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Alpina

A semi-annual review of mountaineering in the greater ranges

Alaska

Denali National Park and Preserve 2014. The 2014 season lacked the 2013 season hoopla associated with the celebration of the centennial of the 1913 first ascent of **Mt McKinley** (20,320 ft) by Hudson Stuck's expedition. Slightly more climbers attempted the mountain in 2014: 1,204 versus 1,151 in the previous year, both numbers less than typical recently. In 2014, the weather was persistently cold and stormy, and only 429 climbed the mountain, far less than the record 787 scored in sunny, warm 2013. Six climbers (out of the twelve who tried) reached the summit of **Mt Foraker** (17,400 ft)—a good score for Foraker.

One climber, Sylvia Montag, 39, died in 2014, the same as the death toll for 2013. For the mountain, that is a good record. (In 2011, nine died; in 2012, six.) Montag's death in early May illustrates the risk of attempting McKinley early in the season when the rangers and other rescue staff and equipment are still low on the mountain. At that time of year, no one staffs the 17,200-ft High Camp on the West Buttress route.

Montag, of Tacoma, Washington, climbed with Mike Fuchs, 34, of Berlin, Germany. They began on the Muldrow Glacier route in April. On May 3, they reached the 18,200-ft Denali Pass, where high winds forced them to camp for two nights. Debilitated and short of supplies, they elected to try for the unoccupied High Camp on the West Buttress route. They divided their survival supplies and proceeded unroped, but soon became separated. The faster Fuchs reached High Camp at 11 A.M. on May 5 and called the ranger station to report that Montag, carrying the tent and limited food, had not reached camp. He hoped she had bivouacked near Denali Pass. At the time, no other climbers were above 14,200 ft on the mountain. The only National Park Service ranger patrol was encamped at 7,800 ft. Weather prevented a helicopter search until the evening of May 7, when Montag's body was spotted on Peters Glacier about 800 ft below the Muldrow traverse. The helicopter crew evacuated Fuchs from High Camp to Talkeetna for treatment. A ground crew later recovered Montag's body.

Eight other more minor search-and-rescue operations (below the recent average of fifteen per season) included a dubious first. A whitewater kayaker flipped, then lost, his craft on the West Fork of the Yentna River. He swam to shore and activated a Personal Locator Beacon. Mountaineering rangers picked him up with a helicopter and flew him to Talkeetna, where he was treated for minor injuries.

As usual, most of the climbers registered on McKinley were from the United States, and most of those came from Alaska, Washington, Colorado, and California. Most international climbers were from Canada followed by the United Kingdom and Poland (Japan no longer sends many climbers). South Korea and an unlikely contender, the United Arab Emirates, each sent 25 climbers. The busiest month was June with 330 climbers reaching the top. The biggest day was June 4, with 99 summits. Both are far from record numbers. The 153 women attempting McKinley composed 13 percent of the total. The summit success rate for women was 33 percent compared with 36 percent for all climbers. Both success percentages are far below recent averages because of the severe weather.

In the Denali National Park and Preserve, “new routes and notable ascents,” let alone first ascents, are becoming difficult to find, but climbers still try. Kilian Jornet acclimatized on the West Buttress. He then used skis and crampons on June 7 in a solo round-trip of a route called the “Rescue Gully variation”: Kahiltna Base Camp to McKinley summit and back in 11 hours and 48 minutes, beating the best previous time by almost five hours. In March, John Frieh, Jason Stuckey, and Brad Farra made the first winter ascent of the French Ridge on Mt Huntington. The big climb of the season was by Colorado climbers Kevin Cooper and Ryan Jennings, who, after more than a decade of planning and waiting for good conditions, climbed an “ephemeral and futuristic” route up the true N Face of Mt Johnson. (Johnson is adjacent to the better-known Mt Grosvenor.) Cooper and Jennings prepared a route onto the face, then retired to wait for better weather. Starting up on May 1, they climbed 4,000 ft of new ground during the next three days, reaching the summit on May 4. They made a hazardous descent between Johnson and Grosvenor to reach their base camp after 81 hours out.

