Alpina: A Semiannual Review of Mountaineering in the Greater Ranges

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St. Elias Range: The Past Resurfaces
In 1937, Bradford Washburn and Robert Bates made the first ascent of Mount Lucania (17,150 feet), which was then the highest unclimbed peak in North America. They also climbed Mount Steele (16,644 feet). Their return from the remote St. Elias Range is vividly described in David Roberts’s *Escape from Lucania* (Simon & Schuster, 2002). Washburn and Bates abandoned a large equipment cache on the Walsh Glacier. Thought forever lost, in August 2022 this material was found buried on the glacier, a full 14 miles from where it had been left. The remarkably persistent Griffin Post led the expedition to find the equipment. Post was sure the cache could be located, even after 85 years.

Karakoram
Two notable and probably related developments took place on K2 (8,611 meters), the world’s second-highest peak, in summer 2022. First, more than 200 climbers reached the top. That is more than triple the number for any previous year. And, second, a great deal of garbage was left around the lower camps.

It is hard to remember that not long ago many seasons would pass without any successful ascents. It is even harder to remember 1938, the year of the first American K2 expedition. Those days were incomparably different. You can read the whole story in the classic *Five Miles High* (Dodd, Mead; originally published in 1939), edited by Robert Bates and others and telling the stories of several team members. Readers may be startled to learn that in 1938 nobody had tried the mountain for nearly 30 years. Perhaps even more shocking: Not only was this the only expedition on the mountain in 1938, but one of only two in the entire Karakoram. About one-third of the book is given to the approach journey—understandably because it was a 330-mile month-long odyssey through valleys and villages that had seen very few Western visitors. “As we jolted and bumped along,” Bates wrote, “the driver swerving round corners an inch from the ditch, grazing cows and bullocks with placid equanimity,
and continuously blowing his raucous horn . . . we were cheered only by the knowledge that if we survived for another hour we should be there.”

Later it got harder.

It was a small group: five Americans, a British liaison officer, and Sherpa support. No previous venture had gotten within 6,000 feet of the summit. Nor was the best route obvious. It took weeks to settle on the Abruzzi Ridge, named after the Italian duke who had attempted it in 1909. Only four climbers went really high, two reaching the shoulder around 7,900 meters. They had solved a number of technical problems, the steep and nasty cleft known as House’s Chimney, after its first ascensionist, and the Black Pyramid. Notably, nobody was killed or even injured. And the group was congenial (mostly).

Subsequent history is very different. The peak saw its first fatalities in 1939, and it remained unclimbed until 1954. Both these trips led to bitter
recriminations and even a lawsuit. Since then so many have reached the summit that this very challenging peak has been called “a tourist mountain”! Between 1954 and now, an estimated 706 people have climbed it. And this year a commercial company is offering many treks to base camp—and back—in only three weeks. It’s a lot more accessible than it was in 1938.

**Peruvian Andes**

**Jirishanca** (6,094 meters) is one of the most spectacular peaks in the Andes, and one of the most difficult. First climbed in 1957 by Toni Egger and Siegfried Jungmair, that climb has rarely been repeated. Summer 2022 saw the mountain’s first alpine-style ascents, by two different routes. The Americans Josh Wharton and Vince Anderson returned to the South Face, which they had nearly completed three years earlier. This time they made it all the way: 39 pitches of rock, ice, and snow. Much of it was extremely difficult. Warming temperatures have exposed more rock and made the going even harder.

Within minutes of reaching the summit, Wharton and Anderson were joined by the Canadians Alik Berg and Quentin Roberts, who had finished an alpine-style ascent on the east side.

**Siula Grande** (6,344 meters) may be best known for Joe Simpson’s astounding survival dramatized in his book *Touching the Void* (Harper & Row, 1988) (and in a vivid 2003 film and 2018 play). Often lost in the survival drama is the description of the West Face, very bold for its time. From July 11 to 16, 2022, the Spanish climbers Bru Busom and Marc Toralles completed an even more challenging route on the East Face. It took six days and was very hard indeed, with rock pitches rated up to 5.12a, a very challenging route on the Yosemite Decimal System scale. Rockfall was a major hazard, and the rappel descent was tricky. “This [was] the first time that I do not want to return to a route that I have climbed,” Toralles later told PlanetMountain.com.

**A Milestone on Mount Everest**

Before the 2022 season, only 8 of the 4,000 people who climbed Everest (8,850 meters) were people of color. The first Black ascent, by Sibusiso Vilane of South Africa, came only in 2003. On May 12, 2022, an all-Black party of seven, with a team of Nepali guides, reached the summit. The Full Circle Everest Expedition, as it was called, also included a team of support crew and journalists at lower camps. “We’re climbers—we’re people who like to
be outside, and we just happen to be Black,” the Full Circle leader Philip Henderson told reporter Ben Ayers of Outside Online. “We also know that we represent our communities.” The Full Circle Everest Expedition summiters were Manoah Ainuu of Bozeman, Montana; Kenyan climber James Kagambi; Rosemary Saal of Seattle; Desmond “Dom” Mullins of New York City; Abby Dione of Fort Lauderdale, Florida; Eddie Taylor of Boulder, Colorado; Thomas Moore of Denver; and the following Nepali guides: Pasang Nima Sherpa, Lhakpa Sonam Sherpa, Phurtemba Sherpa, Dawa Chhiri Sherpa, Sonam Gyalje Sherpa, Nima Nuru Sherpa, Chopal Sherpa, Chawang Lhendup Sherpa, Tasha Gyalje Sherpa, and Amrit Ale.

