

Mount Baker North Ridge

My high school spring break was winding down and my climbing buddy and I wanted it to go out with a big climb. Ski season has been too long and it was time to take out the tools and crampons. Our first objective, which was an ice climb, was hindered by the weather. The weather was too good. It was too hot. The lowest overnight temperatures were well above the 40s even at 8,000, so that climb was thrown out the window. Our eyes wandered through the Washington 50 classic climbs on Mountain Project. Considering a climb on Prusik but we didn't want to walk that far. We finally came to the North Ridge on Mount Baker.

We hopped on the 7:55 ferry to Seattle and started driving north. The anticipation was increasing as we got closer and could see glimpses of the mountain. It was hot out. As we were driving through Glacier we stopped for last minute food and water. We turned on to NF-39 I believe and drove up about half a mile. We came to find the road was closed. This was not apparent to us when we left for Mt. Baker, but it became a sudden reality and I reacted the only way I know how to. I stripped down everything except the essentials. I took out all the layers that I could live without and only brought what would keep me at an "ok" temperature. That included throwing out my down jacket and shell. The shell would have been nice. We also ditched one of our pickets so we only had 2 on route. We contemplated not bringing the rain fly of our tent after another party commented on how "light" we were going, but decided it would be nice for wind protection. The only other party that was at the start of the road was a pair of skiers that had packs higher than their heads. 2 really nice guys. They set off roughly ten minutes before we did and 20 minutes later we passed them on the road. A testament to "light is right". The next 7-8 miles was uneventful. Snow patches came to appear on the road 1 and a half miles from the TH and eventually roughly a mile away the road became completely covered in snow. We got to the Heliotrope trailhead and proceeded to just keep hiking. The road was uneventful as was the trail. We were keeping a pretty good pace and wanted to make it an early night.

We camped just before the start of the Coleman glacier and were planning on crossing it in the morning. We saw the skiers catch up with us. After conversing for a bit with them, they told us their plan of crossing the glacier tonight. And they were off.

The night was windy and my sleeping pad had a hole in it. My sleeping arrangement was sub-par to say the least. But nonetheless I was stoked to get on the route. My adrenaline was pumping so getting up at 3:30 on maybe 2 hours of cumulative was no problem. It's that feeling you get when you're just about to do something awesome. We got up at 3:30 to the stars shining bright and no moon. We sort of just sat up right in our sleeping bags unable to go back to bed. Talking about the plan for the day. We were hoping that with the wind and colder overnight temperatures that the snow would firm up and ice over. In the hope that the glacier cross and climbing would be more enjoyable. Our prayers were answered as I got up to take a leak, the ground was hard, compact and iced over. Perfect.

We set off at around 5:00am and were greeted by a warm morning wind. Delaying just after 5 minutes. The mile and a half of glacier travel took us around an hour and a half. We were sitting below the snowfield we planned on ascending around 6:45. We set a summit time of 12ish. And that was a very "ish" time at it. We really had no idea how long it would take. But that's the fun part right? We told our remaining party at our camp to "start worrying" at "around" 6. We ascended the steep snowfield, navigating the Bergshrund and gained the ridge. We could see the pair of skiers on the ridge already while we were on the glacier and knew we had some catching up to do. Once on the ridge it was a pretty basic trudge up to the ice section. My partner was already feeling the altitude. Coughing from the dry air. And my partner is one of the most in shape, physically fit people I know. Air Force Academy, "Race Across America" bike racing strong. It just shows that anyone can be hit by elevation.

We kept going up and up, expecting the skiers to be over the ice pitches by now. But as we approached the ice fall we saw them descending. "Alpine shutdown" they called it. They didn't bring any ice protection and felt uneasy soloing the steep ice. I'm glad we bought screws and pickets. We ascended to the top of the small rock crop to find the shortest and easiest way up the ice. We weren't any super competent ice climber at all. No fancy ice tools. Just some BD Venoms. We pitched the first steeper ice section out with 4 screws. 35 meters. Around 15-20 feet of vertical 90 degree ice. With the rest climbing this cool serac-gully-on a snow bridge thing. Really freakin cool. There was really only one pitch of real ice climbing at this time. The next 60 meters of snow was perfect and no one would want to place pro so we just kept climbing. As the slope gradually got shallower we unroped and started kicking steps in a much softer snow. Lucas (my partner) was feeling the elevation again. I took the rope from him and started kicking steps.

We got the the "left or right" decision. Both looked sorta scary to be honest. And we really didn't want to rope up again. Left looked easier but longer. Right was definitely steeper and right over the Coleman Headwall. A certain death if we fell. But that's why you climb alpine routes right? To get the feeling of "my feet are fucking solid right now, this is great". We zig zagged through the steep snow finding the snow and ice with the best purchase. We quickly got up to the summit after a little bit of heavy breathing. The altitude hit me a little bit for the first time. We checked the time: 3:00pm. Fuck. We realized we had to descend as fast as we could. So we didn't wait at the summit for long. We descended the Roman Headwall and glissaded as much as we could. Navigated the glacier back to camp. With some more glissading we made it down to our camp at around 5:30. The day was over right? No. We still had to descend the trail and the 8 miles of closed road. My boots were way to small for me and my toe box was cramped and it hurt. That's not me complaining, but it's me sorta complaining.

Cheers

Matias

Pictures Below:



