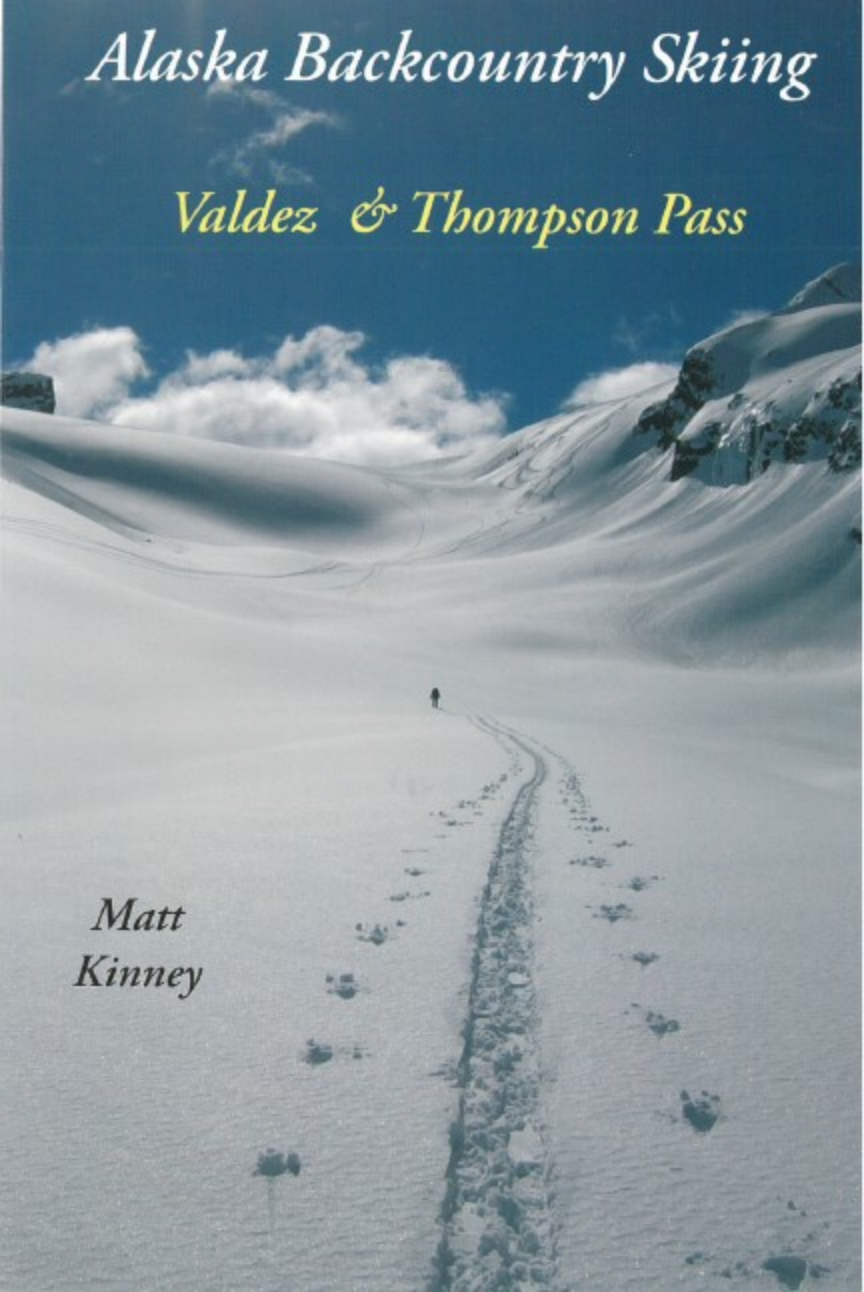


Alaska Backcountry Skiing

Valdez & Thompson Pass

*Matt
Kinney*

A photograph of a snowy mountain landscape. A person is seen skiing down a trail that leads from the foreground into the distance. The trail is marked with footprints and ski tracks. The snow is deep and smooth, with some shadows cast by the surrounding terrain. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds. The overall scene is serene and captures the beauty of a backcountry ski area.