Nepal Himalaya

Post-monsoon 2013. The conventional wisdom has long been that mountaineers should avoid climbing in the post-monsoon season—October and November—in Nepal because the monsoon may end late and overlap with the beginning of the high-altitude winter snows. Commercial expeditions usually don't risk post-monsoon trips. Climbers in 2013, as in 2012, went against the usual advice and climbed during that season, but most of them were making repeat climbs of established routes, particularly those peakbagging on 8,000-m and high 7,000-m peaks.

In post-monsoon 2013, 180 expeditions attempted 35 mountains; 260 team members reached the summit of their desired peak with the help of 185 hired supporters. Five deaths were reported: 2 members and 3 hired supporters. (The death numbers in post-monsoon 2012 were much higher, distorted by the avalanche on **Manaslu** (8,163 m), which killed 11 in a single event.) Despite the 35 different mountains attempted, the bulk of the mountaineers concentrated their activity on a few higher peaks. On **Cho Oyu** (8,188 m), 69 members summited; on Manaslu, 66; on the surprising **Himlung Himal** (7,126 m), 57; and on the easier **Ama Dablam** (6,814 m), 57. All of these ascents were on the normal (easiest) routes. On no other mountain did climbers summiting number more than 8 in autumn 2013.

The only members to die in the season were Petr Machold, 40, and Jakub Vanek, 29, both of the Czech Republic, who were reported to have disappeared on October 12 at about 6,600 m on the W Face of the SE Ridge of **Baruntse** (7,152 m). Three Sherpas died in a single avalanche on Himlung. All were working on route preparation at about 5,700 m when the avalanche hit at about 10 A.M. on September 29. Kaji Sherpa, 42, was working for a private Netherlands expedition, and Tendi Sherpa, 44, and Ngim Pasang Sherpa, 35, were employed by a New Zealand commercial group.

First ascents still occur in Nepal, although increasingly on mountains no one has heard of. Those claimed in the fall season were all near the border with Tibet and of no more than moderate height. **Bamongo** (6,400 m) is in the Rolwaling region on the border. Mingma Gyalje Sherpa, Pema Chhiring Sherpa, and Yong Liu of China climbed the SW Face to the SW Ridge on October 30, reaching the top at 2:45 P.M. **Chhubche** (5,602 m) is in the Damodar Himal area, NNE of the popular trekking peak Pisang. On November 16, Britons Brian Jackson and Hugh Wrightson, Pasang Sherpa, and Tendi Wangya Sherpa climbed the W Face to the SE Ridge, reaching

the top of Chhubche at noon, the first ascent of that peak. Frenchmen Max Benoit and Sebastien Moatti made the first ascent of **Triangle Peak** (6,484 m) on October 9. The climb was a sort of consolation prize after their failure on Shisha Pangma. They approached Triangle from the Tibetan side. Triangle lies in the Jugal Himal, NNW of Dome Blanc on the Tibetan Border.

The outstanding climbs of the post-monsoon season were the only two ascents of the difficult and dangerous **Annapurna** (8,091 m), both on a new S Face route. The well-known Swiss speed climber Ueli Steck pioneered the route solo. After a short acclimatization, he established a low camp on the face, then started up. He used his signature tactic: he traded the security and weight of survival gear for the riskier security of climbing fast. He reached the summit at 1 P.M. on October 9 and immediately started back down. He did the entire climb in just 28 hours, the fastest Annapurna climb ever. The cold but otherwise ideal conditions on the usually unstable mountain helped.

