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Alaska Mountaineering – Mt. Blackburn Expedition

With tremendous vertical relief (11,000 ft in some places) Mt. Blackburn is the tallest peak in the Wrangells and the 50th most topographically prominent peak in the world. The true summit was reached in 1958 and since then, less than 50 parties have climbed the mountain. A true wilderness climb, the route ascends the Northwest ridge with over 7,500 vertical feet (2,286 m) of climbing.



The route overlooks the Nabesna Glacier, the longest valley glacier in North America at 75 miles (120 km) long! Throughout the climb you'll encounter steep snow and ice, cornices, crevasses, ice falls, stunning alpenglow, and the rarified air of big peaks.

Participants should be fit and have some mountaineering experience. Contact us for schedule – or to inquire about the new route/variation that we've had our eye on...

Trip Highlights:

- Become one of the few to summit the highest peak in the Wrangells.
- Spectacular views of rugged Wrangell-St. Elias National Park.
- Challenging climbing on a remote Alaskan peak.
- Learn new techniques from experienced Alaska mountain guides.

Mt. Blackburn Expedition – Detailed Itinerary

The following is a sample itinerary for this trip. Due to individual abilities and goals, as well as the demanding environment of Alaska, all of our trips are customized as they unfold. The guide will constantly make decisions based on weather, logistics and group dynamics to maximize each day's experience. There can be quite a bit of variation, but we always strive to make every trip your best ever.

Some interesting facts about the mountain.....

Mt. Blackburn was named in 1885, by Lieutenant Henry Allen, after Joseph Clay Stiles Blackburn, a senator from Kentucky. 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 (4,995 m), Mt. Blackburn is the highest peak of this volcanic range. Formed just to the north of the St. Elias Mountains, the Wrangells are volcanoes formed by the fiery collision of tectonic plates that lead to the birth of the immense St. Elias and Ice Field Ranges to the south and east. Mt. Sanford, Mt. Blackburn, and Mt. Wrangell, are all massive volcanoes, with Mt. Wrangell being the most recent peak to erupt, in 1916. During this eruption, 3 feet of ash was deposited on the Copper River Valley below.



Mt. Blackburn, and the rest of the Wrangells, are relatively unknown mountains. Kennedy Peak, or East Blackburn, 16,286 ft (4964 m), is the eastern summit and the one that was originally thought to be the highest point. The first ascent of this summit was made in 1912 by Dora Keen and George Handy via the Kennicott Glacier (on the south side of the mountain) and East Face. This heady

exploit was ahead of its time. Dora Keen, driven by a deep desire for the climb, solicited miners from the nearby Kennecott Copper Mine, and forged a route up the heavily crevassed East Face to the East Peak, but did not traverse over to the West Peak. Keen went on to write a famous article for the Saturday Evening Post titled, "First up Mount Blackburn." In 1912, Keen and Handy thought they were on Blackburn's highest point. However, the western of Blackburn's two summits is the mountain's highpoint, a fact that was not understood until the 1960s when the then new USGS maps came out. The first ascent of the west peak, and hence Mount Blackburn, was done on May 30, 1958 by Bruce Gilbert,

Dick Wahlstrom, Hans Gmoser, Adolf Bitterlich, and Leon Blumer via the North (also called the Northwest) Ridge. This team made the first ascent of Blackburn, but did not even know it at the time due to the incorrect identification of the highpoint. In fact Blumer's article in the 1959 American Alpine Journal is titled "Mount Blackburn – Second Ascent."

Climbed less than 50 times, Mt. Blackburn 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. You won't have to stand in line, waiting to clip onto fixed ropes here, like you do on Denali. There are numerous unclimbed faces and ridges waiting for the footprints of future mountaineers and the Northwest Ridge is a route that allows access to the summit, but not without some steeper climbing.

DAY 1 - Your Alaska mountaineering trip begins this morning in Anchorage, Alaska. One of our knowledgeable and friendly staff members will pick you up at your hotel and drive you and your gear to our headquarters in the tiny mountain town of McCarthy. Located in the magnificent Wrangell-St. Elias National Park, McCarthy offers the perfect jumping off point for a trek in Alaska. Within minutes of leaving Anchorage, the scenery becomes impressive. On one side are the steep, snow-capped peaks of the Chugach, and on the other side, the tidal flats of Cook Inlet. Turning east, the Glenn Highway follows the Matanuska River valley where the long days of summer produce the famous sixty pound cabbages. As you approach Chickaloon Pass, the white ice of the mighty Matanuska Glacier fills the valley below.

