Basal crevasse formation on Byrd Glacier, East Antarctica, as proxy for past subglacial flooding events

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Key Points:

- Increased tensile stress from subglacial flooding may initiate abnormally large basal fractures.
- We date abnormally large basal crevasses via feature tracking of overlying surface depressions.
- These rapid changes in glacier dynamics appear to have no effect on Byrd Glacier's stability.

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Abstract

Linear elastic fracture mechanics (LEFM) suggests that short-lived flow accelerations, such as the one observed in the 2006 Byrd Glacier, East Antarctica, subglacial flooding event, can initiate abnormally large basal crevasses at the grounding line. Airborne radar measurements acquired in 2011 reveal hundreds of basal crevasses ranging in height ∼40 – 335 m. Particle tracking results show that the formation of the largest basal crevasse occurred at the grounding line during the 2006 flooding event. Very large basal crevasses form distinctive surface depressions directly overhead, which are observed along the Byrd Glacier flowline to the terminus of the Ross Ice Shelf. By using these surface depressions as proxies for abnormally large basal crevasses, we create a timeline of past subglacial flooding events on Byrd Glacier. Understanding the frequency of flooding events and their effect on glacier dynamics will help inform subglacial hydrology models and models of ice sheet stability.

Plain Language Summary

Flooding events that occur under the Antarctic Ice Sheet are difficult to observe due to their location and a limited supply of remotely sensed data. In 2006, a flooding event occurred at Byrd Glacier that was followed by a ∼10% increase in the glacier's speed. At approximately the same time as the flood, an abnormally large basal crevasse formed within Byrd Glacier's grounding zone. Without monthly satellite data, we cannot be certain exactly when the speedup began and ended, but modeling results using the velocity data that we do have from December 2005 to February 2007 shows that significantly larger basal crevasses initiate during these speedups due to an increase in extensional stresses. These abnormally large basal crevasses form surface depressions directly overhead, which are observable from satellite data. We hypothesize that all surface depressions overlie abnormally large basal crevasses whose initiations are the result of speedups caused by subglacial flooding events. We use the surface depressions as proxies for past subglacial flooding events to better understand subglacial hydrology and its relationship with glacier dynamics.

1 Introduction

Basal crevasses are common on Antarctic ice shelves. They form when tensile stress and water pressure, which act to widen the crevasse, exceed lithostatic stress, which acts to close it (Rist et al., 1996, 2002; Van der Veen, 1998). Basal crevasses seem to form exclusively at glacier grounding lines, then advect down-flow through the ice shelf, often providing zones of weakness at which icebergs detach (Jezek, 1984; Luckman et al., 2012).

The location and geometry of basal crevasses can be mapped with ground-based or airborne radar measurements (Jezek et al., 1979; Jezek & Bentley, 1983; McGrath et al., 2012; Luckman et al., 2012; Vaughan et al., 2012). Along the Byrd Glacier flowline, radar data show that basal crevasses are neither uniformly sized nor spaced. Crevassing that does not occur at regular time intervals is the result of short-term variations in the stresses modulating crevasse initiation. Of the modulating stresses, tensile stress is the only variable that undergoes short-term variations, as exhibited by changes in ice velocity.

In this study, we investigate the formation and evolution of basal crevasses extending from the Byrd Glacier grounding line onto the Ross Ice Shelf (RIS) (Figure 1A). We identify over 300 basal crevasses within ∼5 km of the grounding line. Of the crevasses whose heights we are able to measure, 86% are shorter than 100 m, but a few crevasses, including the one closest to the grounding line, exceed 300 m in height. We hypothesize that the rapid drainage of two subglacial lakes in the Byrd Glacier catchment (Stearns

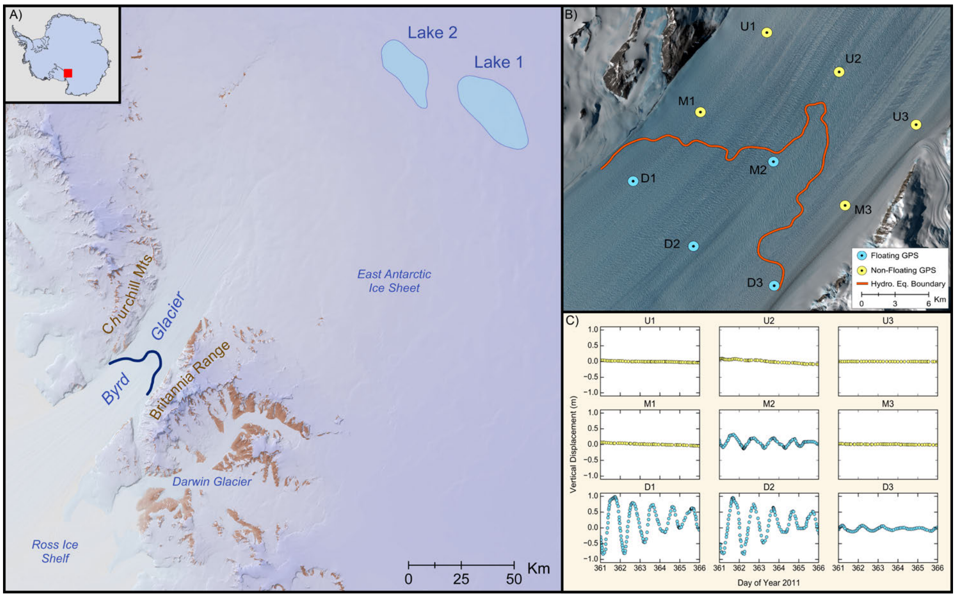


Figure 1. A) Map of Byrd Glacier and the subglacial lakes located ∼175 km up-flow from the grounding line (Stearns et al., 2008). The trunk of Byrd Glacier is ∼25 km wide and ∼100 km long; ice flow is from the top right to the bottom left. The background image is a hillshade made from the Polar Geospatial Center's Regional Elevation Model of Antarctica 8 m mosaics. The grounding line, derived in section 3.1, is shown as the navy blue line. The extent of (A) is outlined in red on the inset map at the upper left-hand corner. B) The grounding zone is between the limit of tidal flexure (just down-flow of yellow GPS points) and hydrostatic equilibrium (orange line). GPS labels represent up-flow (U), middle (M), and down-flow (D). C) Time-varying estimates of the vertical component of site position of the nine GPS receiving systems that straddle the grounding line, for six days in December 2011.

et al., 2008; Carter et al., 2017) led to the formation of this anomalously large basal crevasse at the grounding line. And, because large basal crevasses cause surface depressions, we explore whether the train of surface depressions between Byrd Glacier and the calving front of the Ross Ice Shelf can be used as proxies for past subglacial flooding events.

2 Data and Methods

2.1 Grounding line location

Basal crevasses appear to only form at the grounding line, where tensile stresses and water pressure can exceed the lithostatic stress (Jezek & Bentley, 1983; Bentley, 1987). The grounding line is located within a grounding zone (Figure 1), estimated through tidal flexure (up-flow limit, where a glacier undergoes vertical displacement due to ocean tides) and the hydrostatic equilibrium boundary (down-flow limit, where a glacier is fully floating) (Vaughan, 1994; Fricker & Padman, 2006; Brunt et al., 2010). We use both *in situ* GPS observations and airborne and satellite data to identify these limits (see supplemental for more information).

2.2 Basal crevasse geometry

2.2.1 Observed crevasse locations and heights

From December 2011 to January 2012, the Center for Remote Sensing of Ice Sheets (CReSIS) collected a dense grid of airborne radar data over Byrd Glacier. In this study, we only use the data recorded by the radar depth sounder (MCoRDS V2) operating at 180-210 MHz (Gogineni et al., 2014). The main sources of error for MCoRDS V2 are multiple reflectors, electronic noise, and off-nadir reflections (CReSIS, 2014), which is an estimated error of ∼30.6 m in thickness measurements (Gogineni et al., 2014). The elevations are referenced to the WGS84 ellipsoid.

We ascertain locations and heights of the basal crevasses directly from the MCoRDS V2 echograms. Basal crevasses open in the same direction as the radar flight appear as hyperbola in radar echograms and the apex of those hyperbola represents the peak of the fracture. Crevasse heights are estimated by identifying the apex and both asymptotes of a hyperbola. In some cases, basal crevasses are so numerous that the asymptotes of neighboring hyperbola intersect and estimating crevasse height is not possible. We only report crevasse heights where both asymptotes are clearly identifiable.

2.2.2 Modeled crevasse locations and heights

CReSIS radar data were not collected coincident with the subglacial flooding event in 2006. To determine whether conditions during flooding events could produce abnormally large basal crevasses, we model crevasse heights using linear elastic fracture mechanics (LEFM) with flood and non-flood parameters (see supplemental for more information). LEFM calculates a stress intensity factor (K_I); when this stress intensity factor exceeds the fracture criterion, or ice toughness, then a crack will propagate (Rist et al., 1996; Van der Veen, 1998), following:

$$K_I = \int_0^{h_0} \frac{2\theta_n(z)}{\sqrt{\pi h}} G(\gamma, \lambda) dz. \tag{1}$$

Here, h_0 is the size of the starter crack, which we set to 2 m after Rist et al. (2002) and a value of .155 $MPa\ m^{\frac{1}{2}}$ for K_I (Rist et al., 1999). $G(\gamma, \lambda)$ is a function of $\lambda = \frac{h}{H}$ and $\gamma = \frac{z}{h}$, established from fitting a polynomial curve to the modelled stress intensity values, with H the ice thickness and z the depth within the glacier (Van der Veen, 1998). $\theta_n(z)$ represents the combined stresses (tensile, lithostatic, and water pressure) acting at the crevasse tip. Tensile stress is calculated from strain rates, following Glen's Flow Law, and using a rate factor appropriate for surface ice at -20°C (after Van der Veen et al. (2014)). Strain rates were determined from velocity data collected in February 1989 to January 1990 and December 2005 to February 2007 (Stearns et al., 2008).

2.2.3 Surface depressions

Ice overlaying a large basal crevasse adjusts to hydrostatic equilibrium by forming a surface depression (Shabtaie & Bentley, 1982; Luckman et al., 2012). Several radar studies describe the relationship between surface depressions and basal crevasses (Jezek et al., 1979; Luckman et al., 2012; McGrath et al., 2012; Humbert et al., 2015). On Byrd Glacier, anomalously large basal crevasses have overlying surface depressions which are detectable from radar echograms and optical satellite imagery (see Figure 2). We use the panchromatic band from Landsat 8 OLI imagery collected in January 2016 – December 2017 to identify surface depressions.

We determine the age of the surface depressions by using a particle tracking algorithm (after Konikow and Bredehoeft (1978)) from the depressions' centroid locations

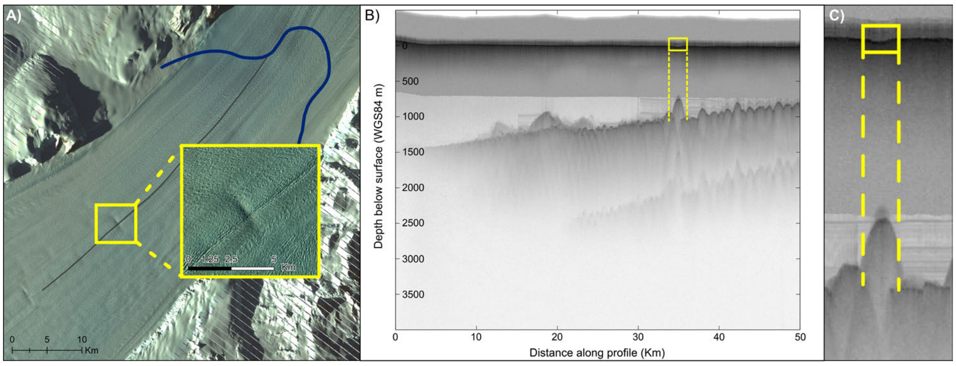


Figure 2. A). The surface depression overlaying a large ∼290 m tall basal crevasse (shown in panels (B) and (C)) with the CReSIS flight line in gray. The background is a Landsat 7 ETM+ image (Bands 2,3,4) acquired on February 22, 2011, approximately 10 months before CReSIS data were collected. B). Along-flow, vertical cross-section CReSIS echogram (ID: 20111205_08_003) highlighting the ∼290 m tall crevasse in yellow. C). Zoomed-in view of the ∼290 m crevasse and the overlying surface depression.

to the grounding line. This approach allows us to determine the flow path of each depression and an estimate of when the crevasse formed at the grounding line. Byrd Glacier has a lack of merging flow bands from the grounding line to the ice shelf terminus, which suggests the glacier has maintained a consistent flow regime for the last few centuries (Hulbe & Fahnestock, 2007; LeDoux et al., 2017). The little to no deviation in Byrd Glacier's temporal speeds and stress regime means that accurate estimates of basal crevasse flow advection can be determined from present-day velocity and ice flow data. The velocity data used for particle tracking is from the Landsat Ice Speed of Antarctica (LISA; (Scambos et al., 2019)). The LISA displacement values were generated from July 2016 to April 2017 Landsat 8 OLI imagery and has a spatial resolution of 750 m.

3 Results

3.1 Basal crevasse geometry

The floating base of Byrd Glacier is heavily crevassed within the fjord and out on RIS. Both observational and modeling results reveal that Byrd Glacier is susceptible to crevassing of varying sizes and clusters.

3.1.1 Observed crevasse locations and heights

We identify ∼300 basal crevasses from the 2011/12 CReSIS echograms (Figure 3). Crevasse distribution is most dense within the glacier fjord, and decreases as ice flows into the RIS. Crevasses range in height from ∼40 − 335 m and ∼0.08–1.2 km in width. Hyperbole found in echograms collected near the glacier margins were ignored because high shear stresses means those are likely Mode 2 crevasses (Van der Veen, 1998) whose initiation is not exclusively within the grounding zone.

Of the ∼300 hyperbole in Figure 3, we can confidently establish the height of 107 basal crevasses where the apex and both asymptotes are clearly visible. These 100+ crevasses are located within the region of centrally flowing ice where the primary stress is tensile (Whillans et al., 1989) and initial crevasse propagation is due only to extensional stresses in the direction of ice flow (Van der Veen, 1998).

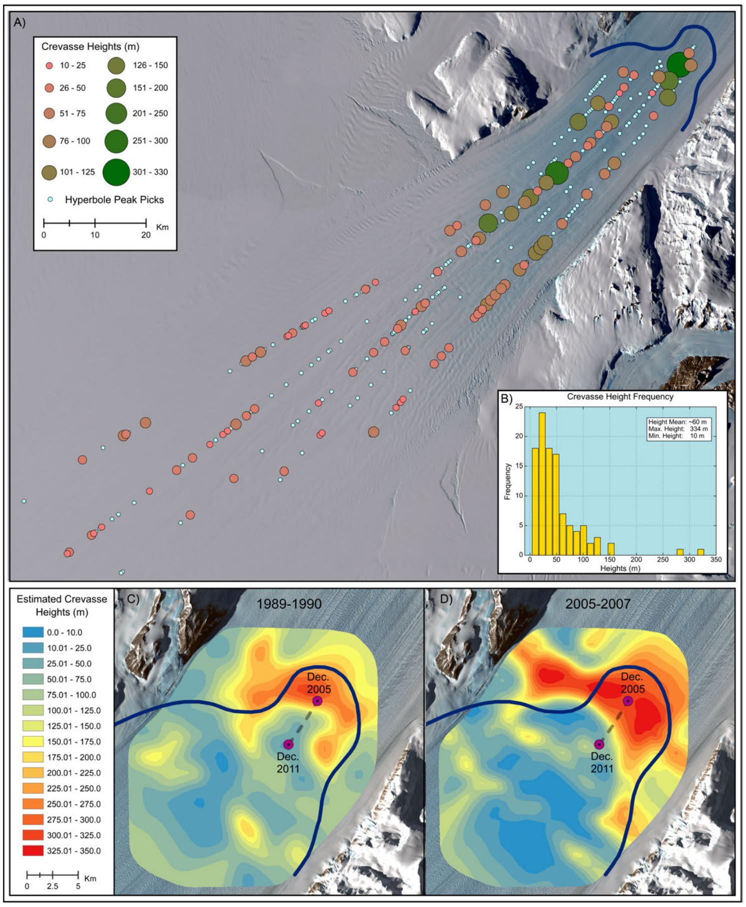


Figure 3. A) Heights for 107 measurable crevasses represented by the green to coral grades in color size gradients. The teal points represent all other basal crevasses. B) A frequency histogram of crevasse heights. C) and D) are the LEFM results for velocities measured in 1989 – 1990 and 2005 – 2007 respectively. The purple points in (C) and (D) represent the approximate location of the ∼335 m tall basal crevasse from December 2005 to December 2011.

3.1.2 Modeled crevasse locations and heights

Due to image availability, it is impossible to pinpoint the exact timing of the acceleration in 2006, but it was likely during the second half of the year (Stearns et al., 2008). LEFM results show that during this time period, crevasse propagation heights within the grounding zone reached ∼285 – 300 m, but only ∼90 – 225 m during a non-flooding period. While both ice flow scenarios demonstrate the largest crevasses forming within the up-flow limit of the grounding zone, the ∼10% increase in speed generates greater tensile rates that result in a ∼75 m taller crevasse height (see Supplemental Information for more detail).

3.1.3 Surface depressions

We identify 28 significant surface depressions over a distance of ∼400 km from Byrd Glacier's grounding line to the RIS terminus (Figure 4). From particle tracking, the oldest surface depression is estimated to have formed ∼600 years ago; the average interval between surface depression formation is 22 years. Most depressions initiated at the furthest up-flow point of the grounding line, but some flow-paths place initiation more south, closer to the Churchill Mountains (Figure 1A).

The 2011/12 radar echograms only overlap with two surface depressions where directly beneath them are large basal crevasses, ∼165 m and ∼290 m tall. We do not observe surface depressions over shorter crevasses. Feature tracking results reveal that the ∼290 m tall crevasse formed ∼1962-1963; however, a surface depression was not observed from satellite imagery until 1990. It took ∼27 – 28 years for a surface depression to form, which aligns well with modeling efforts suggesting that viscous creep is slow at Byrd Glacier (Van der Veen et al., 2014). The basal crevasse that formed in ∼2006 does not currently have a corresponding depression.

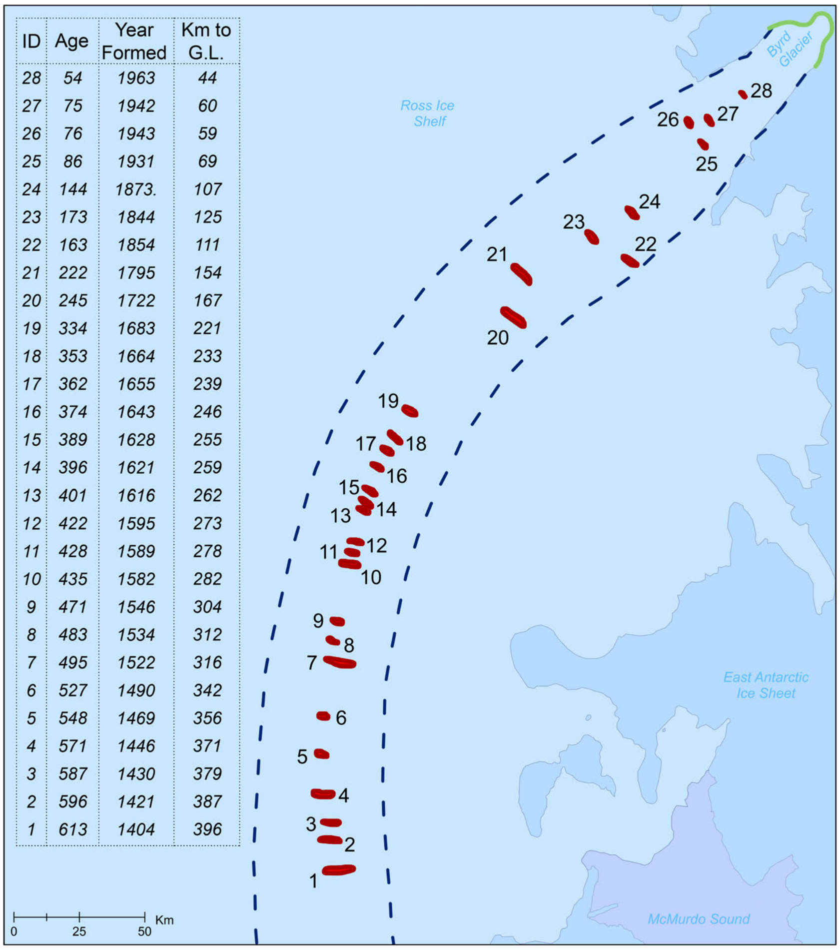
4 Discussion

Basal crevasses downflow of Byrd Glacier are not of uniform height. Most crevasses are <50 m tall (Figure 3) and do not form surface depressions. We infer the 28 observed surface depressions overlie large basal crevasses and we hypothesize that these large basal crevasses form during rapid subglacial drainage events (e.g. Stearns et al. (2008)). These events cause glacier acceleration, which increases the tensile stress at the grounding line. In addition, the large amount of water flowing across the grounding line likely enhances melt of any pre-existing basal crevasse. Below, we outline how these two processes can cause anomalously large basal crevasses to form during drainage events.

4.1 Large basal crevasse formation and glacier acceleration

When ice flow accelerates near the grounding line, tensile stress increases. LEFM results illustrate that with increased tensile stress, basal crevasse heights are predicted to be larger. Ice velocity derived from satellite remote sensing show that Byrd Glacier can flow up to ∼10% faster during subglacial drainage events. This acceleration has the potential to increase crevasse height by ∼25%.

To the best of our knowledge, the only other study to report Antarctic ice shelf basal crevasse heights greater than 300 m is Rist et al. (2002). However, unlike the basal crevasses initiating at Byrd Glacier, those observed by Rist et al. (2002) are rifts (Swithinbank & Lucchitta, 1986). Rifts, though technically basal crevasses, are fractures that have propagated through the entire ice thickness (Cuffey & Paterson, 2010, p.451). The observed rifts from Rist et al. (2002) initiated from the Rutford Ice Stream and do not appear at regular intervals along the Ronne Ice Shelf. It is probable that ice flow from Rutford Ice



ID	Age	Year Formed	Km to G.L.
28	54	1963	44
27	75	1942	60
26	76	1943	59
25	86	1931	69
24	144	1873.	107
23	173	1844	125
22	163	1854	111
21	222	1795	154
20	245	1722	167
19	334	1683	221
18	353	1664	233
17	362	1655	239
16	374	1643	246
15	389	1628	255
14	396	1621	259
13	401	1616	262
12	422	1595	273
11	428	1589	278
10	435	1582	282
9	471	1546	304
8	483	1534	312
7	495	1522	316
6	527	1490	342
5	548	1469	356
4	571	1446	371
3	587	1430	379
2	596	1421	387
1	613	1404	396

Figure 4. Red polygons show the locations of surface depressions extending from the Byrd Glacier grounding line to the RIS terminus. The age of individual crevasses is shown on the left side of the map; distance from the grounding line (green line) is shown on the right. The dashed blue line is the boundary of Byrd Glacier's ice flow. We do not see any non-rift surface depressions outside of these flowlines.

Stream, like Byrd Glacier, has experienced intermittent acceleration events that have caused episodically large basal crevasses (which became full-fracture rifts).

Rist et al. (2002) hypothesized that short-term variations in ice dynamics cause abnormally large fracturing in Antarctica. While the fractures appear to persist for centuries on Byrd Glacier, they do not seem to influence its stability. On other ice shelves, such as the Larsen C Ice Shelf (Hogg & Gudmundsson, 2017) and the Filchner Ice Shelf (Ferrigno & Gould, 1987), basal crevasses become full-fracture rifts and have led to the calving of considerably large tabular icebergs. To date, no data confirms that the large basal crevasses initiated at Byrd Glacier's grounding line have ever evolved into tabular icebergs via rifts. There is also no evidence demonstrating that Byrd Glacier's abnormally large basal crevasses have any impact on the glacier's or RIS's stability.

4.2 Large basal crevasse formation and subglacial drainage events

LEFM underestimates the height of the ∼335 m tall crevasse by ∼35 – 50 m or ∼12 – 15% of the height derived from radar echograms. A possible explanation for this difference is that LEFM only predicts the initial propagation height and not the evolved height of the crevasse. The emergence of a freshwater plume at the grounding line during a subglacial flood event could have caused additional localized melting (Marsh et al., 2016).

Jenkins (2011) modelled grounding line melt rates for Byrd Glacier when a freshwater plume is the result of a subglacial lake flooding event and when the plume is due to discharge from basal deformational melt. During a flooding event, Jenkins (2011) estimates basal melt of 15.9 m/yr and melt of 5.64 m/yr from non-flood event years.

Lake 2 drained from June 2006 to March 2007 with the greatest amount of drainage occurring within the first five months (Smith et al., 2009; Stearns et al., 2008). Without knowing the month the speedup occurred, we arbitrarily designate November 2006 for the velocity increase and crevasse initiation. Assuming uniform flood influenced melt from December 2006 – March 2007 and only normal melt rates from April 2007 – November 2011, the total melt would be ∼32 m/yr. Combining that amount of deformation with the LEFM results produces a crevasse ∼317 – 332 m tall which is within ∼3 – 18 m of the tallest crevasse's measured height.

In regards to the other abnormally large basal crevasses, it is unknown whether their initiation was also due to Lakes 1 and 2. There are several other subglacial lakes within Byrd Glacier's basin (Smith et al., 2009) and we do not rule out the possibility they could also have caused glacier speedups. Different reservoirs and pathways of flooding basal water could be the reason surface depressions are located on discrete flow-lines.

4.3 Implications

Ice shelves can act as a "plug" for outlet glaciers where their presence maintains stable ice flow (Dupont & Alley, 2005; Depoorter et al., 2013). Through basal melt and iceberg calving, the majority of mass loss in Antarctica occurs at the ice shelf interface (Depoorter et al., 2013; Rignot et al., 2013). There appears to be a direct link between the stability of ice shelves and the mass balance of outlet glaciers draining into the ice shelves; following ice shelf collapses, outlet glaciers undergo sustained accelerations (Scambos et al., 2004). These events can be elicited by weakened buttressing from large calving events triggered by basal crevasses forming rifts (Rott et al., 1996; Hogg & Gudmundsson, 2017). Basal crevasses play an integral role in iceberg formation (Colgan et al., 2016) and provide greater surface area for basal melt processes (Hellmer & Jacobs, 1992).

The subglacial hydrology of Antarctica also affects ice shelf stability from grounding line drainage events. Subglacial channels on ice shelves are known to evolve and grow from the influx of fresh subglacial water (Le Brocq et al., 2013; Marsh et al., 2016; Simkins et al., 2017; Dow et al., 2018) whereby increasing basal surface area for further melt to take place. These melt-induced channels are the initiating factor of forming parallel with ice-flow basal crevasses at the crest of the channels on Pine Island Glacier (Vaughan et al., 2012). This is subsequently another means of crevasse propagation as a consequence of subglacial water influx. The Antarctic basal hydraulic system influences the stability of ice shelves through its impact on glacier dynamics (speed increases leading to crevasse propagation) at the grounding line and melt rates of floating glacier ice. Having a better understanding of the drivers behind basal crevasse production has the potential to aid in better constraining of predictive models about the future of both ice shelves and ice sheets.

5 Conclusion

Byrd Glacier's fjord contains an extensive number of basal crevasses–that propagated from tensile stresses–in a wide range of geometries. We confidently identify the heights and widths for 107 basal crevasses. The spatial pattern of the observed heights appears to be random indicating that Byrd Glacier undergoes intermittent variations in its stress regime.

We also detect a series of surface depressions from the fjord of Byrd Glacier to the terminus of the RIS. The depressions within the fjord are observed to directly overlay abnormally large basal crevasses; we predict that the rest of the depressions in the RIS also overlay abnormally large crevasses. Assuming basal crevasse initiation begins at the grounding line, we use feature tracking to estimate the ages of the depressions to produce a timeline of abnormally large basal crevasse formation expanding over six centuries.

The increased tensile stresses incurred during the 2005-2007 flooding event were large enough to cause an abnormally large basal crevasse. LEFM results, in conjunction with estimated basal melt rates, agree within $\sim 3 - 18$ m of the observed 2011 height of the $\sim$2006 crevasse. At present, a surface depression has not developed over this basal crevasse, but given the amount of time from crevasse inception to depression formation of the youngest surface depression (Number 28, see Figure 4), we expect a depression to form over the $\sim$335 m tall crevasse within the next $\sim 12 - 13$ years.

We hypothesize that all abnormally large basal crevasses on Byrd Glacier form as a result of subglacial flooding speedups making basal crevasses proxies for past subglacially induced velocity increases. By tracking the present-day location of surface depressions (e.g. visible markers of abnormally large basal crevasses), to the grounding zone to measure travel times, we create a timeline for 28 past subglacial flooding events.

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