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Alpina: A Semiannual Review of Mountaineering in the Greater Ranges

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Alpina

A semiannual review of mountaineering in the greater ranges

Bad Day at Smith Rock

Smith Rock in Central Oregon is a great attraction for rock climbers. It is spiky, steep, and exposed. You must be careful up there.

But you do not usually have to worry about being shot.

That changed last October ahead of the American Alpine Club's Craggin' Classic event at Smith Rock. Few participants had heard of Samson Zebturiah Garner, although he was a rock climber himself. But Garner was a troubled man. "I fantasize daily about murder, death, and vengeance," he wrote to a former girlfriend in an email, as court documents reported. Garner, then 39, continued about the Craggin' Classic: "My mind immediately thought about killing people rock climbing there, how easy it would be to rampage through the [Smith Rock State Park] shooting belayers and spectators while their climbers watched and lived the horror, unable to help or do anything to save themselves and their friends." On October 19, the day before the Craggin' Classic was set to begin, Garner, in possession of many weapons, was arrested before he could use them. As of this writing, he has been indicted but the case has not yet come to trial.

A Major Climb in Kyrgyzstan

Pik Alpinist (5,482 meters), unclimbed until 1993, is an intimidating challenge in the Tien Shan. Its very steep, icy walls have attracted many alpinists. Last September, Dane Steadman, age 25, Jared Vilhauer, 42, and Seth Timpano, 41, opened a difficult line, Trophy Hunt (1,100 meters, AI5+ M5—which means alpine ice and mixed rock and ice) on the northeast face in 27 hours. Timpano was quoted in an article by Sierra McGivney for the American Alpine Club: "Given the steep ice climbing on the route, we determined our best strategy was to attempt the route without carrying bivy gear."



Climbers on Pik Alpinist survey the rock face. The new Trophy Hunt route scaled the left side. DANE STEADMAN

Old Camera Found on Aconcagua

On December 9, 2023, the *New York Times* devoted an entire sixteen-page special section to a story by John Branch, “Ghosts on the Glacier,” about a pair of 1973 fatalities on **Aconcagua** (6,962 meters), the highest peak in the Western Hemisphere. Could foul play have been involved, as the account considers? It seems more likely that Janet Johnson and John Cooper died of hypothermia or some other hazard. The story details the December 2023 discovery of a camera carried by Johnson. Fifty years after her death, the film was developed into some excellent photographs of climbers ferrying gear up the mountain. The pictures did not answer any questions of how the climbers died.

Everest Challenges and Mysteries

By the end of 2023, **Everest** (8,850 meters) had seen more than 3,600 ascents from the north, usually by the Mallory-Irvine route. Most of these were on

commercial expeditions. Everest is expensive: One company was promising “Luxurious Everest Expedition 2024.”

But even with drastically improved communications, abundant Sherpa support, and improved oxygen supplies, the mountain remains a major challenge. Eighteen died in spring 2023. There is, however, unlikely to be much more mystery. The mountain is too crowded for that.

June 8, 2024, marks exactly 100 years since Andrew Irvine and George Mallory were last seen alive on Everest. Here we have the most famous of mountain mysteries. Did they make the top? The clues are tantalizing but inconclusive. The first is the report of Noel Odell, who took the well-known final photograph of Mallory and Irvine as they prepared to head up from their high camp. “Perfect weather for the job!” Mallory had proclaimed. And just before 1 P.M. Odell saw them “going strong for the top.” But the clouds came in, and the question remains of exactly where the two were when spotted. Odell thought it was the Second Step, the only truly technical obstacle on the ridge that they had chosen. If they did indeed pass this step, they would have had a clear way to the summit. But the rapidity with which Odell credited them makes this improbable.

Clues did appear. Irvine’s ice axe was found in 1933, and then a discarded oxygen cylinder. The most startling was the discovery of Mallory’s body in 1999. But this posed as many questions as it answered. Some personal effects were recovered, but not what everyone was looking for: a camera. Perhaps Irvine had been carrying it. But where was Irvine? One bizarre speculation is that the Chinese removed his body, fearful that its discovery would document a successful summit before their country’s own in 1960. Many expeditions have fruitlessly searched for his body, in what seemed logical places. It may yet be found. As glaciers melt, they bring new angles to old mysteries, for instance, the most interesting part of the Aconcagua story is the discovery of the camera.

Nepal Himalaya

By the end of 1960, thirteen of the world’s 8,000-meter peaks had been climbed in a period of just seven years. (The fourteenth, Shishapangma, politically inaccessible in Tibet, remained unclimbed until 1964.) But plenty of lofty objectives remained. One of the most challenging was **Jannu** (7,710 meters) in remote eastern Nepal. French parties had been looking at it, and soon realized that they were seeing something far from ordinary. “Jannu was not like

other mountains, not even others in the Himalaya,” wrote Jean Franco and Lionel Terray in *At Grips with Jannu* (Gollancz, 1967). Tenzing Norgay had said, “That’s not a mountain. Jannu is a ferocious giant keeping watch.”

