

Primus, Tricouni and Austeria –things come in threes

May 22-24, 2010

Primus (8508'), Tricouni (8102') and Austeria (8334')

–things come in threes

We went for three days. On the way we saw three animals –Coyote, deer and a bear, and managed three peaks –Tricouni, Primus and Austeria...

Short version:

Ended up with only two of us. Was hoping two day, but proved a good three day trip. Flat trail from Colonial Creek CG to McAllister CG the 4000' up ridge to camp at Borealis Glacier. Night summit of Tricouni under a half moon. Sunday Summit Primus and Austeria while getting sunburned with SPF 40 on in the hot sun. All the time gawking at stunning scenery. Hike out Monday and hobble into the diner for a delicious fresh mushroom burger. Okay, now you can scroll the pictures...

Detailed version:

The weather was predicted iffy, though we saw that it looked to be good weather for the northern Icecap area for Sunday and Monday. Others interested decided on other options. I've been hearing from Dicey for a while of Primus and Tricouni being high on her list. Looked like everything was lining up.

Picked up a permit at the quiet Ranger station in Marblemount. Saw a coyote before Newhalem that wasn't too concerned about us barreling down on it at 60mph. Skies clouding we pulled into the parking lot (road to TH still chained) next to deer grazing at the quiet CG. Left the car at a leisure 8:38a (c1230'). The Thunder trail follows the creek (river). Half way to the first bridge (at 1 mile) A younger bear ambled up from the river and off into the woods. Across the bridge the CG is to the right and trail straight ahead. A little way forward the Thunder group CG on the right. The main trail heads the wrong way a very short bit then turns again heading southerly up the left bank of Thunder Creek through richly mossed and enormous trees (some well over 4-500 years).

At 2.9m (1570') a bridge over a beautiful waterfall and wood bridge. The trail crawls up and away from the river. At one point the river pinches into a narrow channel and it felt like the earth was rumbling from the waterfalls.

At nearly 6.2 miles a creek crossing a little deeper than wanted for keeping boots dry. Just before it there is an old giant log fallen across the creek. In another 1/10th mile leave trail to the right to cross the new McAllister bridge. We took a break and dipped water from the river and munchies before the long haul up the ridge we were about to take on. Follow the paths left to the end of the tent pads and up to the start of the ridge. Follow up the ridge and soon a faint climbers path leads up through moss to a route through the first cliffs. As mentioned by TomS and others it is important to follow this route to work your way up, through and around the many cliffs. At c2700' there is a Benchmark for the NCNP boundary. Trail is less pitched then again works up another cliff. Some spots too narrow for the pack. It's either up rocks or through skinny tightly spaced trees. A nice bench at c3440', up talus, then it looks to get steep. My thoughts were I hope this little path continues and has switchbacks. Luck was both are true. Then it got a little steeper to a small flattish outcrop (c3900') with a view north down Thunder Creek. Back into the skinny trees with tight spacing. Little branches and needles down the back and going further –yuk. The path diminishes then is visible again. Just in case we put up temporary flagging for our way down. We wanted a easy return and not to wander and miss the routes through the cliff bands. Generally we'd followed the faint and sometimes easy to follow path hanging left most the time. Now the terrain was more shallow an obvious wide ridge. No visibility but trees, faint path. At a small rock cliff we headed right and up encountering our first snow. Not like a small patch. This is going up steep and headlong into a 4-5' bank of snow. We went over some and skirted right on others. At c4700

