



# the SCREE

## Mountaineering Club of Alaska

December 2015

Volume 58 Number 12



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**Monthly meeting: 6:30 p.m., Tuesday, December 15.**

### **CHANGE OF VENUE**

**Annual Potluck at the Old Pioneer School House at 437 East 3rd Avenue.**

*"What makes old age hard to bear is not the failing of one's faculties, mental and physical, but the burden of one's memories."*

**- W. Somerset Maugham**



# The Mountaineering Club of Alaska

[www.mtnclubak.org](http://www.mtnclubak.org)

**"To maintain, promote, and perpetuate the association of persons who are interested in promoting, sponsoring, improving, stimulating, and contributing to the exercise of skill and safety in the Art and Science of Mountaineering."**

Join us for our club meeting at 6:30 p.m. on Tuesday, December 15

Old Pioneer School House, 437 East 3rd Avenue, Anchorage, Alaska.

<https://www.google.com/maps/place/437+E+3rd+Ave,+Anchorage,+AK+99501/@61.219924,-149.877756,17z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m2!3m1!1s0x56c896260a579873:0x25238b832aa2955e>

For the MCA Membership Application and Liability Waiver, visit

<http://www.mtnclubak.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=members.form>.

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## Cover Photo

Christian Nettet climbing the walled south face of Mount Nettet at 5800 feet, about 300 feet below the summit.

Photo by Christian Nettet

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**Article Submission:** Text and photography submissions for *the Scree* can be sent as attachments to [mcascree@gmail.com](mailto:mcascree@gmail.com). Articles should be submitted by the 24th of each month to appear in the next issue of *the Scree*. Do not submit material in the body of the email. Do not submit photos embedded in the text file. Send the photo files separately. We prefer articles that are under 1,000 words. If you have a blog, website, video, or photo links, send us the link. Cover photo selections are based on portraits of human endeavor in the outdoors. Please submit at least one vertically oriented photo for consideration for the cover. Please submit captions with photos.

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## Monthly Meeting: Tuesday, December 15, at 6:30 p.m.

**CHANGE OF VENUE** Old Pioneer School House at 437 East 3rd Avenue in Anchorage, the northwest corner of 3rd Avenue and Eagle Street. Come to the MCA Holiday Party! There will be turkey! Bring a dish according to your last name:

A-I: Dessert    J-S: Salad    T-Z: Side Dish

Bring your own table setting and five digital slides, with corresponding stories, from any trip at any point in your life. People will share these in an informal, open-microphone-style presentation.

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## Hiking and Climbing Schedule

**December 5, 2015:** Echo Bend Eagle River Valley. Join Richard Baranow for some ice climbing in the Echo Bend area of Eagle River; three miles south of the Eagle River Nature Center. Travel by skis/snowshoes/on foot; conditions dependent. Be prepared for a potential wet crossing of the river if weather doesn't fully cooperate. Water Ice grades 2 through 4; participants must have basic ice-climbing/belay skills and their own equipment. Rehydration/potluck party after the event at Richard's cabin. Limited to 10 participants. Class D. Leader: Richard Baranow; phone 694-1500; email [eralpine@mtaonline.net](mailto:eralpine@mtaonline.net).

**December 5-6, 2015:** Ship Creek trail maintenance. The MCA maintains the five miles from the Arctic Valley Trailhead to the beaver pond. Bring older clothes, loppers, saw, etc. for trail work and overnight gear. Non-technical. Trip leaders: Greg Bragiel and Stu Grenier.

**December 19-20, 2015:** Flattop Mountain Sleepout. No leader.

**February 20-28, 2016:** Seward to Hope backcountry ski tour (90 miles). Sign up at the December 15, 2015, MCA meeting. Trip leader Greg Bragiel.

(continued on page 3)

Online? Click me!



**Check the Meetup site and Facebook for last minute trips and activities. Or, schedule one that you want to organize.**

## **Hiking and Climbing Schedule** (continued from page 2)

**February 27-28, 2016:** Ice Climbing weekend at Eklutna Glacier. The MCA has booked the Serenity Falls Hut for the nights of Friday, February 26th, and Saturday, February 27th. All are welcome to come out and join the fun. Come to climb, fat bike, hike, ski tour, or just enjoy spending time at the hut. Bunks are first come, first served. Bring a tent and sleep outside if you like. You will need to arrange your own transportation (ski, hike, or bike) and bring your own gear. The hut is 12 miles from the trailhead. Orientation to the area will be provided. If you don't have a climbing partner, come anyway and we'll do our best to get you partnered up to climb. Send any questions to Cory Hinds at [chinds100@gmail.com](mailto:chinds100@gmail.com).

**April 3-10, 2016:** Eklutna Traverse ski mountaineering (31 miles) OR Bomber Traverse five huts ski tour (35 miles). Glacier Travel. We will go wherever the snow is. Trip leader Greg Bragiel. Participants must attend trip training March 26-27, 2016.

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## **MCA Hiking & Climbing Committee Chair**

Ed Smith is taking over for Vicky Lytle as the Chair of the Hiking and Climbing Committee. You may contact him at [hcc@mtnclubak.org](mailto:hcc@mtnclubak.org) or by phone at 907-854-5702.

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## **Geographic Names**

On October 30, the Alaska Historical Commission informed the MCA that the proponent for naming Peak 6608 in the Paradise Creek drainage of the Chugach Mountains as Mount Carl Brady had withdrawn its proposal. On November 3, the AHC requested that the MCA comment on a proposal to name Peak 7216 in the Schwan Glacier drainage of the Chugach Mountains as Mount Carl Brady. Interested parties can submit comments to Steve Gruhn at [geographicnames@mtnclubak.org](mailto:geographicnames@mtnclubak.org) by December 1.

The AHC will be voting on four other proposals at its December 8 meeting. Three of those proposals involve new names for previously unnamed features: 1) The proposed name Redemption Lake for Lake 2456 southwest of Lake Louise; 2) The proposed name Rotary Falls for a waterfall at the 2300-foot elevation on the south side of Government Peak in the Little Susitna River drainage in the Talkeetna Mountains to honor local Rotary Clubs; and 3) The proposed name Regaey Lake for a Lake 112 on the Kenai Peninsula northeast of Nikiski (Regaey is the proponent's name spelled backward). The fourth proposal is to change the name of Deadman Slough south of the University of Alaska Fairbanks campus to Troth Yedha' No' Slough (a lower Tanana Athabascan phrase meaning "wild potato ridge stream") to demonstrate "the rule-driven place name system of the Athabascan people."

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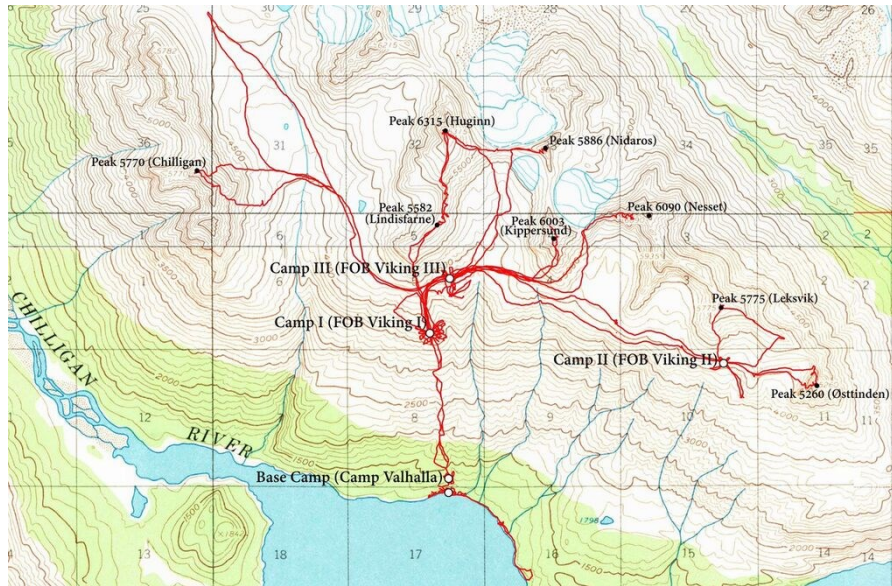


*On the ridge above the South Fork of the Eagle River a few days after a big wind storm (out of the north).*

*Photo by Frank Baker*

# One Month at Ch'akajabena Lake

Text and photos by Christian Nettet



*Christian Nettet (left) and Vegar Kippersund observing avalanches on Point 7720 across Ch'akajabena Lake.*

## Who we are

Christian Nettet, born 1987. Working as a kindergarten assistant and as a quick reaction force in the Norwegian Armed Forces, my spare time is spent climbing steep peaks in Norway, with a heavy camera in my backpack. I have directed my own tours to Greenland and three times to the Himalaya Mountains (both Nepal and Tibet).

Vegar Kippersund, born 1990. Studying to become a police officer after a career in the Norwegian Armed Forces, Vegar enjoys hunting, fishing, a perfect campfire, and pure wilderness. Vegar and Christian have been on several trips together in Norway, as well as the Himalayas and Alaska.

## Why Ch'akajabena Lake?

A few years back we were sitting around a fire with freezing cold beers in our hands on a one-week journey near the Svartisen Glacier in northern Norway. We were talking loudly about our visions of going on a longer trip into the wild, for at least a month. As we wanted a Scandinavian sort of geography and climate, we soon had our minds fixed on Canada or Alaska, as one just can't go into the wilderness in Norway for that long without having to cross a road or meet other people. One won't find any areas or mountain peaks not touched by humans in one way or another in Norway.

A year and a half went by until we suddenly just decided on going in June 2014. We did some research on prices, rules of campsites, and rules of carrying a weapon. Alaska seemed to be an easier destination than Canada.

