

## LOCAL HERO

Ryleigh Norgrove on Kelsey Gray

An hour north of Anchorage, Alaska, a road cuts through the Talkeetna Mountains, creating convenient access to striking granite cliffs. But in Hatcher Pass, climbing is a short-season gamble—and *convenient* is a complicated word. And yet, for Kelsey Gray, Hatcher has been a proving ground. For nearly two decades he has scrubbed routes into life throughout Alaska, replaced bolts others trusted for too long and charted crags most climbers never bothered to name. His guidebooks are more than maps. They tell the story of Alaska climbing as it is: wild, improvised, enduring.

GRAY FIRST TRIED CLIMBING in college in Anchorage, quickly discovering that persistence mattered more than polish, and a do-it-yourself attitude was the only way in.

"I was at the gym one day, and I was like, 'You know what, fine—I'll write the rock climbing guide,'" he told me. "That summer, I climbed 340 routes, just because there was so little information to go off of."

The climbing world knows Denali—its glacial heights and legendary summits—but the lower stretches of the Alaska Range, as well as the Talkeetna, Chugach and St. Elias Mountains, are far less chronicled. The rock and ice here are unpredictable. Routes are scattered, communities are small and tight-knit and beta is hard-won. Before Gray's work, locals relied on rumors, Sharpie maps on beer boxes and gas station receipts—and that one guy at the gym who swears it goes.

For the past fifteen years, Gray has taken on the monumental task of collecting, honoring and adding to Alaska's climbing history. He's self-published a series of guidebooks that together cover thousands of routes across the state. Scrappy at first, sharper with each new edition, they've become more than references; they're cultural records of a community that has long flown under the radar.

"Climbing made me care more about this place," said Gray. "You spend that much time hiking, bushwhacking, cleaning holds—it changes your relationship to it."

The deeper he got into documenting routes, the more he saw the dangers. Rusted old bolts pulled out by hand, buttonheads that hadn't been touched in decades. "I felt like I was gonna die if I kept trying to use this hardware," said Gray. So he did what he always does—he figured it out.

For a decade, starting in 2010, he worked with the American Safe Climbing Association to replace aging bolts across south-central Alaska. Over the last six years, along with other Alaskans, he's placed many more—mostly purchased with his own money—hauling chains and drills up scree, scrubbing moss from holds and leaving behind stainless steel that others could trust.

"I just kept thinking, *If I don't fix this, someone's going to get hurt*," he went on.

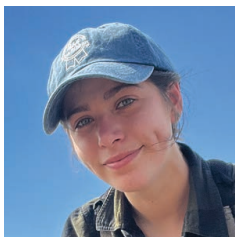
But Gray's contributions run deeper than bolts and guidebooks.

He's taught climbing at the university level and has mentored new climbers through their first climbs outside. His routes—easy, hard, obscure and classic—mark Alaska's backcountry like dog-eared pages saving space for someone else's story.

"I build for people," he said. "Some climbers build for themselves.... My routes, and the books I make, are created with the idea that everybody can enjoy them." For Gray, the mark of a good route isn't a flashy first ascent—it's how much someone enjoys being on the route.

Climbing in Alaska demands patience, grit and imagination. Gray shepherds all three—but what sets him apart is the way he's shared them. Those who know him call him humble, kind and unshakably dedicated to the community. They also say his greatest climbs aren't in the guidebooks at all, but in the hours he's spent spotting beginners on their first boulders, or hiking back down in the dark so someone else could finish a route. He's the kind of guy who would rather hand over the sharp end than keep it for himself.

And in a place where wind, stone and ice are never still, Gray's work has given Alaska climbers something rare: a foundation that holds.



[This Page] Author Ryleigh Norgrove. 1 [Facing Page] Climber and author Kelsey Gray. Gray has written and contributed to guidebooks on climbing

in both Alaska and Thailand. In addition to those guides, he's published several books of poetry, including *Found Wandering* and *Mixed Identity*. John Borland

