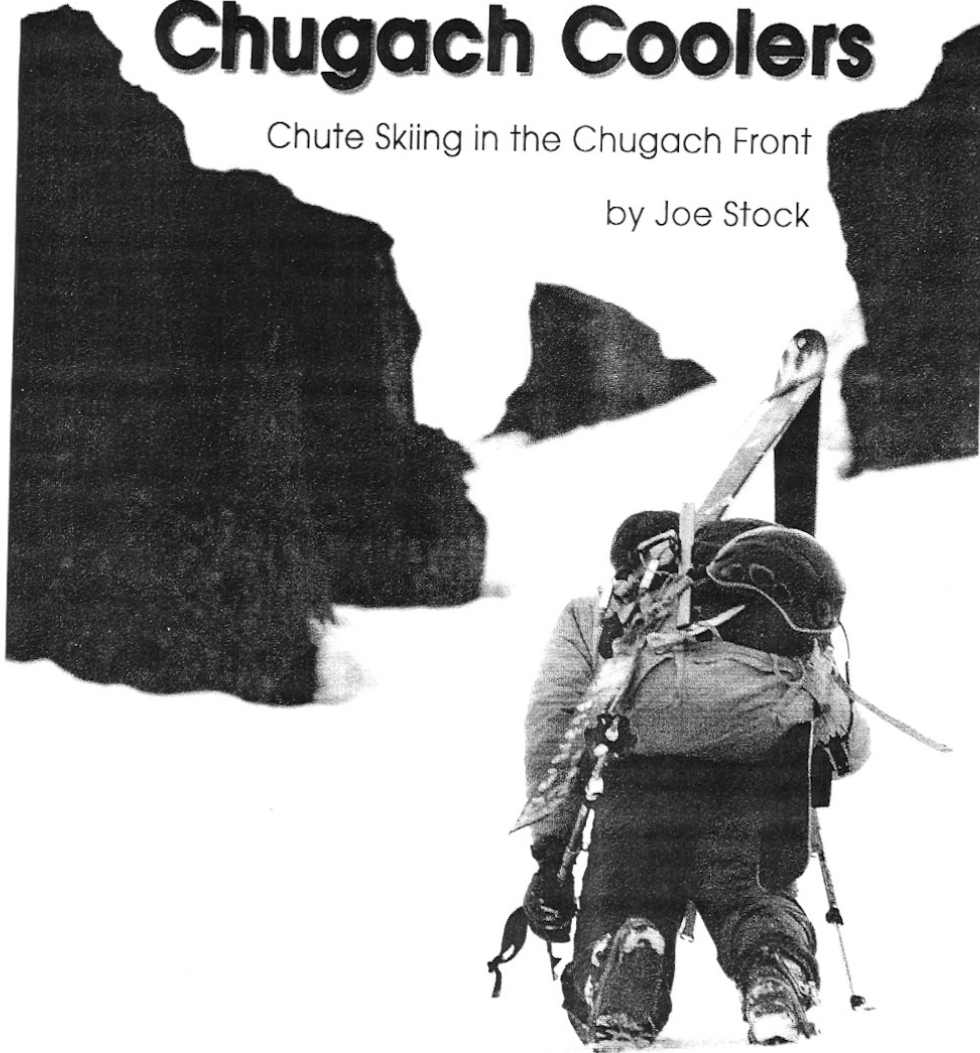


Chugach Coolers

Chute Skiing in the Chugach Front

by Joe Stock



Andrew Wexler cooler bootin' the south face of Ptarmigan to ski the S-Couloir, north face of Ptarmigan Peak, Chugach Front Range, AK

Alaska starts at the edge of Anchorage. Houses merge up into alder, then higher into the tundra of reindeer lichen, and on to a skyline of mountains. These mountains above Anchorage are called the Chugach Front. They're not grand, but they don't stop until the North Cascades in Washington State.