On a clear day the magnificent Wrangell Mountains will be directly in front of you as you descend the pass. Mt. Drum stands out and looks the highest, because it is much closer. In reality it is the smallest of these large peaks at 12,010 feet (3,660



m). Mt. Sanford at 16,237 ft (4,949m) is on the left (north), and the huge dome of 14,163 ft (4,316m) Mt. Wrangell is to the right (south). Mt. Wrangell is the largest active volcano in the world. On a clear day, it is even possible to see your objective, the massive form of Mt. Blackburn, far in the distance. At 16,390 ft (4,995m) this spectacular peak is the tallest of the Wrangells, and only twenty five miles from McCarthy.

At Glennallen you follow the highway south towards Valdez. As you drive, keep your eyes peeled for glimpses of the famous Alaska Pipeline paralleling the highway to the right. Turning east at the Edgerton Cutoff, the Copper River Valley lies directly in front of you and you make your way to the tiny hamlet of Chitina and the beginning of the McCarthy Road. Originally the rail bed of the Copper River and Northwestern Railroad; the unpaved McCarthy Road snakes through thick spruce forests, along the edge of the Wrangell Mountains, as it winds its way to McCarthy. If you look closely, you can sometimes see the original rail pushed aside into the bushes along the road, and careless travelers have been known to get flat tires from century-old railroad spikes. Evidence of the engineering feats of the early inhabitants of this region can still be seen in the form of railroad trestles and bridges that still stand today. As the end of the road comes into view, the roaring Kennicott River slices the road like a knife, and a narrow footbridge is all that connects this side to the town of McCarthy. From the river, it's just a short distance to McCarthy and the Mother Lode Powerhouse, the home of St. Elias Alpine Guides.

DAY 2 - Alaska Mountaineering has some unique challenges and every trip begins with an equipment check and detailed preparation. St. Elias Alpine Guides has a detailed equipment list, with various recommendations, coming from three decades of mountaineering and trekking in Alaska. You and your guide discuss logistics, delving into specific expedition menus, their nutritional values, and how to package it all for the trip. You also discuss equipment in depth; what kind of tents, ropes, and sleeping bags are best and why. After lunch you and your guide grab ice axes, crampons, harnesses and ropes for a review of techniques and terminology. You end the day with a session of crevasse self-rescue training. A rope, hung from the three-story ceiling of the Motherlode Powerhouse, is the perfect place to practice this. You put your harness on, tie in, and with the aid of ascenders, climb the rope just like you were climbing out of a crevasse!



DAY 3 – In the morning, you and your guide drive up to the McCarthy airfield to meet your bush pilot for the flight into Mt. Blackburn's Northwest Ridge. Your pilot sets you down on the snow-covered Nabesna Glacier at around 8,000 ft. (2,438 m), just to the west of Mountaineers Pass. As the sound of the plane's engines fades away and the silence returns, you are enveloped by the remote grandeur of the Wrangell Mountains.

Out here, far from any other people, you and your guide are dependent on each other for safety and rescue. There are no “Park Rangers”, and you must always climb safely and prudently. The first order of business is to set up base camp. You “dig in”, creating strong snow walls to protect your tents from inclement weather. Successful Alaska mountaineering requires good decision making. An early decision you and your guide make is when to climb. You may want to change to a night schedule because the snow conditions are better in the coldest part of the day. Since it never truly gets dark in the early parts of the Alaska summer, night climbing is simple and hopefully the snow bridges over the glacier’s crevasses are much stronger and there is less avalanche danger in the midnight hours. So, after setting up camp you retire to your tents for some sleep. Around midnight you start cooking breakfast. This first night’s activities will be to begin the process of “ferrying” loads to a higher camp. You’ll try to take a load of food and equipment to nearly 10,000 ft. (3,048 m) and cache it below a saddle that provides access to the Northwest Ridge above. After marking the site well, you head back down to Base Camp for some rest.

DAY 4 – You continue to move gear, food, and equipment to the 10,000 foot level, below the Northwest Ridge proper. These first days are vital to both your acclimatization and adjusting to the level of physical activity. You will be “climbing high, and sleeping low”, which is the best way to acclimatize and it’s prudent to take it a little slow and careful.



