

# Appalachia

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Volume 73  
Number 2 *Summer/Fall 2022: The Ubiquitous  
Cell Phone*

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Article 15

2022

## Alpina

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### Recommended Citation

(2022) "Alpina," *Appalachia*: Vol. 73: No. 2, Article 15.

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# Alpina

*A semiannual review of mountaineering in the greater ranges*

## Barry Blanchard Is Injured

The renowned Canadian mountaineer Barry Blanchard received a serious head injury in August 2021. Blanchard, who has survived many falls, near-falls, shredded ropes, avalanches, and other alpine hazards, slipped on some concrete stairs in Saskatchewan and was taken to a hospital. Although he seems in for a long recovery, he was making good if slow progress by the beginning of 2022. He had returned to gym climbing and had even been ice climbing with fellow alpine legend Steve Swenson.

While wishing Blanchard well, you might look at his book *The Calling* (Patagonia, 2014). It is an engaging and often frightening chronicle of extreme climbs in the highest peaks and in his native Canada.

## Karakoram

**Sani Pakkush.** This formidable peak (6,953 meters) was first climbed by a German party in 1991, via its Northwest Ridge. There were no other known ascents before 2020. In that year the French duo Pierrick Fine and Symon Welfringer established a difficult route on the formidable South Face. It required a lot of hard mixed climbing and four bivouacs, two of them very uncomfortable. This splendid achievement was awarded a *Piolet d'Or*. Photographs suggest a number of even harder, rockier routes to the right of this one.

**Tengkangpoche** (6,487 meters). The previous Alpina described an attempt on the formidable North Pillar of the Karakoram peak. The route was completed in October 2021 by two British alpinists, Matt Glenn and Tom Livingston. Generating a bit of controversy, they used some of the gear left in a cache partway up the mountain by their predecessors. Theirs was a major achievement in any case.

## In Memoriam

**Rick Allen, 1954–2021.** After a storied career, the great Scottish mountaineer Rick Allen died on July 25, 2021, in an avalanche on **K2** (8,614 meters), while attempting a new route on the Southeast Face. His partners, Jordi Tosas of Spain and Stephan Keck of Austria, escaped with only minor injuries.

Rick's greatest triumph was on the Mazeno Ridge of Nanga Parbat (8,126 meters). This astonishing feature, some six miles long, had been tried by some of the greatest climbers, including Doug Scott and Voytek Kurtyka. The ridge lies around 7,000 meters and is no gentle snow slope: It is studded with subpeaks that must be climbed or bypassed. There is no practical



*Rick Allen on the first ascent of the Mazeno Ridge on Nanga Parbat in Pakistan.* SANDY

ALLAN

way off until one has done the ten kilometers all the way to the Mazeno Gap. About five kilometers across is aptly named the *point of no return*. Allen tried the ridge without success in 1995. Americans Steve Swenson and Doug Chabot were first to make the entire traverse (2004), but they did not continue to the summit. So in 2012 Rick returned with his frequent partner, Sandy Allan, along with Cathy O'Dowd, Lhakpa Rangdu Sherpa, Lhakpa Zarok Sherpa, and Lhakpa Nuru Sherpa. After they traversed the entire ridge, four of them descended by another route and were soon relaxing far below. Sandy and Rick headed for the summit, more than 1,000 meters higher. After a failed attempt, they battled their way to the top. Rick broke the way up the last section, despite his exhaustion. The effort took a toll: On the way down he was slow and incoherent. Sandy had his own problems: He hallucinated Charlie Brown's dog Snoopy and a witch flying by on her broomstick.

They did get down safely. It had been a tremendous achievement, which earned them a *Piolet d'Or*. At the time of their ascent, Rick was 59 years old, Sandy 57. This harrowing experience is the subject of Sandy's book *In Some Lost Place* (Vertebrate Publishing, 2016). It is also described in the Alpina section of this journal (Summer/Fall 2013).

