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Alpina

A semi-annual review of mountaineering in the greater ranges

Alaska

South District Ranger John Leonard reports a tough 2011 season on **Mt McKinley** (20,320 ft) and in the surrounding Denali National Park and Preserve. Nine climbers died. It was the most tragic season result since thirteen climbers died in 1992, and search-and-rescue teams and volunteers faced other severe challenges. Climbing activity was typical of recent years. There were 1,232 attempts on McKinley (the same number as 2002), 687 climbers reached the top—as usual, most ascents were by the W Buttress route. On the biggest summit day, June 6, 66 trod the peak—not at all a record. Most climbers attempting the mountain were from the United States (716), followed by Canada, the United Kingdom, Poland, and Japan. Activity on other mountains in the park and reserve was limited, although three of the nine deaths occurred on them.

Deaths in the 2011 Season. In the very early morning of April 28, five members of two guided parties were asleep in their tents on the Root Canal Glacier below **Moose's Tooth** (10,335 ft) S Face when a serac avalanche blew them from the tents, scattered their gear, and partially buried them. When park rangers reached the site at first light, they found that Christopher Lackey, 39, of Houston, Texas, had succumbed to traumatic injuries. All others survived.

Guide Dave Staeheli and three clients were descending from an ascent via the W Buttress of McKinley on May 11 when one of the clients, Jeremiah O'Sullivan, fell and dragged the entire roped party down about 300 feet to "Pig Hill" at 19,400 ft. O'Sullivan broke his leg; the others suffered lesser injuries. They were unable to contact anyone by radio or satellite phone. They tried unsuccessfully to move O'Sullivan and then apparently agreed to leave him and descend to the high camp, where they would organize a rescue. (The survivors' accounts are conflicting.) Staeheli and Lawrence Cutler eventually reached the camp. The other client, Swiss Beat Niederer, 38, separated from the group and got lost in the deteriorating weather. At 3:45 A.M. on May 12,

the National Park Service was informed, but the adverse weather delayed the start of an air search. Late that afternoon, the NPS helicopter found and picked up O'Sullivan at 19,500 ft. Although hypothermic, O'Sullivan dragged himself into the rescue bucket and was subsequently evacuated to Anchorage for treatment of his broken leg and severe frostbite. Searchers eventually found Niederer's body near 18,300 ft. An autopsy determined that he died of injuries and exposure.

Three climbers left the high camp on May 16 for the summit but turned back in bad weather at 18,500 ft near Denali Pass. Two were roped together, and the third, Luciano Columbo, 67, of Italy, elected to descend unroped behind them. The first pair heard Columbo shout, then saw him, unable to self-arrest, fall 1,400 ft to his death. On May 23, Jiro Kurihara, 33, and Junya Shiraiishi, 28, of Japan were reported overdue from an attempt on Mt Frances (10,450 ft). NPS rangers flew a reconnaissance mission and spotted possible bodies in avalanche debris on the W side of Frances. On landing, the rangers determined that the pair had been swept down by an avalanche or had fallen from high on their climb.

Guide Suzanne Allen, 34, was leading three clients down the route called the "Autobahn" just below Denali pass when one of the clients fell and dragged the entire rope down 1,400 ft. Allen and Peter Bullard of Shanghai were killed; the other two clients were significantly injured. A large contingent of rescuers responded, and the two survived. One, James Mohr, required an emergency "cricothyrotomy" to insert a breathing tube performed with a razor blade by Sgt Bobby Schnell, an Air National Guard Pararescueman from the 212th Rescue Squadron. Schnell nursed his patient through the subzero night to a subsequent helicopter evacuation from 17,200 ft. (For earlier contributions at the 14,200 ft camp and his service in leading and triage in this rescue, Schnell was selected by the Denali mountaineering ranger staff as the 2011 recipient of the Mislou-Swanson Denali Pro award. Quoting from the award: "Without the efforts of Bobby, James Mohr would have died from his injuries.")

