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Mechanisms for upstream migration of firn aquifer drainage: preliminary observations of Helheim Glacier, Greenland

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	the current, farthest-upstream drainage point. Using our LEFM model, we identify three vulnerable regions with coincidence between dry crevasse depth and water table variability, indicating potential future inland firn aquifer drainage sites. These results suggest the downstream boundary of firn aquifers can migrate inland under future warming scenarios and may already be underway.

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Mechanisms for upstream migration of firn aquifer drainage: preliminary observations of Helheim Glacier, Greenland

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ABSTRACT. Surface meltwater can influence subglacial hydrology and ice dynamics if it reaches the ice sheet's base. Firn aquifers store meltwater and drain into wide crevasses marking the aquifer's downstream boundary, indicating water from firn aquifers drives hydrofracture to establish the upglacier-most surface-to-bed hydraulic connections. Yet, sparse observations limit our understanding of the physical processes controlling firn aquifer drainage. We assess the potential for future inland firn aquifer drainage migration with field observations and linear elastic fracture mechanics (LEFM) modeling to determine the conditions needed to initiate and sustain hydrofracture on Helheim Glacier, Greenland. We find that local stress conditions alone can drive crevasse tips into the firn aquifer, without meltwater, allowing hydrofracture initiation year-round. We infer inland expansion of crevasses over the firn aquifer from crevasse-nucleated whaleback dune formation and GNSS-station detected crevasse opening extending 14 km and 4 km, respectively, inland from the current, farthest-upstream drainage point. Using our LEFM model, we identify three vulnerable regions with coincidence between dry crevasse depth and water table variability, indicating potential future inland firn aquifer drainage sites. These results suggest the downstream boundary of firn aquifers can migrate inland under future warming scenarios and may already be underway.

INTRODUCTION

Amplified Arctic warming has led to an increase in the the magnitude and inland extent of melting on the Greenland Ice Sheet (van den Broeke and others, 2023). Meltwater contributes to ice sheet mass loss directly, via runoff, and indirectly, via ice dynamic discharge, through modulating subglacial water pressures and sliding once it reaches the ice sheet's base. Meltwater can be transferred from the ice sheet surface to bed through the hydraulic fracture of crevasses to the bed. With a sufficient meltwater supply, full-thickness crevasses can transport large volumes of water to the most hydraulically efficient parts of the subglacial drainage system (Gulley and others, 2012). These surface-to-bed hydraulic connections are more prevalent at low elevations, and decline with distance inland on the ice sheet (Phillips and others, 2011; Yang and Smith, 2016). Far inland, these connections are located in the accumulation area where high-elevation melting in snow-covered areas can also form full-thickness crevasses (Poinar and others, 2015).

High on the ice sheet above the ELA, snow-cover persists for all or much of the year. Meltwater percolates down through the snowpack, and in areas with high winter accumulation rates the thick annual snow layer protects liquid water from refreezing and allows the formation of firn aquifers that perennially store liquid water beneath the snow surface (Forster and others, 2014). Firn aquifers are thermally bounded at their base and are resupplied with surface meltwater that percolates down through the snow and firn to recharge the aquifer before laterally flowing downslope through the firn pore space (Meyer and Hewitt, 2017). If a crevasse intersects a firn aquifer, water discharge from the firn aquifer into the crevasse can drive full-thickness hydrofracture (Poinar and others, 2017), bringing water directly to the subglacial drainage system and establishing the upglacier-most surface-to-bed hydraulic connections along a given flow line (Cicero and others, 2023).

Climatic warming has caused the GrIS to experience melt at higher elevations, resulting in the seasonal snowline retreating to higher elevations (Steger and others, 2017b). This high elevation melting has similarly caused the upstream boundary of Greenland firn aquifers to migrate inland (Horlings and others, 2022; Miège and others, 2016; Miller and others, 2020). We investigate the hypothesis that the downstream boundary of the firn aquifer is also changing. The location where firn aquifers drain is important because firn-aquifer water within the subglacial drainage system elevates water pressures over large areas (>10 km) and can influence ice velocity and the seasonal evolution of and water residence times within the downstream drainage system (Poinar and others, 2019). Ultimately, firn aquifer drainage at higher-elevations would supply aquifer-sourced water to new regions of the bed which has the potential to influence subglacial water pressures, ice velocity, and downstream drainage system evolution with potentially widespread and significant ramifications for ice dynamics and ultimately mass loss (Bartholomew and others, 2011; Doyle and others, 2014; Mejia and others, 2022; Poinar and others, 2015; Sommers and others, 2024).

To test our hypothesis that the drainage region of firn aquifers can move inland, an understanding of the physical processes controlling the formation of firn-aquifer draining crevasses is required. While initial work found that firn aquifers have the ability to drive full-thickness hydrofracture (Poinar and others, 2017), the initiation of hydrofracture is poorly constrained due to the difficulty of collecting direct observations. To address this gap, we investigate the requirements for firn aquifer fed hydrofracture initiation using linear elastic fracture mechanics (LEFM), complemented with in situ and satellite-derived observations, to calculate dry crevasse depths for a region on Helheim Glacier to determine if crevasses can penetrate the firn aquifer upon formation. We interpret our results to evaluate the potential for the inland migration of the region draining the firn aquifer under future climatic warming.

METHODS

Field site

Helheim Glacier is a fast-flowing outlet glacier in southeast Greenland with an extensive firn aquifer located in the accumulation area spanning elevations of 1,400 to 1,800 m a.s.l. (Fig. 1a). Here, we focus on a 23 km segment along an approximate flow line on the southern branch of Helheim Glacier (Fig. 1). This specific region was chosen to align with repeat firn aquifer locations detected by NASA's Operation IceBridge (OIB) between 2010–17 (Miège and others, 2016) and existing data from geophysical field campaigns undertaken during 2015 and 2016 (Miller and others, 2017, 2018; Montgomery and others, 2017). In June 2023 we established a camp (66.3538°N, -39.1560°E) located 4 km upglacier from the crevasse field bounding the firn aquifer (Fig. 1). We installed eight Global Navigation Satellite System Stations (GNSS) in a strain diamond configuration that extended from our base camp to the crevasse field in June and July 2023 (Fig. 1a). We now briefly describe our remote sensing analysis and field measurements. A description of our linear elastic fracture mechanics (LEFM) model in Appendix B.

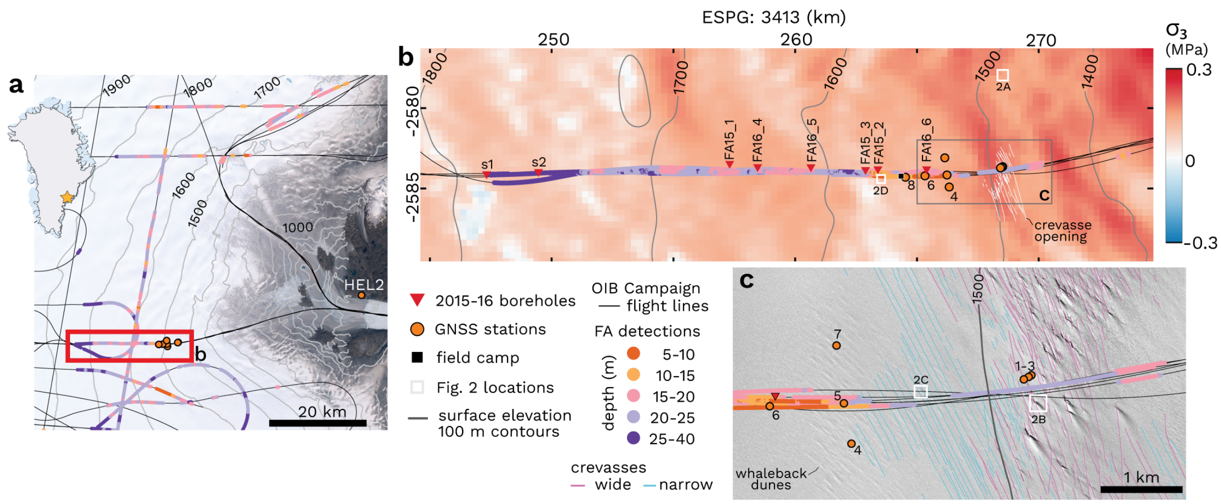

Fig. 1. (a) Study area location (red box) on Helheim Glacier's southern branch with OIB firn aquifer locations (dots colored as depth) along flight lines (narrow black lines). Ice surface elevation contours in m.a.s.l. accessed through BedMachine v3 based on Greenland Ice Mapping Project DEMs (Howat and others, 2014; Morlighem and others, 2017). Inset shows location in southeast Greenland. (b) Firn aquifer profile with principal strain rates (σ_3) in MPa. On-ice GNSS stations (orange circles) and historic firn aquifer sampling sites (red triangles) are marked along profile, surface elevation contours in m above WGS84 ellipsoid (Porter and others, 2023). (c) Detail (5 km x 3 km) of narrow (blue) and wide (pink) crevasses delineated on 28 March 2024 WorldView-2 imagery.