Rick also established a new route on the South Face of Ganesh II and a very challenging direct line on the North Face of Dhaulagiri (8,167 meters) in 1993. He was the only Westerner on a team of Russians and had studied the language in preparation. He and Sandy climbed a new route on Pumori in 1986. Allen climbed Everest in 2000 after two previous attempts.

Much later (2018) Rick tried to solo a new line on Broad Peak (8,047 meters) and disappeared. Thought dead, he was spotted high on the mountain by a drone and rescued by humans.

After he survived exhaustion on Nanga Parbat and near-death on Broad Peak, you might think that Rick would retire from the big mountains. Instead he went to K2. When he died there, he was 68 years old.

### Nepal Himalaya

People looking for a (relatively) easy 8,000-meter peak have for years chosen Cho Oyu (8,201 meters). But the "easy" route lies in Tibet, and that route has for some time been closed by Chinese authorities. **Manaslu** (8,163 meters) has become a popular substitute. It lies entirely in Nepal and is protected from the politics of other countries. Last autumn 371 made the top. Or did they?



Along with some other 8000-ers such as Shishapangma (8,013 meters) and Broad Peak (8,047 meters), Manaslu had its actual summit questioned. In these cases many climbers have stopped short of the highest elevation, which is accessible by a precarious ridge traverse.

Manaslu was first climbed—to the *real* summit—by a Japanese party in 1956. Most subsequent parties stopped short of the final ridge. Late in September 2021, Mingma Gyalje Sherpa, known as Mingma G, led the way down right (west) from the forepeak of Manaslu, traversed from a lower point, and then climbed to the summit. The true summit. The accompanying photograph shows climbers on the forepeak, with Mingma's descent, traverse, and upward route to the top. Note that the left (east) side is even more intimidating than the west.



*Mingma Gyalje Sherpa, known as Mingma G, leads a group of climbers to the true summit of Manaslu.* JACKSON GROVES

## Denali

Climbers returned in great numbers last spring. As early as May 21 Denali Mountaineering Rangers issued a warning: “We have seen a disturbing amount of overconfidence paired with inexperience in the Alaska Range. While climbers may have a good deal of experience at elevations up to 14,000 feet in the Lower 48, the remoteness and extreme weather we get in the Alaska Range make the experience here more challenging and dangerous. Please do not underestimate conditions, take the time to acclimatize, and do not ascend too quickly. We have already had several SAR events related to HAPE [high altitude pulmonary edema] this year.”

Only three days later on the West Buttress came an episode that gained national attention when climber Jason Lance used a satellite communication device to call for a helicopter rescue, claiming that he and two companions could not descend because of hypothermia. In fact they could and did descend, but only after the other two spent hours persuading him that they could. Lance was charged with three federal misdemeanor counts for making a fake call. According to court documents, he claimed the Park Service was obliged to assist them because “we’ve paid our fee.”

The proliferation of communication devices raises many ethical issues discussed elsewhere in this journal.

## Ecuador

**Avalanches.** Of all mountain hazards, avalanches are probably the hardest to anticipate. Many of the world’s best climbers have perished in them; Rick Allen (see earlier) is only one of them. You can dig test pits, monitor radio warnings, and still get buried. And even if your party has shovels and avalanche beacons, you may still not get out. And avalanches occur on even the most familiar routes. The volcano **Chimborazo** was once thought to be the highest mountain in the world. At 6,268 meters (20,564 feet), it is not even the highest in South America. Its summit, however, is the farthest from the center of Earth, because of its closeness to the equator. Although its easier routes have relatively few technical difficulties, all high snowy peaks can be dangerous. In 1993 ten climbers were killed in an avalanche on the standard West Face route—described in Yossi Brain’s *Ecuador: A Climbing Guide* (The Mountaineers, 2000) as “one long slog.” Last October, in nearly the same place, another avalanche claimed the lives of six climbers.

## Caucasus

In a 2005 interview, Boris Tilov, chief of the Mount Elbrus rescue service, told interviewer Alex Trubachev that “on the average from 15 to 30 people perish every year on Elbrus.” In 2021, one fierce snowstorm took five lives. Alan Arnette reported on his blog that more than 70 people worked to rescue the other 14 members of the group, who said the storm had surprised them even though bad weather had been predicted.