Then began the much larger task of picking our area. Alaska was huge, and there was a lot of wilderness to choose from. As it was too much to remember as I was reading through lists of national parks and areas picked by other expeditions, I started making a map on Google Earth, giving each area I researched a color code. Slowly I began zooming in on areas that I felt were attractive. Our demands for the area were that it needed to be fairly far from urban centers and roads, but close enough making it economically possible for both of us. We wanted lakes, woods, and spectacular mountains. We also wanted wildlife and expected to see bears, but didn't want to be camping in the densest of bear populations, because our





*Ch'akajabena Lake from Camp I minutes after Kippersund and Nasset chased off a sow black bear and her cub.*

Ch'akajabena Lake would be the best spot from which to start. However, we would have to make the final decision by flying alongside the lake and see things from up close before deciding. So in advance we had nicknamed the three potential mountain ranges that were separated by bigger rivers and valleys with Western, Eastern, and Central Mountains. [Ed. note: These mountains are all part of the range unofficially dubbed the Hidden Mountains.] We used the naming during our stay when guiding ourselves in the area.

experience with bears was non-existent! Climate was also a subject; we appreciated the sun and had experienced enough rain in our past short lives!

The cheapest good alternatives that came up early were the Talkeetna Mountains, Chugach Mountains, and Wrangell Mountains, but these were all close to urban centers, though I saw a lot of valleys and areas that probably see very little attention by the local people. Once I started looking at the area southeast of Denali, a big lake caught my attention. Chakachamna Lake, now known as Ch'akajabena Lake, was a close flight from Anchorage, but still very inaccessible. Googling some photos from that area made me really want to go into the area, the Neacola Mountains looked amazing, and the Tordrillo Mountains to the west with an active volcano? Perfect! Christian was the one fixated at climbing the steeper mountains while Vegar enjoyed the views from the easier ones or from the valleys below.

The mountains located between the Nagishlamina, Chilligan, and Igitna Rivers looked fair – easy enough, yet exciting enough. I came across no reports of summiting in this area. The only reports about this area were the geological surveys written in the 1920s, which provided a lot of information on the vegetation and wildlife in the area.

### **Climbing the Central Mountains**

In advance we had gotten familiar with the geography and terrain in the area. By map it looked like the mouth of the Chilligan River into

We successfully landed and managed to find a perfect spot on a beach east of the Chilligan River and had the Central Mountains at our doorstep. It struck us within the first minutes after our landfall, that area was unbelievably beautiful. Why did so few ever venture there?

The first three days we spent getting our base camp safe and functional. The forest there was a mix of taller trees, which were easy to walk between, and zones of inaccessible dense bush. It wasn't easy going up and establishing Camp I at 3700 feet, but we found a way through that mean brush at last and were to use the same path several times.

Altogether we spent around 20 days in the mountains and had eight successful climbs and one unsuccessful climb. Our first summit was a 5500-foot point (GPS elevation 5582 feet) that we nicknamed Lindisfarne (after the first town in England the Vikings raided). We nicknamed all of the closest mountains so it would be easier for us to orientate. The highest, 6315-foot Mount Huginn (after one of Odin's two ravens in Norse



*Evening view of the northwest aspect of Point 7720 south of Ch'akajabena Lake from base camp.*

mythology) was climbed by me alone on the same day as we climbed Lindisfarne. Vegar sat back and enjoyed the view while reading a book while I tried a rather difficult traverse from Lindisfarne to Huginn.

Basically, most of the mountains were loose, sometimes very loose. Mount Nasset (6090) was all just loose, and had tens of pinnacles on its ridges. Nidaros (5850) was very loose at one location, more stable toward the summit. Østtinden (5260) was the most fun climb; it was steep, but had a really fantastic narrow ridge of stable rock on its southwestern side, my route up. Leksvik (5775) was just a pile of rocks that we walked up one evening. Kippersund (5850) was easy, a lot of big rocks all the way to the top. It had two interesting pinnacles, one to the north and one to the northwest, which were doable without climbing equipment and gave us some excitement and air under our feet! Chilligan (5770), the westernmost point I summited, was full of very small loose rocks all over the place. The top 50 feet were more interesting with scrambling on somewhat stable rock. Looking farther north, all the peaks looked even looser. However, to the west, around Merrill Pass in the Hidden Mountains, were several peaks that looked like serious technical climbs, but on more stable rock.

The only unsuccessful climb was of my own mountain. Nasset was very loose and full of excitement. From the south the only doable route seemed to be on the southeastern ridge. The ridge was full of steep pinnacles, between which I had to find a way. Along the ridge I had to climb atop some pinnacles, and mix between the north and south sides of the pinnacles. The south side was very steep and it's a near vertical 700-foot drop to the bottom. On the north side there were still snow and ice lying around. The snow was very rotten, and the rocks were slippery and always started sliding down whenever I stepped upon them. I triggered several slushy avalanches along the way that I caught on my camera.

I used several hours and finally turned back when I got to a point that was even more demanding below the very last pinnacle before the ridge looked easier toward the summit. An easier route was probably from the north side, or later in the summer following my route when the snow would be all gone and the north side could be used.

### **Weather observations**

We knew the weather in this area would be unstable, but since there were higher mountains to the east, south, and west we hoped it would be somewhat drier and calmer north of Ch'akajabena Lake.

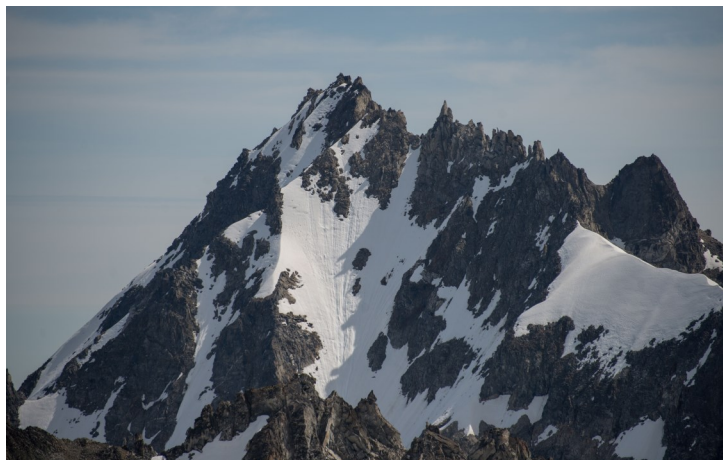
During the stay we experienced a lot of sunny weather, with

high temperatures up to 25 degrees Celsius. Usually the good weather lasted for several days. We had about the same share of cloudy days as well, but usually it looked like the bad weather always lingered in the Neacola Mountains and the Tordrillos. The Tordrillos were very often wrapped up in the cloud while it was clear blue skies where we were.

In the end of June, we had three days of rather hard rain that were followed by clear blue skies and high temperatures just a few hours after the last drops came out of the clouds. During those three days we were camping at 3700 feet, above the timberline. There was barely any wind during those days; in fact, there was never any wind during our stay in the mountains (above 3500 feet). There was never any wind on any of the summits, either. We had one night and half a day of rain and wet snow/sleet when we were camping next to Østtinden Peak at 4700 feet, which were the coldest temperatures we encountered.

The last six days we stayed around our base camp down at Ch'akajabena Lake. We had some cloudy days and some sunny days, but bad weather was all around us and we experienced some hard rains with thunderstorms and ferocious valley winds, especially in the night and morning. Luckily it cleared up on our pickup day, making the extraction by floatplane possible. On arrival 30 days earlier, we encountered difficulties on landing near the Chilligan River, at a bay we hoped would be the perfect place to find a good sheltered landing spot. Because we had to abort the landing attempt immediately after hitting some hard waves there, we flew farther east and found a perfect spot there, both for landing and camping.

[Ed. note: To view videos from the expedition, visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HYOZh1abPJM> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7J-nUNSaGc>.]



*Mount Nasset as viewed from Mount Huginn on the party's second ascent of Mount Huginn.*



## Peak 4283, June 6, 2015

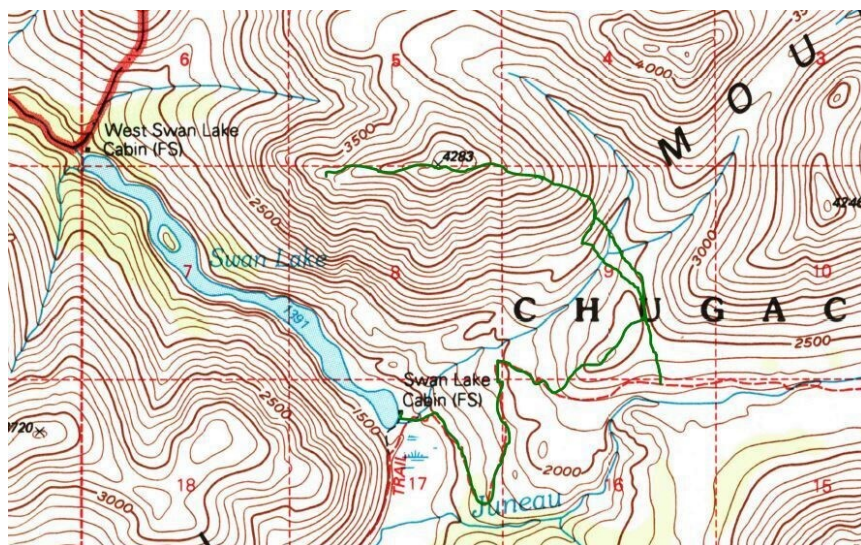
Text by Deborah Kelly

The trip was already going much differently than expected when Colleen Metzger and I decided to do some exploring off the Resurrection Trail. Shaun Sexton had organized a seven-day, ultra-light backpacking-style exploration of the trail, and then had dropped out due to a last-minute medical issue. His excellent planning ended up with Colleen and I set to enjoy the leisurely trip anyway. He had even called the ranger and gotten up-to-the minute snow information and told us there would be life vests ready for crossing Swan Lake. All the planning in the world couldn't change the weather forecast, though, which was for a dreary week of rain.