Brian Young, 52, of Kodiak, Alaska, climbed McKinley on June 10 and descended to the high camp. He showed signs of altitude illness on the descent, but he chose to sleep it off. His companions found him not breathing and alerted NPS rangers, who performed CPR, but were unable to restore a pulse. The death was attributed to cardiac arrest. Finally, guide Juergen Kanzian, 41, of Kötschach-Mauthen, Austria, planned a climb and ski descent of McKinley as the fourth step in his quest to climb the Seven Continental Summits. On the evening of June 28, he was reported missing for more than

24 hours by his guided group at the high camp. A full-scale ground and air search was launched the next day, and on May 30, NPS rangers spotted a body at the foot of the Orient Express couloir, climbed to the spot, and identified him. Kanzian had apparently abandoned his backpack and skis at the top of the couloir and fallen to the location of his body at 15,300 ft.

Nine deaths following nineteen years of more favorable results in Denali National Park and Preserve obviously distressed park staff and volunteers, who, particularly under the leadership of former South District Ranger Daryl Miller, made major organizational and educational efforts to reduce the death rate. The resulting highly regarded system has been taken as a model for other dangerous mountain areas. See the comparison of recent results of this system and recent events on another great mountain in the later section, “A Comparison: Deaths in Denali and on Everest.”

Significant Accomplishments. Italians Diego Giovannini and Fabio Meraldi made the first recorded ascent of the W Ridge of **W Kahiltna Pk** (12,835 ft) on May 23. The route may have been climbed in 2008 by the “Giri Giri boys” Tatsuro Yamada and Yuto Inoue, but they were subsequently lost on the Cassin Ridge before returning to base. (See Alpina, LX no. 2, page 126). Americans Ben Gilmore and Hans Johnstone made a twelve-hour traverse of Mt Barille (7,650 ft) in the Ruth Gorge on May 13. They climbed the NE Face and NE Ridge to the summit then descended the NW slope to the Mountain House. Ten days later, on May 23, Swede Andreas Fransson made the first ski descent of McKinley’s S Face.

Climbing Fee Change. Leonard also reports the need for an increase in climbing fees. After public discussion and review, the climbing fee will be changed to \$350 (\$250 for ages 24 and under) starting in 2012. The new fee recognizes increased climbing program costs at a time of reduced NPS operating budgets.

A Comparison: Deaths in Denali and on Everest

The largest annual death toll in Denali National Park and Preserve in nineteen years suggests a review of the extensive and much-praised model safety program. No comparable program exists on a mountain of equivalent height, but significant similarities between McKinley and the higher Everest justify comparisons of mountaineering safety on the two. Conveniently for this study, both maintain accessible archives of their mountaineering history.

Denali's appears in its annual mountaineering summaries; Everest's climbs are chronicled in the very complete *Himalayan Database*, which covers all mountains in Nepal and on its borders. In what follows, *Denali* refers to all of the national park and preserve, *McKinley* to all mountaineering on that mountain massif, and *Everest* to all activity on Mt Everest routes from Nepal and China. To make comparisons easier, all elevations are listed in meters. McKinley's S summit measures 20,320 ft or 6,194 m.

McKinley and Everest are the highest mountains on their respective continents—Everest also, of course, in the world. Both were once considered remote and little visited; both now are crowded every year. On both, paradoxically, the recent increase in number of climbers—some of less skill than in earlier years—attempting the mountains has led to a lower relative death rate. Most climbers use the popular routes—the W Buttress Route on McKinley and the two standard routes from the N and S on Everest.

Obviously, the top of Everest is much higher than that of McKinley—2,654 m more. Latitude effects make the difference in oxygen partial pressure available to climbers somewhat less than might be expected. This makes the McKinley summit physiologically equivalent to a Himalayan summit perhaps 200 or 300 meters higher. In one sense, McKinley is the greater mountain because the total elevation gain from the usual starting points is considerably greater. From the Denali base camp, which actually is a glacier landing strip at 2,195 m, the elevation gain to the S Summit is 3,999 m. On Everest, the gain from the N side Base Camp to the top is 3,698 m and from the S side, 3,484 m.