Nevertheless, the French made several attempts, and in 1959 they came very close. Three years later a large party, including leading French alpinists René Desmaison and Lionel Terray, reached the summit—a major achievement, and not only for its day.

Other routes followed, all extremely difficult. But the prize remained the astoundingly long, almost vertical north face, known as the Wall of Shadows. There were two ascents, both controversial. The first was by the Slovenian Tomo Česen in 1989; it has been widely doubted, especially after his dubious claim to have made the enormous south face of Lhotse the following year. One undeniable ascent of the face was made by a large Russian team in 2004, but it has been criticized because of their siege tactics and the gear they abandoned on the face. The great American climber Steve House said it was “an amazing accomplishment of engineering and perseverance, but they also mutilated it with their heavy style.”

This prelude makes all the more remarkable the achievement of three Americans, Alan Rousseau, Matt Cornell, and Jackson Marvell. On October 7, 2023, they left their camp at 15,400 feet to approach the Wall of Shadows, which they climbed in three days (the Russians had taken almost two months for their entire effort). Even more impressive were the three climbers’ true alpine-style tactics: no supplemental oxygen, no ropes fixed in advance, and no porters past base camp. The trio had prepared for this feat the previous spring by climbing a very difficult new route on the east face of Mount Dickey in Alaska’s Ruth Gorge (noted in the previous Alpina). There were no major injuries during their ascent of Jannu, but Rousseau and Marvell spent five days in a hospital after the climb to have their frostbitten hands treated.

Mark Synnott once called this the “last great problem in the Himalaya.” But no: There will always be another last great problem.

Surma-Sarovar (6,605 meters) is a previously unclimbed peak in a remote corner of northwestern Nepal. On October 25, 2023, United Kingdom–based climbers Tim Miller and Paul Ramsden reached the summit by a hard route on the 2,100-meter north face. They fixed no ropes and used no porters. The ascent took four days, the descent two more. The approach through largely unexplored territory was difficult too.

On October 28, Oswaldo “Ossy” Freire (Ecuador) and Joshua Jarrin (United States) reached the summit of **Yansa Tsenji** (6,567 meters) via an

alpine route on the east face. It took 19 hours and was very technical. The rappel descent, in darkness, took 10 hours. The peak had been attempted only twice before, even though it lies in the accessible Langtang Park, north of Kathmandu.

K2 Postscript

As noted in the previous Alpina, the Norwegian climber Kristin Harila and her party were harshly criticized for leaving a porter to die high on **K2** (8,611 meters) while they continued to the summit in July 2023. The criticism seems unjustified: Harila's group paused their ascent for more than an hour in a vain attempt to rescue the porter. This was more than many other teams did—other teams just kept going. The porter was under-experienced and his clothing was inadequate. He had fallen in a high and hazardous place; there was little chance of saving him. Ethical dilemmas of this kind are likely to increase, along with the numbers of climbers in the highest mountains.

A sad addition: A few months later (October 2023), Tenjen Sherpa, who had joined Harila in her quest to climb the 8,000-meter peaks in record time, was killed in an avalanche on Shishapangma. Three others died with him.

In Memoriam

Audrey Salkeld, the prolific British mountaineering historian, died October 11, 2023, at age 87. She wrote many books about mountains, including *People in High Places* (Jonathan Cape, 1991) and *Kilimanjaro: To the Roof of Africa* (National Geographic, 2002) after she had climbed Kilimanjaro—at 19,341 feet the highest point in Africa. She also reached the base of the North Col on Everest. Her venture on Everest was with an expedition hoping to find answers to the Mallory-Irvine mystery.

—Steven Jervis

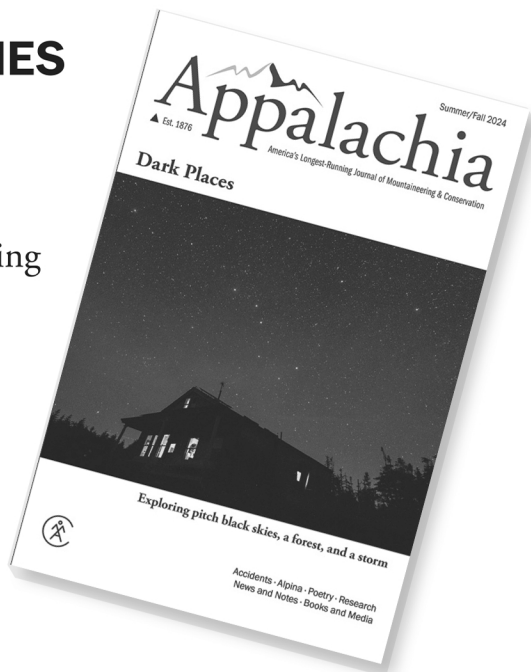
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