Colleen and I drove to the Hope trailhead in a veritable downpour, and rain accompanied us for most of the next few days. This limited our exploration of the peaks around the trail system, which were being covered in fresh new snow driven by a chilly wind. The fact that this was an ultra-light gear-testing trip meant that I wasn't ready to lay siege to the land in those conditions. We did manage a nice side trip down to Devils Pass and beyond, though, seeing fresh bear tracks over a snowfield and a marmot I swear must have had a few bear genes in it to reach its enormous size. The upside of the weather was the unusual amount of solitude we experienced on the normally busy Kenai Peninsula trail.

We found ourselves at the Swan Lake Cabin on the fourth under a warm overcast and nothing on the agenda except to paddle across to the West Swan Lake Cabin. We decided on a little side trip to take advantage of our weather window. We were eager to head back up above timberline and check out some of the peaks that seemed so accessible when we had passed them the day before. After a couple of days hiking in driving rain and snow, we both looked forward to the pleasant walk ahead of us.

We walked up the trail a couple of miles, stashing the bulk of our packs in a bear box in one of the unused campgrounds. Colleen moved much faster without her pack, which weighed over 40 pounds. I joked that she had misread the trip description and opted for "ultra-heavy" instead. She was in training for an ambitious upcoming trip and had brought lots of gear to test. With our burdens lightened, we trekked back up to just above timberline. There were a few late fiddleheads here and there to snack on, and we made a note to gather



some on our return trip for a tasty dinner garnish. The hillsides were covered in chocolate lilies and other spring flowers. As we ascended out of the Juneau Creek valley, we saw a likely hill ahead that rose out of the brush and seemed the most direct way to the numerous peaks north and west. Departing the trail, we had a very short bushwhack and a long slog up the hill to the top where hemlocks provided a break from the breeze. The hill was the first of several low hills, so we continued northward. When we got to the end we had to make a decision: head northeast and try to make Point 4275, where we would have an overlook of Resurrection Pass, Summit Creek Pass, and the Devils Pass Trail, or head northwest for Peak 4283, which dropped sharply off to Swan Lake.

The decision was made easier by our view from the Swan Lake Cabin that morning: a band of mountain goats on the steep south face of 4283. According to the logbook, they are an institution there high above the picturesque lake. We decided to make for the peak and have the opportunity, for once, to look down on the sure-footed animals. From the hill we continued north and dropped down into a soft grassland that was blessedly free of brush. We aimed northwest from there, following the contours of the vegetation to avoid any bushwhacking until we crossed a lively stream. At that point we had to find our way through a hundred yards or more of thick brush, but we were aided by a large game trail of some kind. It looked like a bear had crashed through with abandon – the brush was laid over and broken in places by what must have been a big heavy animal. Needless to say, we made plenty of noise getting through it. The stream was easily crossed with dry feet once we scouted back and forth, picking a spot not too

choked with vegetation. From there on it was all clear. We checked out the rest of our route. It looked like a smooth, even grade up a grassy slope all the way to the peak. We stopped for a snack and a breather before tackling it. The weather was holding out so far, though the clouds were heavy. After a bite and a stretch, we headed up.

The fresh snow of previous days was gone and the grass was dry, which helped immensely on the way – wet ground would have been dangerously slippery there. The tundra and grass covering the slope were thin and fragile, and it was easy to rip through to the loose gravel below. With carefully chosen steps we worked our way up, avoiding damage to the delicate plants. There was a surprising abundance of flowers all the way up. It seemed like a miracle in a place so windblown and forbidding. Our scouting had proved true and the going was strenuous but pleasant. There was little exposure there and one could pick almost any route up the southeast side and find themselves at the top. I aimed for the gentler slope that extended due east from the peak, looking forward to a break from the unrelenting uphill. Colleen followed close behind me, lugging a pack that looked shockingly bulky after all we had stashed in the bear box that morning. She was getting twice the workout I was, and seemed to be enjoying it.

The slope became gentler as we neared the top, and the flower studded tundra didn't end until we were almost to the peak itself. We found and followed a goat trail, and I enjoyed knowing that I was literally following in their wild footsteps. The peak was a welcome sight. It was no more than a rise that made the highest point of this wide gentle mountaintop. There was what looked like a small cairn of flat rocks indicating that we weren't the first human visitors. Colleen and I relaxed and snapped a few pictures, reveling in finally getting up into the mountains. The view south was endless, and all the lakes of the Scree—December 2015



*Colleen Metzger on the summit of Peak 4283.  
Photo by Deborah Kelly*

Resurrection Pass Trail stretched before us. We couldn't see any goats, though, so we headed west to look for them. We hiked down another slope, following an obvious goat trail, and dropped 100 feet of elevation or so. Looking down a steep gully to the south, there they were! So far away they were only white blobs without the magnification of Colleen's camera, they lounged around in varying states of relaxation. Many of the 15 or so goats were having an afternoon nap, it seemed. The south side of Peak 4283 looked like a likely place for some future exploring, as it didn't immediately drop off into steepness. It looked like a scramble due south from the peak to the lake might even be possible, though we saved that for another trip.

It started to snow, and it was time to head down. We still had a three-mile paddle across the lake and dire warnings about the rowboat's performance. As the snow began to fall, we too descended. We headed back the way we came, more or less. We missed our previous game trail through the bushes, and spent a very stimulating few minutes flailing blindly through the tall brush. Out the other side, we decided to head straight for the Resurrection Trail instead of heading southwest the way we



*Faces of Success.  
Deborah Kelly (left) and Colleen Metzger (right).  
Photo by Colleen Metzger*

came. This decision was influenced by our tired legs and the hill we would have to climb to start our journey. I was apprehensive about the hillside full of brush that stretched out below us, apparently blocking our way to the trail. We were pleasantly surprised to find an easy open maze that led us down, giving a reprieve from any more bushy adventures. It wasn't snowing down here, and we had a pleasant walk down the dirt trail back to our gear stash.

Peak 4283 was a highlight of our week on the Resurrection Trail, and I will surely return there if I ever find myself near Swan Lake again. The incredible views, easy accessibility, and resident goats combined to make an excellent side trip for those searching for more adventure and solitude than the trail offered.



## Cross-Country Ski to the Devils Pass Cabin

Text by Sasha Johnson



*The U.S. Forest Service sign at Devils Pass on the Kenai Peninsula indicating the elevation of 2400 feet.*

*Photo by David Leon*

Ten miles is a long way in the mountains, especially in winter. Breaking trail uphill in the snow, it would be optimistic to expect more than a two-mile-an-hour pace. Should we take snowshoes or skis? I examined the route again, which confirmed that eight miles of steadily ascending trail plateaued at Devils Pass and continued two more miles until the cabin. Rumor had it that snow had fallen along the trail and the week passed with temperatures well below freezing. That Saturday, November 14, David Leon, Jess Fitterer, Kelly Fitzgerald, and I intended to drive south out of Anchorage to the Devils Creek Trailhead, ski 10 miles in to the cabin at Devils Pass, spend the night there, and ski back the next day. David and I had met about a year ago on a hike and spent some time together at the Matanuska Glacier ice-climbing festival. I knew Jess from one or two brief encounters, but it had been a while, and we had never covered any real distance together. Kelly and I had never met. After exchanging a handful of messages, we determined to meet at a nearby grocery store at 6:00 a.m. and head south.

When I arrived at our meeting place, I purchased a bottle of vitamin C tablets and a bag of cough drops to quell the

unwelcome soreness I could feel lingering at the back of my throat. David and Jess arrived soon afterward, as did Kelly, and we decided to take one vehicle, cramming packs, skis, and sleds into Ruby, Jess' sleek and roomy SUV. For a moment, Kelly stood in front of her own car, staring at her pack, snowshoes, sled, skis, boots, and other items. "I'm just not sure what to bring," she said to herself. Finally she decided against the snowshoes, grabbed skis and her pack, and shoved a light sled with gear wrapped in a tarp on top of everybody else's gear. We had all opted for skis. We were on the Seward Highway heading south by 6:20.

"This is Jess' longest winter hike ever," David commented as he drove. "She's hiked all of Resurrection Trail before, with the kids. I've hiked Resurrection five times, but never in winter." I had met David and Jess, with the children, on the ice-skating trip to Gold Cord Lake last November. Kelly had met both of them at cross-country skiing nights at Russian Jack Springs Park led by a mutual friend. We chatted a little during the first hour, but in the pre-dawn darkness, Jess and Kelly fell asleep, and I took out my tablet and began to read. After a two-hour drive to the Devils Creek Trailhead, we arrived in the blue light of dawn,

and stepped out into 13 degrees of frigid air and thick snowdrifts.

“Are you ready?” David asked us, chuckling, as we gathered our gear into separate piles in the snow outside the SUV.

“I’m ready to go back home,” Jess muttered to herself with a small groan as she got out of the car and zipped up her down coat. I wondered how she would fare today. Her seeming reluctance reminded me of a recent hike in which I had started in a similar temperament and ended in somewhat of a fiasco. “How do you feel?” I asked her. “Oh, I’m O.K. I just need to get on the trail,” she surprised me with a disarming smile and sparkling blue eyes. Jamming her ski boots into their bindings, she threw on her pack and shuffled over toward Kelly, who knelt beside her sled, securing the tarp in place with small bungee cords.