Elsewhere in the Caucasus, several hard routes were opened. Of special note: on the Northwest Face of the rocky, gorgeous twin-peaked **Ushba** (4,710 meters). In September 2020 local climbers Archil Badriashvili and Giorgi Tepnadze found 1,700 meters of very hard going, some of it overhanging.

This may not be the best time to venture to the Caucasus. The region has a history of crime, with tourists often the victims. Climbers too. One party reported this about Mount Ushba on summitpost.org: “We were totally robbed right at the base of Ushba route, while sleeping in the Base Camp. The thieves got everything—climbing gear, clothing, cameras, documents, leaving a group almost naked.”

—Steven Jervis  
*Alpina Editor*

## Annapurna III, Southeast Ridge

On November 6, 2021, three Ukrainian climbers, Mikhail Fomin, Nikita Balabanov, and Viacheslav Polezhaiko, completed the coveted first ascent of the Southeast Ridge of **Annapurna II** (7,555 meters), in Nepal. The objective had rebuffed some of the world’s best climbers on expeditions stretching back 40 years.

Although several parties have reached the summit of Annapurna III, the soaring 2,300-meter spine of ice, rock, and snow of the Southeast Ridge was an alpine puzzle of the highest order, requiring a full battery of mountain skills. British climbers Nick Colton and Tim Leach were the first to try the ridge back in 1981. They reached a high point approximately 1,000 meters below the summit before retreating. Other expeditions with high-profile climbers have tried and failed in the years since, including a 2016 team led by the late Austrian alpinists David Lama and Hansjörg Auer. Before the Ukrainians’ ascent, the last time the mountain had been climbed was in 2003, when Ian Parnell, Kenton Cool, and John Varco, all of the United Kingdom, did the first ascent of the Southwest Ridge.

As with the Lama-Auer expedition, Fomin, Balabanov, and Polezhaiko took a helicopter to Base Camp. From there they acclimatized on surrounding peaks before starting up the Southeast Ridge. The route breaks down into three distinct pieces: a 1,300-meter buttress of icy couloirs and moderate rock to start, a 1,000-meter steep rock wall with poor rock quality in the center, and (after the Southeast Ridge proper) a final 500-meter snow slog to the summit. The difficulty stems largely from the complexity and size of the route. The Ukrainian trio had already tried the Southeast Ridge once before, in 2019, and realized that it would take a prolonged effort.

This time, they prepared for battle, took as much as they could fit in their packs, and committed to a full-on alpine-style siege of the wall. In total they spent 18 days on the mountain. By the time they were picked up by helicopter—a bit shy of their Base Camp, which they came back to dismantle later—Fomin had lost 27 pounds, Balabanov 30 pounds, and Polezhaiko 38 pounds.

—*Michael Levy*  
*Assistant Alpina Editor*



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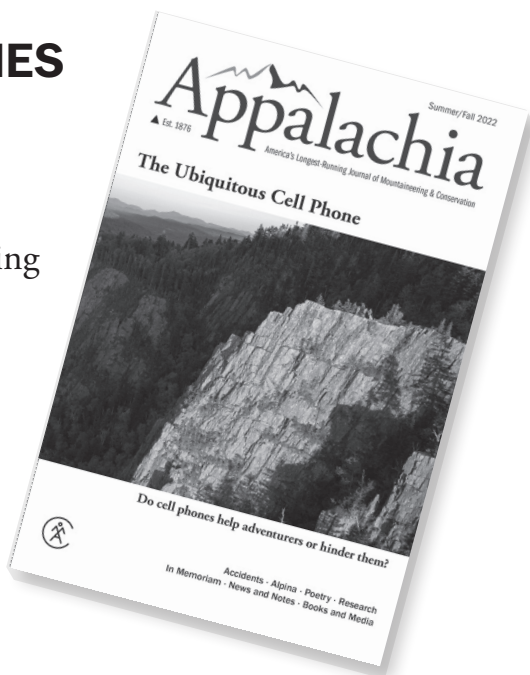
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