**Kilimanjaro Connected**

*Kilimanjaro*, at 19,341 feet the highest summit in Africa, was expected to have full internet service—all the way to the top—by the end of 2022. The connectivity will likely outlast Kili’s famed ice cap, which warming temperatures may destroy around the middle of this century.
Honnold and Findlay in Greenland

On August 16, 2022 the extremely strong team of Alex Honnold and Hazel Findlay completed the first ascent of Ingmikortilaq, an imposing 3,750-foot cliff composed of 3-million-year-old granite and gneiss in eastern Greenland. The ascent took five days. To reach the monolith, the climbers rowed from a camp on the nearby shore and started their climb from the ocean. The climb went free—they used no direct aid.

Broad Peak Movie

In 1988 the Polish climber Maciej Berbeka thought he had made the first winter ascent of Broad Peak (8,047 meters). But he had reached only a sub-summit, an hour away from the true one. Twenty-five years later, in 2013, he returned. He reached the summit but sadly, he and a companion died on the way down. A movie on Netflix, Broad Peak, completed in 2020, tells this story with great verisimilitude. Much of it was filmed in the Karakoram, where the team spent 35 days, filming as high as 5,600 meters.

Patagonia

In September, Colin Haley made the first solo winter ascent of the Super-canaleta route on Cerro Fitz Roy, at 11,171 feet the region’s highest peak. Also noteworthy (among many other difficult climbs) were the fall 2021 explorations of Sebastian Pelletti, who ventured to a “mystical looking group of three rock towers” in Chile’s southern Cordillera Riesco. Pelletti and Chilean climbers Jose Navarro and Nicolas “Nico” Secul took a six-hour boat trip before establishing their base camp. They made a number of hard climbs, including a first ascent of the central rock tower, called Aguja Central.

In Memoriam

Ed Webster, a great American climber of the later twentieth century, died on November 22, 2022. He was 66. Webster established an early reputation as a rock climber, with very hard ascents in New Hampshire, Colorado, and other western states. But his ambitions reached to the highest peaks, and in 1985 he started in a big way, with Everest—and not by a standard route. He joined an attempt on the much harder West Ridge, which had seen only two ascents.
He did not reach the summit, but Webster climbed to 24,500 feet (7,468 meters), some 10,000 feet higher than he had ever been.

Everest had not seen the last of Ed Webster. In 1988 he returned as part of a four-man team, this time to a greater challenge than even the West Ridge: the remote, intimidating Kangshung Face. They carried no radio or supplementary oxygen. Like the only other route on this face, the team’s objective begins with a very steep and intricate rock buttress. Once the group had passed this, the climbers had to contend with a succession of snow bulges, which they called the Cauliflower Ridge. After this, they expected a manageable snow slope all the way to the South Col. But they were in for a shock: an enormous, unbridgeable crevasse, the “Jaws of Doom.” As one team member later said, “This is why we needed Ed.” With his ice-climbing skills, Webster aided his way up the far wall of the crevasse. After that, the climbing did ease off, and all four reached the South Col, although only one, Stephen Venables, made his way to the summit.

Webster paid a price for his achievement: He lost three toes and many fingertips to frostbite. He describes his ordeal in one of the finest of the hundreds of Everest books, *Snow in the Kingdom* (Mountain Imagery, 2000). It is 580 glossy pages, with abundant photographs, many in color.

**Hilaree Nelson**, who was one of the world’s foremost big-mountain skiers, died September 26, 2022, while descending Manaslu (8,163 meters). She was 49. A small avalanche caught her, and she fell to her death. Her body was retrieved and cremated in Kathmandu. She was the first woman to climb Everest and Lhotse within 24 hours. Among her many other achievements were ski descents of Cho Oyu and Denali. She was an active spokesperson on climate change, which, she said, “is real. I know this because I’ve seen it with my own eyes.”

**Glen Denny**, one of the last of the major Yosemite climbers of the 1960s, died last October at age 83. His many ascents in the Yosemite Valley included the third of the Nose—the original route on El Capitan—and the West Face of Leaning Tower. Many of his exploits are described in Steve Roper’s Valley history, *Camp Four* (Mountaineers Books, 1998). Denny was also well known for his magnificent photographs of Yosemite and its inhabitants.

—*Steven Jervis, with thanks to Mike Levy.*

Sources consulted include explorersweb.com, 8000ers.com, Climbing, Outside Online, and the American Alpine Club.
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