*Jess Fitterer passing Devils Pass Lake on Sunday's return trip.*

*Photo by David Leon*

I decided to hike the first part of the trail in boots and microspikes, and set my skis and poles on my pack as David advised, using my ski straps to secure an A-frame structure. I had neglected to bring anything as an emergency shelter, assuming that we would make it to the cabin within about six hours. I had two down sleeping bags, head lamp, glide wax, a sleeping mat, the Whisperlite stove with a small bottle of fuel, dehydrated food, bars, cider, hot chocolate and oatmeal packets, a bag of chocolate caramels, first aid kit, my tea thermos, and two bottles of water. The car thermometer at the trailhead read 13 degrees Fahrenheit, so I put on all my extra clothing, carrying one pair of liner gloves in my pocket. I wore thin wool base layers, my winter cycling tights, gaiters, a wool sweater, a fleece pullover and a bulky ski jacket. I had brought an extra pair of socks just for sleeping, as well as the warmers for hands and toes, but I kept them in my first aid kit. I also had a pair of rain pants and two warm hats. My pack was probably less than 30 pounds. David and Kelly had decided to start out skiing and pulling sleds. Jess carried just her pack, and had also opted for

skis. With her long down skirt, thick ski hat, and puffy coat, at a distance Jess appeared to be a monk heading out into the alpine wilderness on some long winter pilgrimage. “Jess and I will be the slower two of the group,” David told me. “You and Kelly can keep this walkie-talkie with you.” I stuck it in an outside zippered pocket, and the four of us started down the trail.

Kelly and I pulled ahead of David and Jess within the first mile and continued along a wooded snow-covered trail, along switchbacks, until we cleared the forests and came out into the sunshine on the rise above the creek, which ran through the valley below. After we checked in with David and Jess on the walkie-talkie, we heard David’s cheerful response, “We’re doing all right. We’ll get there. Slow and steady. Can you see the sun from where you are?” “Yes,” I replied. “But it’s going to disappear soon behind the peaks on our left.” “O.K.,” he responded. “I just want to get a sense of how far ahead you are.” I didn’t like to put any more distance between us, but David seemed confident and untroubled, so Kelly and I continued on.

Around Mile 3, a four-foot-wide trail wrapped along the southern side of the mountain, thickly blanketed in snow, with only the faintest impressions of boots and snowshoes from several days previous, and dropping down on our left was a snowy, alder-strewn slope. There I decided to put on my skis and began to break trail while Kelly followed with her sled. From time to time, the sun came out from behind the peaks to the southeast, but we were chasing the light, and for most of the way, our trail lay in a cold, blue shadow. Half-frozen creeks streamed down the mountain to our right, and in some places formed water crossings, which became increasingly difficult. Each time Kelly’s sled or our skis became wet, snow clung to them and instantly turned into clods of ice, which had to be scraped off. When we took off our skis, the bottoms of the boots iced up and had to be cleaned out with a blade before we could get our skis back on. This process of crossing, de-icing, and re-fitting our boots to our bindings took place four or five times. I had to use Kelly’s knife because I hadn’t brought one of my own, a choice which I regretted. If I hadn’t had recourse to her blade, I wouldn’t have been able to use the tips of the ski poles, for they were clumps of ice as well, and I didn’t have anything else that could have sufficed to scrape the boots clean.

Around Mile 5, we came across the last two frozen waterfalls, which were quite tricky to cross with the sled. At the first, Kelly tried to ski across icy slush, dragging the sled behind her, but it slipped precipitously toward the frozen wash on the left, and I



reached out quickly to stabilize it before it took her down the side. She crawled across the ice, hunching down on her skis. At the next waterfall, we both took off skis and picked our way across snow-covered rocks and thicker ice. I crossed first and she passed me the tow poles of her sled. Even so, the base was encrusted with ice and snow afterward. I stopped to de-ice my skis and spread glide wax over the tips and tails and contacted David on the walkie-talkie. "We've hit the halfway point and there are some waterfalls across the trail, so be careful." I heard his answer: "O.K., we're about an hour behind you, I think. We've just come out of the switchbacks. We've got our ice cleats, so we'll be O.K. See you at the cabin."

That was the last radio transmission from David and Jess. Soon after that, the batteries died from the cold, and even after I stuck the radio in the warmest place I could find, it never came on again. Kelly and I continued on in the cold, crossing several more small waterways, but no more major waterfalls. She struggled at each one, trying not to let her sled get wet. Every time we came to a curve on the trail that provided a vantage point, we both would glance back and strain to catch a glimpse of David or Jess. With all the water crossings, we had lost a lot of time, and I expected that they would have made up the distance between us. I would skim my eyes over the trail, which curved around the mountain to the east, but there was sign no of anyone following us. Kelly was moving more slowly now as her ice-encrusted sled dragged along the snow. Finally, she called to me. "We need to stop and talk. I'm really worried about Jess' ability to handle this trail."

I skied back to where she was and nodded my agreement. "Yeah, I agree. This isn't easy for any of us."

Kelly looked back over her shoulder at the trail. "Have you seen them even once? I'm really concerned."

I shook my head and thought a moment. I knew Kelly was worried, but David was one of the most reliable people I knew.

"The last thing David said to me was, 'See you at the cabin.' I'm fairly certain he's thought through worst-case scenarios. He's in the military, he knows Jess really well, and he wouldn't do anything to put her in danger or ask her to do something she couldn't handle. I imagine that when they realize how long it's taking them to make progress, they will probably just turn around, head back to the car, and

take Jess home. They'll expect us to get to the cabin, and they'll come back to pick us up tomorrow when we come out." Even as I said this, I winced at the thought that Kelly and I might be alone on the trail. I hadn't realized until then how I had been depending on David's and Jess' presences to help convince myself that I could handle both the distance and the extreme cold. Somehow it felt more manageable if we were all in it together.

Kelly shivered and shoved a ski pole into the snow. "What do you think about going back to meet up with them? Maybe something's happened."

I considered this for a moment. If we went back, that would mean that we would travel even farther and make ourselves more tired and cold. As much as I wanted the confirmation that David and Jess were right behind us, I knew that we wouldn't be able to help them move any faster. "No, we should continue on to the cabin before it gets dark. That's what they're expecting us to do."

Kelly looked unwilling and dejected, but she agreed. After about another hour or so, I had pulled well ahead of her, but kept looking back from time to time to see where she was. After I had cleared a large snowdrift, I waited for a long time on the other side for Kelly to appear. After about 10 minutes and a cup of hot tea, I looked back and still

couldn't see her. I called her name a few times, and finally took off my skis and hiked back about 200 feet or so. I heard her voice and just over the rise of snow, I saw her skiing toward me.



*Jess Fitterer gingerly crosses the frozen ice on Saturday.*

*Photo by David Leon*



*Jess Fitterer negotiating the frozen waterfall runoff on Saturday.*

*Photo by David Leon*



*The Devils Creek Trail in a brief moment of sunshine on Saturday.*

*Photo by Sasha Johnson*

"I had to leave my sled!" She shouted to me. "It was like pulling a rock!" Actually, before the ice and snow gathered on the base, it pulled easily and one could hardly feel the weight inside it, but after the water crossings, it had become unmanageable. She had taken what she needed and left the sled bottom side up along the side of the trail. David and Jess would surely see it as they passed. I wondered what superfluous items Kelly had chosen to leave behind, considering everything had been carefully chosen for just one night's stay.

Kelly could move faster now, and to my relief, we both could ski together from this point forward. "I feel so much better now that I've dropped that sled. It was really increasing my stress, just dragging. But you know, David and Jess have most of the fuel for the stove. Even if we do get to the cabin, it's going to be really cold in there unless they show up." We soon reached the plateau and what had been a thick, powdery snow into which our skis perpetually sank turned into a windswept layer across which we could ski quite quickly. The pass opened up before us and directly ahead lay a valley stretching out perpendicularly, along which the Resurrection Trail connected the trailhead in Hope with Cooper Landing, 39 miles to the south. We curved along the trail to the left, heading south, as the sun sank into the west, taking with it the last of the light. We skied the last two miles in a blue wash of soft twilight on a trail which wound above frozen lakes. The wind increased in the pass, and blew snow crystals into our faces. At several windswept cornices, the trail disappeared under hard drifts, and I imagined skidding 40 feet down to the frozen lake surface beneath us. There was no moonlight, and I imagined what it would be like for David and Kelly to maneuver across these treacherous spots in the dark, guided by headlamps, following our trail. We ground the metal edges of our skis into the hard snow to force a grip and in other

places took them off and walked on exposed rock. Before us stretched more frozen creek, more snowy trail, and the landscape started to curve and rise again with spruce and alder on the slopes.

"Where's the cabin, Kelly?" I asked, my voice tight and clenched, as I tried to mask my nervous tension. The light was failing, the sky turning orange and pink, with the silhouettes of the mountains hard-edged and black. "Did we go the wrong way?"

"No, it's definitely this way. Just a little more beyond this second lake, around the hill, and to the right. The cabin should be there." Kelly knew the area and was confident that we would find the cabin any minute.

In the grey twilight, scouring wind and growing dark, we skied and skied. Kelly was breaking trail now, and I followed her tracks. We passed by distant dark shapes, and at each one, I strained my eyes to discern what it might be. A shimmer of light on the roof? No, just a silver pond. A huddled clump of spruce. My mind toyed with the idea of putting up a shelter with what we had. Under a tree? The snow wasn't deep enough for a snow cave. The temperature must have been near zero. Neither Kelly nor I had a tent, and even her tarp was left behind with her sled. Finally, just as I was imagining how it might feel to freeze to death, a small wooden structure appeared. "The outhouse!" Kelly gleefully exclaimed. She skied up to a U.S. Forest Service sign, peered at it, and as she bent forward, I saw the cabin further off to her left. "Devils Pass Cabin," she crowed. We skied toward it with relief. The cabin would still be as cold inside as it was outside, but it would protect us from the wind. After 9 hours and 21 minutes of hiking and skiing across 10.88 miles of snow, ice and rock, we had found shelter. But without David and Jess. Within minutes, all features outside the cabin were swallowed in darkness.