we worked right to avoid vertical snow climbing and found a weakness to get to a rock outcrop (c4780', 3h30m, 2880vert from McAllister CG) NW of point 4835 on the map. Being in the woods the weather had been cool and nice. Popping out to attain this bump the wind howled with snow. Time for shells and hoping it was a squall that would pass. From here the terrain looked to flatten (all relative). After a few moments of sinking we donned snowshoes, mainly for traction. The maze of the spindly trees changed to more of what I'm used to. At this elevation (c4900') the snow was melted out at the bases and the new maze was weaving through and around the tree wells and avoiding the 3-4' ledges. We hung rightish of the ridge rather than doing the up and down game. The trees began to open and soon there was more snow than trees –oh, and time to gain the rest of the elevation. The snow held us sinking in only 3-5". Another view of Tricouni, Primus and Borealis basin through the clouds. Up some steep snow and the last of the ridge flattened (again all relative) for the last ¼ mile to the Glacier Basin. We dropped right to a gap and found a nice flat spot 30' higher than what looked like a lake. Stats: 8.6m, elev 5950', 8h55m and 5470' ascent from TH; 2.3m, 6h10m, 4070' ascent from Thunder Ck .

Still windy, but the snowing had stopped. Faint views coming and going of Tricouni and the NE route on the left and imposing cliffs of the east side of Primus to our right. Straight ahead Borealis GI looked like a vertical wall. Could we get up, what was the snow like, avy issues...? First things first, setup camp and onto the flat spot to dig a well. About 2 ½ feet down we hit clear water. Sweet, the snow filtered it and we'd save a lot of pain of melting snow. Cooked dinner then walked around to check out the views. Today was the iffy weather day. Looking toward Ragged Ridge and Logan the clouds had the area obliterated. Looking north to Diablo and Snowfield the darkest clouds I'd seen in awhile. Even with the clouds around us it looked like we were in the best weather spot.

It was 8:00p, I headed to the wall of the Borealis to check it out. Maybe get steps in for an easier day tomorrow. Across the "lake", right around a sluffed spot, then left toward the rock wall. I snowshoed up the ever steepening pitch. A spot got above 45deg so zigged out right and c6600' the slope mellowed. It was starting to get dark and the moon popped out the side of the mountain. I felt good and kept ascending. Soon I was at Lucky Pass (c7235', +1285, 1.1m, 1h40m from camp). Primus looked to be a walkup zigging around rock islands. Tricouni didn't offer many choices. One col to ascend that appeared to get steeper the higher you went. Clouds had cleared and the moon was bright. What the heck? I started up in deep soft snow. A hundred feet up the pitch got too steep and I changed to crampons (steel). The fluff was gone and I was front pointing with strong hits going in a inch or so. I worked right then left keeping from the steepest parts. Past three rock islands (notice a lot of threes on this trip). And moved right in a wide snow area. Three options here. Right to the unknown traversing til finding a break in the rocks, scramble the rocks in pons up or leftish up the ever steeper col. Hmmm, I cut back left. Topping off the snow, a little mixed cl3 to a high point. The moonlight glow on the mountains was spectacular. Primus looming behind me, camp thousands of feet below and about 4-500' east the summit.

I summited at 10:53p (8102', 2h53m, 1.2m, 2150ascent from camp) temps now in the 20's and a steady wind. A little snow removal and I found some small rocks. Clearing around and under a vitamin bottle with a piece of map in it from July 4, 2004 and familiar names... MikeC, SteveR, GregK, MitchB & PeterB. I read Fay's report and thought there should be a nother reg, Digging around I didn't find it so signed it. Had a little food, enjoyed the moonlit views and worked my way down the mountain. This time I went down and left in the large upper basin, through a short patch of rock to the col and down to Lucky Pass. The snow was very hard and most my time seemed to be front pointing. Now with headlamp I walked the shallow pitch and around 6700 worked right to avoid the glacier ice wall. A very peaceful, and now tired walk into camp at 12:20a –a 15h40m day –Yawn! Nestled in my warm bag I fell asleep with a smile knowing tomorrow would be much more feasible with one summit less.