McKinley is the closest high mountain to the Arctic Circle. This makes it generally colder than Everest, which is at the same latitude as central Florida. The climbing seasons are similar. Most climbers attempt Everest between April and around June 1, the pre-monsoon season. The cold in Alaska discourages climbers from going to McKinley before May. (In 2011, 236 climbers summited in May, 358 in June, and 93 in July.) Later in the season, the glacier landing sites become unreliable and the weather is colder. Similarly, activity in the autumn post-monsoon season is very limited on Everest because of the difficulty presented by the cold, particularly for commercial expeditions. One latitude effect probably significantly favors McKinley, both for ascents and search-and-rescue activity. During the peak month of June, it never really gets dark. On Everest, the day lasts a little more than 14 hours on June 1, and twilight is very short.

Table I on the next page summarizes results in the two areas for 2000 through 2011. This twelve-year period includes the high Denali death toll in 2011 and the bad year of 2006 (the worst since 1996) on Everest. Even for these areas of careful record keeping, determination of the number of **Attempts** is difficult. The Denali **Attempts** include only those on McKinley and the adjacent Mt Foraker, the two peaks for which the NPS requires pre-registration. For Everest, **Attempts** includes all expedition members and “hired”—natives of the countries around Everest who are paid as guides or porters—above the base camps. Some of the latter are porters working on the routes or in the lower camps who may not be trying to reach the summit.

Summit % and **Death %** are the number of **Summits** and **Deaths** in each year normalized to **Attempts** and expressed as percentages. Deaths are calculated thus: On Denali, all deaths are considered, not just those on McKinley and Foraker. Note that the number of **Attempts** in Denali is quite uniform and always greater than the number on Everest. Everest **Attempts** vary more (often for political reasons), and only in 2007 do they approach the Denali value. The **Summit %** averaged over the period—53.64 percent for Denali and 48.40 percent for Everest—are similar. Not at all so for the average **Death %**—Denali 0.3023 percent, Everest 0.6367 percent. For the typical climber chosen at random and attempting an ascent of Everest, the chance of death is (in some sense) more than twice as great as that for Denali.

To say more about this difference, one must examine the causes of death. Table II on page 124 lists the death causes for Everest in decreasing order of frequency using the *Himalayan Database* classification. The parallel Denali classification is a subjective attempt to categorize similarly the death descriptions from the annual summaries. **Plane Crash** deaths are reported for Denali because the NPS controls small plane flights, which are often an integral part of Denali mountaineering. **Icefall collapse** is peculiar to the Khumbu Icefall on Everest. **Disappearance** is entered for individuals missing for the season, even if the bodies are found in later seasons. The classification of **Unknown** for Everest comprises two unfortunate individuals found inside tents after some days of disappearance. The cause of these deaths was never determined.

It is striking that **AMS** (acute mountain sickness), tied for most likely, and **Exhaustion**, the third most frequent cause, account for 21 deaths (37.50 percent) on Everest and none for Denali. Of course, McKinley is not as high as Everest, but climbers do suffer AMS on McKinley. Indeed, in 2011, 21 percent of required medical interventions were for “altitude AMS.” On

Table I: Deaths Denali and Everest 2000 to 2011

Year	Denali					Everest				
	Attempts	Summits	Deaths	Summit %	Death %	Attempts	Summits	Deaths	Summit %	Death %
2000	1,209	556	4	45.99	0.3309	590	145	2	24.58	0.3390
2001	1,345	783	0	58.22	0	528	182	5	34.47	0.9470
2002	1,268	652	4	51.42	0.3154	411	158	3	38.44	0.7299
2003	1,213	690	4	56.88	0.3298	796	266	3	33.42	0.3769
2004	1,291	660	1	51.12	0.0775	614	337	7	54.89	1.1401
2005	1,372	779	3	56.78	0.2187	837	307	6	36.68	0.7168
2006	1,182	582	3	49.24	0.2538	857	491	11	57.29	1.2835
2007	1,239	574	5	46.33	0.4036	1,047	633	7	60.46	0.6686
2008	1,288	756	4	58.70	0.3106	695	423	1	60.86	0.1439
2009	1,176	690	4	58.67	0.3401	830	457	4	55.06	0.4819
2010	1,231	675	4	54.83	0.3249	852	543	3	63.73	0.3521
2011	1,246	692	9	55.54	0.7223	869	529	4	60.87	0.4603
Totals	15,060	8,089	45			8,926	4,471	56		
Average	1,255	674.08	3.750	53.64	0.3023	743.83	372.58	4.667	48.40	0.6367