"Do you know how to light the stove?" Kelly asked me, stamping her feet and taking out a small lantern from her pack. I stared at the brown metal cylinder in front of the bunks, bent closer to inspect the small silver box at its base, fiddled with an L-shaped piece of metal sticking out of the side, and glanced up at the long exhaust pipe that extended through the ceiling. "Not really. But maybe it's just like a really big Whisperlite." Apparently Kelly had brought one liter of heating oil after all, which might be enough for us to create about three hours of warmth. I walked over to the dusty binder on the table, and opened it to find plastic-lined pages with large photographs and clearly printed instructions. After reading through the material, I was able to fill the container outside with oil and get the stove going fairly quickly with my small



lighter and a bit of tissue paper. The fuel at the bottom of the cylinder caught flame and I replaced the lid on top. While the cylinder radiated heat, Kelly and I set about boiling hot water to rehydrate our food, thaw out frozen water bottles, and prepare water for the next day. My little stove was giving me trouble again, and this time it refused to continue burning after it had primed. I concluded there must be some dirt clogging the valve, because although it produced a flame, as soon as I opened the line and a hint of a blue flame appeared, the fire went out. After the third time, I decided to heat my water on the top of the cabin stove. This brought it pretty near a boil, and worked fine under the circumstances. I had forgotten my spork, but Kelly found a metal fork left behind in the cupboard. Kelly had a small canister stove that, despite the low temperatures, functioned without a hitch. As the stove radiated gentle heat toward the ceiling, we hung our mittens, gloves, gaiters, and extra clothing on the string around the stove to help them thaw out and dry.

“They must have gone back to the car. There’s no way they’re out in this. Listen to that wind!” Kelly glanced out the window into the black night. I sipped hot cider and rubbed my right foot. I had been nursing some blisters all day, and just taking off my ski boot had been fairly painful. I

was hoping in the morning to be able to wrap yet another layer of moleskin and band aids around the blisters in order to be able to ski the return stretch. “Yeah, I can’t imagine David would have kept Jess out in this. They must have turned around. They’ll expect us to stay in the cabin tonight and head out tomorrow. He probably took Jess home and then he’ll wait for us at the trailhead. If they got far enough to see your sled, they’ll know we were having trouble.”

“But if they got far enough to find my sled, they would be only about three or four miles away from the cabin, and they would have gone on.”

“We know that’s how close it is. They don’t necessarily know that.”

“That wind is insane.” Kelly rose and looked out the window for a moment. There was a persistent moaning sound and a strange swooshing noise in the air outside the cabin.

“It’s O.K.,” I shrugged. “David knows what he’s doing. He’s a really sensible guy.”

“I guess you’re right.” Kelly took her inflatable orange sleeping mat out of her pack and started to set up her bunk. I did the same, setting up my mat and tucking one down sleeping bag inside the other. We both set our things on the top bunk, and within 20 minutes had cleaned up the cabin in preparation for a long night. It was perhaps 7 p.m. We bedded down, and tucked our freezable items around us in the bags: water bottle, phone, contact lens supplies, and gloves, too, just to keep them warm for the morning. I closed my eyes and began to drift into a mixture of dreams and reflections almost immediately. I’m not sure if I was asleep or awake, but at one point I was convinced that I heard a consistent banging sound, like someone hitting

two sticks together eight or nine times.

“Kelly!” She didn’t hear me. She must have been asleep. “Kelly. Kelly!”

“Huh?”

“Can you turn on your lantern? I swear I just heard a banging sound outside.”

“Uh, O.K.” She flipped on the little lantern that hung from a string above our heads. “What did you hear?”

“A banging sound. Just like someone was out there slapping sticks together, really regularly, like ‘Wham, wham, wham.’ Did you hear it?”

“No.”

“Can you just keep the light on? If they’re out there trying to make some kind of signal, they will be able to see the light of the cabin.”

“Yeah, of course.” We kept talking a bit longer, and finally decided that they couldn’t really be out in the icy dark, and so we turned the lantern off again.

We both lay down and let the quiet return to the cabin. I drifted back into dreams, as snowy landscapes lit by moonlight, scoured by wind, and stippled with spruce trees passed through my mind. The swish-swish, scrape of the skis. The glassy, fogged over surface of the frozen lake. Suddenly, I heard the distinct sound of boots stomping on snowy steps.

“Kelly, they’re here!”



*The windswept intersection of the Resurrection Trail and the Devils Pass Trail on Sunday.*

*Photo by David Leon*

I sat up and with blurry vision made out David's figure entering through the doorway. A whirl of cold swirled around my shoulders as I left the warmth of the bag. "David! Where's Jess?"

"I left her about half a mile back. I'll have to go back for her. She's a lot better off than I am right now, but her knee's bothering her a little."

David slumped onto a bench and leaned on the table. Kelly hopped down and started toward her stove. "I'll make up some hot water."

"Thanks," he muttered, his eyes closed, but his voice cordial. "I'm pretty discombobulated."

I climbed down the bunk ladder and walked over to the door, looking out the window at his orange sled, which he had brought up onto the porch. "Is Jess O.K.?"

"Yeah. Can I have some water? I'm so thirsty. We drank everything we had."

"Of course." Kelly handed him a water bottle from where it hung above the stove and David downed every drop. "Here's some hot water. You can use my cup." She handed him a steaming steel mug. "And here's a piece of chocolate," she said, handing him a little dark slab.

"Thank you," he mumbled softly, sipping the water. "I've got to go back out and lead her in." He stood up, opened the door, and headed back out into the night. The door stood open a little behind him, and I pulled it shut, not even watching, but listening to the crunch of his steps growing more faint.

Kelly and I looked at each other. "I can't believe they were still out there all that time," she groaned, her eyes wide.

"I'll bring in the sled. Let's get their food ready for them. They're going to be ravenous." I slipped my cold boots back on over my socks, stepped outside, dumped the snow from the sled, and brought it inside onto one of the benches. "I'll go get more water from the creek," I volunteered, putting my heavy coat back on as Kelly began fishing through the containers in David's sled, looking for dehydrated meals. As I took the water bag from the wooden counter, Kelly advised me, "Take that long ice scraper with you to push the bag under the water so it fills up. It's stubborn. And you'll have to stand out on the ice a little in order to get the bag into the water."

Wearing my knitted gloves outside, I could feel the cold instantly in my fingertips and knuckles, and by the time I reached the creek, my hands were already numb. I stepped through the snow, out onto the ice, watching the black, shiny water carefully, and using the metal end of the ice scraper to

plunge the bag six or seven times down into the water, before I was able to bring up half a bag of water. Back inside, Kelly was boiling water in her little stove. "I'm just going to keep a lid on the water and put it on the stove until they get back. I don't want to make their food and then let it get cold before they get back." I set the water bag on the counter and glanced around. "Let's fill up some containers with hot water, so they can cook and drink as soon as they get back."

Kelly found some dehydrated potato soup among David's things. I brought in all the skis and poles and set them in a corner. We opened David's gallon of heating fuel and I started the stove again, which had already used up the fuel we had poured in earlier, and grown cold. Then, when everything to be done was done, we waited. It wasn't long before we heard the sounds of steps in the snow again, and the door opened. David came in first, followed by Jess, who entered with a smile. "Hello!" she grinned. She strode into the room. "How are you all?"

"It's so good to see you!" I exclaimed, shocked at her genial composure. I had expected a more desperate entrance, but no, Jess stood there beaming. I glanced at David, and he chuckled weakly. "You think I'm tough." He gestured at Jess. "She's a rock star." Jess smiled broadly, her blue eyes sparkling. "Wanna know my secret weapon against the cold?" She unzipped her down jacket to reveal a woolen sweater, and slowly took it off over her head to reveal yet another, thinner sweater below that. "Seven layers of wool, baby." She continued to undress, laughing softly to herself, until she reached the last base layer. It had taken them 12 hours of skiing to get to the cabin, yet her characteristic serenity remained unruffled.

Jess got out her phone and a wireless speaker and started playing cheesy pop music. I didn't even care that it was Britney Spears and Miley Cyrus. It was just so good to know they were safe and sound inside the cabin, doing normal things like eating potato soup and drinking hot chocolate and telling us stories. "Yeah, there were times when I fell down in the snow, and I was so tired that I just lay there. I didn't even want to get up," Jess admitted. "But then I started to feel really, really cold, and I knew I had to keep moving."

"I don't know how you got your sled all the way up here!" Kelly exclaimed. "I had to leave mine."

"I saw that," David nodded. "For a while, I had Jess' pack on the sled, to help her move more quickly, but once, going over one of those waterfall crossings that you warned us about, the sled slipped to the side and even though the pack was clipped on, it broke loose and fell down the side of the slope, and I had to go down after it. That was exhausting, and it was pretty soon



afterwards that we used up the last of our water. For a while Jess took off her skis so she wouldn't keep falling, but then she just got slower and slower, and I was farther and farther ahead of her. But when we got to the flat part right before the Resurrection Trail, she put her skis on again and could move more quickly."

Jess broke in, "Yeah, but by then it was dark, and the snow was so windswept that it was sometimes impossible to find your ski tracks. For a while, I just kept watching David's head lamp bobbing ahead of me, but at one point it completely disappeared, and then the trail did, too. I didn't really know which direction to go in the dark."

"That was around the time when I headed for the cabin. I knew I could come back for her, but I needed water." David sighed and looked at Jess.

"I was fine. I just kept moving in the same direction until I saw your light again. Then after a little ways, your tracks were visible again."

"What about that big cornice of windswept snow? We hiked above it because I was afraid we would slip down the slope towards the lake?"

"We saw that, but we also saw that your tracks kept going about 20 feet further on. Jess and I just skied right over that cornice."

"Oh," I said, slightly awed. I crawled back into my sleeping bag and the conversation dwindled down. David passed around a few sips of a delicious spirit made from cinnamon and Honey Crisp apples by an independent distillery in Sterling. I snuggled back into my sleeping bag, read a few pages of *Freedom of the Hills* and listened to the familiar voices drift in and out of my awareness. Eventually, I slipped into sleep.

We woke at 7:30 to the sound of Kelly's alarm, but no one left their sleeping bags for about 10 minutes. I peeked my head out, felt the bite of the cold air, and watched David fumble around in the dark to light the stove. Sometime in the night before he went to bed, he had turned it off to conserve fuel. I glanced out the window at the silvery blue morning light, the snowy landscape a foggy blur through the glass. But the thought of ending another day of skiing near dark was impetus enough to pull me out of bed, and I began preparing my things for departure. The thermometer read -2°F on the porch, and as soon as I took my first photo of the morning, the phone died, despite having spent the night tucked in my sleeping bag.

Although we had said that we would stick together as a group, it took me much less time than the others to get ready to

leave, and I was admittedly impatient and cold. I started out, knowing that if I skied slowly, I could get warm and that they would still be able to catch up. I kept looking back from time to time, and once I reached the lakes, I saw Kelly coming around the slope. A few minutes later, I turned again and saw all three of them on the trail. Once I reached the pink light of the morning sun on the plateau, I stopped by the Devils Pass elevation marker to wait for Kelly. She caught up quickly. "So I have the radio, the batteries are charged, and we're going to leave it off until two. Then we're going to make contact. I also have the car key. If we get there before they do, we get in the car, warm up, and wait." "Sounds like a plan," I said, and we both headed back along the plateau, following our thin tracks in the windswept snow.

The descent was slight, but perceptible, and we were definitely going faster. In some places it was difficult to ski downhill without falling down, because the trail was too narrow to "pizza," or make a "V" shape with the tips of the skis to create friction. We crossed the waterfalls before 12, using Kahtoolas on the ones that had frozen over, and were back at the trailhead by 2:30 or 3. We were able to contact David and Jess once near the switchbacks, but after that they never answered our radio transmissions. We continued sending messages, but received no reply. Still, we weren't really concerned this time, since they had sunlight, a downhill slope, and a broken trail. Jess and David beat the sunset and arrive before five. They were again in surprisingly good spirits, despite the fact that it was nearly 0 degrees outside. Turns out that they could hear our radio transmissions the entire time, but we could not hear their answers. We loaded the car and set off north. Dinner took the shape of burgers and fries in Girdwood, and we must have looked as wind-nipped as we felt, because we were greeted by the server with the exclamation, "You look cold! Where have you been?" We exchanged glances. "Skiing," David answered. "Out by Devils Pass."

At the table, over dinner, we basked in the warmth of the little diner and happily replaced the calories we had burned during hours on the trail. "This is going to be one of those nights when I fall asleep in the bathtub," I said to Kelly, laughing, "with a beer and candlelight and a good book." "Oh, that sounds perfect," she agreed. Jess was apple-cheeked and beautiful, and David looked pleased and satisfied. This weekend was the two-year anniversary of their relationship, and it had definitely been unforgettable.

# The John Muir Trail

Text by Colleen Metzger

Hiking the John Muir Trail started almost a year in advance. Over Labor Day weekend, 2014, my hiking buddy Maureen Peterson and I were doing the Lost Lake Trail. She said she was contemplating doing the JMT next summer. Would I be interested, she asked. I only had the vaguest knowledge of what the JMT was or what it entailed, but I had the summer free and am always looking for new hiking adventures.

"Sure!" I agreed.

I had no idea what I had agreed to.

I did a little research to fully understand what I had just signed on for. The JMT traveled more than 200 miles, starting in Yosemite Valley and terminating atop Mount Whitney at 14508 feet. Almost the entire trek is above 8000 feet in elevation. The trail meandered over six mountain passes over 11000 feet, including Forester Pass, which, at 13152 feet, is the highest point on the Pacific Crest Trail. The PCT merges with the JMT for most of its duration. We decided to allot three weeks to complete the hike, and our hiking team included me, our team leader Maureen Peterson, Janetta Norvel Smith, and Robyn Claytor. We had all hiked together previously, enjoyed each other's company, and hiked at similar paces. It seemed like a great team – a good-sized group, and good personalities to be trapped in the wilderness together for weeks on end.

In late October we booked our plane tickets to Reno, and on January 28 we gambled on the all-important lottery to see if we would even be allowed to hike. Permits are released 168 days before the planned date to hike. All four of us submitted requests, figuring the more people in the lottery, the better our chances were. We didn't get it.

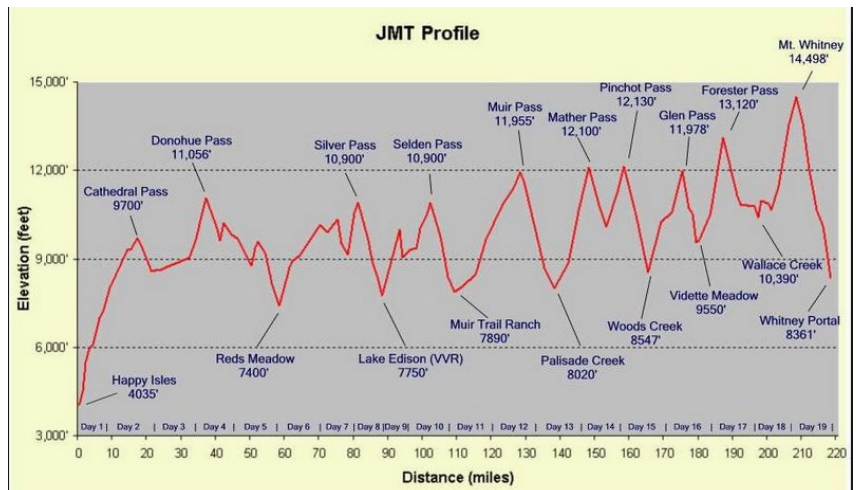


Atop Muir Pass - Colleen Metzger, Janetta Norvel Smith, and Maureen Peterson (left to right).  
Photo courtesy of Colleen Metzger

We tried the permit lottery again the next day.

No dice.

It was a challenging year to do the lottery. Yosemite was lowering the number of people allowed to exit through Donohue Pass to 45 people a day, and that change was being



John Muir Trail Profile

Image courtesy of <http://www.saquetosummit.com/blog/>.





*The view during the first day on the trail.*

*Photo by Colleen Metzger*

initiated mere days after we were submitting our permit request. So everyone was in a panic, flooding the permit office with desperate requests. By glorious chance we were issued a permit on January 30th, and we all sighed massive sighs of relief – we were in! It was on! But then the real work began.

Our team met several times throughout the next few months – arranging food drops, booking rental cars and bus tickets, doing gear checks, and convincing each other we would not die alone in the wild. Summer flew by, and the hike was upon us. On July 15 we were on the plane to Reno, where we rented a car and drove to Mammoth Lakes. We were up at 5:00 a.m. on the 16th to drop off our first resupply (it was more cost effective than mailing it out) and then we dropped off our rental car and boarded a bus to Yosemite. We picked up our permit and spent the night at Tuolumne Meadows, packing and repacking our gear, giddy with nerves, enjoying our last burgers and beers for the foreseeable future. Our official start date was July 17, and we took the Yosemite bus to the Cathedral Lakes Trailhead at dawn and the hike began.

To gain the best chance in the permit lottery, we had all applied for various starting campgrounds. We ended up with the Cathedral Lakes as our starting trailhead, bumping us forward on the trail from the true starting point at Happy Isles. To combat the lost mileage, we opted to start our trip off the JMT, doing the "High Sierra Loop," visiting several high-altitude camps designated for tourists interested in glamour camping. So while we followed the JMT for most of our first day, we detoured off trail at the end of our first day, and by Day Two on the trail, we had already climbed to 10300 feet, camping at

Volgelsang High Sierra Camp. That made for a grueling second day on the trail, combating heat, altitude, and a 15-mile day.

The altitude was probably the biggest hurdle of the trip. Day One on the trail, a fellow hiker ominously warned us, "You don't know what you're getting yourself into," and our hiking team looked at each other and dissolved into laughter. Yes, we were doing heavy mileage days. And yes, we were at a higher altitude than we were used to. But after hiking in Alaska, the JMT felt almost hilariously well manicured. Switchbacks were lovingly cut up each mountain pass. The trail was finely ground gravel, lined with rocks creating a neat boarder on either side of the trail, and creating an obvious visual cue to follow. If the trail gained any elevation, steps were neatly cut into the trail. After hiking in Alaska it was an extremely reasonable trail – no boulder fields! No scree! No icy snowfields!

Day Four on the trail, we headed up our first mountain pass – Donohue Pass at 11060 feet – and exited Yosemite National



Janetta Norvel Smith coming up Glen Pass.