Firn aquifer detection

We use firn aquifer locations detected by NASA Operation IceBridge (OIB) accumulation radar (AR) data over the years 2010–17 (Miège and others, 2016; Miège, 2018), which locate the depth of the firn aquifer water table—the upper surface of saturated firn layer—beneath the snow surface (Fig 1a). Specifically, we use a subset of data from Miège and others (2016), the surface elevation and firn aquifer depth observed at repeat flight lines covering the 23 km segment of the firn aquifer intersecting our field site (Fig. 1b). OIB flight lines maintained spatial consistency between years with a maximum offset of 250 m in the north-south (across-flow) direction. Small deviations in campaign flight track, winter snow accumulation, and survey date introduced variability in surface elevation measurements between years (standard deviation, `std`=3.4 m). Notably, ice sheet surface elevations observed in 2010 and 2011 were consistently higher than all other years. To reduce variability in surface elevation between years we apply a correction of -4.0 m for 2010, and -3.0 m for 2011 data, amounting to the average surface elevation offset from 2016. This correction is imperative because the ice sheet surface elevation acts as a datum when converting the aquifer water table depth to water table elevation and we use 2016 surface elevations as our reference for calculated dry crevasse depth. Failure to adjust for 2010–11 offsets could erroneously imply a reduced water table depth when comparing 2010–11 water table elevations to the 2016 ice sheet surface. Water table depth is reported in meters below the ice sheet surface and has an associated measurement uncertainty of ±72 cm (Miège and others, 2016). Aquifer thickness and bottom elevation are extrapolated from 2016 surface elevations and point observations of aquifer water table and bottom depths measured in 2015 and 2016 (Fig. 1b; Montgomery and others, 2017).

Stress regime and crevasse detection

We use kinematic site positions for our three on-ice GNSS stations to calculate strain rates between station pairs. We supplement these point-measurements with calculated primary principal strain rates using NASA MEaSUREs program Multi-year Greenland Ice Sheet Velocity Mosaic (Joughin and others, 2016) velocities. This velocity product comprises a year-round velocity average that is selected to be representative of the 1995–2015 period and has a pixel size of 250 m by 250 m. Our GNSS station deployment, data analysis, and primary principal strain rate calculations are described fully in Appendix A.

We smooth station positions using a three-hour centered rolling average. We then calculate strain rates between station pairs HLM8-HLM6 and HLM6-HLM5 from 15-minute downsampled station positions. Specifically, we calculate daily logarithmic strain rate, $\dot{\epsilon}$, for a rolling window applied to the 15-minute station positions.

$$\dot{\epsilon} = \frac{1}{\Delta t} \ln \frac{\ell_1}{\ell_0} \tag{1}$$

where Δt is 24 hours, ℓ_0 and ℓ_1 are station separation in meters at the beginning and end of the 24 hour time span, respectively. This technique produces strain rates between station pairs at a 15-minute frequency at times when 24-hour separated data are available for each station.

Crevasse identification from satellite imagery

We manually located crevasses across our study area using WorldView imagery acquired between 2015 and 2023. We use 13 WorldView-1 panchromatic scenes with a ∼0.5 m resolution, and two WorldView-2 multi-spectral scenes with a ∼2 m resolution. Satellite geolocation accuracy is reported at ∼5.0 m CE90 without ground control (Maxar, 2021), however, through comparison between features in WorldView and Landsat images we estimate a geodetic location accuracy of 80 m, a similar finding as Poinar and Andrews (2021). Crevasses were user-identified in QGIS for one acquisition date at a time and a digitizing radius

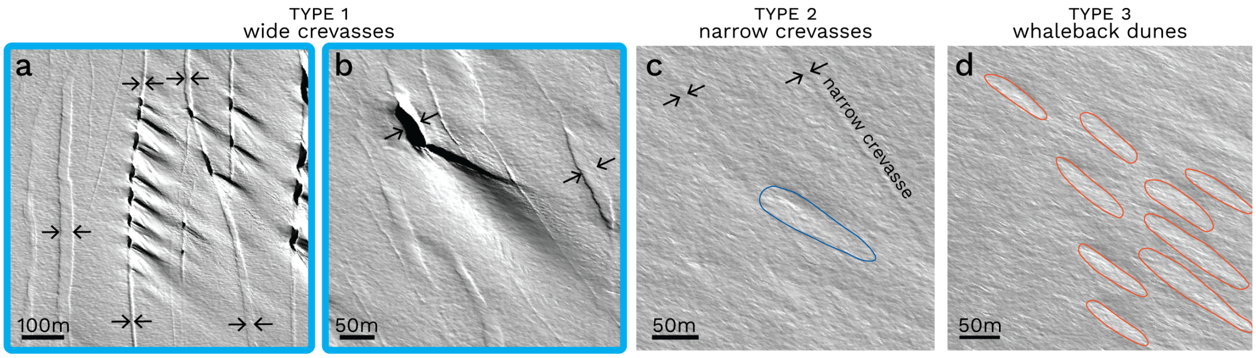

Fig. 2. Accumulation area crevasses with whaleback dunes. Wide crevasses (>5m) with multiple (a) and a single (b) dune. Arrows point to crevasses and blue boxes denote wide hydrofractured crevasses. Type 2 (c) narrow crevasses with a single dune (blue), and Type 3 (d) dunes (orange) without a visible nucleating crevasse. Imagery locations are marked in white with corresponding labels in Fig. 1b-c.

of greater than two meters. We searched for crevasses using a screen scale of `1:10,000` within the region coinciding with the firn aquifer extent determined by Miège and others (2016). We divide accumulation area crevasses into three categories: (1) groups of crevasses with widths greater than five meters (Fig. 2c–d), (2) narrow crevasses that appear as linear features and have widths on the order of one to two meters (Fig. 2b), and (3) crevasse-related longitudinal whaleback dunes where the nucleating crevasse is not visible in satellite imagery (Fig. 2a). We explain our reasoning for class 3 below.

Whaleback dunes are depositional snow bedforms created in regions with strong winds above $\sim$15 m s^{-1} and elongated parallel to the wind direction (Kobayashi, 1980). We can envision two potential scenarios for the formation of whaleback dunes in Helheim Glacier's accumulation area. In the first scenario, dunes form on flat terrain whereby layers of wind-packed snow build up and erode throughout the winter, forming sastrugi. In this case, dunes and sastrugi have similar dimensions (lengths $\sim$10 m), with whaleback dunes forming when a dune becomes polished and rounded on top, and can achieve lengths of up to 20 m (Li and Sturm, 2002). In the second scenario, whaleback dunes form when snow is transported under high wind speeds until it is deposited on the lee side of a sharp break on the snow surface. Dunes formed under this process are large, having widths over 10 m and lengths over 100 m (Filhol and Sturm, 2015), and persistent because erosion will rarely remove the feature after deposition (Li and Sturm, 2002). We observe both types of whaleback dunes on Helheim Glacier. The first type is small (<20 m) and ubiquitous, the second type is large (>100 m) and forms when wind-deposited snow accumulates on a crevasse wall from the created discontinuity in the snow surface of any size, even less than two meters (Fig. 2). We therefore use the presence of large (lengths >100 m) whaleback dunes as a proxy for the existence of the small crevasses that are undetectable in WorldView imagery.

LEFM model for dry crevasse depth

We calculate dry crevasse depth along OIB flight lines where a firn aquifer was detected by Miège and others (2016) (Fig. 1a). The LEFM model used to determine dry crevasse depth is informed by primary principal stress (Fig. 3a,b) at points along OIB flight lines. We use the field-calibrated model parameters for the low-density firn layer surface density of $\rho_s = 400$ kg m^{-3} (A4) and a 50 m average crevasse spacing identified from satellite imagery ($2W = 50$ m). We compare initial dry crevasse depth to 2010–17 firn aquifer water table elevations to determine inland areas potentially vulnerable to future hydrofracture, using observations of crevasse opening and distribution changes to show that the stress conditions required for crevasse formation are already being met over the firn aquifer.