ODESSEY ARENA SUMMARY

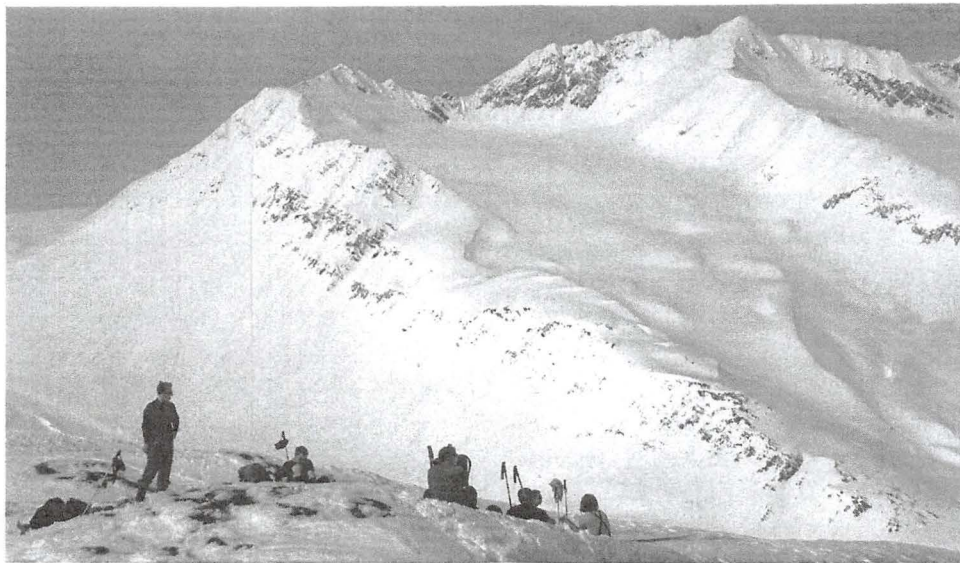
This arena is where extreme skiing was defined in the early 1990s. For many years, the north face of Odessey was the staging area and the first day's venue for the World Extreme Skiing Championships. After the slopes were controlled by explosives and approved by professional patrollers, downhill demons from around the world challenged themselves with many different lines off the summit and down a number of short, but steep couloirs. Backcountry skiers today should not expect this control work when visiting Odessey.

All but lost to the glamour of Odessey are other easily accessible runs offering endless turns that will leave a skier's thighs burning. Moonlight Basin has long been a favorite of local backcountry skiers who in the early 1980s discovered its natural night skiing. This route has easy access and low avalanche hazards. Phenomenal views of remote peaks and the Chugach National Forest dominate the horizon to the south. The Wrangell-St. Elias Range can be seen on clear days to the east. Here, you stand at the edge of the longest contiguous glaciated mountain system in North America, an uninhabited wilderness that stretches hundreds of miles from Thompson Pass to Canada's Yukon Territory.



The hairpin curve at Mile 24 lies at the base of Moonlight Basin. Route #12, offers excellent skiing opportunities for beginners to experts. The route has easy access and low avalanche hazards. It is also a good mid-winter choice as its south-facing slopes give better light during the short winter days.





Skiers atop Little Oddessey [Route #13] enjoy a view of magnificent Loveland Basin [Route #18]. This gentle route makes a good tour for beginners and provides plenty of options for advanced skiers exploring away from the main trail to the summit.

I've always considered South Oddessey Gulley one of the classic ski lines along the front range. It only takes about two to three hours to bag this run. It looks steep from the road, but actually it's around 32 degrees. After making your first tracks above, it's a blast flying over the lower benches.

Little Oddessey offers the beginner an easy ascent from the top of Thompson Pass and along the ridge crest. Perhaps the most challenging run of the Oddessey group is the fall-line on the north face of Little Oddessey and down into the Shadow. The Shadow is steep powder and will take your breath away. The overall "angle to vertical" is higher than the north face of Oddessey. If the Shadow lures your edges, be careful and perhaps bring a partner.

Just beyond Oddessey are School Bus, Gulley One and Gulley Two. These three drainages provide consistent 25-35° slopes from top to bottom with excellent non-stop runouts to your car door. The upper basins lead you to an unlimited number of ski lines to explore. The steep rollovers between these drainages at mid-mountain should be approached cautiously and are notorious for facet garden development in areas where brush is still exposed. Avalanches on these slopes have knocked down the transmission towers more often than avalanches from the three main drainages.

Nicks Happy Valley was the first of many ski routes in Thompson Pass explored by Doug Fesler and Jill Fredston, pioneers in avalanche safety for backcountry skiers.



A skier, steep and deep in powder, races through the willows of lower Gully One [Route #15]. This route, which is suitable for intermediate to advanced skiers, offers great skiing straight to the car door! Photo courtesy of Chris Larson.

They founded the Alaska Mountain Safety Center and began teaching avalanche courses in this area in the 1970s. Nicks has long carried the name of Alaskan Nick Parker, who assisted in these courses throughout the early years. Nicks is the main access to the Berlin Wall [photo p. 86] where stellar snow ramps spill down from the summit. From this arena, Python Peak is visible and presents a striking northern boundary to the Odyssey Arena and beyond.



Route: #12

Name: Moonlight Basin

Trailhead: Mile 23.8 of the Richardson Highway (Hairpin Corner Pullout)

Aspect: South

Starting Elevation: 2100'

High Point: 5580'

Total Time: 2-4 hours

Skill Level: Beginner to Expert

USGS Map: Valdez (A-5)

Additional photos: pp. 62, 72

Difficulties: Low to considerable avalanche potential, chasm, cornices

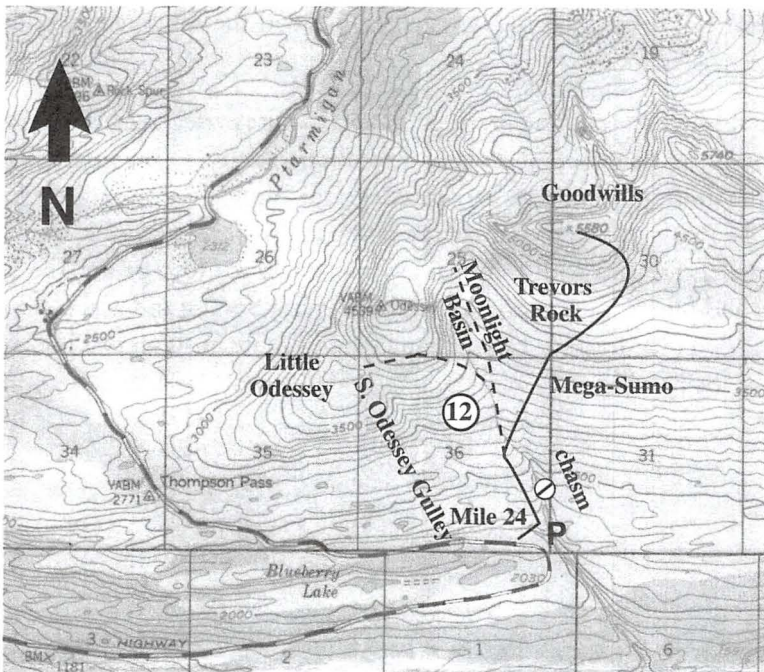
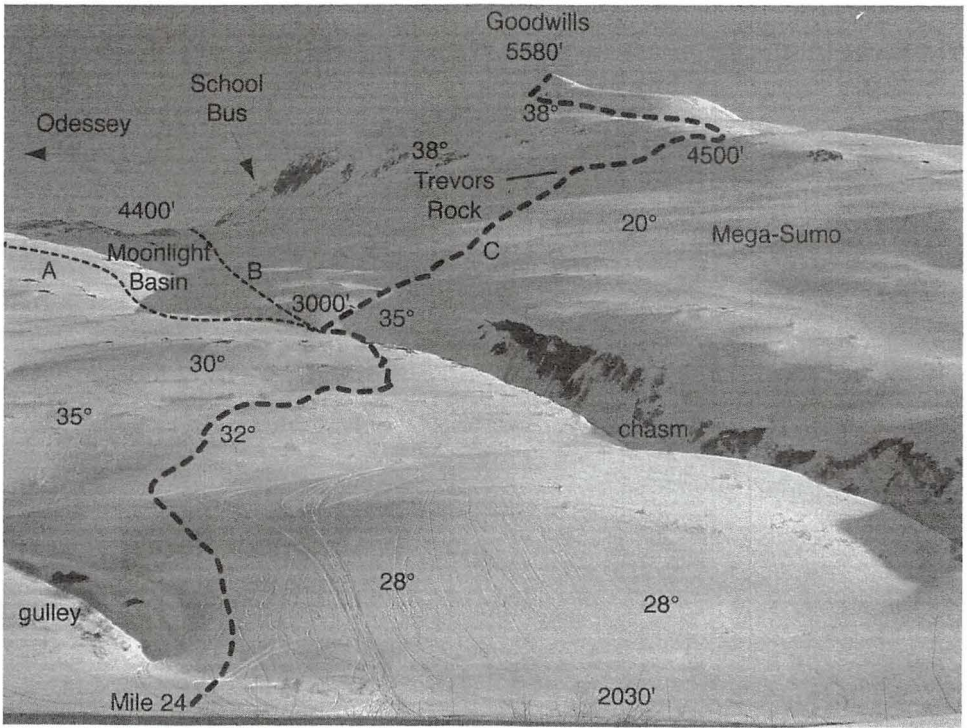
From Valdez, drive the Richardson Highway to the hairpin corner pullout at Mile 23.8. Walk up the highway to Mile 24. Ski up the right side of the visible gully through a series of benches to the basin at 3000'. From here advanced skiers can select one of three ascent options:

A. South Odessey Gully: At 3000' ski northeast up the broad slopes below the rock band to about 3500'. Traverse west below the summit following the bench down to the top of South Odessey Gully. Ski on the fall-line down the gully avoiding steep sidewalls.

B. Odessey: At 3000' follow the drainage to the pass at 4400'. Be wary of large overhanging cornices along this approach. Search for an entry to access the north slopes and School Bus well below the summit. Skiing from the summit is recommended for experts only.

C. Mega Sumo: At 3000' cross above the chasm and continue the long traverse to Trevor's Rock. At 4500' is a small pass through the rock band to the bench under Goodwills. Ski traverse high to within 400 feet of the summit, and then hike to the top near a common avalanche debris path. On top, you are on a large cornice that overhangs School Bus so be very careful.

Moonlight Basin has been a favorite for locals because of its many options for avoiding avalanche slopes while still allowing one to pull off a great tour. Moonlight Basin offers easy access on low angles to a variety of slopes for all abilities. This is also a sweet area for mid-winter as it has a southerly aspect for sun and light to give you the edge during short days.





Route: #13

Name: Little Odessey

Trailhead: Mile 26.3 of the Richardson Highway (pullout)

Aspect: West and north

Starting Elevation: 2750'

High Point: 3900'

Total Time: 3 hours

Skill Level: Beginner to Advanced

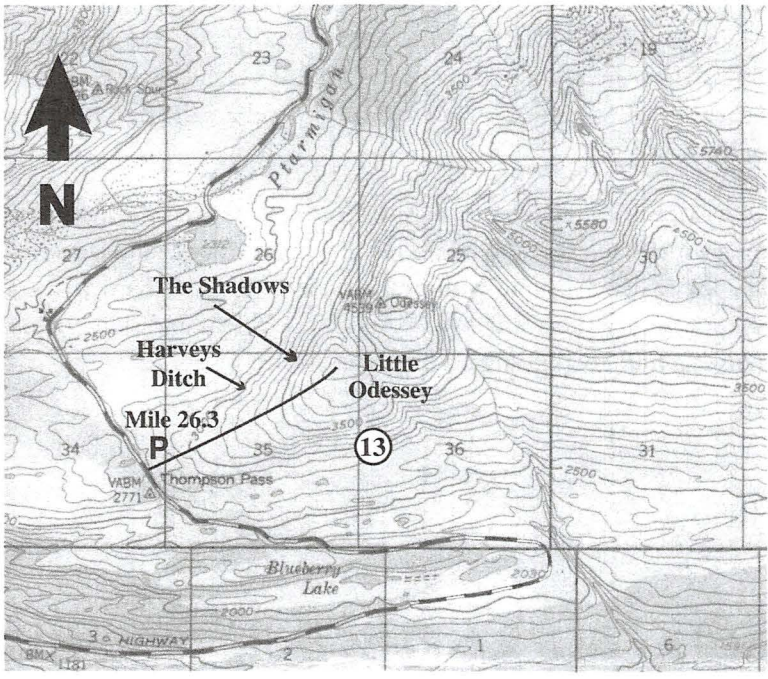
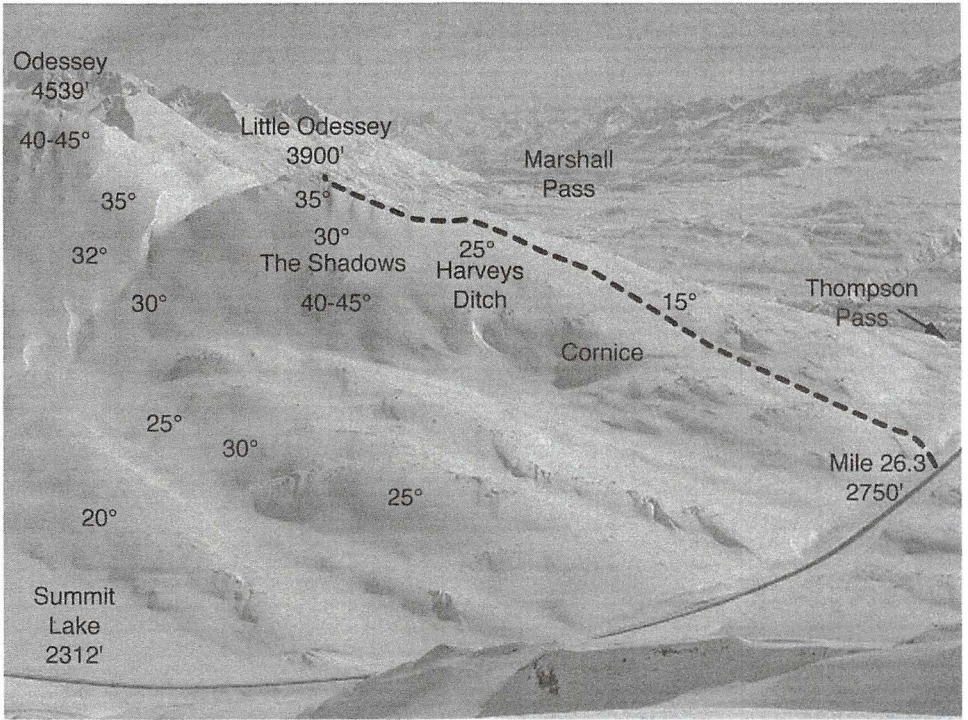
USGS Map: Valdez (A-5)

Additional photo: p. 74

Difficulties: Moderate avalanche potential

From Valdez, drive to Mile 26.3 of the Richardson Highway and park in the pullout on the right side of the highway. Climb the roadside drifts onto the long broad ridge leading to the summit of Little Odessey. Favoring a series of lateral benches on the north aspect of the ridge, cross some small gullies in route to the summit. From the summit area, there are numerous descent lines leading to the valley floor. Your skin track is a low angle option to follow on the descent. When descending the fall-line from the summit, exercise caution in the middle of the west face. This area is known as The Shadow and has a steep rollover and considerable avalanche potential. There is another descent option on the northeast side of the summit. After crossing the summit and before entering the next gulley, descend the sustained 32° slope to the lake at the valley floor.