*Photo by Colleen Metzger*

Park. On our way down from Donohue, one of our team members – Robyn – tweaked her knee. The next morning she was in intense pain, so we followed a branch of the PCT off the trail and bussed into Mammoth Lakes. We got extremely lucky. Obviously getting injured was a crushing blow for Robyn, but if tragedy had to strike, it struck at an opportune moment. To hike off trail was a mere eight miles of rolling terrain. Most of the trail was more remote and would have required more effort and elevation to exit. And, since we were resupplying in Reds Meadow, nearby Mammoth Lakes, we were able to maintain our original hiking schedule. An additional bonus was avoiding a nasty thunderstorm that was raging on the trail, instead treating ourselves to a luxurious night in a hotel in town (our only night in a town for the entire trip) and enjoyed showers, pizza, laundry, and beer! The next morning we said good-bye to Robyn and a local friend drove us to Reds Meadow where we picked up our resupply and hit the trail once more.

The remainder of the trip, we fell into a pattern of hiking to the base of a pass, priming ourselves to tackle it in the morning, and then getting up and over the pass before possible afternoon thunderstorms rolled in, and setting ourselves up for the next pass. The weather was surprisingly mild for most of our trip. We had one day of rain, and two days of a lovely hail/rain mix, but otherwise it was sunny and mild. The landscape was constantly breathtaking, from cinder cone volcanoes to high mountain lakes ringed by trees and spiky mountains, to far off glaciers cradled in sky-scraping peaks.

Every day was stunning. The saddest part of the trip was when I stopped pulling out my camera every mile: "Oh, another charming, sun-soaked creek splashing down the mountain? I've seen three of those already today!" It was such a beauty overload, day after day, that I had to constantly remind myself to be appreciative.

Our team all agreed we made a mistake not planning any zero days. Three weeks of hiking seemed so reasonable in theory, but we allotted ourselves no zero days. No rest days. And by the end of the trip, all three of us were really craving a zero day. On Day Eight we visited Vermillion Valley Resort for a partial rest day, getting beer, real food, showering, and doing laundry. On Day Ten we stopped at Muir Trail Ranch to pick up our last resupply, but Muir Trail Ranch wouldn't allow hikers to eat or shower or do laundry unless they paid

to stay in one of their incredibly pricy glamour tents. But those were our only two "rest" days, and even on our lightest days of hiking we still did at least seven miles. We all felt that we got stronger and faster as we hiked, day to day, but by the last week all three of us were slowing down. We were fatigued and our bodies craved a break. It was especially slow going after our resupply at Muir Trail Ranch, since it was our last resupply and we had over a week of food to add to our packs. We slogged out of the resupply in a brutal sun with insanely heavy packs. At Muir Trail Ranch we also started to notice a haze in the sky – the forest fires over 200 miles away were raging so violently that the air was choked with smoke. For the rest of our hike, the tang of smoke was a



*Guitar Lake*

*Photo by Colleen Metzger*



*Fin Dome*

*Photo by Colleen Metzger*



constant companion.

The landscape was always changing, from bleak desert vistas with scraggly, bare trees and lizards scrambling across the trail to spear-like khaki peaks with pikas peeking out of rock piles. We padded over soft dirt and pine needles in silent, dwarfing forests and swam in chilly mountain streams picturesquely bordered by lush vegetation. I'd get out of my tent in the morning and scare away a curious marmot or turn a corner and interrupt a cluster of grazing deer. I was satiated with stunning beauty, day after day. But it was also a personal revelation. This was the longest backpacking trip I had ever done, and I was constantly amazed that I could keep moving forward, even when my feet were numb or my back was aching or the sun was brutally hot or I was being pounded by hail or the mosquitos or gnats or flies or whatever pesky insects du jour were relentlessly attacking.

We hiked day after day, gaining more and more elevation, and leaving higher and higher mountain passes behind us. And soon, Whitney was looming. The end of the trip was almost there. Our last night on the trail, we camped at Guitar Lake. And it was absolutely miserable. We were not only camped with other JMT through-hikers, but with anyone who had entered via another trail and was planning on tackling the mountain. Guitar Lake was a shimmering lake in the shape of – yep, you guessed it – a guitar, snuggled beside narrow, steep, craggy gray peaks – a forbidding first taste of what Whitney, still hidden at that point, would look like. The lake



*One of the many alpine lakes along the JMT.*

*Photo by Colleen Metzger*

day.

For the first time, I couldn't sleep. The glory of hiking is that I fall asleep like a drunken baby night after night. But I was restless. Perhaps it was the constant scuffling of other hikers packing their gear for dawn summit bids. Perhaps I was

nervous about the summit. Perhaps I was sad to leave the trail. But I stood outside my tent at 3:00 a.m. and watched head lamps bobbing up the trail: hikers determined to see the sunrise from Mount Whitney. A shooting star cut across the clear sky and I took it as a positive sign – clear night after clear night I had waited to see a shooting star, and this was my first of the trip.

We were up at 4:30, and ready to leave around 6:00.

The trail, in true John Muir

style, was well-maintained and full of reasonable switchbacks. Therefore, I kept a steady pace and the altitude was barely noticeable. The view was stunning, the entire wilderness stretching out endlessly beneath me. Sadly, as dawn broke, the smog from the forest fires started to inch across the landscape, and by the time I was at the summit the view was mostly



*Desert trees on the slow climb to Mount Whitney.*

*Photo by Colleen Metzger*

veiled by smoke. But I was giddy at the summit and barely cared that the view was obscured. I had saved a traveler of whiskey and our team did celebratory shots and snapped photographs. We had cell service for the first time in two weeks and took advantage, telling family and friends that we were alive and had officially finished the JMT!

Then came the hardest part of the entire trip. Whitney was the official end of the JMT, but the flaw was that there is no magic slide or zip-line down the mountain. We had to hike down. And when all we wanted was a shower and a beer, when we already were up at dawn and had summited the highest peak in the contiguous United States, we just wanted to get off the mountain. But the hike off Whitney was nine miles, dropping

from 14000 feet to 8000 feet and looping through over 90 switchbacks. It was the longest nine miles I had ever hiked. And getting beer and food and a shower at the end were pretty amazing. But that night, showered, in clean clothes, in a real bed for the first time in 20 days ... I was restless. I felt trapped, suffocated. I missed my sleeping bag. I missed my tent. I missed the wild. I thought I would be happy to return to civilization, but barely five hours off the trail and I already wanted to return to the mountains.

Feel free to contact me with questions about planning a trip, arranging permits and food drops, and for a million stories from the trail: [colleenalexis@gmail.com](mailto:colleenalexis@gmail.com).



*Janetta Norvel Smith, Maureen Peterson, and Colleen Metzger (left to right) on Mount Whitney's summit.*

*Photo courtesy of Colleen Metzger*



# Peak of the Month: Peak 4

Text by Steve Gruhn

**Mountain Range:** Kenai Mountains

**Borough:** Kenai Peninsula Borough

**Drainages:** Paguna Glacier and Sunlight Glacier

**Latitude/Longitude:** 59° 42' 27" North, 150° 1' 8" West

**Elevation:** 4718 feet

**Prominence:** 668 feet from Peak 5 (4734)

**Adjacent Peaks:** Peak 5, Peak 4131 in the Paguna Glacier and Sandy Bay drainages, and Peak 2005 in the Sunlight Glacier and Otter Cove drainages

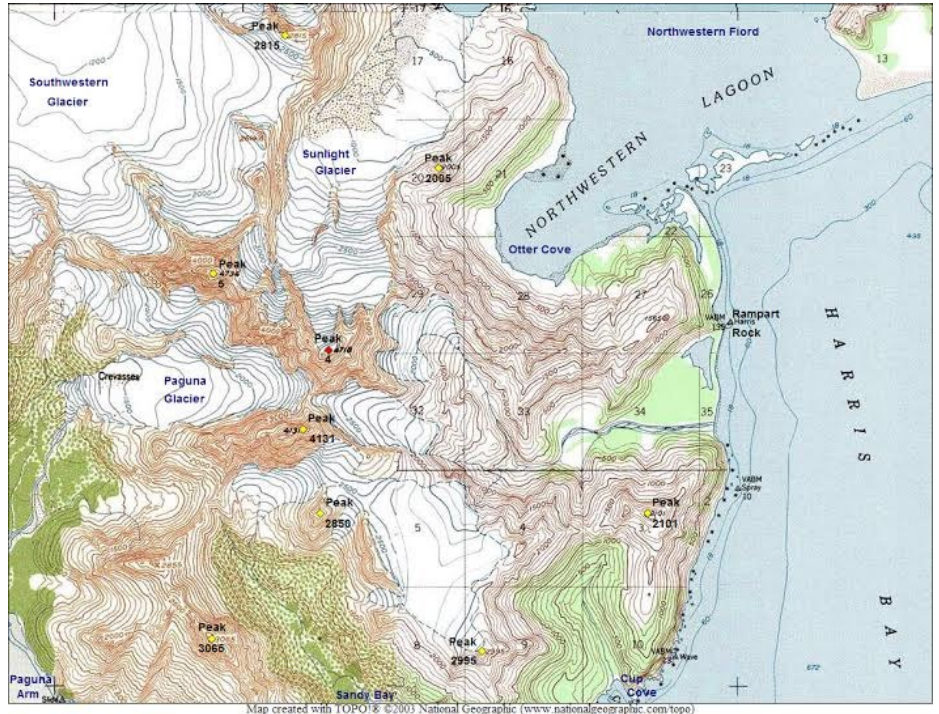
**Distinctness:** 668 feet from Peak 5

**USGS Maps:** Seldovia (C-1)

**First Recorded Ascent:** September 23, 1981, by Loren Adkins and Walter R. Gove

**Route of First Recorded Ascent:** Northeast ridge

**Access Point:** Otter Cove



In 1928 a U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey party under the leadership of Richard R. Lukens described a massive mountain north of the Paguna Glacier between Paguna Arm and Harris Bay in the Kenai Mountains. They noted three summits of this massive mountain and labeled the most southeasterly of the three as Peak 4.