Wind ravages the Chugach Front all winter. For powder, Anchorage skiers drive an extra hour to Turnagain Pass. As summer approaches, the wind slabs in the Chugach Front melt and flowers emerge on the mountains' south faces. Backcountry skiers lean their tired boards against a corner of the garage and divert their energy to pack rafting. While dust settles on their skis, snow lingers in the shady gullies high in the Chugach Front. By summer solstice, only threads of snow remain, snaking down the north faces like rivulets of water.

As a hyperactive teenager in Juneau, I'd ski from nunatak summits, linking gullies of midsummer snow to the icefield below. Fifteen years later, when Cathy and I moved to Anchorage, I learned that the same summer chutes lingered only fifteen minutes from our house. After work, I searched for where these snow-filled clefts hid. I found out when the snow solidified from mush to corn and when the threads of snow disconnected and became ice. I also learned that these chutes dotted the 15-mile length of the Chugach Front. In June 2004, Gabe Rogel and I started hiking

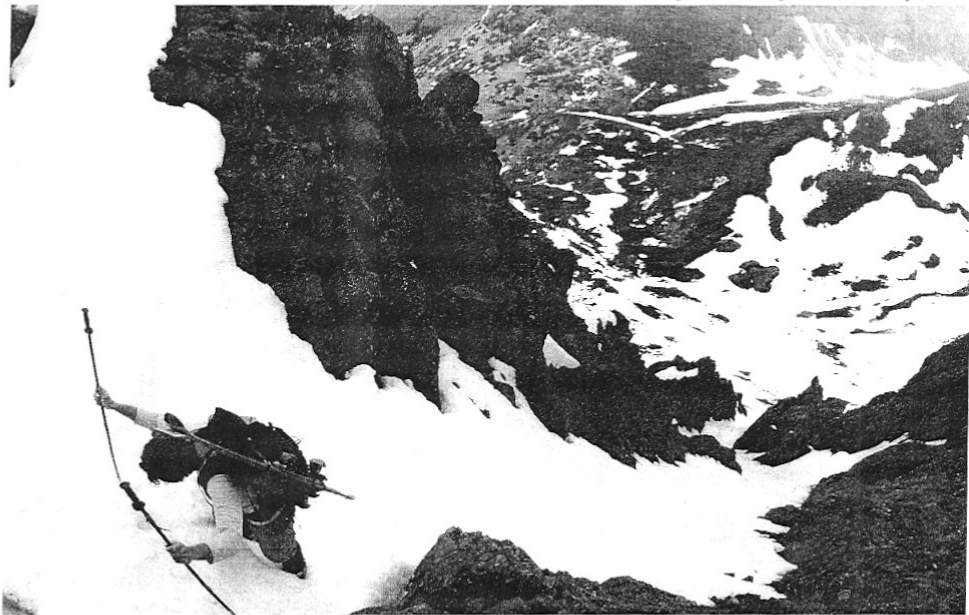
and giggling our way north through the Chugach Front, hoping for a three-cooler connection. At one AM, we reached the last summit, Tanaina Peak, but our desired chute remained hidden in the twilight. We down-climbed to the valley floor and looked back at Tanaina. A white gash split the north face from summit to base. Tired and out of food, we trudged out Snowhawk Valley, wishing we could rewind to the summit.

The Chugach Front cooler connection became a monolith in my mountain-obsessed mind. During June of the following two summers I filled in the pieces for the connection, then waited for conditions and friends to mesh.

Cody Arnold tipped into Ptarmigan Peak's S-Cooler, his sweeping turns aimed toward the gully. Lethargic sloughs dripped like tears from his tracks and filtered down over the cliffs below. Pete Hinmon went next, and I followed three turns later. We skied 2,000



Williwaw Couloirs, Chugach Front Range, above Anchorage, Alaska



Jorge Kuzulj climbing and skiing Couloir 1, north face of Indian House Mountain, Chugach Front Range, above Anchorage, Alaska

feet down the gully, then sat smiling in the tundra, packing our boots and lacing our wet running shoes. One cooler down; three to go. S-Cooler had been a given—I could see it from town. The condition of the next three was less known. Their features hid in steep grottoes, revealed only by peering down into their gullets.