Table II: Death Causes on Denali and Everest 2000 to 2011

Denali Classification	Deaths	%	Everest Classification	Deaths	%
Fall	11	24.44	Fall	11	19.64
	0	0.00	AMS	11	19.64
	0	0.00	Exhaustion	10	17.86
Cardiac	6	13.33	Illness not AMS	7	12.50
Fall/avalanche, Avalanche	12	26.67	Avalanche	4	7.14
	0	0.00	Crevasse	3	5.36
	0	0.00	Icefall collapse	3	5.36
Disappearance	6	13.33	Disappearance	2	3.57
Exposure/fall	1	2.22	Exposure/frostbite	2	3.57
	0	0.00	Unknown	2	3.57
Rock fall	1	2.22	Falling rock/ice	1	1.79
Plane crash	8	17.78			
Total	45	100.00	Total	56	100.00

McKinley, because of the presence of a staffed camp at 4,328 m and an on-call helicopter, AMS sufferers are aggressively treated and promptly evacuated to lower elevations. None have died in the twelve-year period examined.

The Everest classification **Exhaustion** denotes climbers who can no longer move themselves, are either ignored or found too difficult to rescue, and eventually perish. In the period studied, all deaths so classed occurred above 8,100 m. Eight of the ten deaths were on the N side route, where small, less well-supported expeditions are more prevalent. At elevations above 8,000 m on Everest, potential rescuers involved in the great physical effort of moving an exhausted climber need a supplemental oxygen supply and, in any event, will shortly become exhausted and at risk of death themselves. As with AMS, exhausted climbers are far more likely to be treated and helped to descend on McKinley. Although obviously critical for AMS and exhaustion, prompt and effective search-and-rescue response can reduce the death rate for all injuries not immediately fatal. In Denali, the park service is responsible for initiating and executing search and rescue, but for years, the park also has fostered the concept that all mountaineers are responsible for providing prompt help (including alerting NPS rangers) to members of their own party and to others on the mountain in need of it.

On Everest, responsibility and authority lines are far less clear. The controlling countries, Nepal and China, require registration and charge fees

but assume little responsibility and exercise little direct control in cases of danger on the mountain. The larger commercial mountaineering companies do attempt a coordination role, centered on fixed-route preparation at the start of the pre-monsoon season. (Few commercial climbs take place in other seasons.) Of course, the presence of the fixed ropes and various tent camps established by the commercial companies for their clients make the mountain safer, and the companies sometimes participate importantly in rescues at some financial sacrifice and physical risk, but they do not have the authority and often the inclination to direct or coordinate the rescue. The degree of support given to clients by commercial companies varies in quality. Particularly on the N side, the minimum price package offered to solo climbers or small groups is little more than a permit procurement and equipment rental service coupled with boarding at Base Camp. In a widespread problem, for example—bad weather—even the largest and priciest of the commercial operations must ensure their own clients' safety first. No one may even know of the problems of small groups or solo climbers.

Could features of the Denali safety model be implemented on Everest?

A single overall search-and-rescue authority is neither politically possible nor highly valuable on Everest. Only rarely, if ever, would it be possible to join operations or shift resources on the two sides of Everest.

Well-staffed and well-equipped rescue bases similar to the 4,328 m camp on McKinley would have to be at much greater elevation to be valuable on Everest. Keeping them supplied and the physical deterioration of skilled staff kept too long at height would be serious problems, and the cost would be prohibitive, at least for Nepal. Although helicopters are used for search, rescue, and evacuation elsewhere in the Himalaya, and at relatively low altitudes on the Nepal side of Everest, it would be difficult to establish an on-call service high on the mountain. It is true that a French Ecureuil AS350 B3 landed on the S Col and touched down near the summit in 2004, but the cost of providing and maintaining such a machine on-call is probably beyond Nepalese capabilities. I am not aware of any use of helicopters for rescue or evacuation from the routes on the Chinese side, and it appears that the Chinese are not eager to permit the use of helicopters there.