On September 5, 1981, Loren Adkins and Walt Gove left Seward in a two-man Klepper kayak with minimal climbing gear and 23 days of food. They paddled south and west into the newly created Kenai Fjords National Park where they were met with prolonged periods of rainy weather interspersed with brief moments of sunshine. Gove reported that they climbed Peak P (4430) on the Harris Peninsula on the 9th. Adkins reportedly made a solo ascent of Tip Peak (3185) on the Harris Peninsula on the 20th.

On September 23 both Adkins and Gove set out from Otter Cove to climb the northeast ridge of Peak 4. They skirted the north side of the 3450-foot spire and crossed the upper reaches of the Sunlight Glacier before gaining the northeast ridge, which they followed to the summit. Gove mentioned that the

climb was a bit more difficult than the ascent of Peak P, which he described as pretty straightforward. Gove's account of the ascent of Peak 4 in the 1984 *American Alpine Journal* was rather brief, but his recounting of the return bordered on the poetic: "It was late as we descended from that peak. Below the rock buttress the only light came from the stars. Finally we reached the kayak. The sea was still and we paddled gently. Soon the sky brightened with the Aurora Borealis. As we paddled, we hit phosphorescent plankton. The bow of the kayak created a V of golden green and each dip of the paddle a green glowing pool while drops of luminous gold fell from the paddles. We both felt as if we were in the land of elves."

The information for this article came from National Geodetic Survey records obtained from geocaching.com at <http://www.geocaching.com/mark/details.aspx?PID=UW5312>; from my correspondence with Albert E. "Skip" Theberge, Jr., of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; from Gove's article titled "Alaskan Kayak Mountaineering," which appeared on pages 94 through 101 of the 1984 *AAJ*; and from my correspondence with Gove.

# MCA Board Meeting Minutes - Monday November 16, 2015

Attendees: Nathan Hebda, Stephen Austria, Jennifer DuFord, Max Neale, Cory Hinds

1. **Welcome new board members:** Nathan Hebda, Stephen Austria, and Jennifer DuFord. Introductions all around.
  - a. Reviewed roles and responsibilities
  - b. Reviewed Board meeting procedures
2. **VP-Programs (Galen Flint)**
  - a. October: great meeting with Calendar and Aaron Thrasher slideshow
  - b. November: Carl Oswald – Chugach ice
  - c. December: 12/15 holiday party at Pioneer School House. Max: Audiovisual and screen setup (contact Carlene Van Tol and Jayme Mack). Will need help with setup and cleanup, too.
3. **Treasurer's report**
  - a. We've spent 72% of our 2015 budget thus far and expect to be under budget for the year.
4. **Secretary's report**
  - a. All Board documents will be stored in Google Drive, not on personal computers.
5. **Huts (Cory):**
  - a. Vents purchased for Mint Hut. Ross Noffsinger designed them and had them built. Greg Braigel will organize their installation. Greg Braigel: send installed photos to plaque sponsors.
6. **Training (Jayme, Josh Clark):**
  - a. Trying to organize the Winter Basic Mountaineering School. We plan to line up a selection of courses with combination of volunteer and paid instruction.
  - b. Level 1 Avalanche course, March 5-7 at Hatcher Pass. See the Alaska Avalanche Center site to register.
  - c. Crevasse Rescue – date to be determined (TBD)
  - d. Snow climbing, ice climbing – date TBD
7. **Hiking and Climbing**
  - a. Ed Smith has volunteered to be our Hiking and Climbing Committee Chair, which fills two roles: (1) get people to lead trips and communicate trips to our members; and (2) make sure trip leaders are qualified to lead. We have a short new leader checklist. Vicky Lytle will share with Ed.
8. **Mentoring**
  - a. We need roughly 15 more mentors. Will call.
9. **Library (Cory)**
  - a. Lots of progress with sorting and cataloguing. Charlotte Foley will finish creating an online database with our titles.
10. **Equipment (Josh)**

Nothing new to report.
11. **Parks Advisory (Cory)**

Nothing new to report. Looking for someone to take over this role.
12. **New Business**
  - a. Stephen and Cory will pursue MCA apparel (contact Mike Meyers).
  - b. Developed 2016 Budget, for membership review.
  - c. Reviewed member roster, assigned phone calls for mentoring and leading trips.
13. **Next meetings**
  - a. Board: Tuesday, December 8<sup>th</sup>, 6 p.m., REI classroom
  - b. General (Holiday Party): December 15<sup>th</sup>, 6:30 p.m., Pioneer School House



# Mountaineering Club of Alaska

## 2016 PROPOSED BUDGET

		Proposed for 2016	Budget Change	Approved for 2015	Current for 2015
<b>REVENUE</b>					
Membership Dues	<i>received during calendar year</i>	\$9,500	\$500	\$9,000	\$9,745
Scree subscriptions		\$450	\$100	\$350	\$430
Training	<i>BMS, ice climbing, rock climbing, other</i>	\$8,000	\$1,000	\$7,000	\$9,175
Photo Calendar		\$2,300	(\$200)	\$2,500	\$2,268
MCA Products: T-Shirts, Patches, Etc.		\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Interest on Accounts		\$75	\$0	\$75	\$73
Other - Donations, etc		\$0	\$0	\$0	\$168
<b>TOTAL REVENUE</b>		\$20,325	\$1,400	\$18,925	\$21,859
<b>EXPENSE</b>					
Training	<i>campsite, access fees, instructors, trip leaders</i>	\$4,000	(\$200)	\$4,200	\$3,570
Scree	<i>postage, mailing, printing</i>	\$2,800	\$400	\$2,400	\$2,447
General Meeting	<i>rent, refreshments, entertainment supplies, PO box, web site, ads,</i>	\$1,000	(\$700)	\$1,700	\$657
Administrative	<i>travel, misc.</i>	\$800	\$0	\$800	\$728
Hut Construction & Maint.	<i>materials, supplies, hut equipment, lease fees</i>	\$30,000	\$13,000	\$17,000	\$13,858
Insurance	<i>reincorporation fees, insurance climbing gear, misc equipment,</i>	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Club Equipment	<i>storage</i>	\$500	(\$200)	\$700	\$609
Library	<i>new books, periodicals, storage</i>	\$200	(\$50)	\$250	\$0
Other:	<i>miscellaneous expenses</i>				
Photo Calendar		\$2,600	\$0	\$2,600	\$0
MCA Products: T-Shirts, Patches, Etc.		\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Other - Awards		\$600	\$0	\$600	\$0
Other -		\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
<b>TOTAL EXPENSE</b>		\$42,500	\$12,250	\$30,250	\$21,869
<b>DUE TO (FROM) RESERVE</b>		<b>(\$22,175)</b>		<b>(\$11,325)</b>	<b>(\$10)</b>
<b>CASH BALANCE - All Accounts</b>					
Beginning Balance - January 1, 2015					\$37,851
Increase (decrease) during 2015					(\$10)
<b>Current Balance for 2015</b>					<b>\$37,841</b>
Checking - Credit Union 1					\$15,539
Money Mkt and CDs - Credit Union 1					\$20,712
Savings - Credit Union 1					\$416
18-month CD - in trust for hut lease - Northrim Bank					\$1,169
Petty Cash					\$5
<b>Ending Balance - Revised 11/16/2015</b>					<b>\$37,841</b>

## Mountaineering Club of Alaska

President	Cory Hinds	229-6809	Board member (term expires in 2016)	Jamye Mack	382-0212
Vice-President	Galen Flint	650-207-0810	Board member (term expires in 2016)	Carlene Van Tol	748-5270
Secretary	Max Neale	207-712-1355	Board member (term expires in 2017)	Nathan Hebda	310-3255
Treasurer	Aaron Gallagher	250-9555	Board member (term expires in 2017)	Stephen Austria	402-540-7037
			Board member (term expires in 2016)	Jennifer DuFord	227-6995

Annual membership dues: Single \$20, Family \$25

Dues can be paid at any meeting or mailed to the Treasurer at the MCA address below. If you want a membership card, please fill out a club waiver and mail it with a self-addressed, stamped envelope. If you fail to receive the newsletter or have questions about your membership, contact the Club Membership Committee at [membership@mtnclubak.org](mailto:membership@mtnclubak.org).

*The Scree* is a monthly publication of the Mountaineering Club of Alaska. Articles, notes, and letters submitted for publication in the newsletter should be emailed to [MCAScree@gmail.com](mailto:MCAScree@gmail.com). Articles should be submitted by the 24th of the month to appear in the next month's *Scree*.

Paid ads may be submitted to the attention of the Vice-President at the club address and should be in electronic format and pre-paid. Ads can be emailed to [vicepresident@mtnclubak.org](mailto:vicepresident@mtnclubak.org).

Missing your MCA membership card? Stop by the monthly meeting to pick one up or send a self-addressed, stamped envelope and we'll mail it to you.

Mailing list/database entry: Aaron Gallagher - [membership@mtnclubak.org](mailto:membership@mtnclubak.org)

Hiking and Climbing Committee: Ed Smith - 854-5702 or [hcc@mtnclubak.org](mailto:hcc@mtnclubak.org)

Huts: Greg Bragiel - 569-3008 or [huts@mtnclubak.org](mailto:huts@mtnclubak.org)

Calendar: Stuart Grenier - 337-5127 or [stugrenier@gmail.com](mailto:stugrenier@gmail.com)

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Web: [www.mtnclubak.org](http://www.mtnclubak.org)

Find MCAK listserv at <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/MCAK/info>.

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