



Harvard Borkoldoy Expedition Technical Climbing Report August 3-28, 2005

Collected by Lucas Laursen

Edited by Kelly Faughnan

Abstract: The Harvard Mountaineering Club celebrated its eightieth anniversary by sending an expedition to seek first ascents in the little-explored Borkoldoy Range in southeastern Kyrgyzstan. The team of eight succeeded in climbing nine peaks in two valleys over the course of fifteen climbing days. Searches in recent American Alpine Club publications, the internet, and a request for information from the Kyrgyz Alpine Club turned up no previously recorded ascents of our peaks. In the following report, a proposed name, the coordinates, and altitudes for each peak climbed are followed by a route description. In the absence of other reports, we consider these climbs to be the first recorded ascents. This report is submitted to the Harvard Mountaineering Club, the Kyrgyz Alpine Club, the International Mountaineering and Climbing Federation, and a summary is submitted to the American Alpine Club in order to aid mountaineers planning their own trips to the Borkoldoy Range.

The Idea and the People

The expedition was conceived in a discussion between then-Harvard Medical School Instructor in Psychology Bjarne Holmes, his wife Kelly Faughnan, an education graduate student, undergraduate Corey Rennell '07, and physics graduate student Adilet Imambekov following a slideshow Holmes gave at the Harvard Mountaineering Club in December, 2004. Holmes heard about the Borkoldoy Range from Martin Gamache of the Alpine Mapping Guild, freshly back from mapping the nearby Kokshal-Too for the American Alpine Club. He proposed the idea to HMC President Lucas Laursen '06 before the new year. That core group recruited George Brewster '03, Laura Fox, then a researcher in psychology at MIT, and wilderness medical instructor David Krause to round out the team. Attempts at recruiting two other undergraduate members of the HMC failed, and the team of eight set out for Kyrgyzstan.

Travel

We hired Bishkek-based International Travel and Mountaineering Company (ITMC) Tien Shan to drive us from Almaty, Kazakhstan to the Borkoldoy Range, and to cook for us while in base camp. Getting there is dependent on at least three important factors: the condition of the vehicle, appropriate paperwork, and the condition of the terrain. The GAZ 66 provided by ITMC overheated on our second driving day, when we were climbing through the Terskey Alatau south of Lake Issyk-Kul. We had to drive at night to make it over the highest passes and onto the high plateau at the foot of the Borkoldoy. ITMC also failed to file all the necessary border zone permits for our team, instead filing one for a member who dropped out in April and leaving one of our members without a permit. Luckily ITMC maintains a good relationship with the border guards through donations of watermelons, beer, and other hard-to-find commodities in the Tien Shan. Once past the border checkpoint at Karasai, we found conditions to be generally dry enough next to the Chakyr-Korum River, but the water ran strong in the river itself. This prevented us from reaching the Koldmor River valley west of the Ayutor River valley. The

British International School of Mountaineering teams that have been in the region in 2003, 2004, and 2005 went in September, seeking better conditions.

Conditions

We found conditions warm during most days, with cooler temperatures many afternoons punctuated by rain or snow, depending on elevation. Some major avalanches were observed on the north face of Peak Harvard and rockslides on the talus were common. The highest of the three cirques at the top of the Ayutor River valley, which we called Washburn Cirque, had snow-covered crevasses up to a meter wide but which did not appear particularly deep. Nobody fell in, so we can't be sure.

Protection

Ice was generally solid, but layered with twenty to fifty centimeters of less useful snow. Rock was crumbly, sharp limestone that ripped skin from fingers, afforded unsafe protection at best, and served mostly to contribute to the enormous talus fields that constitute the approaches to these mountains. We generally carried a minimal alpine rock rack with a few pins and four to eight ice screws. On snowier routes we left behind the rock gear and added a couple pickets, but rarely used them.

General Observations

Half a dozen peaks surrounded our advanced base camp at the snout of the Ayutor Glacier, each within a day's reasonable climb. Another half dozen subsidiary or slightly more distant peaks could probably be done in a long day, or with an easy bivy, as our Peak of Theoretical Physics was done. There are no major multi-day commitments in the Ayutor River valley, nor in the Koldmor River valley to the west. There are many spectacular alpine day climbs clustered in a small area. The southernmost peaks we climbed looked into the central valley of the Borkoldoy and offered tantalizing glimpses of months of potential alpine climbing.

We have not graded our climbs, in part because our team had many different reference points (Scottish, Russian, New England) with which to compare, and partly because we do not anticipate much climbing activity in these two valleys in the near future. Parties wishing to seek similar first ascents have only to drive their trucks a little further, or hike or horsepack a little further, to reach even more unclimbed peaks in the Borkoldoy. The variety of routes means that well-prepared climbing parties of almost any ability can find suitable climbs.

Further information is available upon request from the Harvard Mountaineering Club, 73 University Hall, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA. See also www.harvardmountaineering.org.

Route Descriptions

Peak Fox: 4446m (14,587') N 41 25' 49.2" E 77 37' 31.4" (*GPS*)

First Recorded Ascent (FRA): Adilet Imambekov, George Brewster, Kelly Faughnan, Laura Fox, Bjarne Holmes, via northeast ridge, 8/10/05.

Second Recorded Ascent (SRA): David Krause, Lucas Laursen, Corey Rennell via Treadmill Gully, north face, 8/10/05.

This peak dominates the view to the southeast of our base camp. The larger group's route crossed the rolling foothills towards the northeast ridge, and followed the long scree ridge that meets a roughly east-west ridge before reaching the summit. The smaller group's route, named Treadmill Gully, turns south before reaching the northeast ridge and follows the long scree approach to the rock band dominating the north face. Treadmill Gully follows what was then the only visible snow on the face up a long scree gully and joins the upper northeast ridge before reaching the summit.

