

**Quantifying meltwater refreezing on the Greenland Icesheet**

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# Quantifying meltwater refreezing along a transect of sites on the Greenland Icesheet

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## Abstract

On the Greenland ice sheet, a significant quantity of surface melt water refreezes within the firn creating uncertainty in surface mass balance estimates. This refreezing has the potential to buffer seasonal runoff to future increases in melting, but direct measurement of the process remains difficult. We present a method for quantifying refreezing at point locations using in situ firn temperature observations. A time series of sub-hourly firn temperature profiles were collected over the course of two melt seasons from 2007 to 2009 along a transect of 11 sites in the accumulation zone of Greenland. Seasonal changes in temperature profiles combined with heat flux estimates based on high temporal resolution temperature gradients, enable us to isolate the heat released by refreezing using conservation of energy. Our method is verified from winter data when no refreezing takes place, and uncertainty is estimated using a monte carlo technique. Results provide additional evidence of a significant amount of refreezing taking place at depths greater than 1 m and that runoff begins to occur above the ELA. Near the runoff limit, lateral migration of melt water significantly complicates the relationship between total surface melt and total refreezing.

## 1 Introduction

The mass balance of the Greenland ice sheet has become increasingly negative over the course of the last decade (Shepherd et al., 2012; Rignot et al., 2011; Vaughan et al., 2014). Recent measurements of outlet glacier discharge indicate that surface mass balance is now the dominant source of mass loss (Enderlin et al., 2014), and regional climate-surface process coupled models show that most of the increases in surface mass loss are due to significant increases in surface melting and runoff beginning in the early 1990s (Ettema et al., 2009). Although the increase in melt is clear from the remotely sensed data, the increase in melt water leaving the ice sheet is not as well constrained.

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A significant source of uncertainty in estimates of Greenland mass balance and melt runoff, both remotely sensed and model-based, is the refreezing of surface melt as it infiltrates into the underlying cold snow or firn. Modeling studies have estimated that almost half of the melt water generated annually in Greenland refreezes (Ettema et al., 2009). However, the complexity of the infiltration process remains difficult to incorporate into snowpack models and infiltration hydrology is usually modeled as a purely uniform process (Greuell and Konzelmann, 1994; Mernild et al., 2010; Fettweis, 2007; Ettema et al., 2009; Bougamont et al., 2005). There have been some efforts to quantify refreezing using a variety of parameterizations typically based on simple energy balance ideas where refreezing is controlled by the total cold content of the firn (Pfeffer et al., 1991; Pfeffer and Humphrey, 1996; Reeh, 1991; Janssens and Huybrechts, 2000; Oerlemans, 1991) (see Reijmer et al., 2012, for an overview). However, these parameterizations remain largely unverified with in situ data (Reijmer et al., 2012). A limited number of studies have attempted direct quantification of refreezing (Wright et al., 2007) or indirect measurements using density (Parry et al., 2007). However, these techniques are resource intensive, non-continuous, and do not adequately capture the complex three dimensional spatial variability of melt water refreezing.

The crux of the difficulty in quantifying the amount of refreezing melt is that infiltration and refreezing in cold firn is highly heterogeneous in space and time. Infiltration is characterized by a complex network of rapidly developing ice lenses and vertical pipe structures (Pfeffer and Humphrey, 1998). Vertical pipe flow can transport water deeper into the firn than uniform infiltration. Recent field observations in the percolation region of the Greenland accumulation zone suggest that melt water is able to penetrate cold firn to depths greater than 10 m and remain mobile throughout the winter (Humphrey et al., 2012; Forster et al., 2013). Piping of melt water into cold firn occurs without warming the entire profile. The water moves down the pipes with only minimal heating of the surrounding firn, making a locally complex temperature field of both cold and near melting temperatures. This deep penetration and heterogeneous heating make rudimentary parameterizations based on Pfeffer et al. (1991) questionable.





heat conducted across the section boundaries.

Heat from refreezing = Change in heat content( $\Delta H$ ) – Net boundary heat conduction( $Q$ )

Where  $\Delta$  is used here and in the following discussion to indicate change of a variable over the data time period, typically over the summer melt season.