This is the highest trailhead in the pass and a picture perfect ascent on gentle slopes as you ski up the geographical divide called Thompson Pass. The Himalayan quality views to the south on clear days are stunning. The route gives one a great feel for the layout of the Pass—nearly one-half of the routes in this book are visible from here. The route is straightforward with minimal avalanche hazards (except for The Shadows). Beginners and others wanting to improve their route-finding and avalanche skills will find this a good practice area. Experts can blitz this route in about two hours with The Shadows as their thrill.





Route: #14

Name: School Bus

Trailhead: Mile 28 of the Richardson Highway (alongside the highway)

Aspect: North and west

Starting Elevation: 2300'

High Point: 4800'

Total Time: 4 hours

Skill Level: Beginners to Advanced

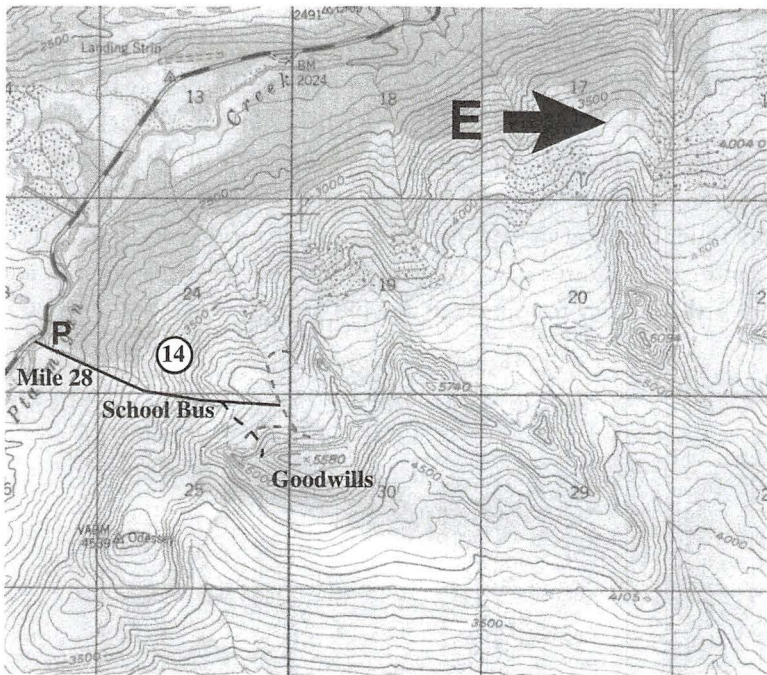
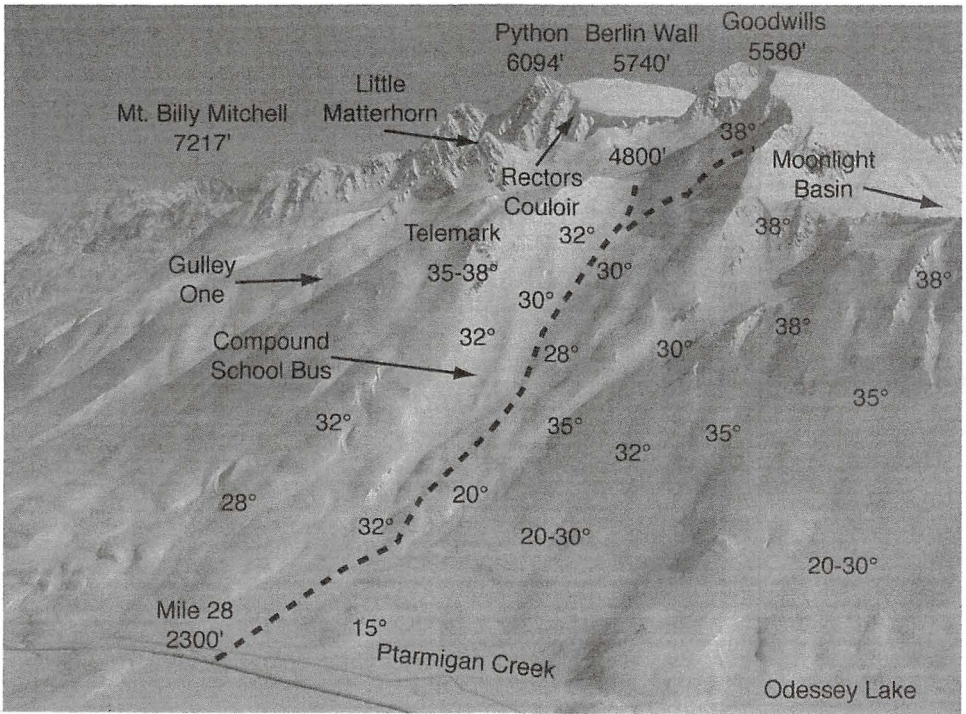
USGS Map: Valdez (A-5)

