

Big-Wall Update

by John Middendorf

Lots of activity on Yosemite's "big-stones" this year, with first-ascents of three new El Cap routes, two new Half Dome routes, and three other major big-wall lines.

Perhaps the main event was Walt Shipley's and Troy Johnson's ascent of Native Son, VI,5.9,A.4+, a line which weaves between Iron Hawk and Aurora, and connects with "The Golden Finger of Fate", a three-hundred foot hollow pillar 2/3 the way up El Cap's Southeast Face, and most definitely was the largest obvious feature yet unclimbed on El Cap. 102 rivets (plus 29 belay bolts = 129 holes total) were required for the route, over half of which were placed in a direct finish, the "Machine Headwall" which strikes up an aesthetic blank wall, and avoids the overused Tangerine Trip final headwall bolt ladder. The route is completely independent except for the last pitch, with 15 new pitches. It was climbed immediately after the seasonal peregrine-falcon climbing ban was lifted from that area on El Cap. A second ascent soon after by Tracy Dorton and Rick Lovelace confirmed the quality of the route, which is destined to become a classic of the "steep side".

Just to the right is Randy Leavitt and Rob Slater's new line, Scortched Earth, VI,5.11, A5, which began as a race for the hollow pillar. Seven new pitches were created, the rest being shared with Aurora and Tangerine Trip. The pitches include "the Big Brother" (A5), a very technical copperheading pitch, and "the Leavittator", a 5.11, A4 offwidth pitch, which ascends the right side of the hollow pillar (Native Son ascends the left side), and goes from knifeblade-size to 24" to knifeblade-size in a single pitch!

John Barbella and Eric Brand climbed Heartland (previously dubbed the Iowa Pig Farm because it cuts through the Iowa area in El Cap's diorite North America) VI, 5.10, A4+ in the 18 days from August 19 to September 5. The rout starts on the New Jersey Turnpike, cuts off left two pitches past Calaveras Ledges, and connects in with The Wyoming Sheep Ranch after 9 new pitches.

Tucker Tech had an impressive solo binge on the big-stone this summer, soloing four El Cap routes in a five-week period: Tripple Direct with the Magic Mushroom start, Dihedral Wall (in 2½ days!), Dorn Direct (1st solo ascent) to the Shield, and the Magic Mushroom (possibly the first solo ascent). No hauling was done on these routes (all gear being carried on his back while cleaning--even the Shield roof), and minimal food was brought on all the

routes (12 Tiger's Milk bars for the Dihedral, a sparse sampling of left-over rescue K-rations for the Magic Mushroom!?!).

Significant repeats this year include Space, by Randy Leavitt and Doug Englekirk in the spring, Lost in America by Eric Brand and Paul Gagner (also in the spring), The Sea of Dreams in 23 days by Jensen and Smith (the "wanna-be's") in good style, a second ascent of The Sheep Ranch by (whose combined ascents of "The Sea" and "The Ranch" make them qualified to make a difficulty comparison between the two), and Eric Kohl's first solo ascent (4th overall ascent) of Lunar Eclipse this summer. Especially of note is Xavier Bongard's impressive first solo ascent of Iron Hawk. An energetic and impeccably competent Swiss wall-climber, Xavier's flash on the big-walls ("the beeg walles") has impressed all. At the time of this writing, Xavier is soloing Lost in America, or, as one can hear him yell as he cheerfully taps away, "Toto (his nickname) is lost in America!"--include accent.

A beautiful new line on Half Dome was put up in July by Peter Mayfield, Sean Plunkett, Steve Bosque, and Jim Bridwell, introducing a new innovative (and equally descriptive) wall-rating system: a combined pitch and overall grading which includes the ratings PH (pretty-hard), NTB (not too bad), NWR (not worth rating), and PDH (pretty damn hard). The Big Chill ascends between Artic Sea and Zenith, completely independent (except for the last 50') in the awesome white overhanging section of Half Dome's right side. The Big Chill is PDH.

Jim (the "bird") Bridwell's ongoing longevity in pursuing new Yosemite lines and remaining on the cutting edge of wall-climbing shows definite quality in his ongoing pioneering talents. Of recent note is his introduction of "Birdbeaks". A "beak" is a modified Chouinard Crack 'n up, used as a hooked rarp. Their useful qualities have gained immediate acceptance as an aid-climbing tool, and are currently necessary equipment on some of the latest new routes.

Dave Shultz and Walt Shipley in June climbed the South Face of Half Dome's most awesome line, Southern Belle, V, 5.11b, AI, a mostly free route which starts just right of Harding's South Face route, and crosses it at mid-height, face-climbing up the South Face's beautiful 80° upper wall for many pitches. 14 full length independent pitches on the route, with only 35 bolts total.

new 1/2 dome line

Washington's Column saw two new routes, Ten Days After VI,5.9,A3 by John Barbella and Eric Brand. The route climbs 8 new pitches between The Prow and Electric Ladyland. Cross-town Traffic (a.k.a. The Horny Johnson) VI,5.8, A3+ was done by Jeff Hornibrook and Troy Johnson in September: 7 new pitches between Astroman and Mid-East Crisis.

Porcelain Wall has a new (this time repeatable!) line: The Luminescent Wall (luminescent being defined by Walt as "a low temperature light emitting source which pretty much describes the route) by Walt Shipley and John Barbella, a 5.10, A4+ (two pitches of hard nailing) route done in three days in June with only 9 holes drilled, in sharp contrast to the nearby Harding/Bosque/Lamba plumblime bolt ladder immediately to the right.

The original Porcelain Wall Route, for years shrouded in mystery as to whether or not the first (and only) first ascentionists chopped their route, was attempted by two Tahoe area climbers in June, who turned back after seeing corroded Z-macs(not noted for their strength even when new), mangled plumber's strapping tape for bolt hangers, and chopped rivets soaring up the blank wall.

Trends: The park service is currently fining anyone caught throwing haul-bags from the top pf El Cap. Also, garbage throwing is no longer considered acceptable wall technique by anyone. The base of El Cap is becomming altogether too littered, and it is quite obvious by all who have any respect for the big walls that garbage (tin-cans, etc.) throwing is out.

Added bolts on repeated routes continues to be out-of-control. The Zodiac's classic wide pitch above Peanut Ledge currently has many holes and bolts added, and a recent party claims that the crack is no longer even needed! Also, Cheater sticks on first ascents is a controversial subject, many feeling that the technique avoids the challenge the wall presents (and invites bolting by subsequent ascents).

Of final note is Mike Corbett's thirty-eighth (38th) El Cap route. Now working as a janitor for the Yosemite Clinic, Mike and Andrew Stevens-- also a janitor--did a "clean ascent" of the Nose in mid-October.