

Lure of Alaska's Revelation Mountains motivates climber

By SETH ADAMS

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Read more here: <http://www.adn.com/2014/05/20/3478268/lure-of-alaskas-revelation-mountains.html?sp=/99/110/#storylink=cpy>

Clint Helander and Scotty Vincik shifted uncomfortably in the makeshift hammock they'd created out of their climbing ropes. They didn't mean to stop there, hanging from a temporary anchor they'd installed into vertical ice more than 3,000 feet up an unclimbed mountain in a remote part of the Alaska Range. The evening sun had hit the upper slopes, dislodging rocks that had been frozen in place, causing them to fall on the two friends. They had been forced to seek shelter, and this spot beneath a bulge of overhanging snow was the best they could do. It was mid-March, and it would be a long night.

The following night, Helander and Vincik would be on the summit of Mount Mausolus, having made the first-ever ascent of the 9,170 foot peak. Mausolus is in the Revelation Mountains, a small group comprising the westernmost peaks of the Alaska Range.

That was in 2011. This spring, Helander returned to the Revelations for his seventh straight year and did another first: the West Face of Titanic Peak, a mountain that had only been climbed once. Helander, with various partners, has now put up a total of seven new routes, including five first peak ascents -- all in the Revelations.

His private playground

"I keep going back to the Revelations year after year because I feel like the potential for new adventure is virtually limitless," Helander said in an email. "I could go almost anywhere else and have a good idea of what I am in for. When I go to the Revelations, I am going there without a good idea of what to expect. I may be attempting a peak that has never been photographed, or (one that I've only seen from) 15 miles away and yet have been obsessing about for years."

The first exploration of the Revelations was in 1967 by a group from the Harvard Mountaineering Club, led by well-known Alaska alpine-climbing pioneer David Roberts. This group made the first ascent of a number of smaller peaks.

"On the flight in to the Revelations, we passed over Mount Mausolus. What a peak!" Roberts wrote in a 2012 article in Climbing Magazine. "I would never have dreamed that 44 years would elapse before someone finally climbed (it)."

Though Helander didn't invent the idea of climbing in the Revelation Mountains, at only 29, he has earned his stripes as the defining force in the rediscovery of climbing in this overlooked corner of Alaska. His fame has grown among those interested in such pursuits, and he was asked to write an overview article on the range for the American Alpine Journal.

Lots of forces have conspired to keep climbers out of the Revelations. Since they lie at the far west end of the Alaska Range, nothing slows the Aleutian storms before they slam into the mountains. Sometimes the storms can blast the range for weeks at a time. The Revelations also cannot be seen from any road or city, which serves to boost their obscurity while making flying in a gamble -- if the weather there is bad and the pilot can't land, the hourlong flight from Anchorage was for nothing.

Before Helander's annual visits, the last serious climbing expeditions to the Revelations were in the mid-1980s.

Helander is originally from Seattle, but he moved to Anchorage at age 18 to attend UAA for journalism and communication. At age 20 he began to climb, and he was 21 when he first heard of the Revelations.

"The Revelations have come to signify not only a limitless playground, but a place where I can chart my growth on a year-to-year basis, both as a climber and as a person," says Helander. "After seven expeditions, my motives and my method for climbing have changed. Climbs that used to take two or three days are now counted in hours. On unknown peaks, where I would have normally brought a tent or sleeping bag, now I often leave them behind."

Because of the significant investment of time and money required to climb in the mountains, Helander works seasonally as a surveyor in order to have large blocks of time free to devote to climbing. This allows him to escape to the mountains, and time to travel in the Alaska off-season to other climbing destinations to practice his craft. And he's not done:

"Every year I go in to the Revelations thinking that it might be the last time. But then, from atop some new peak, I seem to pick out another goal or two. There are at least two pieces remaining before I can close the book on the Revelations. All of my friends joke that I will never be done, and perhaps they are right."

Where no one has climbed

In 2013, Helander had what was likely the most successful climbing season of anyone in Alaska that year. He kicked it off with the first ascent of the second-tallest peak in the Revelations, a 9,345 foot-tall peak called The Apocalypse. Later that summer he traveled to the Central Alaska Range, where he did the third ascent of the Phantom Wall, a steep and difficult aspect of 12,240-foot Mount Huntington. Then just a few days later he did an ascent of Mount Hunter (14,573 feet), via the legendary North Buttress, also known as the Moonflower Buttress. And to cap it all off, he climbed Denali via the popular West Buttress route. Any one of these ascents could be a crowning achievement in the career of an Alaska alpinist, but Helander did them all in a single season.

The North Buttress of Hunter is particularly notable due to its size and technical difficulty, and thus has achieved a reputation as a significant benchmark in the sport of alpine climbing. But the route is readily accessible from Denali's Kahiltna base camp and has been climbed many times. The plethora of information available about the route eliminates many of the challenges of climbing a new and unknown mountain.

Seemingly small differences in what technical climbing gear is carried on the route can make a big difference. For example, on Mausolus, Helander and Vincik found themselves carrying a lot of unnecessary rock climbing gear, while facing much more vertical ice climbing than they had anticipated. They scraped to get by with what ice gear they had, often risking dangerous falls in the process.

"We leave behind two-thirds of our rock (gear) but take every ice screw and wish for more," Helander wrote in an article in climbing magazine about the route. "Even in our wildest dreams, we never envisioned 2,500 feet of steep, continuous ice. Our eight ice screws are laughably meager."

"I knew everything about every pitch on the North Buttress (of Hunter) from reading trip reports and talking to others who had climbed it," Helander explained. "On Mausolus I had very few answers. To this day, I still cannot believe that we made it to the top of that mountain."

A personal place

Helander made his first trip to the Revelations in 2008 with his best friend, Seth Holden. The pair had become obsessed with the range, and Mount Mausolus in particular. They made two first peak ascents, Exodus and Ice Pyramid, in 2008 and 2009, before turning their attention to Mausolus in May 2010. They were hampered by bad weather that season and only made one attempt on the peak, but were turned back by dangerous conditions.

Holden would never climb Mausolus. In August 2010, he was killed in a small plane crash outside of Anchorage.

Helander wrestled emotionally with returning to the range in the spring of 2011 without his best friend and climbing partner. In the end, he went, and the climb of Mausolus took everything he and Vincik had.

"We were all alone, it was the tail end of winter, and we were trying something that was harder and more out there than anything I had even considered before. We made it to the summit and then rappelled throughout the night. We were 24 hours without water, we didn't sleep for 60 hours straight, and the climb felt unbelievably (difficult). To this day, and maybe even for my entire life, it will be one of the proudest things I've ever done."

Helander and Vincik named their route "the Mausoleum" and spread some of Holden's ashes on its summit.

"I feel something very personal and special in these mountains. I pushed myself in them and experienced a broad array of emotions. In a way they feel like home."

Seth Adams is an Alaska freelance writer and avid climber.

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