After a longer acclimatization, Frenchmen Yannick Graziani and Stephane Benoist started up what is now called the Steck Route on October 17. Conditions had deteriorated on the face, and the climbers were already wearied by their preparations. They finally summited on October 25 at 11 A.M. Debilitated, both reached safety and a helicopter evacuation three days later. They had spent ten days on the face proper, both suffered frostbite and exhaustion, and were fortunate to come out alive.

The Piolets d'Or award honors alpinism at the highest level. At the awards ceremony in March 2014 at Chamonix and Courmayeur, Steck received the "golden ice ax" as "one of the two representative examples of the state of mountaineering today." Graziani and Benoist were presented with a special Brotherhood of the Rope award for "demonstrating that a partnership can be greater than the sum of its parts." The Piolets d'Or website lists major ascents for 2014, from which the 2015 recipients will be chosen, at pioletsdor.com.

Pre-monsoon 2014. Of course, the major story of the pre-monsoon (spring) season was the avalanche disaster in the Icefall on **Everest** (8,848 m) on April 18 and the subsequent major consequences for mountaineering activity and Nepal's tourist economy. A preliminary account of the disaster was given in *Alpina (Appalachia, Winter/Spring 2015, LXVI no. 1)* and a wide variety of other preliminary accounts have appeared in various media. We now have more detailed information, principally from the extraordinarily valuable reference the *Himalayan Database*. The Icefall avalanche of April 18 killed sixteen Nepalese, mostly ethnic Sherpas, and injured at least nine others. The

disaster was initially handled insensitively by the large commercial operators and the Nepalese ministries, and some of the Sherpas, perhaps the younger and more sophisticated, then threatened the ministries and the commercial operators with a work action. They also appealed to the media, all in a search for more benefits. As a perhaps unintended result, Everest was effectively closed to climbing from the south by April 21.

Only one group evaded the closure. Wang Jing, a businesswoman from China, hired a helicopter, which flew her and three Sherpas past the Icefall. The four reached the summit on May 23, the only ascent of the season from the south. They then descended to a point above the Icefall and helicoptered back over the blockade. Other clients and foreign mountaineers who had hoped to climb from the south abandoned Base Camp in late April. Apparently few or none of them found it possible to switch to the north side for an Everest attempt.

The effect of the south-side closure on spring mountaineering statistics for Nepal was major because commercial expeditions normally crowd Everest in the spring. In 2014, of 66 expeditions signed up for Everest, only 10 (15.2 percent) succeeded; 52 members and 73 hired reached the summit. The Icefall fatalities were the only deaths on Everest that season. On other mountains, 4 members and 3 hired died. In all of Nepal, 162 expeditions took place, of which 40 succeeded (25 percent); 127 members and 124 hired reached the summit.

Although it is misleading to speak of a normal season in the mountains, numbers for the spring season of 2013 offer a basis of comparison. That was a bad season; 18 died in Nepal. It breaks down this way: On Everest, 88 expeditions signed up, 70 (79.5 percent) succeeded; 308 members and 353 hired reached the top; 4 members and 4 hired died. In all of Nepal that year, 198 expeditions set out; 112 (56.6 percent) were successful; 395 members and 353 hired reached the top. On other mountains, 10 fatalities (8 members, 2 hired) were recorded.

Consider only the north-side experience on Everest in spring 2014. Thirteen expeditions set out on that side. Nine of them, or 69.2 percent, succeeded, versus 79.5 percent for both sides in 2014—roughly comparable given the small sample size in 2014. Because of the extensive support system associated with commercial expedition efforts on the mountain, Everest typically has a relatively high rate of success in the spring season, its great height notwithstanding.