Needless to say I was not up at sunrise. I opened my eyes then pulled the bag over. It was cold and low clouds. Hot breakfast and Hotel Borealis, a check on the well (frozen crust) and heading off in crampons for Primus at 8:40 (hmmm, same start as yesterday:-). Dicey did me a major favor and carried the rope

and kicked stepped all the way to Primus (I took a turn in there somewhere). The snow had blown in covering most of my tracks and deep in a few spots. Dicey navigated away from the deep stuff and today we reached Lucky Pass in 1h20m. We discussed our plan and when I looked up Dicey was gone kicking up toward Primus. c8100' there was a steep col on the right. Dicey waited and we both thought –noway. Too exposed, lee, so most likely wind loaded, bad runout... Slope to the left looked okay, but not the most pleasing. We took turns, I led across to a rock outcrop and she followed. On climbers left of a tower at c8200 she took off again bee-lining for the summit (veering left around rocks then back right). We kept taking in views of Tricouni (notice the “three” influence?). Clouds obscuring then exposed again. Would the weather be clear and sunny as forecast? Rounding off to a large (football field sized) top at 11:45a, 3h10m, 2560' ascent and 1.4m from camp. I walked the high point and probed. Snow was well over 3' deep and I hit nothing but snow. Now reg, no views... Sat and had food, talked and could feel some solar radiation. I plotted compass points for my route across the North Klawatti Glacier, around the buttress and up to Austeria and back. Soon it felt warmer then peak-a-boo views... then AWESOME views. YeeHAW! The clouds cleared. OMG, the views were stunning! We discussed plans and what to do if all didn't go well, and plenty of advice for summiting Austeria. Leaving the summit at 12:35. Dicey heading down to follow my rambling route up Tricouni and myself westward to Austeria.

Down to the Glacier and now the nervous part –crossing. Sun was out helping with visual, cloud shadows dancing across the glacier and some obvious crevasses to avoid. I rounded the Austeria Towers south buttress at 1:45 about 250' lower than it looked on the map (6860', 5h5m, 2.8m from camp), ditched the snowshoes and probe and started the 1500' ascent in scorching hot sun to the false summit. At each pause the scenery changed. Clouds, clearing and covering. Forbidden looking, well... Forbidding. And I did that(!)? Crazy. Peaks of Tricouni, though couldn't pick out Dicey –I hope she makes it. Klawatti on the left with the snow heavily crevassed glacier. Below Klawatti lake. Such a beautiful area. Through a notch Eldorado. Finally, some rock and the false summit (c8352', 7h10m, 4093 ascent, 3.2m from camp). Walked the ridge, now, how to get to the summit block? Cornices built up and didn't want to be near them. Left a too steep sun-baked slope not deep enough... hmmm... crap... a scouted and finally pulled out the rope and lowered myself two pitches. I'd brought a 30m rope –for this and the summit block a 50m would have been perfect. Things sure were different with so much snow high up. I traversed then back up to the notch below the block. I walked a ledge counterclockwise to see the easy, yet wildy exposed route up the east side. Hmmm, deep snow, sunbaked, no belay – NOT! Back to the chimney I started up. The chockstone was buried and in the narrow was over a foot of ice nearly vertical for 6-8'. I found a good spot for an ice screw and self belayed myself up over the ice and the loose snow to the summit on the left (4:40p, 8334', 8h, 4145 ascent, 3.2m from camp). As I reached the false summit the clouds fogged in. Now on the summit it was clear all around. Perfect views, wow! Stunning...! What can I say? I excavated the summit finding no cairn or reg. I wandered and looked but no reg –oh well, that is what you get of early ascents. Relaxed taking in the views, hydrated and ate. Too bad I needed to leave for the long trek back. The reward was well worth it :-)

I left the summit at 5:15, wondering if my guess of 8 hours from Primus to Camp would be on the mark. A rap off the top, recover my screw. Crawl the rock up the ridge and a happy descent with a few glissades to the south end of the buttress (35m from false summit). Loaded my penalty weight and the long traverse back to, over and across the NK Glacier. My earlier track were gone, covered with spindrift. On the map I thought I could skirt around near 7200' and get a spot through the cliffs to Lucky Pass. I'd been spotting it all day and didn't feel comfortable with it. Another option higher through some steep snow cuts in the cliffs –nah, option three. Follow my now visible tracks (put in where I did just in case :-)) and re-ascend Primus 1100' above the cliffs, under the tower at 8-8200' avoiding the avy prone slope then back down to the Pass. I conserved energy and enjoyed the views and just being here. Made below the Tower (c8000', 7:30p, 10h50m, 5.5m from camp) and down to Lucky Pass. Signs Dicey had some good glissades in soft snow. For me the snow was hard and barely dented in the shade. At the pass I could see fresh tracks up and down and a glissade track. Our pre-arranged marker was gone,