Mount Powell: 4555m (14,944') N 41 25' 42.1" E 77 38' 3.8" (*GPS*)

FRA: David Krause, George Brewster, Kelly Faughnan, Adilet Imambekov, Corey Rennell via "17 Year Gully," southwest face.

17 Year Gully up Mt. Powell is non-technical. It is accessed from a scree climb to the ridgeline between Mt. Powell and Peak Schullinger-Krause to the south. The finer scree (we called it cadillac scree) makes for an easier ascent. After topping out on the ridge, the route heads north along the ridge and traverses the southern scree slope to the small rock promontory before heading up the snow slope to the summit. The true summit is northeast on the peak; just south of the peak's hanging cornice. A secondary peak lies on the northwest side.

Peak Harvard: 4817m (15,804') N 41 24' 8" E 77 38' 9" (*GPS*)

FRA: Bjarne Holmes, Corey Rennell, 8/18/05 via "80 Years of Harvard Mountaineering," South Face.

Named to celebrate our club's anniversary, 80 Years of Harvard Mountaineering is a largely non-technical but exposed route. The third scree gully east on the south face will lead straight to the summit, while the first two lead to a sharp rock ridge that is well protected by cornices and crumbling gendarmes with steep drop-offs on the north side. The route reaches a small snow ridge after ascending a scree slope. It then traverses that slope up the broad gully to the right. Small avalanches can be frequent here. Then the route moves up through an icy gully onto the double corniced snow ridge that leads directly east to the summit. Sloughing cornices may be a factor on the north side of the summit ridge.

Peak of Theoretical Physics: 4856m (15,932') N 41 24' 30.2" E 77 36' 16.0" (*GPS*)

FRA: Adilet Imambekov, George Brewster via East Ridge, 8/20/05.

The route consists mostly of hard ice, which can be well protected by ice screws. The ice was covered with snow during our climb. After two unsuccessful attempts to climb it in one push from ABC, we bivouacked on the ridge at the base of the route (~4400m), and fixed one rope the day before the climb. The first part consists of a 40-degree 100-150m ice slope, covered with snow (less steep on the right side). After that, one should move up and left on easy terrain around the big rock formation, about 200-250m. The next pitch is the crux of the route, with poorly protected 60-70 degree rock/ice slope (~30m). From the top of that pitch, the safest way is to climb up the ice covered chimney (stemming, ~30m), and from the top of this chimney continue right on the ice slope. After that, there is a consistent 40-45 degree slope for about 300-350m. At the base of the cornice the route traverses right to climb around it, and an easy ramp to south leads to the summit. It is the highest summit in Harvard Circus (our name for the three cirques we explored above our advanced base camp).

Peak Adventure: 4636m (15,210') N 41 23.06' E 77 37.01' (*GPS*)

FRA: Corey Rennell, Kelly Faughnan, Bjarne Holmes, Lucas Laursen via "Meta-Documentation," West Ridge, 8/21/05.

This snow peak sits at the southern extreme of the Washburn Cirque, rising from the ridge between Peak Omingmak and the unnamed summits to the west. Our route veered west of the prominent bergschrund on the north face and turned southeast, crossing the crevasses at right angles to gain the west ridge that leads directly to the summit. The summit is heavily corniced and requires caution on the north side.

Peak Omingmak: 4746m (15570') N 41 23' 6" +/-3" E 77 37' 23" +/-2" (*Altimeter only*)

FRA: Laura Fox, George Brewster, via Northwest Face, 8/21/05.

From the head of Washburn Cirque, the climb goes straight up the longest visible continuous snow face towards the southeast. The route follows the snow between two large rock bands about halfway up. The long middle section (above the constriction between the two rock bands, and below the last few pitches) was a bit steeper, probably about 55 degrees, and was done with a couple inches of snow over ice. Ice screws afforded good protection. After these rock bands the route trends up and left (bearing more east) towards the visible high point. To avoid a band of rocks, our route moved around them on the snow to the left and gained the summit in about a pitch. The summit affords a spectacular view into the Central Borkoldoy and is located at the high point between Roberts and Washburn Cirques. We descended by reversing the ascent route, which was just as difficult as the ascent.

Peak Schullinger-Krause: 4727m (15,507') N 41 24' 57.5" E 77 78' 23.2" (*GPS*)

FA: David Krause, via "Sneakin' Sallie Through the Alley," South Face, 8/21/05.

Sneakin' Sallie Through The Alley takes a low angle scree and snow gully from Hall Cirque for a few thousand feet until it dead ends at a small waterfall. It then threads left and up through a narrow and easy cliff band, drops down into the drainage/cirque below the ridge between Schullinger-Krause and another summit. It crosses the ridge and climbs a nasty rampart of small gravel over frozen dirt to the summit snow ridge, which leads pretty easily (up to maybe 35 degrees, a little steeper at the top) to the summit.

Mount John Bowlby: 4846m (15,899') N 41 24' 17.0" E 77 33' 24.8" (*GPS*)

FA: Bjarne Holmes, Adilet Imambekov, via "Kazakh/Swedish Route," North Face, 8/24/05.

The route follows the straightforward northern ridge, with subsidiary summit Peak Mary Ainsworth on the way. The eastern side of the ridge is very steep and gets corniced, so we stayed on the western side all the way. An easy snow climb starts at the end of the rocky section (about 40 degrees, could be protected with pickets), with a runout to crevasses down the slope.

Peak Mary Ainsworth: 4612m (15,131') N 41 24' 43.0" E 77 33' 24.5" (*GPS*)

FA: Bjarne Holmes, Adilet Imambekov, via Northeast Ridge, 8/23/05.

See Mount John Bowlby.