RESULTS

Dry crevasse depth

We calculate dry crevasse depth from the primary principal stress at locations where a firn aquifer was identified along OIB flight lines (Figs. 1a, 3a–b; Miège and others, 2016). Figure 3c–d shows OIB surface elevation, 2010–17 firn aquifer surface elevation (Miège and others, 2016), approximated firn aquifer depth extrapolated from 2015–16 in situ observations (Montgomery and others, 2017), and LEFM calculated dry crevasse depth. In the one-kilometer wide main crevasse field, dry crevasses will penetrate 27.3±0.9 m, which is deep enough to intersect the aquifer water table 22.7±0.6 m below the snow surface in 2016 (Fig. 3c–d). Peak surface stress occurs along a 250 m wide area along our profile and produces the deepest crevasses which penetrate 28.3 m in this area (Fig. 3b). The location of these peak stresses and deepest crevasses immediately precedes the onset of active crevasse widening identified from WorldView image-pairs over 2015–23 (white lines in Fig. 3a). On the longitudinal boundaries of the main crevasse field, dry crevasse depth decreases until becoming equivalent to the water table depth (left of blue shaded area in Fig. 3).

Dry crevasse penetration depth decreases with distance upglacier from the main crevasse field, following the surface stress distribution (Figs. 3d). The upglacier edge of the main crevasse field marks a 1.5 km region of narrow crevasses that extends to GNSS station HLM5 (Figs. 1c, 3a). At this intersection,

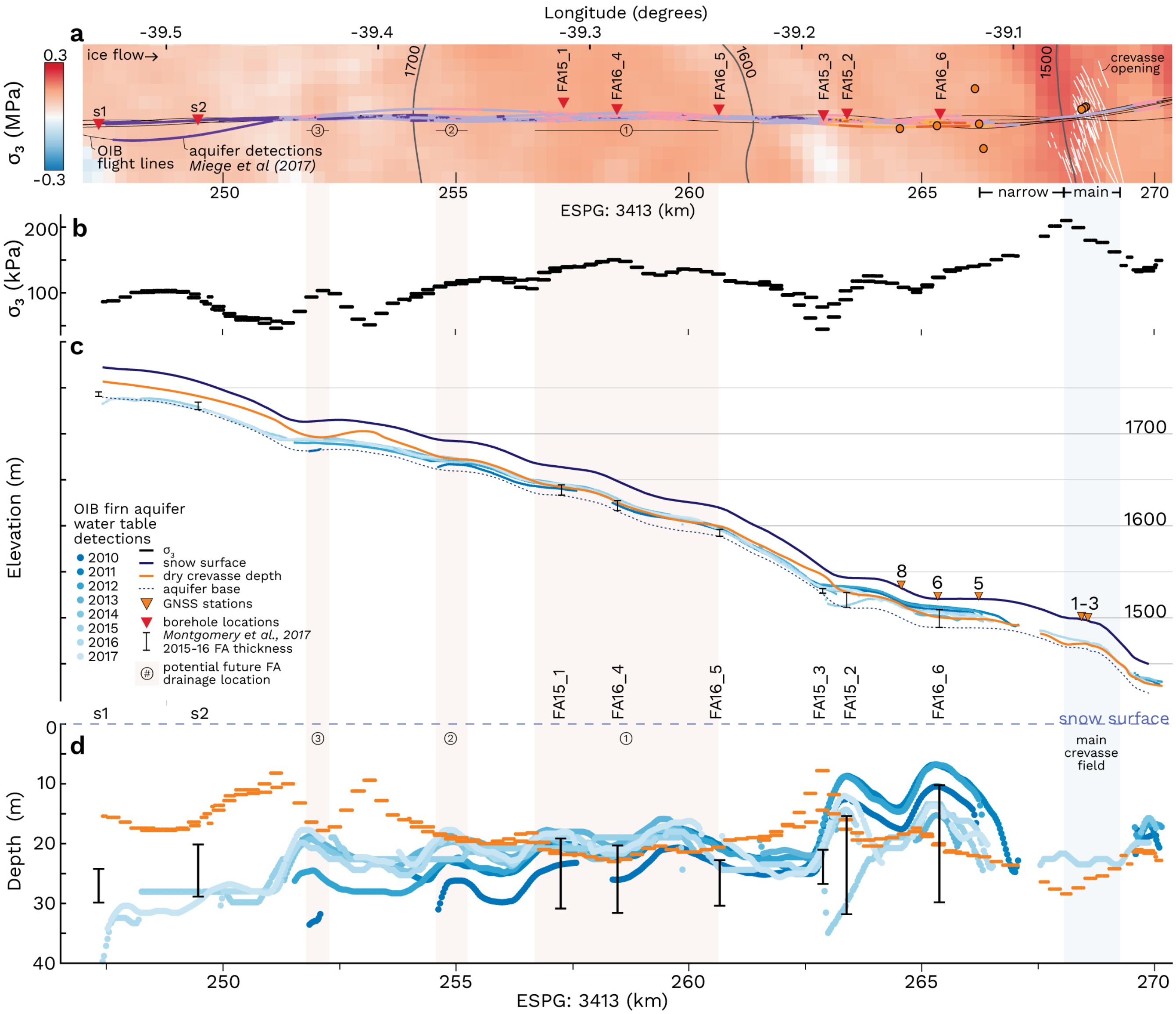

Fig. 3. (a) Plan-view of OIB flight lines and firn aquifer locations with background stress field, colors and symbology as in Fig. 1. (b) Primary principal stress along OIB flight lines in MPa. (c) LEFM dry crevasse depth calculations plotted in meters above WGS84 ellipsoid showing 2016 snow surface (black) and dry crevasse penetration depth (orange). OIB water table locations, 2015–16 aquifer measurements (Montgomery and others, 2017), and extrapolated aquifer bottom. (d) Same as (c) with data plotted as depth below snow surface in meters.

crevasse depth reaches the water table depth of 23.2 m and decreases over 1.5 km, reaching 21.0 m. The firn aquifer's water level in this area are sparse and variable. Inspection of Accumulation Radar and Multichannel Coherent Radar Depth Sounder radiograms confirm this gap in aquifer locations, likely caused by a combination of the heavily crevassed area and a thin aquifer potentially caused by drawdown from the nearby crevasses draining the firn aquifer, both of which would obscure the water table in radiograms. Importantly, the lack of a detectable water table in this area does not mean that the aquifer is nonexistent; instead, it means AR does not see the water table in these areas due to the aforementioned limitations of the instrument itself. The firn aquifer's surface elevation falls below calculated crevasse depths 0.53 km, 1.09 km, or 1.29 km from the upglacier end of the main crevasse field corresponding to 2011, 2016, and 2015 OIB observations, respectively. The region 3.2 km upglacier from this point the water table reaches its shallowest depths with a minimum depth of 6.7 m below the snow surface in 2011 and 2012. Due to these shallow aquifer depths (>20 m), dry crevasses with depths of 11.8–22.0 m could penetrate the water table in this area. The shallowest water table was located near GNSS station HLM6 and the aquifer sampling site `FA16_6` where Montgomery and others (2017) recorded a firn aquifer depth of 10 m below the snow surface with a thickness of 20 m (Fig 3d).

In the upper 15.5 km upglacier-most region of our profile (west of `FA15_3` at elevations above 1550 m) dry crevasse depth is predominately above the aquifer water table except for three areas where dry crevasse depth falls within or comes close to the range of water table variability of 2010–17. The first region spans 4 km between `FA16_5` and `FA15_1` where dry crevasse depth is deeper than the aquifer water table in 2011–17 and is located 7.8 km from the main crevasse field (Fig. 3a,d). The second region spans 170 m where the water table reaches a local minima of 17.7–26.9 m and is located 12.7 km from the main crevasse field at an elevation of 1,692 m. In 2017 and 2013 the water table height of 17.7 m and 18.0 m, respectively, is within a meter of the dry crevasse depth of 17–17.4 m. The third region spans 370 m and is located 15.7 km upglacier from the main crevasse field at an elevation of 1,714 m (Fig. 3b–d). The minimum water table depth ranges from 18.7 m to 33.6 m which is within 1.0 m of dry crevasses with a maximum depth of 17.7 m. This region corresponds with the upglacier firn aquifer extent in 2010, and 2012–13. In 2015–17 the firn aquifer extended 4.3 km further inland, reaching an elevation of 1,770 m, the final 2.8 km is located in an extensional stress regime with dry crevasse depths ranging from 14–17 m. The water table in this area was consistently below dry crevasse depths with OIB reported depths of 26.8–39.7 m and field measurements of 24 m at `s1` and 20 m at `s2` (Fig. 3c–d).