so I took a deep breath not having to re-ascend Tricouni, turned left and back to camp (camp at 8:35p -8 hrs from summiting Primus –spot-on). It was good seeing Dicey also had a successful day (yet a red face). A hot dinner, talk of the day and some clouds came in and barely hid Tricouni as the moon cast a firey glow and peak shadow in the high cloud. Even at night the views amaze me.
Today's stats: 12h, 5264ascent, 6.6m.

Day 3, Awake at light catching a little morning alpine glow. It was in the 20's again –brrr. I tricked Dicey to getting up early. Relaxing breakfast and packed camp. Such a beautiful place, it'd be nice to stay, but I doubt I'll come up that ridge route again. Left the basin at 6:50 on snowshoes for traction and to keep on top of the crust. Our tracks higher on the mountain were filled in, down here they looked like we just set them. Down, following them and the ridge. Left of the ridge as the trees got thicker. Left of point 4835, removed snowshoes and down the nasty bump –proving more a challenge than when we went up. The ridge is wide here and we followed and retrieved our flagging (leaving some new and old flag in critical points). Going down was proving to be a lot of work. Some places too tight for the packs, some places losing the route then regaining. We managed to stay on track all but one place above the flat area at c3440, then back on track. It seemed to go on and on, cliff bands, lower, skirt here, switch here, pull hard to get pack through a tight spot, over log, lower... Benchmark –wheh! Getting closer. Another cliff to work through then the pitch mellowed. Even though a heck of a scramble the terrain was beautiful with mosses, orchids, lichen and such. The mellow last of the ridge in deep green moss was a relief. We veered right and to a tent spot, and trail to the bridge (c1900, 9:50a, 3hrs from camp).

Time for a nice half hour break to remove boots, longjohns, get water, eat, slap mosquitos... The walk out was beautiful. I didn't remember so may little ups. The creek log cross close to McAllister CG almost got me. Thunder creek felt like it was shaking the ground, views of Snowfield, the ridge we descended, then Colonial, moss, waterfalls, giant 400+yr old trees. Good scenery, but over 6 miles is long in semi plastic boots. A few breaks including a stunning waterfall with a bridge over (where I broke my camera Saturday). Shortly, after Thunder CG bridge was a couple out for a stroll and photo session. The last mile dragged on. Feet sore and heels feeling like mondo blisters. We kept going wondering if we'd get lucky and see the bear again. River changed from a class 5-6 canyon creek drop fun ride, to a deep fast, yet smooth running wide flow. A bounce back in our stride as we saw the amphitheater and the final asphalt walk through the CG to the car (8.6m, 5h55m from camp, 2h30m from McAllister CG).

Warm sunny, crows mingling instead of deer. Emptied gear to dry –even the fly still had condensation ice on it. In no hurry we relaxed, both dreaming of fat juicy burgers and Marblemount Diner. The place was empty, I hobble like a gimp my shoes digging into my sore heals. A soft bench seat, fresh picked mushroom burger, real ice cream shake and watching the hummingbirds... life is good.

Note: This route is short, yet grueling. Beautiful and rewarding, yet did I say the short 2.3 miles from McAllister CG to the Borealis Gl is grueling?

Another great weekend and the weather co-operated with near perfect timing.

Stats:

3 3s- animal species (coyote, deer, bear), summits –Tricouni, Primus, Austeria and days
26.3miles (8.6 approach), 12730' ascent accumulated.

Gear: Snowshoes, shovel, probes, avy transceiver, harness, glacier rescue gear (including ice screw), 30m rope (wish was 50m), ice axe, steel crampons, picket, sunscreen(!)

Happy trails!
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