Finally: Is it possible to export what we might call the Denali “rescue ethic” to Everest? The development of that ethic took years of dedicated and costly effort by park service staff and many volunteers. Neither Nepal—because of cost—nor China—because of disinterest—is likely to undertake such an effort. It should be noted that recently Denali has established a sort of

internship where each climbing season an experienced Nepalese Sherpa trains with Denali rangers to “further develop his rescue, emergency medical, and clean climbing skills.” A highly laudable program, but too small to produce rapid ethical change even if it can be continued in a time of contracting budgets. Obviously, the commercial mountaineering companies, taken as a whole, could benefit from an improved rescue ethic and a lower death rate on the mountain. Taken individually, they are business firms operating in a highly competitive environment with little margin for increased cost. They close down frequently and are unlikely to be able to support a complex multi-year program.

As I drafted these notes in August 2012, the results for the principal 2012 seasons on the two great mountains were still not available. It was a difficult pre-monsoon for Everest, with frightening changes to the S side route because of excessive warmth. One of the best known of the commercial operators canceled his season (which damaged his reputation and cut his income) because he judged the danger to Sherpas and clients to be excessive. At least ten people died on the mountain. In Denali National Park and Preserve, six died. Four of those were caught in an avalanche that hit a five-member Japanese party.

Indian Himalaya

Harish Kapadia, writing for the *Himalayan Journal*, notes that the overall level of mountaineering in this area in the 2011 season was nearly identical to the uninspiring 2010 season. Climbers from India mounted 57 expeditions; foreign groups numbered 40. As was typical in recent years, about half of the foreign expeditions and perhaps two-thirds of the Indian ones were to easy and routine peaks, but there were significant exceptions, most notably the American first ascent of the second-highest unclimbed peak in the world.

The intense interest in the ascent of the *second*-highest previously unclimbed peak, **Saser Kangri II East** (7,518 m), arises because the recognized highest unclimbed, Gangkhar Puensum (7,750 m), lies entirely within Bhutan, where mountaineering has been forbidden since 2003. The matter is further confused by the fact that Saser Kangri II West (ca 7,500 m) was climbed by an Indo-Japanese team in 1984, which then thought it to be the higher summit. The summit team for the successful 2011 attempt comprised Mark Richey, Steve Swenson, and Freddie Wilkinson, all of the United States. Richey and

Swenson had tried the mountain once before. In 2009, Richey led Swenson, Mark Wilford, and Briton Jim Louther on an extended route reconnaissance. Bad weather forced them to turn back at 6,500 m.

Richey and Swenson spent well over a year assembling the right team and negotiating permits for another attempt in this closely controlled Indian East Karakoram area. The team left Leh on July 7, 2011, to establish first a base camp then an advanced base camp at 5,800 m on the S Shukpa Kunchung Glacier. Finding the mountain out of condition in warm weather, they acclimatized on lesser peaks with other team members (see later), deferring the actual attempt to August 21. The climb was alpine style, no fixed camps or fixed ropes, taking five days to reach the summit on August 24, 2011. The summiters assured themselves that the east summit of Saser Kangri II is indeed the higher. The descent required 30 rappels, complicated by rockfall damage to one of the ropes and Swenson's worsening sinus condition. (On August 26, Indian Air Force helicopters evacuated Swenson from advanced base camp to Leh hospital, where he recovered.)

In the twentieth Pioletts d'Or (French for "golden ice axes") at Courmayeur in March 2012, the ascent received the golden ice ax award (a dual honor with the Slovenian ascent of K7 in Pakistan) as "an example of classic exploratory alpinism and committed alpine style climbing at high altitude. . . . A wealth of experience enabled the team to take a very minimal lightweight alpine-style approach in achieving the first ascent [of the second-highest previously unclimbed mountain in the world]."

