



## **MT. BLACKBURN (16,390 ft.) EXPEDITION**

**Mt. Blackburn was named in 1885, by Lieutenant Henry Allen after General Blackburn, a superior officer in the War Department. It is a shame that this name simply doesn't do justice to the magnificence of the "Jewel of the Wrangells," for at 16,390 feet, Mt. Blackburn is the highest peak of this volcanic range. Formed just to the north of the St. Elias Mountains, the Wrangells are the volcanoes formed by the fiery collision of the tectonic plates that lead to the birth of the immense St. Elias and Ice Field Ranges to the south and east. Mt. Blackburn, Mt. Sanford, and Mt. Wrangell, are all huge volcanoes, with Mt. Wrangell being the most recent peak to blow its top, the last eruption being in 1916, when it deposited over 3 feet of ash on the Copper River Valley.**

**Mt. Blackburn and the rest of the Wrangells are relatively unknown mountains. Climbed less than 50 times, Mt. Blackburn, at over 16,000 feet is still a wilderness climbing experience as well as an immense glacier covered arctic peak. An attempt on this remote giant gives a climber a great introduction into world class mountaineering. Climbers don't have to stand in line waiting to clip onto fixed ropes as on Denali. There are numerous unclimbed faces and ridges waiting for future mountaineers, and the Northwest Ridge is a route that allows access to the summit, but not without some steeper climber.**

**On our Mt. Blackburn Expedition subjects and skills that will be covered are:**

**Climbing equipment - types, differences, specific uses**

**Carabineers - types, uses, care, safety considerations, locking**

**Knots - tie in, anchoring, glacier travel vs. rock/ice climbing, figure 8, butterfly, follow through 8, bowline, water, munter, garda, clove**

**Rope work - different types, care, coiling, smooth management**

**Ice axe - types, techniques, proper use on different terrain**

**Crampons - types, step ins, strap ons, French technique, American technique, front pointing, traversing, care, protection from**

**Belaying - hip belay, devices, safety, back-ups**

**Ascending - types, emergency, fixed line, crevasse rescue**

**Rappelling - anchors, back-ups, double checking, devices**

**Anchors - types, snow, ice, rock, equalizing, back-up, checking**

**Rescue - techniques, rope management, belay escapes, self, group, crevasse**

**Evacuation - self sufficient, technical, ground, air**

**Leading - experience, practice, dangers, anchors, rope work**

**Leadership - experience, skills, techniques, attitude**

**Rating systems - differences, examples, relation**

**Route finding - objective dangers, experience, factors**

**Self arrest - techniques, all positions, different tools**

**Crevasse rescue - self ascending, group, Z-pully, drop loop**

**Rope work - glacier travel, tautness, zigzagging, tie in**

**Knots - specialty, tie in, figure 8, butterfly, follow through 8, bowline, water, muentner, garda, clove**  
**Anchors - snow- pickets, flukes, dynamic belays, shock loading  
back up, stacking, bomb proof**  
**Camp sites - selection, objective dangers, probing, wandering, digging in, snow walls,  
block walls**  
**Tents - anchoring devices, fire safety, cooking in/near, ventilation, care**  
**Stoves - choice of type, fuel, care, survival need, protection**  
**Equipment storage - careful attention to clean up, concern of being buried by snow,  
putting away, wandering**  
**Shelters - snow pits, caves and igloos, discuss advantages, discuss danger of wetness  
while digging, emergency needs**  
**Sanitation - bagging waste, washing hands, pitching in**  
**Water - snow melting, purity, amounts**  
**Caches - building, site selection, protection**  
**AMS - symptoms, cause, prevention, acclimatization, monitoring self and others, being  
honest, communication to leaders**  
**Hypothermia and Frostbite - causes, additional factors, prevention, communication with  
leaders, honesty, monitoring**  
**HAPE and HACE - symptoms, causes, mitigating factors, prevention, going down,  
recovery, side effects.**

**DAY 1- We will pick you up at your hotel early in the morning and begin our drive to McCarthy. Our route will take us along the Chugach Mountains. Within minutes of leaving Anchorage, the scenery becomes impressive. On one side are steep, snow-capped peaks, and on the other side the tidal flats of Cook Inlet. We will follow the Matanuska River valley where the long days of summer produce the famous sixty pound cabbages. As we approach Chickaloon Pass we will sight our first glacier, the mighty Matanuska.**