DAY 5 – Once you have gear at the next camp, you pack up your tents and personal equipment and move up to the cache site. You dig in, making sure that your camp is prepared for any type of weather. During part of an afternoon, after sleeping most of the day, you and your guide grab your gear and hike to a steep snowfield to go over the essentials of snow climbing. Your guide discusses the differences between snow, ice and rock climbing, and the special techniques needed on snow for belaying and anchoring. You go over the placing of anchors—snow flukes and pickets. Everyone will get the chance to “fall” on their own anchor placement and get hands on experience with good and bad placements. Ice axe arrest is a vital skill while climbing and proper technique is essential. “On the job training” will be the focus, and everyone will take a turn “falling” in all different ways to prepare for the real thing. After several hours you hike back to camp and catch a cat nap before midnight when you, once again, ferry a load higher on the mountain.

DAY 6 – Once on the Northwest Ridge, you and your guide spend some time route finding. You 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 you approach the steeper sections of the climb. You establish a higher camp, digging good tent sites in preparation for moving camp.



DAY 7 to DAY 11 – These days will be spent climbing the Northwest Ridge. Steeper snow will dictate that you place anchors and make sure that no one falls while climbing or ferrying loads. On all of our Alaska mountaineering trips, safety comes first. You establish at least one camp along the ridge. The views to the west and south are spectacular. Looking straight down is the Kuskalana drainage (you crossed the

Kuskalana River on an old railroad bridge on your drive into McCarthy), the lower Chitina Valley, and the Chugach Mountains. Your goal is to establish a high camp near where the Northwest Ridge broadens out and blends with the broad summit massif of Mt. Blackburn. High Camp will be dug in very well, able to withstand the severe weather that can occur at over 14,000 feet (4,267 m) on an arctic mountain.

DAY 12 & 13 – These days are summit days. From your High Camp you may have nearly 2,000 vertical feet (609 m) left to the summit. You'll still be several miles from the top, so your guide will only make the call to 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 safety and human life is the priority. All team members are expected to work together, to set aside personal needs and goals at times, so that they may work as a team and make the chances to reach the summit much greater.



DAY 14 & 15 – You and your guide retrace your footsteps and descend the same route. Hopefully you're wearing the "perma-grin" smiles that come from achieving such a worthy goal. We're convinced, however, that even if reaching the summit isn't in the cards, the stunning scenery and good company will have you smiling anyways. You continue down, collecting any caches that you made on the ascent. Nothing

will be left on the mountain. Though you and your guide are tired, you try to descend as quickly and safely as possible, to get as low on the mountain as you can. This greatly reduces your chances of being pinned down by bad weather. Once back in Base Camp, you dig in and wait for the bush plane to pick you up. You and your guide are partners now and you pass the time swapping stories and reveling in your amazing experience.

DAY 16 – You awake today feeling refreshed and satisfied with a great climb. You and your guide enjoy breakfast and then sort out your gear in preparation for the flight back to McCarthy. After several false alarms, the sound of the plane's engines becomes distinct and soon enough it's landing in a cloud of snow. Grinning, your pilot asks how the trip went....but he already knows; the smiles on your



faces have betrayed you. You return to McCarthy, a hot meal, and well-deserved soak in our wood-fired sauna. Life is good!

DAY 17 – Waving goodbye to your new found friends in McCarthy, you head back to Anchorage. Though this trip is over, your wheels are already turning, planning your next visit to McCarthy. Don't worry....we understand. This evening, we'll drop you off at your hotel in Anchorage and wave goodbye for now.

What's Included?

- Guiding and instruction from skilled professionals. Our guides have extensive experience, as well as medical, rescue, and avalanche training.
- Round trip transportation between Anchorage and McCarthy.
- Ski plane flights to and from the mountain range.
- Delicious breakfasts, lunches, and dinners while in the mountains.
- Group equipment: stoves, tents, ropes, fuel, etc.



What you're responsible for:

- Personal gear – check the gear list for this trip for a complete description.
- Lodging for the nights before and after your trip (see below).
- Food while not on the mountain.
- Guide gratuity – Please let us know if you have any questions about this.

If you would like us to arrange your transportation to/from McCarthy/Kennecott and/or lodging while in the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park, we offer this as a free service to our multi-day clients. Please email or give us a call to discuss the details.