A one dimensional approach requires that horizontal temperature gradients within the firn are negligible when averaged over the summer melt period despite the horizontally heterogeneous nature of melt infiltration. Fortunately, the diffusive nature of heat flow ensures that horizontal gradients in temperature decay rapidly as long as the length scale of the lateral heterogeneity is less than the vertical scale. Furthermore, the gross firn structure, which dominates both thermal and hydrologic properties, is predominantly horizontally layered, and we therefore assume lateral variations in both temperature and infiltration should be stochastically distributed. A random distribution of lateral temperature variations coupled with rapid decay in horizontal temperature gradients implies that the transfer of heat laterally should sum towards zero on a seasonal timescale.

Our assumption that lateral gradients can be ignored is given credence both by analysis of the data from the two adjacent temperature strings located at T1 and by a theoretical scaling analysis. The two profiles at T1 show occasional, significant differences during melt events that last a few days (see Humphrey et al., 2012), demonstrating that firn temperatures show some local, lateral variability. However, the calculated refreezing quantities (see Table 1) are within measurement error of each other, indicating that the temperature variations are insignificant when averaged over the summer season. The significance of the lateral variations can be investigated theoretically by using the analytical solution of exponential thermal decay of a line heat source (representing a vertical pipe) in a 3-D homogeneous firn solid (Carslaw and Jaeger, 1986). As an example of this scaling for 1 m pipe spacing, using appropriate parameters for firn, the analytical solution yields a temporal decay scale of 3 days, which also supports our assumption that horizontal gradients decay over the summer season. If the pipe spacing

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would show up as spurious melt or refreezing. Multiple tests were performed at all sites except T4 where there is no temperature data outside of the melt season (roughly May–September). In order to verify consistent results, multiple tests were performed with time spans range from 1 to 4 months and include data with different sampling frequencies. With the exception of four sites, all tests resulted in refreezing quantities within 1 cm w.e. of zero.

At sites H1, H165, H2 and H3, tests showed that the method produced unlikely refreezing quantities somewhat greater than 1 cm w.e., indicative of a mismatch between the change in the firn internal temperature structure and the flow of heat across the boundaries. The most important parameter in this balance (other than refreezing which is assumed to be zero) is the firn conductivity at the boundary. This is based on our measured firn densities of the previous summer. A small increase in the thermal conductivity in the near surface firn eliminates the mismatch in our energy balance. This increase in conductivity implies a plausible increase in firn density in the boundary firn during the melt season. We found that, in all cases, the mismatch can be eliminated when the densities near 1 m depth are increased to around  $600 \text{ kg m}^{-3}$ . It should be noted that although the above discussion is somewhat speculative, this same density change applied during the melt season has minimal effect on our calculated refreezing quantities as the melt season temperature gradient near 1 m is often near zero.

The analysis of the winter data gives us confidence in the method, however it gives little information on the size of the errors in estimates of refreezing of summer melt. Since our method differentiates discrete data when the heat flux is calculated, we assume that the largest errors stem from amplification of data noise by differentiation. In addition, we investigate the other large potential error produced by errors in our density profiles.

A Monte Carlo approach is used to estimate how these errors contribute to overall method uncertainty. Random perturbations were added to the observed temperatures and densities, and then the refreezing quantity was recalculated for each case. Since the noise in the data is electronic, the distribution of the perturbations is Gaussian

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with a SD equal to the uncertainties in the observed data. Temperatures showed noise with an uncertainty conservatively estimated to be 0.5°C and uncertainty in density is estimated to be 20 kg m<sup>-3</sup>. After 1000 Monte Carlo trials, the average and SD of the refreezing is then used to estimate mean refreezing values and corresponding uncertainty.

## 6 Results

The calculated quantity of water refreezing between 1 and 10 m depths at each site is plotted in Fig. 3. The error bars on each value are equal to two SDs of the variability generated in the Monte Carlo trials. The higher elevation sites show melt results calculated from 2007 temperature data, while the lower elevation sites use data collected from 2008 (Table 1). As might be expected due to increases in melting, refreezing quantities generally increase with decreasing elevation. Sites T2 and T1 have temperature profile data from both 2007 and 2008. In addition, there were 2 temperature profiles available at site T1, placed about 20 m apart. Refreezing values calculated from these two profiles show no significant difference from one another.

The results show a large difference in overall refreezing magnitudes between 2007 and 2008 that reflect the overall melt conditions experienced during each melt season (2007 was a high melt year). Unfortunately, data quality problems prevented all refreezing quantities from corresponding to exactly the same time period (see Table 1). With the exception of site T1, refreezing quantities in 2007 correspond to July and August, while all sites in 2008 correspond to June–August. Site T1 in 2007 corresponds to only July. If the T1–07 data also included June, the difference in refreezing trends between 2007 and 2008 would likely have been even more substantial than is shown in Fig. 3.

It is useful to give our results some context by comparing them to two separate and independent analysis. First, a simple positive degree-day melt model (PDD), following Hock (2005), is used to calculate a plausible surface melt range at each site (Fig. 3). In Greenland, empirically determined melt factors (DDF) for snow range from 2.5 to

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5 mm day<sup>-1</sup> °C<sup>-1</sup> (Hock, 2003; Janssens and Huybrechts, 2000; Braithwaite, 1995; Cuffey and Paterson, 2010). Air temperatures at 2 m height from the CP weather station are used as input to the melt model. Prior to calculating the sum of positive degree days, the raw, hourly air temperatures are adjusted for each site using a seasonally variable slope lapse rate given by Hanna et al. (2005). Also, the hourly temperatures are averaged to daily values. The upper and lower bounds correspond to our estimates of maximum and minimum degree day factors. Note that the PDD model only produces melt, it does not deal with refreezing.

We also compare our results to refreezing quantities output by the regional climate model MAR (Fettweis, 2007; Fettweis et al., 2011; Tedesco et al., 2014) (Fig. 3). MAR has a resolution of 25 km, a time step of 120 s, and has been utilized in numerous studies related to modeling surface mass balance on the Greenland ice sheet (for a list see <http://www.cryocity.org/papers.html>). MAR utilizes the physically based, one dimensional snowpack model CROCUS to calculate refreezing to a depth of 15 m. MAR based estimates of refreezing quantities were determined for each of our sites by summing the daily average values of refreezing output by MAR over the time periods shown in column 5 of Table 1. Some sites lie within a common grid cell and have identical MAR refreezing values despite their different locations.

The melt range estimated by the PDD is roughly of the same order as our refreezing values, as well as, the MAR refreezing values at the 2007 sites. In contrast, the MAR refreezing values corresponding to the 2008 sites are substantially higher than our values, including some values over 10 times higher (Fig. 3). There is also a significant difference in the data trends. MAR refreezing values do not show any clear difference between 2007 and 2008 or a decreasing amount of total refreezing near the ELA. Differences between our refreezing values and the PDD become more significant at lower elevations. Below H165 the refreezing begins to exceed the estimated melting, peaking at site H2, and below that, the refreezing apparently becomes much less than the melt.

## 7 Discussion

The large discrepancy between our values and that of MAR may be partly a result of refreezing taking place in the upper one meter of firn. Refreezing in the near surface is not included in our analysis as, unlike the deeper thermistors, the data from thermistors in the first meter are influenced by the effects of ablation, accumulation, and solar radiation, complexities that are outside the scope of our simple energy balance approach. Nonetheless, the near surface data can still be used make qualitative interpretations of the thermal conditions in upper meter of firn, enabling us to investigate the significance of refreezing in the upper meter.

At each site, a daily mean of the average of the temperatures at depths of 0, 0.25, 0.5, and 0.75 m was calculated, and a subset of sites are plotted in Fig. 4 (some sites are omitted for clarity). At all of the sites in 2007 and most of the sites in 2008, warming was sufficient to bring the average temperature in the upper one meter of snow to zero degrees for almost the entire melt season (Fig. 4a). In some cases, the average temperatures are even above the melting point indicating that either the sensors are close enough to the surface to be warmed by radiative heating or even exposed by ablation or wind scour. These observations imply that the capacity for refreezing in the upper one meter of firn at these sites is almost zero. Consequently, most melt water generated will infiltrate without refreezing until it reaches the deeper, colder firn within our method domain. Sites T2 and T1 in 2008 are the only sites with near surface firn temperatures below zero for a significant part of the melt season. However, the large difference in refreezing values between the two methods (our values vs. MAR) is present at T1, T2 (2008), and the other sites. It is therefore, unlikely that refreezing in the upper one meter of firn is the sole source of the difference in values.

Diurnal melting and refreezing of pooled water at the surface is also unaccounted for using our method. In this situation, refreezing takes place at the surface from radiational cooling without the need for sub-freezing firn temperatures. Several melt-freeze cycles could take place before the water finally infiltrates and/or runs off. The cumulative effect

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in both 2007 and 2008 despite the substantial change in total melting between the two years. This shows that the firn has some ability to at least temporarily buffer large changes in melt as the refreezing capacity in this region was not completely eliminated during the 2007 season, or it was able to sufficiently recover during over the 2007/08 winter.

For sites above H165, all melt produced at the surface appears to refreeze in the upper 10 m of the firn column. In contrast, the in situ refreezing in the lower percolation zone, below H165, cannot be simply described as full refreezing of the predicted melt. We interpret our results to indicate two separate processes occurring in the lower percolation zone. At elevations below H2, the refreezing quantities begin to decrease. This is inconsistent with the expected increased melt at lower elevations and therefore must result from melt water running off rather than refreezing (Humphrey et al., 2012). This region is the location of the runoff limit, where some of the melt water may ultimately leave the ice sheet and contribute to sea-level rise. The zone encompassing H165, H2, and H3 is more difficult to interpret. The refreezing values in this region may be higher than the calculated melt due to lateral migration of meltwater in the firn. It is also plausible that some of the total refreezing quantity is derived from melt water generated during a previous melt seasons remained unfrozen within the firn in a manner described by Forster et al. (2013). Lastly, it is also possible that the PDD melt model significantly under predicts melt in this region. It is interesting to note that Ambach (1988) calculated DDF for the ELA elevation of this transect region in Greenland and found a particularly high DDF, which may indicate that it is not realistic to use a single DDF in this region, but that the DDF should increase with decreasing elevation. Nevertheless, this transitional region is not fully explained by this comparison with the simple PDD model.

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## 8 Conclusions

Firn temperature profiles provide an effective means of estimating in situ quantities of melt water refreezing. Our method treats the firn as a one dimensional system and the heat conducted into and out of the system through time is tracked using temperature measurements. The latent heat released into the system by refreezing is calculated using conservation of energy, and this value is then converted to a water equivalent.

Application of our method is problematic in the upper meter of the snow profile because of radiative heating and cooling and because of unobserved snow accumulation and ablation during the yearly cycle. Any refreezing in this layer represents an unaccounted error in our melt estimates. Nonetheless, testing of the method using winter temperature measurements, when it is assumed that no refreezing is taking place, verified that, in most cases, our method is robust. Four of the sites required slight tuning of the near surface densities, but this is reasonable given expected melt season densification of the firn.

The calculated refreezing quantities reveal a transition from complete refreezing of melt water at higher elevations to eventual runoff of melt water near an elevation of around 1500 m, up to 40 km inland from the ELA. Even where complete refreezing does occur, a significant portion of the overall refreezing takes place at depths greater than 1 m. This may be a result of piping of melt water to much greater depths than would otherwise occur by uniform infiltration. Since heterogeneous infiltration is not currently accounted for in snow hydrological models, these in situ refreezing values provide an important source of snow/firn model validation. Our results show that piping of melt water significantly complicates the relationship between total refreezing and simplified theoretical approaches to predicting refreezing capacity. Thermal profiling for the lower accumulation zone can be used to both quantify melt refreezing, as well as help to locate important zones such as the runoff limit.

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## Appendix A:

Typically, snow thermal conductivity ( $K$ ) is calculated from snow density using an empirically derived relationship (i.e. Sturm et al., 1997; Yen, 1981, and others). However, many empirical formulations are based on measurements from lower density seasonal snow packs and may be less applicable to higher density firn. Instead, we use a theoretical relationship between firn density and thermal conductivity based on modeling the firn as an ice matrix embedded with spherical pockets of air (vapor transport of heat is not included). This idealized geometry enables the analytical calculation of the heat flow through the system. This model was originally determined by Maxwell for electrical conductivity in two phase metal alloys, and was adapted for snow by Schwerdtfeger (1963) (see Carson et al., 2005).

$$K_{\text{eff}} = \frac{2\rho_{\text{firn}}}{3(\rho_{\text{ice}} - \rho_{\text{firn}})} K_{\text{ice}} \quad (\text{A1})$$

Our dense winter data show the temperature profiles evolving solely via conductive diffusion. The surface temperatures remain below freezing, along with the entire profile. The lack of phase change energy allows us to test the range of  $K$  vs. density values against a simple thermal model. A 1-D vertical finite difference thermal diffusion model was run in comparison with the observed data, and a range of conductivity values were compared. This testing revealed that the Maxwell model yielded significantly more accurate firn temperature profiles (as compared to observed) than the Sturm et al. (1997) empirical regression. Furthermore, the Maxwell formulation is quite similar to the relationship found by Calonne et al. (2011) using microtomography on higher density snow. These results may indicate that snow evolves towards a more simplistic geometry as it undergoes densification. We have used these density based  $K$  values, that are internally consistent without temperature data, in our modeling of the summer melt/refreezing calculations.

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**Table 1.** Temperature profile data summary.

| Site   | Complete Data Timespan  | Data Sample Interval | Dates for Refreezing Calc. | Ave Ref. (cm w.e.) | SD   |
|--------|-------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|------|
| CP     | 25 Jun 2007–21 Oct 2007 | 30 min               | 30 Jun 2007–1 Sep 2007     | 2.29               | 0.9  |
| T4     | 3 Jul 2007–27 Jan 2008  | 30 min               | 5 Jul 2007–24 Aug 2007     | 7.77               | 0.44 |
| T3     | 25 Jun 2007–2 Jan 2008  | 30 min               | 28 Jun 2007–1 Sep 2007     | 10.87              | 0.46 |
| T2–07  | 28 Jun 2007–29 Oct 2007 | 30 min               | 30 Jun 2007–1 Sep 2007     | 13.1               | 0.44 |
| T1–07  | 28 Jun 2007–22 Dec 2007 | 30 min               | 30 Jun 2007–31 Jul 2007    | 14.93              | 0.49 |
| T2–08  | 27 May 2008–16 May 2009 | 20 min, 8 h Oct–Apr  | 28 May 2008–1 Sep 2008     | 0.76               | 0.51 |
| T1–08a | 30 May 2008–16 May 2009 | 20 min, 8 h Oct–Apr  | 30 May 2008–1 Sep 2008     | 0.1                | 0.63 |
| T1–08b | 1 May 2008–16 May 2009  | 20 min, 8 h Oct–Apr  | 30 May 2008–1 Sep 2008     | 1.42               | 0.58 |
| H1     | 31 May 2008–15 May 2009 | 20 min, 8 h Oct–Apr  | 1 Jun 2008–1 Sep 2008      | 1.8                | 0.63 |
| H163   | 30 May 2008–15 May 2009 | 20 min, 8 h Oct–Apr  | 1 Jun 2008–1 Sep 2008      | 4.42               | 0.60 |
| H165   | 30 May 2008–15 May 2009 | 20 min, 8 h Oct–Apr  | 1 Jun 2008–1 Sep 2008      | 5.96               | 0.53 |
| H2     | 30 May 2008–15 May 2009 | 20 min, 8 h Oct–Apr  | 1 Jun 2008–1 Sep 2008      | 15.99              | 0.63 |
| H3     | 31 May 2008–17 May 2009 | 20 min, 8 h Oct–Apr  | 1 Jun 2008–1 Sep 2008      | 11.44              | 0.63 |
| H4     | 31 May 2008–15 May 2009 | 20 min, 8 h Oct–Apr  | 1 Jun 2008–1 Sep 2008      | 4.2                | 0.73 |

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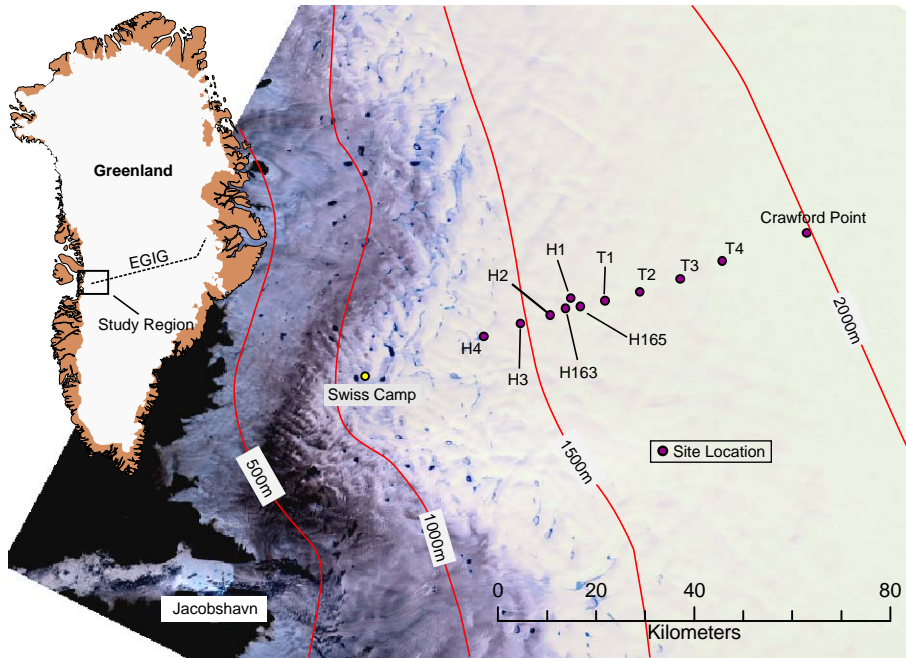
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**Figure 1.** Temperature profile site locations in SW Greenland.

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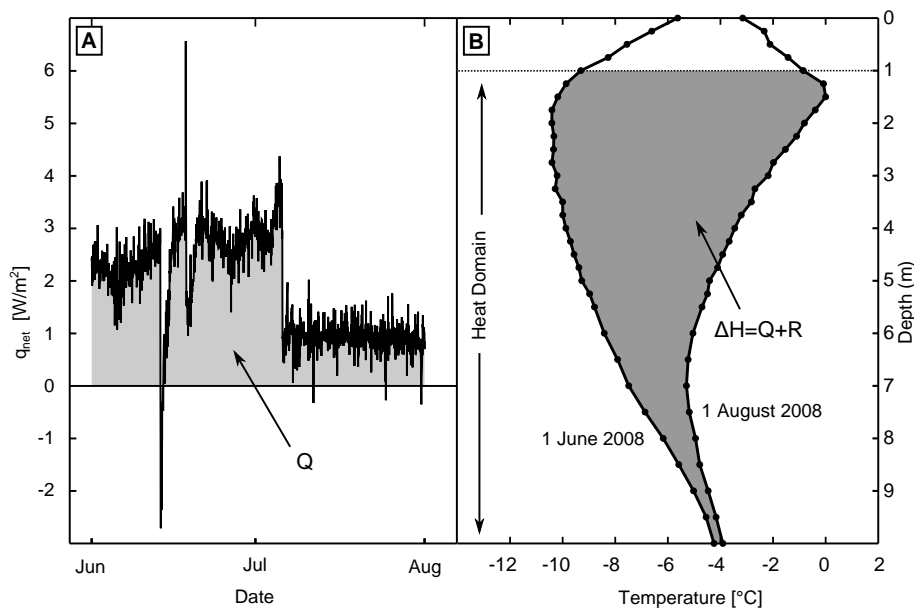
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**Figure 2.** (a) Net heat flux through the top and bottom of the domain (see panel b) from 1 June 2008 to 1 August 2008 at site H2.  $Q$  is the integral of the time series (see Eq. 2). (b) Temperature profiles at site H2 on 1 June 2008 and 1 August 2008. The grey area between the profiles ( $\Delta H$ ) is equal to the heat gained through the top and bottom of the domain ( $Q$ ) and the heat released by refreezing ( $R$ ). Note that the domain does not extend to the surface. The upper meter of the firn was not included in analysis due to uncertainties caused by accumulations, melting, and solar radiation.