**Glaciers are Mother Nature's pathways into the mountains. They gain altitude gradually, and the hiker can avoid precipitous ridges. Typical cross-country terrain in Alaska can range from hip-deep bogs and muskeg to impenetrable alder thickets. These frozen rivers are highways in comparison.**

**On a clear day the magnificent Wrangell Mountains will be directly in front of us as we descend from Chickaloon Pass. Mt. Drum will stand out the most, and look the highest, but that's because it's much closer. In reality it is the smallest of these large peaks at 12,010 feet. Mt. Sanford (16,237 ft.) is on the left (north) and the huge dome of Mt. Wrangell (14,163 ft.) is to the right (south), which is the largest active volcano in the world. If it is very clear, it is even possible to see the massive form of Mt. Blackburn in the distance. This peak at 16,390 ft. is the tallest of the Wrangells, and only twenty five miles from McCarthy.**

**At Glennallen we will turn south towards Valdez until we reach the Edgerton Cutoff. Here we'll turn due east. The large valley in front is carved by the Copper River. It's 35 miles to the old railroad town of Chitina. Across from the Chitina Bar is an old box car from the Copper River and Northwestern Railroad completed in 1910. Along a road just above the bar is an old Model-T with railroad wheels, used after the line was abandoned in 1939 for private transport up and down the tracks. There is still a population of native Ahtna Indians that have inhabited this region long before whites showed up.**

**We will continue out of Chitina, through a narrow cut in the rocks that gives you the feeling of being on a steam locomotive over sixty years ago, and turn the corner for a panoramic view of the Copper and Chitina River's confluence. Cross the new highway bridge over the Copper River, and you'll be on the old railroad bed.**

**The next sixty eight miles takes you through spruce forests, alder thickets, along lakes, and over gorges. The Kuskulana Bridge will excite everyone as they get to look straight down over 250 feet to the boiling, silt laden waters below. Small homesteads along the way will show that this is a growing region, where people still hope to carve their livelihoods from the land. Several lakes along the road, Silver and**

**Sculpin, have good fishing, but the further along the road, the more mountains and glaciers begin to dominate the scene.**

**After several hours, the end of the road is in sight. The roaring Kennicott River slices the road like a knife, a lone cable spanning the distance to the far bank. Directly to your left (north) is the rock and gravel covered Kennicott Glacier.**

**A sturdily built steel tram cart rides the cable to the far side. A quarter of a mile walk and then we must cross a footbridge or another tram. From there it's just a short distance to McCarthy and the Mother Lode Powerhouse, the home of St. Elias Alpine Guides.**

**DAY 2- We will begin the day with an equipment check. St. Elias Alpine Guides has a detailed equipment list with strong recommendations. This list, while not the "gospel" should be closely followed when deciding on equipment. Please give us a call well before arrival if you have questions. We will be looking at the type of equipment you've brought and its durability.**

**The Motherlode Powerhouse was built in 1917 by the Motherlode Copper Company to house the boiler and Allis-Chalmers steam driven turbine producing electricity for their mining operations. After the equipment check we will discuss logistics, delving into specific expedition menus, their nutritional values, and how to package it all for an expedition. We will continue our discussions with an indepth study of equipment, what kind of tents, ropes, sleeping bags are best and why. We will grab ice axes, crampons, harnesses and ropes and become familiar with their different terminologies and review different techniques. We will cap off the day with a session of self crevasse rescue. You will put your harness on, tie into the rope and then with the aid of ascenders climb the rope to the three story ceiling of the Motherlode Powerhouse, just like you were climbing out of a crevasse.**

**DAY 3 - In the morning we will drive up to the McCarthy airfield to meet our bush pilot for the flight into Mt. Blackburn's Northwest Ridge. We will land around the 8,000 foot level, just to the west of Mountaineers Pass. Once the drone of the plane is gone we are alone. There are no other humans within miles and we are totally dependant upon ourselves for safety and rescue. There are no "Park Rangers" here, and we must always be aware of climbing safely and prudently.**

**We will immediately set up a base camp. We'll dig the tents in creating a large snow wall to protect them from the wind. We will continually talk about what we're doing and why. Education is a prime directive and we hope that everyone will take full advantage of the guides' experience and knowledge by asking questions. First order of business is to change from a day schedule to a night schedule. Climbing will take place at "night." In early summer it never truly gets dark in Alaska, and snow conditions are much safer during the cold of the night-- snow bridges over crevasses are stronger and there is less avalanche danger. So after setting up camp we'll crawl into the tents and sleep for awhile.**