I have demonstrated previously in these notes (as others have elsewhere) that, in the usual spring season, well more than half of the money spent on expeditions is for Everest, primarily by commercial groups. In spring 2014, the economic situation was obviously far different. The school solution for this sort of analysis is to follow the money. But answers to the necessary questions—how much money was there? where did it go? who benefited? and who lost?—are not easily found by me or anyone else. The Sherpas did gain improved benefits for death and injury, and the media publicity produced some generous contributions to the Sherpas. Of course, this could not make up for the death of the family’s principal income provider. A substantial portion of the money flow in a commercial expedition is committed up front: client payments in part, permits and other government fees, insurance premiums, and the like. Probably little of the up-front expenditure was refunded, and thus some portion stayed in Nepal. The popular and well-regarded blogger Alan Arnette has posted extensive historical information on the costs and money flow in Everest commercial expeditions. His postings look at the problem from the standpoint of the climber interested in buying his way to the top of Everest, but provide a good idea of the complexity of the economic question.

Regardless of who won and who lost, it is clear that few on the Nepalese side of Everest want to repeat the closure of the south-side route. There apparently were no climbs of Everest in autumn 2014. Traditionally, commercial expeditions have avoided that season on Everest. Commercial operators were advertising trips to the mountain for the 2015 spring season. For more detail, again see Arnette’s postings at alanarnette.com/blog/. But for most, the only “lesson learned” seems to be: no matter what, don’t close the mountain.

Trekking disaster in the autumn of 2014. Beginning on October 14, a heavy snowstorm and consequent series of avalanches hit the popular north-central trekking area around Annapurna and Dhaulagiri in the Manang and Mustang districts. The storm, said to be the worst in ten years, dropped nearly six feet of snow in twelve hours. At least 43 persons, including at least 21 trekkers, died. When search-and-rescue operations were formally ended on October 19, as many as 400 people had been rescued, 175 had injuries, mostly frostbite, and a surprising 50 were still listed as “missing.” The event is called Nepal’s worst trekking disaster.

Trekking is an important source of income to Nepal and the Nepalese, but is not at all a risk-free pastime. No one seems to keep track of deaths

and injuries associated with the trekking activities each year, but they certainly occur. Lists of mountaineering deaths do not include those of trekkers unless they happen on the (misnamed) “trekking peaks.” Perhaps the worst previous trekking disaster occurred in 1995. On November 9 and 10, 1995, a major snowstorm dropped three to six feet of snow on many of Nepal’s mountains—particularly in the Khumbu-Gokyo region. Fewer trekkers were reported dead, but local people and their animals suffered severely.

Autumn is a favorite season for trekking in Nepal. In theory (not always in actuality), a period of pleasant weather follows the end of the monsoon and lasts until the onset of winter snows. Trekkers provide an economic boon to the Sherpas and others accompanying them as well as to the many inns and guesthouses at a time when mountaineering is less busy.

I have trekked twice in Nepal, both times in the autumn, but rather long ago, in 1972 and 1992. The first trek with Jimmy Roberts’s Mountain Travel Nepal was from early November to early December. We indeed had mostly sunny and pleasant weather until our highest camp, Gorak Shep below Everest at about 5,000 m. On November 26, about two feet of snow fell. We were the only large group still that high. (We had eighteen members, a good number of Sherpas and porters, and a trekking permit, which had been duly checked at Namche Bazar.) Even then, a few trekkers operated unofficially. At Gorak Shep, we met two Americans who were out on their own and an English woman accompanied by a Sherpa. Both parties would have been at significant danger in the snowstorm without our group. We provided them with some food and drink, shelter, and, of course, trail breaking on the way down. At a lower altitude, there was less snow, which quickly melted.

The trek in 1992 was a two-week Appalachian Mountain Club trip to the Annapurna–Dhaulagiri area supported by a Kathmandu-based Sherpa company. (We were about a one- or two-day walk south of the area of the 2014 disaster.) The weather was generally poor with many rainy days and, at our high point, a little snow. Even then, we noticed a large number of young European or New Zealand trekkers, operating on very low budgets and evading the few, poorly manned checkpoints. These trekkers would have been at substantial risk in the event of heavy snows.

