have proven a bad decision.

We refuelled and were airborne again early afternoon. We landed on the subsidiary glacier at an elevation of 2500m. Being Mid May this shouldn't have been a problem of being relatively low with expected cold conditions (and stable snow pack) usually guaranteed until early June. By example the 2009 expedition had minus 15 degree centigrade night time temps from Mid-May. On this trip however the temperature rarely got below freezing during the night. This was to prove a very significant factor. After setting up camp the conditions deteriorated and a clag set in. This was to prove typical conditions for the next 4 days, with brief and tantalising glimpses through occasional breaks. However, the temperatures were the most disappointing.

Wednesday May 18 Bad weather prevented movement from Camp. A thick clag sat on the glacier the whole day. Thursday May 19. Bad weather with thick clag prevented any prospect of climbing again but we explored the glacier. An unfortunate incident happened when Jonathan, moving off the glacier onto a medial moraine, fell in a crevasse with a very weak bridge. The snake of the rope as he walked sideways was suddenly whipped taught as he disappeared from view. Luckily the 20 foot fall was arrested, a devious chasm between the moraine beckoned below him, but he was able to revive an axe and by a taught belay rope scabbled out, shaken and stirred.

Friday May 20 and again bad weather again prevented climbing with temperatures causing avalanches, of old and new snow. We couldn't see them, but heard them! There were hours of snow which was formed by condensing cloud as we could see at times the sun or a vague outline of it above the cloud. We undertook further exploration of glacier and when the clag cleared the temperatures soared. Saturday May 21 Bad weather confined us to camp. Very dense fog reduced visibility to 10 metres at best.

What we had been able to scope out was all north facing slopes were badly crevassed and seraced, whilst south facing slopes were rocky, by seared by avalanche. The prospect of rich pickings was not favourable.

On Saturday May 21 we awake at the predetermined time of 2.00am to crystal clear skies, this was the first time. But even being up and having breakfast it wasn't cold (relatively). The need to climb during the very early hours stemmed from the unusually warm weather and to take advantage of frozen snow conditions. We left camp at approx. 4.00am.



The ascent of Peak 3450 behind the camp took a very old avalanche slope with huge debris for at least half of the initial slopes. The upper half of the lower slopes evened out and lead to a col. The average slope angle being approx. 45 degrees.

At a col we turned north east to ascend a broad ridge at an increased angle of 50 to 55 degrees in softening snow, knee deep. We took turns to lead through eventually summiting at 10.00am. The views were magnificent, and we enjoyed the knowledge that this was a first ascent. We made our way down without incident until the final quarter of the slope which, again due to the temperatures made the surface unstable and prone. The hard debris and runnels turned to knee deep slush in places.

The next day, the conditions early morning were not good, so we were late away from Camp. But our objective was via a huge south facing bowl for which there was no alternative route. Mid way up, the feeling we really shouldn't be here, and that we had to return the same way, as the temperatures again soared, we made the decision to retreat.

Tuesday May 24 and hot and misty conditions prevented climbing. Wednesday May 25 was full of low cloud and mist. We decided, now getting a bit stir crazy to attempt to climb another peak but dense fog reduced visibility to 5m. We tentatively climbed a glacial snout not knowing what lay above or realistically below our feet. Most of the time we couldn't see each other so again, discretion overtook valour and we retreated. The next day, Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> of May, our attempt took us up the same avalanche slope as our ascent day trying to give us access to another peak to the rear of the one we had ascended but which necessitated skirting a huge bowl. Part way through the climb, we discussed the merits of our actions, and took a decision to call it a day. Too many factors were stacking up against us and conditions were far from ideal. This was my 4<sup>th</sup> trip to the Icefields, the others being in 2002, 2005 and 2009 and the conditions we experienced in 2011 were far and away the worst and least favourable for climbing I had experienced.

Back at camp, we made the call to Kluane, for a flight out. Three hours later we were back at Kluane feeling very sorry for ourselves. Other factors which helped shorten our time on the glacier was being hemmed in by badly crevassed glaciers above, to the side and below which restricted us to a very small area. All in all not a good choice, but badly exacerbated by the weather and temperatures.



**Jonathan on the final slope to the summit**



**The Summit of 3450m**



**The plane on landing**



**Camp**



**Typical conditions**



**The original objectives from the air. The objective of a new expedition?**

## WEATHER AND CONDITIONS

The weather on reaching Kluane, was clear and calm, but on trying to fly over the Icefields to the desired landing zone the westerly winds were over 22 knots direct onto the plane's nose. The pilot made the decision to abort the flight.

We tried again next day. We reached the area but buffeting winds prevented us landing. After a fly around we had to make a decision to return, which we did via Stairway Glacier and a subsidiary glacier which I had spotted in 2009.

We returned to Kluane and had a major discussion as to waiting for more favourable conditions of go to the subsidiary glacier. Owing to a known party of 9 climbers due at Kluane the next day bound for Mt Logan, we didn't want to fit into a queue which could see us waiting at Kluane for a few days so decided on the staircase glacier option. With hindsight this may have proven a bad decision.

Upon landing the elevation of the glacier at 2500m meant we did not have cold conditions, especially in comparison to the 2009 expedition which at the same time of year had minus 15 degree night time temps. It rarely got below freezing during the night.

From there on we experienced whole days of super clag where 10m visibility was the maximum. Plus the temperatures meant a lot of new snow formed as condensing cloud and avalanche.

These factors shortened our time on the glacier. The decision to leave early was difficult and is difficult today. But the area did not lend itself to good exploration, being hemmed in with badly crevassed glaciers around us.

## INCIDENTS

Jonathan fell in a crevasse on the first day's exploration.

## EXPENSES

	Expenditure	Income
	£	£
International flights (£1225 each)	2,250	
Glacier pilot	1,100	
Satellite phone hire and calls	190	
Kluane Park and landing permit	133	
Food/fuel for glacier	280	
Camping/eating out (\$700)	125	
Insurance	524	
Sundries	269	
<b>Total</b>	<b>4871</b>	
MEF grant		1,250
<b>Total</b>		<b>1,250</b>
<b>Cost to team members</b>	<b>£3,621</b>	
<b>Cost per team member</b>	<b>£1,810</b>	

## **CONCLUSION**

The expedition was a huge disappointment. In terms of climbing potential the glacier area was very limited.

Not being able to land on the area we had originally chosen was very disappointing and frustrating. The area we had chosen had limited landing sites for a plane, and we now know is prone to the winds coming up from the Pacific to the head of the Icefields and the Walsh Glacier divide.