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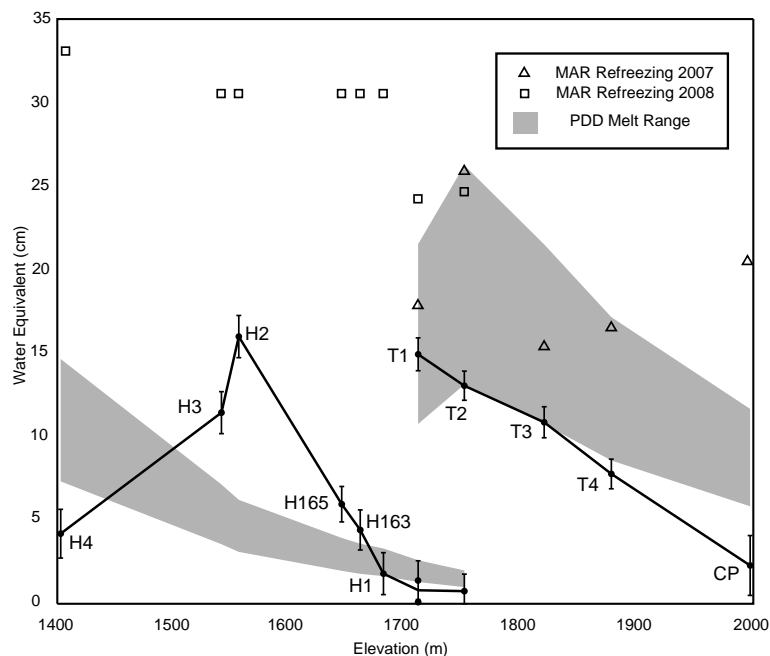
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**Figure 3.** Refreezing quantities at each site with error bars equal to plus and minus two standard deviations. A line connects sites with data from the same melt season (either 2007 or 2008). The grey region is an estimated range of surface melt at each elevation calculated using a positive degree day model. Triangles and Squares are refreezing quantities output by the regional climate model MAR. MAR values are associated with the model grid cell encompassing the site and correspond to the time periods used to calculate refreezing values shown in Table 1.



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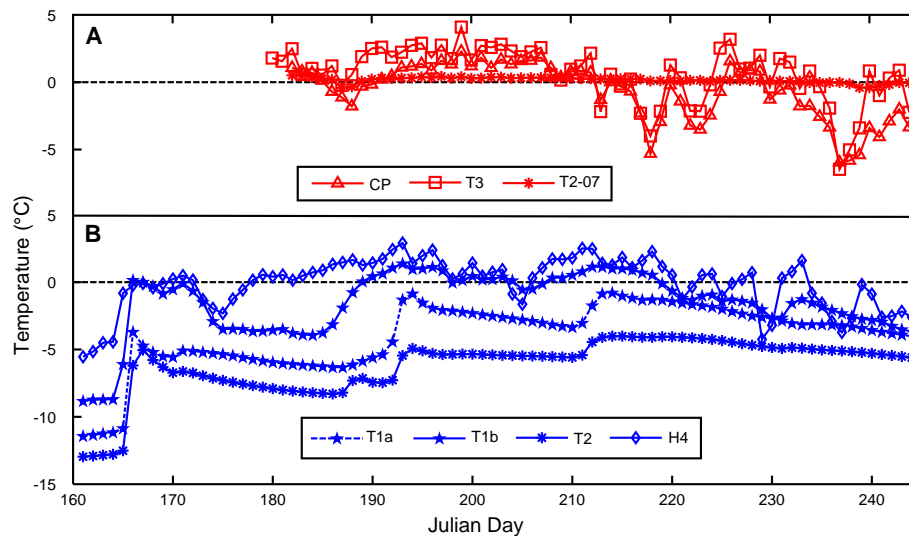
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**Figure 4.** Daily mean values of near surface temperatures at select sites. Some sites are not shown for figure clarity, but in all cases were very similar to the sites that are included. **(a)** 2007 sites. **(b)** 2008 sites. The near surface temperature is calculated as the average of the temperatures output by the upper four thermistors in the temperature strings at each site.