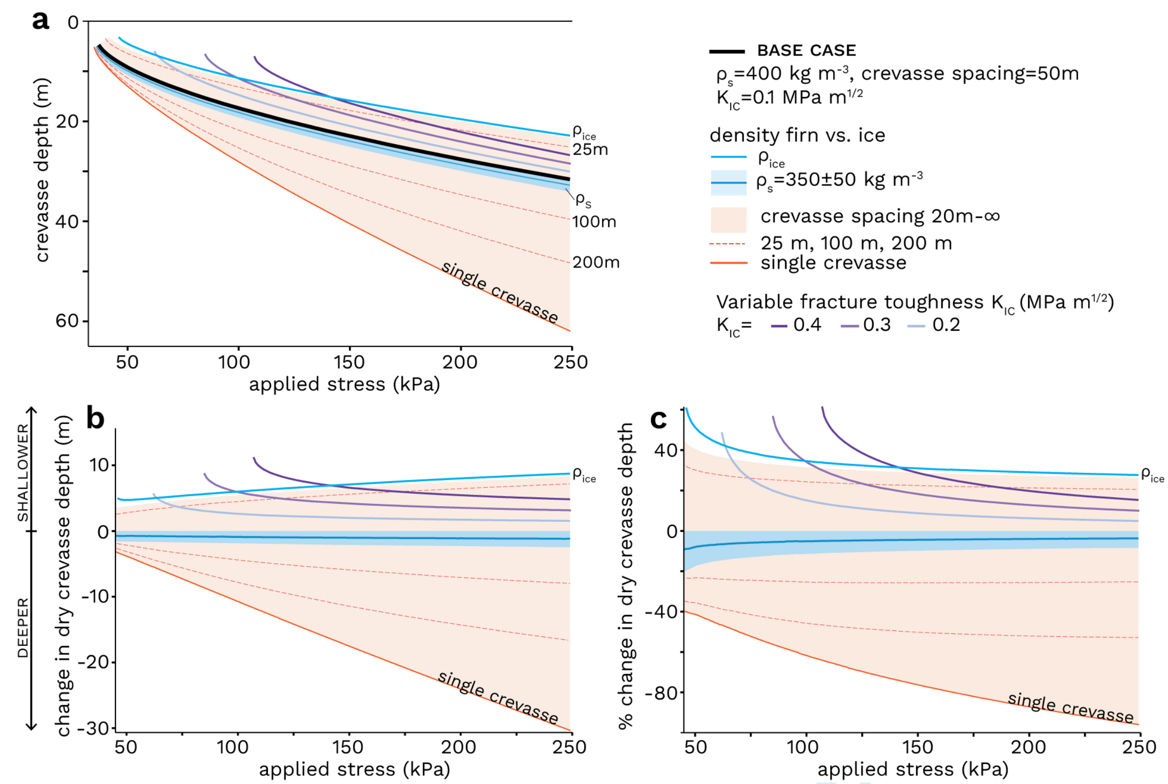

Fig. 4. (a) Dry crevasse depth for model parameters (see legend) for applied stress. (b) Change in dry crevasse depth from base case in meters and (c) as a percent difference from base case. Parameters explored are firn density (blue shading), ice density (blue line), crevasse spacing (orange shading and lines), and increasing K_{IC} (purple).

Sensitivity to parameter values

Here we report the range of dry crevasse depths that would be obtained with other plausible parameter values different than our base case. A low-density firn layer reduces the lithostatic compressive stress acting to close the crevasse, and produces deeper crevasses than for a constant ice density. We used a depth varying density profile with a surface density of 400 kg m^{-3}, a crevasse spacing of 50 m, and fracture toughness K_{IC} = 0.1 MPa m$^{1/2}$ to obtain the results presented in the previous section (black line in Fig. 4a). If we instead used a constant ice density of 917 kg m^{-3}, under an applied stress R_{xx}=45–250 kPa, dry crevasses would be 4.7–8.8 m (61–27%) too shallow. Alternatively, a lower surface density of 300 kg m^{-3} would produce dry crevasses 1.6–2.5 m (20–8%) deeper than our base case (Fig. 4).

The influence of multiple closely spaced crevasses, however, shields each crevasse from the far-field resistive stress acting to open the crevasse, and produces shallower crevasses than for a single crevasse. In our study area, crevasses readily identifiable from satellite imagery (i.e., type 1 and 2 crevasses) are located in distinct crevasse fields with closely spaced crevasses, separated by 20–200 m with an average spacing of 50 m along our profile. Crevasses become shallower as they are spaced closer together. For example, a single, isolated crevasse formed under an applied stress of 45–250 kPa would be 2.3–30.3 m (40–96%) deeper than our base case with a crevasse spacing of 50 m. Crevasses 100 m apart would be 23–25% or 1.5–8.0 m deeper than our base case, whereas crevasses 20 m apart would be 45–26% or 3.7–8.3 m more shallow (Fig. 4). Finally, larger values of K_{IC} would produce more shallow crevasses, such that for K_{IC}=0.4 MPa m$^{1/2}$ dry crevasses would be 62–15% or 11–4.8 m more shallow than our base case. The minimum applied stress required for a crevasse to exist increases from 37 kPa to 107 kPa for K_{IC}=0.1 and 0.4 MPa m$^{1/2}$, respectively (Fig. 4). Overall, we find that plausible parameter values are likely to change our resulting dry crevasse depth by up to 20 m (Fig. 4). This uncertainty increases with background stress and, at higher stresses, is asymmetric in depth: crevasses may be up to 20 m deeper than our base case, but no more than 10 m shallower.

Crevasse opening and distribution

GNSS station observations

We report on data from the three upglacier-most center-line stations from our strain-diamond deployment. The two upglacier-most GNSS stations, HLM8 and HLM6, captured crevasse opening on 25 June 2023,

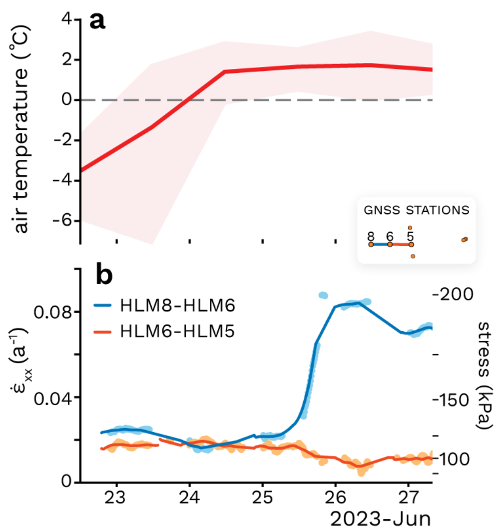

Fig. 5. Crevasse opening during 2023 melt onset (a) MERRA-2 derived mean air temperature for our field site with daily minimum and maximum values shaded. Grey dashed line marks 0°C. (b) GNSS measured strain rate between station pairs HEL8 to HLM6 (blue) and HLM6 to HLM5 (orange) with 15-minute observations (points) and smoothed (lines) data. Right axis shows strain rates converted to stress in kPa. Legend shows GNSS station configuration. Times are reported in local time.

within three days of the onset of melting at our field site (Fig. 5). MERRA-2 air temperatures for our study area remained above 1°C from 24–28 June 2023, marking the first multi-day period with above-freezing air temperatures for the 2023 melt season (Fig. 5a; additional details in Appendix A). This warm period coincided with an abrupt increase in the strain rate between the station pair HLM8–HLM6, whereby the strain rate increased from 0.057 a^{-1} to 0.877 a^{-1} between 13:30 and 19:30 local time (UTC-02:00) on 25 June 2023. This strain corresponds to a lengthening of 3.4±2.0 cm over the 790.3 m length span between stations. The abruptness of the lengthening makes it unlikely to be caused by viscous stretching of the ice. We consider the alternative interpretation, that this signal resulted from fracture, the opening of a 3.4±2.0 cm wide crevasse located at some position between stations HLM8 and HLM6. This fracture would have formed upon shear stress of 125–141 kPa (Fig. 5b), calculated with A for ice of -10°C in Eq. A1. From visual inspection of the raw data, we were not able to resolve multiple distinct opening events as could be produced by several crevasses opening in quick succession, but we cannot completely rule out this possibility.

The jump in the strain rate detected by HLM8–HLM6 was not reflected in the measurements by the downglacier station pair HLM6–HLM5. Over this same time period, strain rates between HLM6–HLM5

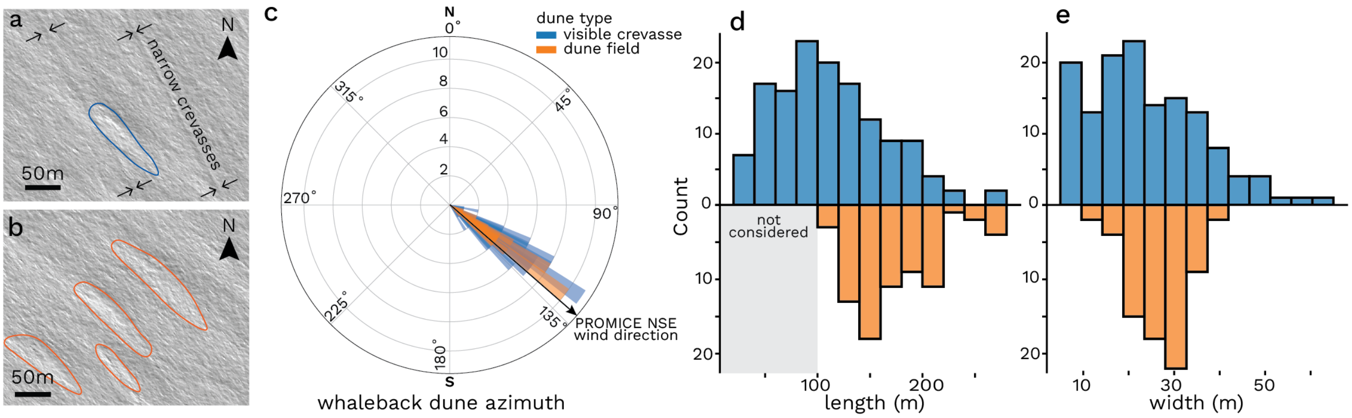

Fig. 6. Whaleback Dune Geometry. Whaleback dune examples (a) with and (b) without a visible crevasse in WorldView Imagery acquired 28 March 2023. Annotations as in Fig 2. Dune geometry comparison for dunes with (blue) and without (orange) visible crevasses. The black arrow marks wind direction during high wind events at the PROMICE weather station NSE. (c) Dune orientation histogram as azimuth angle in degrees from North (0°). Histograms for whaleback dune (d) length and (e) width in meters.

slightly decreased from 0.0157 a^{-1} to 0.0093 a^{-1}. We did not observe any significant net lengthening between stations HLM6–HLM5 accompanying the change in strain rates during the crevasse opening event which amounted to 0.5 mm over the 896.2 m length span between stations, which is below our measurement confidence. Therefore, we interpret strain rates between HLM6–HLM5 during this period as representative of typical slow viscous deformation.

Crevasse distribution

Crevasses with whaleback dunes (Fig. 2) are abundant in our study area of Helheim Glacier. Large whaleback dunes form on the downwind side of crevasses, where wind-blown snow is deposited on the discontinuity produced by the crevasse, to create dunes that then sinter in place and can achieve lengths exceeding 100 m. These whaleback dunes have been identified in OIB Digital Mapping System imagery by Poinar and others (2017), we therefore have some confidence in extrapolating them to smaller, sub-WorldView-pixel-scale crevasses. Because crevasses are required for the formation of whaleback dunes on Helheim Glacier (henceforth referred to as simply dunes), the presence of a dune without an observable crevasse suggests that either the crevasse is less than 0.4 m wide and is therefore undetectable on satellite imagery or the crevasse had formed then subsequently closed between the time of formation and image acquisition. Dunes with and without visible crevasses have similar orientations and geometries to each

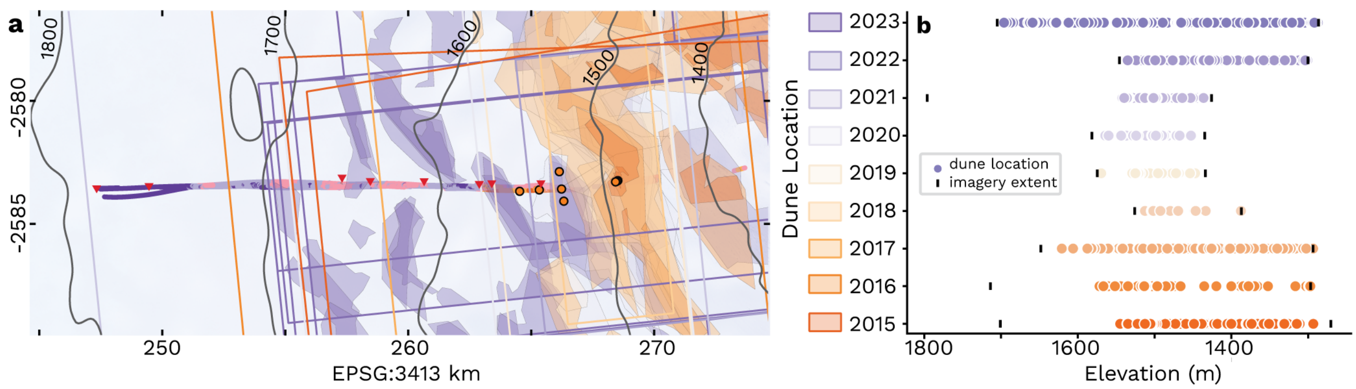

Fig. 7. Dune and crevasse locations 2015–24. (a) Map view of dune and crevasse locations with imagery extent delineated by solid lines. (b) Dune and crevasse elevations in meters above the WGS84 ellipsoid. Satellite imagery extent is marked by back bars.

other (Figure 6c) and with the median wind direction during high wind speed events (>15 m s^{-1}) recorded by the PROMICE weather station NSE (Appendix A). The shorter lengths of dunes with visible crevasses can be attributed to our conservative approach in delineating dunes without visible crevasses producing calculated geometries for the larger dunes in dune fields (Fig. 6b). The close spacing of large crevasses on Helheim glacier contributes to the shorter dune lengths because neighboring crevasses frequently truncate dunes created by crevasses upwind. We therefore use the criteria of dunes with lengths greater than 100 m to distinguish dunes without visible nucleating crevasses.

We observed dunes up to 13 km inland from our main crevasse in 2023 WorldView imagery, at elevations up to 1,696 m (Fig. 7). The dunes were present in four WorldView imagery scenes acquired from 21 March through 08 September 2023; they were not present in the preceding scene captured 12 April 2022, indicating dune field formation occurrence over the 344 days separating observations. Dunes maintained the same relative sizes and ∼55 m spacing, and occupied the same areas in WorldView imagery acquired through 08 September 2023. Because the 2023 inland extent of dunes was limited by WorldView imagery bounds (Fig. 6), dunes were likely present further inland and at higher-elevations than the 1,696 m reported here during 2023.

DISCUSSION

Our application of LEFM modeling to the crevasses in our study area showed that dry crevasses in sufficiently extensional stress settings can reach the depth of the firn aquifer water table, without the need for surface melt. When these crack tips reach the water table, the inflow of firn aquifer water is likely sufficient to hydrofracture to the bed (Poinar and others, 2017). Thus, we find that water table height and stress state determine whether a crevasse can hydrofracture to the bed, not surface melt as previously thought by Poinar and others (2017). Our observations of crevasse opening and the distribution of crevasse-nucleated whaleback dunes indicate crevasses are forming over the firn aquifer, but their narrow surface widths suggest they are not yet water-filled. While these crevasses are not presently draining the firn aquifer, future changes in the magnitude of the local stress regime or in water table height could produce the conditions required for crevasses forming in these higher-elevation areas to hydrofracture to the bed and drain the firn aquifer. As a result, the downstream boundary of the firn aquifer could migrate to higher elevations, allowing meltwater to access the bed in new, further inland regions. Given historical and ongoing climatic warming, the inland migration of firn aquifer draining crevasses is likely a continuous process whereby firn aquifer drainage crevasses have migrated to their present locations over the past 40+ years since their formation in the 1980s (Miller and others, 2020).

Requirements for firn aquifer drainage

Our results demonstrate that the drainage of firn aquifers requires a balance between (1) dry crevasse depth at the time of formation, (2) firn aquifer water table height, and (3) an influx of water to the crevasse sufficient to drive the hydrofracturing process. Since Poinar and others (2017) studied point (3), we focus on the first two requirements.