**Around midnight we'll start cooking "breakfast." This first night's activities will be to begin the process of "ferrying" loads to a higher camp. We'll try to take a load of food and equipment to nearly 10,000, and cache it below a saddle that gives us access to the Northwest Ridge above. After we mark the site well, we'll head back down to Base Camp and rest.**

**DAY 4 - We will continue to move gear, food , and equipment to the 10,000 foot level below the Northwest Ridge proper. We will be "climbing high, and sleeping low" which is the best way to acclimatize. These first days are vital to both our acclimatization as well as breaking in physically, so we'll take it a little slow and careful.**

**DAY 5 - Once we have gear at the next camp, we will pack up the tents and personal equipment and move up to the cache site. We will again dig in, making sure that we are prepared for any weather that might come our way. During part of an afternoon, after sleeping most of the day, we may grab our gear and hike to a nearby steep snow field. Here we will cover the spectrum of snow climbing. We'll discuss the differences between snow, ice and rock climbing, and the special techniques needed on snow for belaying and anchoring. Next will be the placing of anchors--snow flukes and pickets. Everyone will get**

the chance to "fall" on their own anchor placement and get hands on learning of good and bad placement. Ice axe arrest is a vital skill while snow climbing and we will spend time focused on proper technique. "On the job training" will be the focus, and everyone will take a turn "falling"--on their back, stomach, upside down, every which a way!

After several hours we'll hike back to camp and get a "cat nap" before midnight and once again ferrying a load higher on the mountain.

**DAY 6 -** Once on the Northwest Ridge, we'll have to spend time route finding. We may cache equipment in one spot, only to move higher the next time, and then retrieve the lower cache to consolidate it with the higher. Snow conditions, weather and the group will dictate how we approach the steeper sections of the climb. We will establish a higher camp, digging good tent sites in preparation for moving camp.

**DAY 7 - DAY 11 -** These days will be spent climbing the Northwest Ridge. Steeper snow will dictate that we place anchors and make sure that no one falls while climbing or ferrying loads. We will establish at least one camp along the ridge. The views to the west and south are spectacular. We will be looking straight down into the Kuskalana drainage (we cross the Kuskalana River on an old railroad bridge on our drive into McCarthy), the lower Chitina valley, and the Coast Mountains. Our goal is to establish a high camp near where the Northwest Ridge broadens out and blends with the broad summit massif of Blackburn. High Camp will be dug in very well, able to with stand the severe weather that we can encounter at over 14,000 feet on an arctic mountain.

**DAY 12 - DAY 13 -** These will be summit days. From our High Camp we may have between 1500 and 2000 vertical feet left to the summit. We'll still be several miles from the top, so we will only head for the summit if the weather is good, and looks to be holding. Summit day will be 10 to 12 hours of hard physical work. The terrain is not steep, but the altitude combined with a variety of snow conditions, from soft deposits to wind carved sastrugi, will suck the energy out of legs and lungs. This is where your training program will show its effect! It is important that team members be in good physical condition before embarking on the Expedition.

The summit is always a bonus while climbing in Alaska. Many different factors must be in place to be able to finally stand safely on the top of the Wrangells. Safety is always the main focus of our climbs. If one of the team members needs assistance, everyone needs to be prepared to pitch in and help on a rescue. An accident or rescue might mean the end of the Expedition, but certainly safety and human life is the priority. All team members need to work together, to set aside personal needs and goals at times to be able to work as a team and make the chances to reach the summit much greater.

**DAY 14 - DAY 15 -** We will descend the same route, collecting any caches that we made on the ascent. Nothing will be left on the mountain. We will try to descend as quickly as possible, to get as low on the mountain as we can so that we will not be pinned down if the weather turns bad. Once back in Base Camp, we'll dig in and wait for the bush plane pick up.

**DAY 16 -** The plane will pick us up early in the morning ( weather permitting), and we will land back in the land of green trees, flowers and smells! We'll soak the soreness out of muscles in the wood fired sauna, washing the climbing grit off, and enjoying the warmth of spring. We'll spend the night at the Powerhouse.

**DAY 17 -** We'll retrace our route to Anchorage, being dropped off at respective hotels or the airport, and wishing all team members safe climbing!