During the acclimatization period, Richey, Swenson, Wilkinson, and other team members Emilie Drinkwater, Kristin Kremer, and Janet Bergman, collectively, climbed four supposedly unclimbed lesser mountains: **Tsok Kangri** (6,585 m) on July 31 via the N Face (by Richey, Swenson and Wilkinson); **Saserling** (6,100 m) via the S Face on August 6 (by Bergman and her husband Wilkinson); **Pumo Kangri** (6,250 m) via the W Face on August 5 (by Drinkwater and Kremer); and **Stegasaurus** (6,600 m) S Glacier to S Ridge on August 9 (by Bergman, Drinkwater, Richey, and Wilkinson). All these heights and the status as previously unclimbed are subject to verification. The mountain names applied by the first ascenders probably will not stand.

Americans made another long-awaited first ascent, of the **Shark's Fin**, which is not an independent peak but the sharp prow (sometimes also called the E Pillar) of Meru Central (6,301 m) in the Garhwal. The dramatic fin-like feature had attracted many attempts (the *American Alpine Journal* estimates more than twenty) by an international selection of distinguished

mountaineers before a twelve-day push ending on October 2, 2011, when Conrad Anker, Jimmy Chin, and Renan Ozturk climbed the fin and went on to the summit of Meru Central. Favored by good weather, they completed the lower part of the route in only six days, then climbed steep sections requiring the use of their big-wall kit (an assemblage of tools and hardware for climbing steep, blank areas on big walls, mostly developed at Yosemite). The final section was mixed climbing and artificial aid.

Anker had tried the fin twice before, first in 2003 in light alpine style with Doug Chabot and Bruce Miller. Deep snow and inadequate equipment defeated them. Anker tried again in 2008 with a new team of Chin and Ozturk, but a major storm forced them down after nineteen days on the prow. They were determined to try again but had learned that “alpine style” did not work on the fin. So they carried equipment for alpine ice and rock and a full big-wall kit. Chin said, “Tons of teams have tried the route alpine style. But you just can’t. . . . Hauling a big-wall kit through the lower alpine route . . . is part of what makes the route so logistically challenging.” And challenging it was; collectively the team spent more than 30 days on the fin in the two attempts. The three climbers were nominated for the twentieth Pioletts d’Or in Courmayeur.

A smoother first ascent was of **Chemma Pk** (6,105 m) at the head of the Karcha Nala in Lahaul by a distinctly senior (average age 65) team from the Tokai branch of the Japanese Alpine Club. The leader, Kazuo Hoshi, a relative youngster at 60, brought the entire party, Yutaka Shinohara, Hitoshi Ishii, Katsumi Kuze, and Liaison Officer Gajendra Deshmukh, from a base camp at 4,400 m to the summit in nine days. They established three camps on glacier “B” at the head of the nala and climbed via the NE Face from the highest camp at 5,550 m to the summit in a little over four hours, arriving in full sun at 11:45 A.M. on August 9, 2011. They returned to camp 2. Heavy snowfall in the subsequent days caused them to abandon their gear and supplies at their base camp and escape to the resort town of Kalpa. Base camp was eventually cleared following August 20.

A similarly mature group of five Japanese, ranging from age 70 to 73 and led by Kimikazu Sakamoto, explored the Lenak and Giabul nalas in the South Zanskar mountains. They located, photographed, devised identifying numbers for, and marked on Google Earth maps a number of apparently unclimbed 6,000-meter peaks. The results are published for the delectation of prospective climbers in *Japanese Alpine News*, Volume 13 (2012), pages 54–64.

Nepal Himalaya

Pre-monsoon 2011. Reflecting the effects of the worldwide recession and continuing political instability in Nepal, spring 2011 expeditions were fewer than in spring 2010. Of the 176 expeditions to 24 mountains in Nepal or on its borders, 98 placed 704 climbers on summits. One “hired” (see page 122) and ten members died. In 2010, there were 196 expeditions to 21 mountains, 112 successes placing 675 climbers on top. Twelve members died.