Controls on dry crevasse depth

The magnitude of applied stress exerts the strongest control on dry crevasse depth. We use primary principal strain rates calculated from 1995–2010 multi-year ice velocities (Joughin and others, 2016) as representative surface strain rates over our study area. The calculated values of surface stress are likely a good approximation for the inland region of our profile where we expect the seasonal effects of subglacial hydrology and stress perturbations from downstream fractures to be minimal. Calculated surface stress values are likely too conservative in the three to eight kilometer region upstream of the main crevasse field, where hydrologic connections can induce rapid or temporary changes to the stress field that are important in creating new fractures (Gudmundsson, 2003). These transient stress perturbations are not resolved in our derived stress field which is therefore likely too conservative because it does not capture transient stress maxima. Induced stress perturbations would decay with distance from the hydrofractured crevasses where they originate to produce the highest magnitude stresses in the region closest to the crevasse field. Therefore, actual dry crevasse depths may be deeper than we predict, especially near known crevasse fields.

We find that the stress required to initiate fractures is 125-141 kPa, which is lower than observed in some contexts (e.g., Ultee and others, 2020), but falls within the range of observations (Cuffey and Paterson, 2010; Ultee, 2020; Vaughan, 1993). The values of surface stress presented here are calculated with the creep parameter A for ice of -10°C (Cuffey and Paterson, 2010, p. 73). For a given strain rate, the lower A values for colder, stiffer ice would produce a higher calculated stress, increasing our observed yield strength of ice and producing deeper crevasses. Conversely, the higher A values for warmer, softer ice would produce a lower calculated stress, decreasing our observed yield strength of ice and producing shallower crevasses. We would expect a similar effect for using variable A for a vertical temperature profile due to the warmer temperatures near the firn surface. For example, under an applied stress of 0.1 MPa our base case model calculates a 17.4 m deep crevasse, changing A to 9.3×10^{-25} Pa^{-3}s^{-1} for -5°C would lower the applied stress by 0.028 MPa (28%) and reduce crevasse depth by 3.9 m (22%). We would therefore expect dry crevasse depth to be shallower at the time of their formation if ice/firn temperatures were to warm.

For the purposes of determining if a dry crevasse will reach the depth of a firn aquifer's water table, it is important to consider the effect of low-density firn layer which can increase dry crevasse depth by up to 67%, however, the exact surface density value used is less important. Interspersing higher-density ice layers within the firn pack increases ice density and produces a re-shallowing effect whereby dry crevasses are 4–20% shallower. Our results agree with the work of Clayton and others (2024), who found the incorporation of a low-density firn layer can increase crevasse depth by up to 20% for a thin glacier ($H \leqslant 250$ m). Even though our work is applied to areas where the ice is thick ($H \geqslant 1{,}000$ m) and the effect of a surficial firn layer will be minimized with depth, our focus on dry crevasse depth in the top 30–50 m reveals a similar importance for incorporating the low density firn layer in LEFM modeling.

We account for the presence of multiple closely spaced crevasses by considering the shielding effect of neighboring crevasses that dampens the far-field stress concentration at the crack tip (Sassolas and others, 1996). Without accounting for the effect of multiple crevasses, calculated dry crevasse depths would be 40–90% too deep and would overpredict where crevasses should intersect the firn aquifer water table. Crevasse fields with a greater spacing between neighboring crevasses would produce deeper crevasses which may increase the likelihood of intersecting the aquifer water table. However, lower applied stresses would be required for these crevasses to reach the same depth as another area with more closely spaced crevasses. Crevasses located on the outer boundaries of a crevasse field can penetrate slightly deeper because they are only shielded on one side (Clayton and others, 2022), potentially aiding the upglacier-most crevasses in reaching the water table to initiate hydrofracture.

An increase in the fracture toughness of ice increases the applied stress required for the crevasse to exist and reduces dry crevasse depth by 61–15% for applied stresses of 107–250 kPa. For $K_{IC} = 0.1$ MPa, including a low-density firn layer reduces the applied stress required for a crevasse to exist by less than 27% (33–45 kPa) for a single crevasse, or 24% (35–46 kPa) for crevasses spaced 50 m apart. If the fracture toughness of ice is increased to 0.4 MPa m^{-2} an applied stress 2.9 times larger, of 107 kPa, is required for a crevasse to exist in the same conditions (Fig 4).

We find that our LEFM model produces deeper crevasses than the Nye depth (Fig. 10 in Appendix C.) where crevasse depth is calculated as $T/\rho_i g$ where T is the traction stress acting to open the crevasse (Nye, 1954; Weertman, 1977). This result is expected and aligns with the analysis of Van Der Veen (1998) as the Nye depth uses a constant ice density and is insensitive to crevasse spacing. For an applied stress less than 125 kPa the Nye criterion is similar to the model scenario with a constant ice density (Fig. 4a), for applied stresses between 125 and 225 kPa the Nye criterion is similar to the model scenario where $K_{IC} = 0.4$ MPa m$^{1/2}$.

Influence of firn aquifer hydrology on hydrofracture initiation

For a crevasse to drain the firn aquifer it must penetrate deep enough to reach the water table which supplies the water necessary to drive crevasse hydrofracture to the bed (Poinar and others, 2017). The firn aquifer water table height responds to the magnitude of surface melt supplied as recharge and the horizontal flux of water within the saturated zone as it is transported downslope following the hydraulic gradient until draining into downstream crevasses. The firn aquifer water table varies over seasonal and interannual timescales; thus, the critical dry fracture depth is also time-variable. The water table height is closely tied to the slope of the snow surface, such that in steep areas the water table is deeper and in less steeply sloping areas the water table is shallower (Miège and others, 2016). The depth to water table in low-slope areas is consistently the shallowest along our profile and these areas experience more temporal variability than steeper areas do (Fig. 3c–d).

On interannual timescales, aquifer water table height varies at a rate similar to that of surface mass loss (Chu and others, 2018; Miège and others, 2016), whereby the water table height increases during high melt intensity years and falls during subsequent years (Meyer and Hewitt, 2017; Miège and others, 2016; Poinar and others, 2017). Notably, 2010–17 OIB detected water table locations demonstrate the aquifer's water table can vary by over 10 m between years at a single location (Fig. 3). Crevasses formed during years with high magnitude melting would be more likely to hydrofracture and drain the firn aquifer.

On seasonal timescales, meltwater recharge to the aquifer can raise the water table by up to four meters (Miller and others, 2020), peaking in September after the end of the melt season. This lag between peak melting and peak water table height likely reflects the lateral (downslope) flow of water within the aquifer that continues after surface melting ceases for the year (Miège and others, 2016). A seasonal increase in water table height of a few meters could determine whether a dry crevasse can hydrofracture to the bed, particularly in the three regions identified as potential future aquifer drainage locations in Fig. 3. The timing of dry crevasse formation may therefore play an important role in determining the inland migration of aquifer drainage because dry crevasses are deepest immediately following their formation, before creep closure causes the crevasse to shrink. The June 2023 crevasse opening event should have preceded the period of rising water table which may have prevented this crevasse from intersecting the water table. Crevasses that instead form during the fall may have an increased likelihood of reaching the water table and hydrofracturing due to the higher water table from the full integrated melt accumulated over the summer and the absence of snowfall. Although surficial meltwater discharge into crevasses has been suggested as a requirement to begin aquifer drainage, we find that dry crevasses can penetrate the water table upon formation to immediately initiate hydrofracture. Therefore, the timing of aquifer drainage would not be constrained to the melt season but would still require the stress conditions conducive to fracturing.