Pete's Vail-raised lungs led us to the summit ridge of Avalanche Peak for cooler number two. When Pete stopped to look into a promising gully, I sprinted ahead, desperate to know the condition of Thin White Line. From above its confines, I looked down onto a strip of snow, 10 feet wide, angled at 40 degrees, and plummeting 2,500 feet to Ship Lake. "Aahoooo!" I yelled.

Pete dropped in, leaving the snow almost untouched for Cody and I. Pete floated over the snow, forward and calm, never losing ground contact. As the chute's hourglass opened, his turns became monster arcs, with his body almost horizontal to the snow. Together, Cody and I followed, jump-turning and working double. A fumbled turn would have been a grinding rash through the barrier rocks.

Two hours later, high on The Ramp's summit ridge, I scrambled amongst the teetering blocks of sandstone, searching for the entrance to cooler number three, the East Chute. Soon, I found a near-vertical dihedral of disintegrating gravel and boulders leading 15 feet down into the East Chute.

Cody backed into the decomposing dihedral first, singing Sublime as blocks collapsed

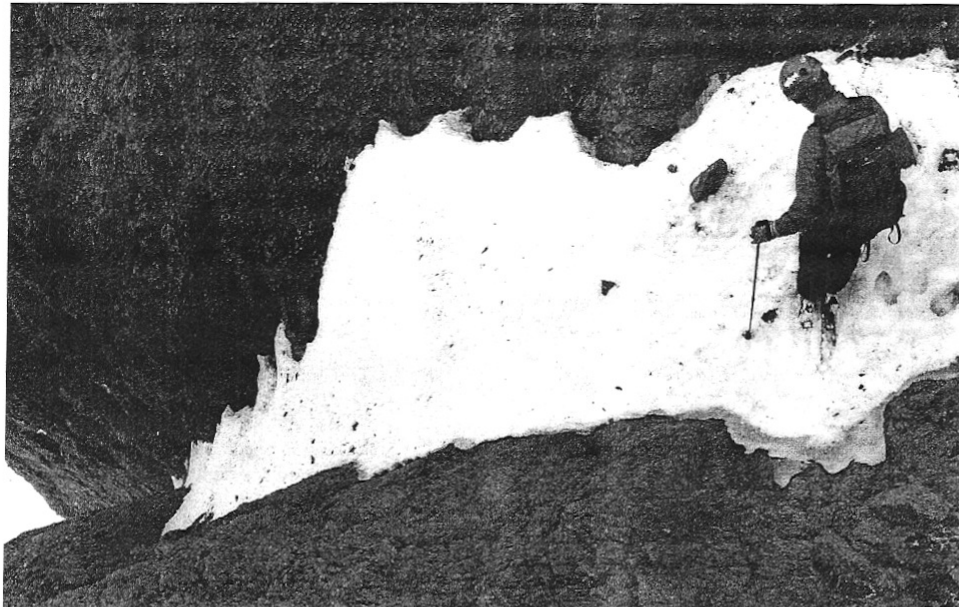
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Surviving Coolers in the Chugach Front

- **Bears**—Step between mama bear and baby bear or a grizzly and its food and your day will be ruined. Carry pepper mace and make noise every 30 seconds (whistle, clap or yell) when in bushes or cresting a ridge.
- **Moose**—Dumb and three times bigger than a grizzly. Keep making noise.
- **Weather**—Thunderstorms are rare, but always carry a rain shell for showers.
- **Loose Rocks**—The Chugach Front is famous for portable handholds. Slow down when scrambling through rocks; they're all loose and sharp.
- **Water**—Macho Alaskans drink straight from Chugach Front streams and lakes. Whether you use iodine or drink straight, you'll have no problem finding refill water.
- **Gear**—Bring whippets, a helmet, and running shoes for the approach.