Following the 2014 disaster, the Ministry of Tourism, which is responsible for trekking, came close to blaming the victim, referring to “cheaper tourists” who did not want to hire individual guides. Trekking is a very big business in the Annapurna–Dhaulagiri area with more than 100,000 trekkers in 2013, so more tactful wording shortly followed. Nevertheless, easy and cheap

transportation from Kathmandu because of extensive road construction, and sketchy enforcement of trekking regulations encourages many low-budget trekkers who are poorly prepared to handle difficult weather. In 2012, the ministry issued a regulation requiring the hiring of one skilled guide for each trekker, but the regulation was never enforced. Other proposals—individual global positioning system locators, a new trekking registry, and more and better checkpoints—are also expensive and difficult to implement. A better weather warning system, involving improved weather information transmitted directly to the extensive network of trekker lodges, would be more cost effective, and more likely to get life-saving information to those who avoid registration.

Everest 1996 Redux

Eighteen years after the disastrous 1996 spring season on Everest, Lou Kasischke has written a book, *After the Wind* (Good Hart Publishing LC, 2014), adding to a monstrous pile of information and disinformation in all media. The book is subtitled *One Survivor's Story* and were it no more than that it could be left to those who like survivor stories. Until the 2014 season, the 1996 spring Everest deaths were the most tragic on the mountain. Most of the earlier reports focused on the two largest commercial expeditions, Rob Hall's Adventure Consultants and Scott Fischer's Mountain Madness.

Kasischke's book also might appeal to those collecting the rationalizations made by those knowing that climbing Everest by the Normal Route is expensive, extraordinarily uncomfortable, and quite dangerous—while providing very minor personal prestige—but attempt it anyway. But Kasischke claims more for his book: several major novel insights into the “real” causes of the disaster.

Kasischke has never been a major figure in accounts of the tragedy. He was a skilled climber with no Himalayan experience and no practice with the use of supplemental oxygen. He turned back before reaching the summit and returned to his tent on the S Col just before the worst of the storm. Because he could not make his oxygen set work, he was severely hypoxic and snow-blind. He suffered alone in the tent on the night of May 10–11, participated in none of the rescue attempts, and was essentially a passenger on the eventual escape from the S Col.

Evaluation of Kasischke's claims requires familiarization or re-familiarization with at least two major books from 1997: Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air*

(Villard) and *The Climb* (St. Martins) by Anatoli Boukreev and G. Weston DeWalt. Krakauer was an Adventure Consultants client and Boukreev was lead guide for Mountain Madness. *Thin Air*, by far the most popular book on the tragedy (and the most popular American mountain book of the late twentieth century), makes a fair attempt at objectivity except on the behavior of Boukreev, where Krakauer has always shown, many believe, unreasonable prejudice. *Climb* attempts to redress this injustice and gives much additional detail on Fischer, his guides, and his clients.

The first of Kasischke's insights—that Krakauer's assignment as a journalist for a popular outing magazine exacerbated the competition between Fischer and Hall through the expected increase in publicity—reverses cause and effect. The American Fischer's attempt to enter the Everest commercial market threatened New Zealander Hall's near monopoly of well-to-do American clients. The intense competition caused both to avidly seek publicity. When Hall outbid Fischer for Krakauer, Fischer signed up Sandy Hill Pittman, who already had an agreement with an NBC website. The competition caused the publicity, not the other way around.

In two chapters of his book, "The Same Day Decision" and "The Hedge," Kasischke develops with little justification a complex thesis, a conspiracy theory with a nod to the mathematical theory of games. The factual basis is that Hall and Fischer originally agreed to try for the summit on different days, but then—after a discussion witnessed by no one—decided to shoot for the same day, May 10. Kasischke asserts that the intent was to ensure that either both leaders would succeed (get many clients to the top) or that both would fail. This plot would in some unclear fashion benefit Fischer and Hall to the detriment of their clients. It is simpler to note that Hall chose May 10 early on because he had succeeded on that day in previous years. Fischer's clients could not complete acclimatization before May 10. Fischer was burning his oxygen supplies at a high rate, could not afford to buy more, and thus could not agree to let Hall go first and then wait for an indeterminate later day. Also, shooting for the same day allowed the two expeditions—both short of experienced guides and Sherpas—to combine efforts, as they did plan to do. Fischer could also benefit by following the more experienced Hall and watching his turn-around decisions.