Inland migration of firn aquifer drainage

The downstream boundary of the firn aquifer in our study area has been relatively steady (fluctuating ± 2 km) since 2010 (Miège and others, 2016). Similarly, the locations of the widest crevasses, which are hypothesized to drain firn aquifer water to the bed, have also been relatively steady (± 1 km) since 2010 (Fig. 1b; Poinar and others, 2017). Firn aquifer drainage has been thought to require surface generated meltwater to begin the hydrofracturing process that then continues when crevasses penetrate deep enough to access aquifer sourced discharge (McNerney, 2016). However, our modeling results indicate that surface

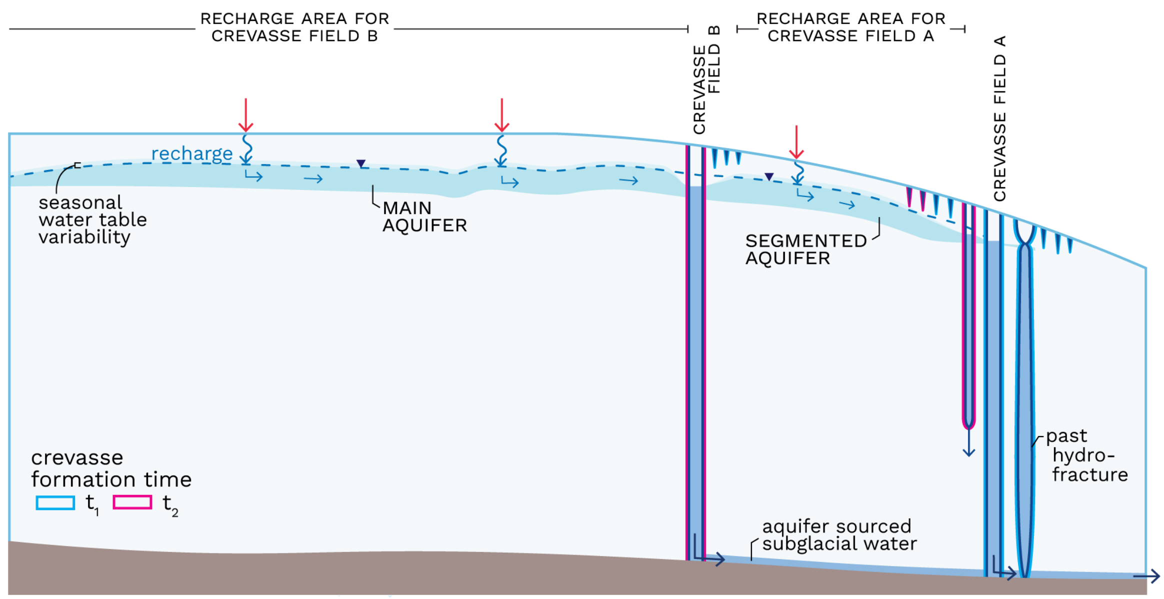

Fig. 8. Conceptual model of firn aquifer drainage inland migration (crevasse field B, time t2) and segmented aquifer development (upstream of crevasse field A). Crevasses are outlined according to formation time with t1 (cyan) and t2 (magenta).

generated meltwater is not required to begin hydrofracturing, instead surface stresses can produce dry crevasses deep enough to intersect the firn aquifer water table. Crevasses that intersect the firn aquifer could immediately access the water required to initiate hydrofracture, regardless of the seasonal timing or availability of surface melt. Furthermore, our observations of crevasse-nucleated dunes and narrow crevasses at higher elevations than crevasses draining the firn aquifer indicate crevasses are forming in these further inland regions, but they are not propagating deep enough to intersect the water table. An increase in either the surface stresses or the aquifer water table height could enable firn aquifer drainage at higher elevations.

Along our transect on Helheim's southern branch, we identified three areas as potential future aquifer drainage locations where dry crevasses either reach or come within a meter of the OIB water table height (Fig. 3c–d). Crevasses formed in these areas could hydrofracture given a small (<1 m) increase in water table height, which is within the bounds of the expected seasonal and interannual variability of up to 4 m and 10 m, respectively (Miège and others, 2016; Miller and others, 2020). In response to the inland migration of firn aquifer draining crevasses, the firn aquifer could either recede inland and abandon downstream crevasses or the aquifer could become segmented such that smaller aquifers occupy compressional areas and drain into downstream crevasses (Fig. 8). We would expect the latter scenario as long as the region between full-thickness crevasses is sufficiently large and maintains a thick firn layer, so that sustained aquifer recharge between crevasse fields can keep the smaller aquifers intact. This concept of a segmented firn aquifer would explain observations of small, isolated firn aquifers located between crevasse fields at lower elevations (Miège and others, 2016).

The inland migration of firn aquifer drainage would allow aquifer-sourced water to reach new areas of the bed to affect the structure of, and pressures within, the subglacial drainage system that controls sliding. In a scenario where full-thickness crevasses form in region 1 (Fig. 3), water would enter the subglacial drainage system 7.8–11.6 km further inland than it currently does. The movement of the injection point would increase subglacial water pressure at the inland location while potentially decreasing pressures downstream according to idealized simulations by Poinar and others (2019), which suggested that this change in water pressure is long-lasting (>4 years). However, how the downstream subglacial drainage system will respond to the inland migration of firn aquifer drainage is unresolved. We would expect subglacial pressurization, and therefore elevated ice velocities, to expand inland resulting in a larger area exposed to higher subglacial water pressures than at present. The increased basal lubrication and higher sliding speeds would likely raise wintertime or "background" sliding speeds that are used as a baseline to measure seasonal, melt-induced velocity changes against (Sommers and others, 2023). Consequences of higher winter sliding speeds, in terms of ice sheet mass loss, could be magnified as firn aquifer drainage migrates further inland and as higher wintertime velocities persist if they are not compensated for by summertime slowdowns at lower elevations.

These surface-to-bed connections are particularly important because firn aquifers have expanded and can continue to expand inland under enhanced melting (Horlings and others, 2022; Miège and others, 2016; Steger and others, 2017a). By constraining the conditions required for crevasses to drain firn aquifers, dry crevasse depth and aquifer water table height, we find that the location of aquifer-draining crevasses can, and as evidenced by the detection of crevasse formation over the firn aquifer, may already be in the process of migrating inland. For these reasons, future work should assess the impact of firn aquifer drainage at higher elevations on subglacial hydrology and ice dynamics.

CONCLUSIONS

Our findings suggest that crevasses formed over a firn aquifer on Helheim Glacier can reach the water table depth to initiate hydrofracture without surface meltwater inputs. We identify inland areas that are the most vulnerable to full thickness hydrofracture given rises in the firn aquifer water table, increases in surface stresses, or both. These full-thickness crevasses would drain aquifer water to the bed at new inland locations, moving the downstream boundary of the aquifer inland. This inland expansion may be underway as evidenced by our in situ observations of a crevasse opening event 4 km from the main crevasse field and of crevasse-nucleated whaleback dunes expanding 14 km inland from the main crevasse field in 2023. New surface-to-bed connections at even higher elevations than those observed presently would allow meltwater to access new regions of the bed with potentially significant impacts on downstream subglacial hydrology and ice sliding velocity.

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APPENDIX A – EXTENDED METHODOLOGY

On-ice GNSS station pairs

In 2023 we installed eight GNSS stations in a strain diamond configuration extending 4 km along flow from our field camp to the crevasse field draining the firn aquifer, and 1 km in the across-flow direction (Fig. 1). Each station was equipped with a Trimble NetR9 receiver, recording at 15 second intervals, and a Zephyr Geodetic Antenna mounted to aluminum conduit installed within the snow and stabilized with snow anchors and guy lines. We process positions using the GNSS base station HEL2 (66.40116°N, -38.21570°E) mounted on bedrock near the terminus of Helheim Glacier, with a baseline length of 41 km. We determine kinematic site positions for on-site stations using carrier-phase differential processing relative to HEL2, implemented with TRACK software (Herring and others, 2010). Kinematic positions for each station were resolved at 30 second intervals to match the sampling rate of our base station HEL2. Station position timeseries has a formal error of $\sim$2 cm in the horizontal direction.

We calculate shear stress (σ) from the GNSS-station derived strain rate ($\dot{\epsilon}$) following Glen's Law,

$$\sigma = \sqrt[n]{\frac{\dot{\epsilon}}{A}} = \sqrt[3]{\frac{\dot{\epsilon}}{A}} \tag{A1}$$

where n is the flow law exponent taken to be $n = 3$, and A is the creep parameter. We use A for ice temperature $T = -10°\text{C}$ where $A = 3.5 \times 10^{-25}$ $\text{Pa}^{-3}\text{s}^{-1}$.