Difficulties: High avalanche potential

From Valdez, drive the Richardson Highway over Thompson Pass and park near Mile 28. Ski across Ptarmigan Creek, which typically flows all winter. The gully leading to the east is called Telemark. Once high into the humps, begin a traverse into Telemark and continue a straight skin to the saddle at 4800'. From the high basin, access the northwest side of Goodwills by traversing a series of large rollovers on a very small crevasse-free glacier to a rocky ridge at the top of School Bus. Choose any number of descent lines.

Here, it is essential to pay attention to avalanche potential in the high elevation starting zones above your route. Every few years after large storms this area produces avalanches capable of reaching the highway. However, generally avalanche activity is minimal. Winds typically load from the north so favor “lookers right” when skiing the drainages. There are two significant cornice areas perched over this route: the first is on the backside of Moonlight Basin and the second off the treacherous north face of Goodwills.

Due to its aspect, elevation and abundant snow, this run is the local glory hole for spring skiing which can extend well into July. It climbs straight and consistently forces you to play the avalanche game with prudence and to manage micro-terrain. There are lots of options including 3000' yo-yos— if your thighs and skins are up to doing it. Beginners can find good skiing on the lower slopes.





Route: #15

Name: Gulley One

Trailhead: Mile 29 of the Richardson Highway (pullout)

Aspect: Northwest

Starting Elevation: 2100'

High Point: 5500'

Total Time: 5 hours

Skill Level: Intermediate to Advanced

USGS Map: Valdez (A-5)

Additional photo: p. 75

Difficulties: High avalanche potential, glacier travel

From Valdez drive the Richardson Highway over Thompson Pass to Mile 29. Park in the pullout on the right side of the highway. Ski across Ptarmigan Creek [see p. 33] and then head southwest through the brush into the drainage. Climb the drainage up and onto the glacier. (Intermediates should stop before climbing on the glacier unless they are skiing with a partner experienced in detecting glacier hazards.) Travel up the left side of the glacier to avoid crevasses. Once near Little Matterhorn, the terrain opens up with many broad slopes. Stay left and head up to the ridge crest and small summits south of Little Matterhorn. There are multiple descent options along the ridgeline. To avoid crevasses, descend near your climbing route.

Don't be deceived standing at the road eyeing this route. It's not that steep, so get your inclinometer out and go for it. Typically, this route is skiable by mid-November, but it becomes inaccessible around May 15th when Ptarmigan Creek opens up. Once in the drainage at mid-mountain, you will be surrounded by some of the deepest snows in Thompson Pass. When light is adequate, this is north face powder at its best. Many times I turn around at the glacier and just ride back fast to the car door. Flatlight can make this run brutal. When you are done here, take a break and go do a quickie on Little Odessey to round out an epic day.