Kasischke is also severely critical of most of the professional guides, including the leaders, on both expeditions. Most agree that both Hall and Fischer made bad and apparently irrational decisions on May 10, for which both suffered painful deaths. Krakauer suggests that the fact that both were

exhausted and hypoxic (and Fischer probably ill) account for their irrationality. Other judgments of the expeditions' performance are highly subjective. A more objective assessment of the effectiveness of the two groups on May 10 and its aftermath can be based on a summary of the unquestioned results:

- For Rob Hall's Adventure Consultants—eight reached the summit: Hall; guides Mike Groom and Andy Harris; clients Krakauer, Yasuko Namba, and Doug Hansen; and two Sherpas. Of these, four died: Hall, Harris, Namba, and Hansen. Beck Weathers, who did not summit, was horribly crippled and disfigured by frostbite.
- For Scott Fischer's Mountain Madness—thirteen reached the summit: Fischer, guides Neal Beidleman and Boukreev; clients Martin Adams, Charlotte Fox, Lene Gammelgaard, Tim Madsen, Sandy Pitman, Klev Schoening, and four Sherpas. Of these, only Fischer died. Because of their own strength and the heroic actions of Boukreev and Beidleman, none of the clients suffered permanent physical damage from the harrowing descent in the storm.

Without question, the spring 2014 season on Everest supplants spring 1996 as the worst Everest season ever. Unless major changes are made to the commercial expedition model for getting clients to the summit, spring 2014 will not hold that sad title indefinitely. The fixed path up the south-side Normal Route remains a single-track railroad incapable of rapidly carrying heavy two-way travel. On a few select days each spring, more than 100 climbers struggle to reach the summit. At some points, not just in the Icefall or above the S Col, bottlenecks and long lines form as climbers wait to climb or descend. If, because of inadequate meteorology or poor communication with the climbers, an unforeseen storm like that of 1996 should strike on one of those days, many more climbers will die. The 2015 earthquake and avalanches appeared to have already exceeded the 2014 record as we went to press.

Acknowledgments. These notes are based partly on accounts in the American Alpine Journal, the Himalayan Journal, and their electronic supplements. The use of the valuable reference source the Himalayan Database is also gratefully acknowledged.

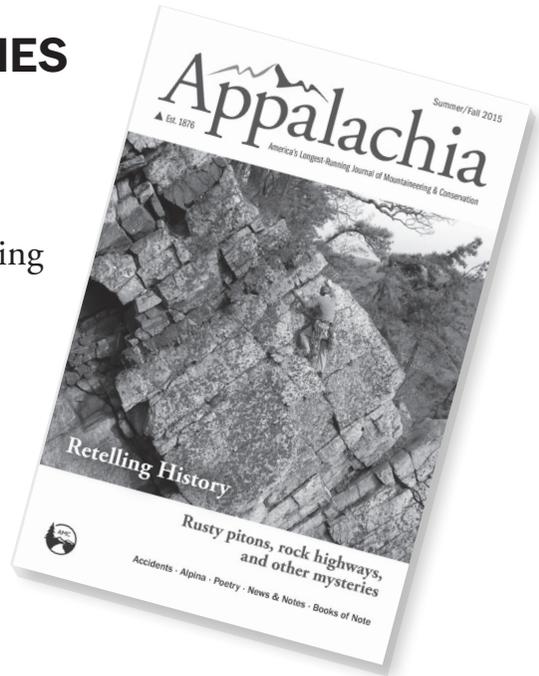
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