Principal strain rates and surface stresses

We calculate primary principal strain rates using NASA MEaSUREs program Multi-year Greenland Ice Sheet Velocity Mosaic (Joughin and others, 2016) velocities. This velocity product comprises a year-round velocity average that is selected to be representative of the 1995–2015 period and has a pixel size of 250 m by 250 m. We smooth the velocities with a 1 km^2 Savitzky-Golay filter to derive two-dimensional principal strain rates over Helheim Glacier (cf. Meyer and Minchew, 2018; Minchew and others, 2018; Poinar and Andrews, 2021). Here we use the more extensional principal strain rate ($\dot{\epsilon}_3$) alongside the more compressional principal strain rate ($\dot{\epsilon}_1$) and the shear strain rate ($\dot{\epsilon}_{xy}$). Shear stress along the OIB firn aquifer profile is calculated as:

$$\sigma_3 = \frac{1}{A^{\frac{1}{n}}} \dot{\epsilon}_{eff}{}^{\frac{1-n}{n}} \dot{\epsilon}_3 \tag{A2}$$

where the creep exponent is n=3, the creep parameter is A=3.5×10^{-25} Pa^{-3}s^{-1} for ice temperature of -10°C, for effective strain rate

$$\dot{\epsilon}_{eff} = \sqrt{\frac{1}{2}(\dot{\epsilon}_1{}^2 + \dot{\epsilon}_3{}^2) + \dot{\epsilon}_{xy}{}^2} \tag{A3}$$

Air temperatures

To approximate when the snow surface in our study area first reached the melting point in 2023, we use MERRA-2 climate reanalysis data (Rienecker and others, 2011). We start with the MERRA-2 daily aggregated statistics single-level diagnostics data (M2SDNXSLV; Global Modeling and Assimilation Office, 2015) for 2-meter air temperature on the MERRA-2 grid. These data are spaced by 0.5° latitude and 0.625° longitude, or ∼55 km by ∼42 km at our study area. To calculate air temperature at our field camp (surface elevation s=1,536 m), we regress MERRA-2 daily minimum, mean, and maximum temperatures against surface elevation at the five closest grid points to camp (Fig. 5). The centers of these grid boxes span surface elevations from 1,270 m to 2,015 m and are located 19 km (s=1,770 m) to 44 km (s=1,480 m) from our field camp.

Wind direction at weather station NSE

We compare dune orientation to wind direction data at the closest PROMICE weather station, `NSE`, located at 2,375 m a.s.l, 150 km west of our study area (Fausto and others, 2021; How and others, 2022). We use

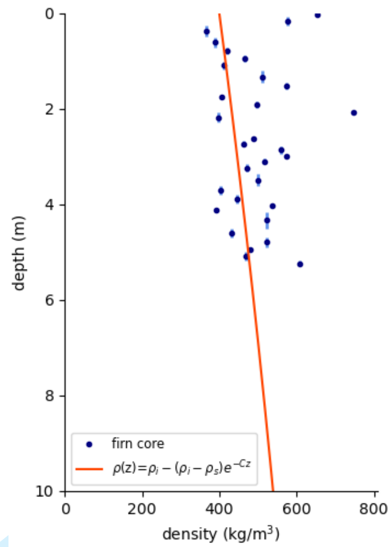

Fig. 9. Firn core measurements and depth-density relation fit (red) for $\rho_s = 400$ kg m^{-3} and $C = 0.0314$ m^{-1}. Navy dots mark the mid-point of the depth range for that given density and light blue lines mark the full depth range for a density measurement.

daily averaged weather station observations collected between 19 June 2021 through 8 February 2024. We resolve the wind direction during dune formation events by filtering the dataset to observations ($n = 357$) with wind speeds greater than 15 m s^{-1} as required for whaleback dune formation (Filhol and Sturm, 2015). Wind directions were within 129°–138° representing 21% of all high-wind observations (Fig. 6c).

Firn Density

To constrain the empirical snow density-depth formulation, $\rho(z)$, used to calculate the overburden pressure acting on the walls of crevasses in our LEFM model in Appendix B, we measured snow density in June 2023 from a 6-m firn core collected at our field site over the firn aquifer (Figs. 1b, 9). Snow density as a function of depth is calculated following (Cuffey and Paterson, 2010, p. 19):

$$\rho(z) = \rho_i - (\rho_i - \rho_s)e^{-Cz} \tag{A4}$$

where z is depth below the surface in meters, ρ_i is ice density taken to be 917 kg m^{-3}, ρ_s is surface snow density, usually within the range of 300 to 400 kg m^{-3}. C is a site-specific empirical constant that ranges from 0.0165 to 0.0314 m^{-1}. The snowpack exhibited high variability with depth; conditions ranged from sugar snow to ice and melt layers. We obtained values for ρ_s and C by least-squares fitting the data. We find a best fit of the snow density-depth formulation to our data occurs with a surface density ρ_s=400 kg m^{-3} and C=0.0314 m^{-1}, and use these values in Eq. B4 in Appendix B.

APPENDIX B – MODEL FORMULATION

Here we follow van der Veen (2007) for the penetration depth of a water-free crevasse, solving for the net stress intensity factor (K_I^{NET}) by setting it equal to the fracture toughness of ice K_{IC} taken here as 0.1 MPa m$^{1/2}$.

$$K_I^{NET} = K_I^{(1)} + K_I^{(2)} = K_{IC} \tag{B1}$$

K_I^{NET} is the sum of the tensile $K_I^{(1)}$ and lithostatic $K_I^{(2)}$ stress components. For closely spaced crevasses we calculate the the stress intensity factor for crevasse opening due to a constant tensile stress following (Van Der Veen, 1998):

$$K_I^{(1)} = D(S)R_{xx}\sqrt{\pi d S} \tag{B2}$$

$$D(S) = \frac{1}{\sqrt{\pi}}\left[1 + \frac{1}{2}S + \frac{3}{8}S^2 + \frac{6}{16}S^3 + \frac{35}{128}S^4 + \frac{63}{256}S^5 + \frac{231}{1024}S^6\right] + 22.5S^7 - 63.5S^8 + 58.05S^9 - 17.58S^{10} \tag{B3}$$

where R_{xx} is the far-field resistive stress, d is crevasse depth, $S = \frac{W}{W+d}$ where the spacing between neighboring crevasses is $2W$. We use $2W = 50$ m which is derived from the mean crevasse spacing in the main crevasse field along in our study area (Fig. 1c). $D(S)$ describes the effect of shielding when more than one crevasse is present as in the case of the closely spaced crevasses characteristic of Helheim Glacier.

Crevasse closure due to ice overburden pressure is accounted for by calculating $K_I^{(2)}$ which yields the stress intensity factor for the weight of the overlying ice as:

$$K_I^{(2)} = \frac{2\rho_i g}{\sqrt{\pi d}}\int_0^d \left[-z + \frac{\rho_i - \rho_s}{\rho_i C}(1 - e^{-Cz})\right] G(\gamma, \lambda) dz \tag{B4}$$

$$G(\gamma, \lambda) = \frac{3.52(1-\gamma)}{(1-\lambda)^{3/2}} - \frac{4.35 - 5.28\gamma}{(1-\lambda)^{1/2}} + \left[\frac{1.3 - 0.3\gamma^{3/2}}{(1-\gamma)^{1/2}} + 0.83 - 1.76\gamma\right] \times [1 - (1-\gamma)\lambda] \tag{B5}$$

where H is ice thickness, $\gamma = z/d$, $\lambda = d/H$. We account for the presence of a low-density firn layer at the surface using the relationship in (A4), where $\rho_s = 400$ kg m^{-1} and $C = 0.0314$ m^{-1} whose determination is discussed in Appendix A.

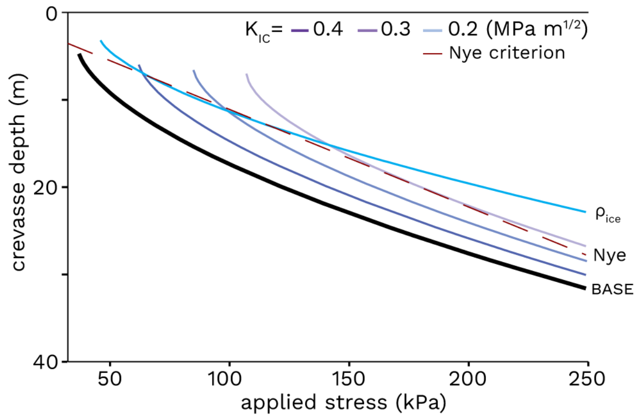

Fig. 10. Nye criterion crevasse depth comparison. Same as in Fig. 4a but with the Nye criterion in a red dashed line. Our base case is shown in bold (ρ_s=400 kg m^{-3}, K_{IC}=0.1 MPa, $2W$=50 m). Purple lines show model runs with variable K_{IC} and the cyan line shows a constant density solution where $\rho_s = \rho_i$.

APPENDIX C – NYE CRITERION

We compare our model results to the Nye criterion for crevasse depth (Nye, 1954; Weertman, 1977) which is shown in Figure 10. For closely-spaced, water-free crevasses the Nye criterion states that crevasse depth L is

$$L = \frac{T}{\rho_i g} \tag{C1}$$

where T is the tensile stress within the ice, ρ_i is the density of ice taken to be 917 kg m^{-3}, and g is acceleration due to gravity of 9.81 m s^{-2}.