Two of the deaths were on the only first-ascent attempt of the season, that on Thulagi (7,059 m) SW of Manaslu. This mountain was opened to climbers in 2003 and surely is one of the very few Nepalese unclimbed 7,000ers left. Nikolay Bandalet of Belarus led a four-man expedition in May. Few details are available, but apparently, the leader and Sergei Belous disappeared from a bivouac at about 7,000 m on May 8, and the other two members abandoned the expedition. Two parties previously attempted Thulagi: Japanese in 2008, and Bandalet and two Russians in autumn 2010. The latter tried the NE Ridge and abandoned the attempt because of “avalanche conditions.”

Four other deaths occurred on Everest, not surprising given the high level of activity there, and are described later. The “**Manaslu** (8,163 m) effect” persists. Seven expeditions put 43 climbers on the summit but lost 4. One of these was the (sadly) typical death, from acute mountain sickness (AMS), of Eisa Mir Shikari of the sprawling Iranian expedition. He persisted too long in his attempt and died trying to descend above camp 3. The deaths on a four-person French expedition led by Bernard Jean Francois Milian are something of a mystery because only one member survived. Milian led Alain Pierre Marie Laurens, his wife Francoise Laurens, and Tashi Chhiring Sherpa in an attempt on the Manaslu Normal Route. All had been together on a successful climb of Tilicho in spring of 2008. According to Francoise Laurens, Milian, Pierre Laurens, and Tashi Chhiring all reached the summit on May 5. (It is not clear how she knows. Perhaps she received a satellite phone message.) The three got off route and disappeared on the descent. Francoise Laurens used the satellite phone to call for help, but after extensive search, only the Sherpa’s body was found and brought down.

The only other death in the season was that of Swiss Joelle Catherine Brupbacher, 32, who attempted Makalu with only one Sherpa. She reached a high point of about 8,400 m on May 21 on the Makalu La-NW Ridge

route and, apparently feeling unwell, returned to camp 3. She was unable to descend from there. Before supplemental oxygen could be found, she died at 11:30 P.M. on May 22. Her death is marked “AMS” in the *Himalayan Database*. Brupbacher had claimed several other climbs, one of them disputed, in the Nepal Himalaya.

The pre-monsoon season on **Everest** (8,848 m) was little different from other recent spring seasons. Expedition leaders mounted 91 expeditions with a success rate of 70.3 percent; 252 members and 277 hired made the top for a total of 529 individual ascents. Thirty-three of these were women. Only three made the summit without the use of supplementary oxygen. On the busiest day, May 21, 106 persons summited. This was far from a record day. Typically, almost all climbers tried the normal routes from the N and S, and most were on commercial expeditions.

The most quixotic and perhaps the saddest of the 91 expeditions was the “Senior Citizens Mt Everest Expedition” led by Shailendra Kumar Upadhyay, comprising himself and five Sherpas. Born September 19, 1929, the 82-year-old Upadhyay had been foreign minister of Nepal and that country’s United Nations representative. He hoped to become the oldest man to climb Everest and thus publicize an elderly rights group he supported. Though not an experienced climber, Upadhyay had made a few high-altitude treks and acclimatized on a 6,050 m trekking peak before his attempt. On their first day above Base Camp, he and three Sherpas reached a high point of 6,100 m; then Upadhyay, not feeling well, started down to seek medical assistance. He collapsed and died, probably of AMS, at about 5,600 m. Although he did not become the oldest man to reach the top of Everest, he was the first to die there in the spring of 2011, and (according to records in the *Himalayan Database*) he is the oldest man ever to die above Everest Base Camp.