Chugach Coolers

continued



Pete Hinmon skiing the Falls Lake Couloir, Falls Creek, Chugach Front Range, AK

around him. "Oh dude, I love Chugach crud," Cody said. A life in Anchorage had taught him to enjoy climbing rock so bad that a Californian wouldn't pee on it.

We skied into the strip of snow angled at 45 degrees, canted to the right, and diagonally hard to the left. After 300 feet, the slope opened up and our GS turns criss-crossed between islands of rock. When the snow thinned, we wiggled our bare toes in the sun and leaned back in the heather. Only the North Chute on Tanaina to go.

We crested the summit of Tanaina after three hours of rest-stepping. Like with Gabe three years earlier, I was squinting into the updrafts from the featureless north face in the twilight. My obsession for the cooler connection was hinging on finding the correct gully. I felt frantic, stumbling and muttering. I wanted to experience the North Chute, but almost more, I wanted to graduate from cooler skiing in the Chugach Front.

Two hundred feet below the summit, a smooth funnel of snow rolled down over the face and appeared to cul-de-sac into overhanging sandstone. Far below, avalanche debris fanned out, letting me know the cul-de-sac connected to the valley below.

"Got it guys!" I yelled back to Pete and Cody. "We're gonna do it! Yes, yes, yes!"

"I love cooli-yors," Pete said. Seconds later, the cooler's venturi swallowed him. Cody and I heard the sound of fireworks as Pete scraped the snow free of gravel and rocks. "I'm glad I borrowed Andy's skis," Cody said. "He's trashed plenty of my stuff." Cody dropped onto the face, making wide turns on creamy snow. I watched a wave of rocks spray from the base of Andy's skis before Cody disappeared into the venturi. I followed Cody's trail of clean, rock-free snow. I skied last, next to a meter-deep garbage chute draining a torrent of snow kicked off by Pete and Cody.

As we walked out the Snowhawk Valley, I looked back at Tanaina's North Chute and smiled. Walking another three hours in the endless solstice twilight would be easy. I could now let my mind wander to the Western Chugach, where the coolers have twice the vertical, dropping like plumbs from 7,000-foot summits.

Stats:

- June 20-21, 2007
- 19 hours
- 25 miles
- 13,000 vertical feet
- First Descents? Who knows?

Evening Chutes near Anchorage

Logistics: Chugach Front skiing is best during June when snow is solidified. Purchase a Chugach State Park map from Alaska Mountaineering and Hiking at 2633 Spenard Road in Anchorage. To pull off these chutes in an evening, you'll need a car and a mountain bike.

Ptarmigan Peak, S Cooler: The Anchorage classic. From the Glenn Alps trailhead, cycle three miles along the powerline before slogging to Ptarmigan Pass and up the South Face to the saddle between the summits. Four to six hours round trip. Be careful! This run isn't over 40 degrees, but falls here have mangled and killed many.

Avalanche Mountain, Thin White Line: The best summer line in the Chugach Front. Cycle five miles back to Gray Lake, below Ptarmigan Peak. Stash your bike and hike up to Powerline Pass, then on past the false summits of Avalanche Mountain to a notch 200 feet before the true summit. Thin White Line drops 2,500 feet down to Ship Lake. You'll climb back over the pass between The Wedge and Avalanche Mountain to retrieve your bike. Four to six hours round trip.

The Wedge, The Wedgy: Short and fun. Cycle three miles back along the powerline and stash your bike at the Hidden Lake Junction. Hike up to Ship Lake Pass, scoping The Wedgy along the way, and continue on to the summit. Three to four hours round trip.

Falls Creek Coolers: Three killer coolers in one beautiful basin. Drive or hitch from Carrs Huffman to milepost 106 on the Seward Highway (20 minutes from Anchorage). Hike to treeline on the Falls Creek Trail. To your right, you'll see two snow threads dropping off the shoulder of Indianhouse Mountain. The third cooler drops down a north-facing cleft into Falls Lake. Plan on three hours from car to car for a single Falls Creek cooler.