Three deaths occurred later on the mountain. Fifty-five-year-old American Rick Howe Hitch, taking part in a commercial expedition up the S Col Route, reached camp 3 on May 1, then collapsed and died—a probable heart attack. Takashi Ozaki, 58, leading his own filming expedition, reached a high point at the top of the Hillary Step with two Sherpas at 6:30 A.M. on May 12. Ozaki, the only one using supplementary oxygen, felt weak and decided to retreat. His descent, aided by the Sherpas, was very slow. About noon at 8,650 m, Ozaki took off his mask, became irrational, and could no longer move. He died at 2:45 P.M., the death attributed to AMS. Unusually for deaths at that altitude, his body was brought down and eventually flown to Kathmandu for

cremation. Last to die on Everest was John Delaney, 42, of Ireland, a member of a Russian commercial expedition on the Normal N Col–NE Ridge Route. Delaney, survivor of a 2006 cancer, had told his family that he would climb no higher than 7,000 m to camp 1, but he acclimatized well and proved to be a strong climber. He and a Sherpa reached 8,800 m on the morning of May 21, where he became exhausted and collapsed, thus blocking the fixed ropes. (Recall that May 21 was the busiest day on the mountain.) His Sherpa and two others from the expedition got him off the ropes and down to the top of the Third Step at 8,750 m where he suddenly died.

Climbing All Fourteen 8,000-meter Peaks

Membership in this the most exclusive of peakbagging clubs is growing rapidly. In the past, several Alpinas might go by without a change in the list—no longer so. Since the club was last considered here, there are three new members: another from S Korea (making five), an Italian (also now five including club founder Reinhold Messner), and the first Japanese.

When 50-year-old Korean Kim Jae-soo reached the top of Annapurna on April 26, 2011, and claimed the 28th membership, a chorus of objections broke out. His 1993 climb of Cho Oyu was not recorded in the *Himalayan Database*. His explanations of the discrepancy have varied, but he eventually settled on a desire to not confess an illegal crossing of the Nepal–Tibet Border to reach the summit. Surely that was only a venial sin or, more accurately, a venerable tradition going back to the first ascent of Cho Oyu in 1954. Anyway, Kim re-climbed Cho Oyu on September 23, 2011. Most of his climbs were with Go Mi-sun, who died with eleven 8,000ers to her credit on her descent from Nanga Parbat in 2009.

Mario Luciano Panzeri, a 47-year-old Italian guide from Lecco and the 29th member, took from September 1988 to May 2012 from his first 8,000er ascent on Cho Oyu to his last on Mt Dhaulagiri. He thus holds (so far) the dubious distinction of longest probationary period (23 years, 7 months, and 21 days) for membership. Unlike Kim, he used no supplementary oxygen on his climbs.

Hiroataka Takeuchi of Tokyo was 41 when he became the 30th member and the first Japanese to climb all of the peaks as he reached the top of Dhaulagiri on May 26, 2012. Oddly, given the many years of active Japanese

mountaineering in the very highest mountains, his membership comes about five months short of 26 years after the club was founded by Reinhold Messner in October 1986. No other Japanese climbers have reached the top of as many as ten 8,000ers.

Ed Viesturs remains the only American to climb all of the 8,000ers. The highest number for a living American woman is now six for Cleonice Weidlich. (Weidlich sometimes gives her nationality as Brazilian.) She is tied at six with Christine Boskoff, who died on Genyen in 2006.

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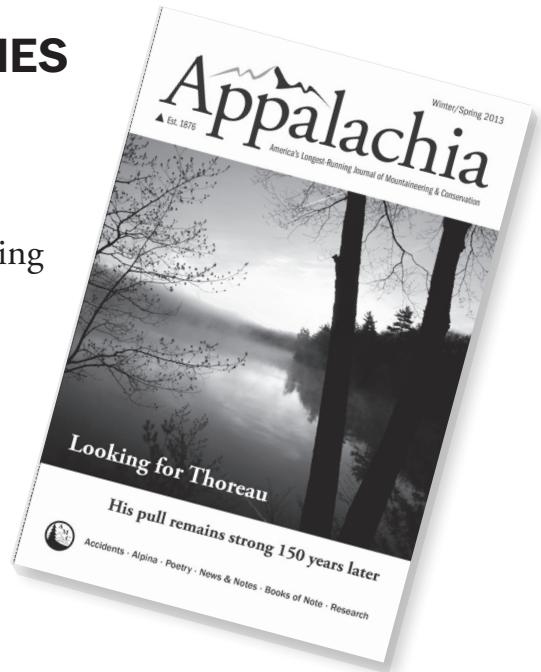
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