



AAC Publications

Capulin Canyon, Many New Crack Climbs

New Mexico, Jemez Mountains

Capulin Canyon lies in the heart of the Dome Wilderness, a pristine section of the Jemez Mountains in New Mexico's Bandelier National Monument, famous for its Ancestral Puebloan cliff dwellings.

However, no cliff dwellings exist in this area. The welded tuff composing these cliff bands is often bulletproof, and the normal welded-tuff features you'd expect to see, such as huecos and pockets, are all but missing here. Instead, the rock has fractured to form splitter cracks and corners, riddling the cliff line for a several-mile stretch.

First visits to Capulin Canyon by exploratory rock climbers may have begun sometime in the '80s. In the early '90s, brief visits to Capulin by the likes of Doug Pandorf, Lee Sheftel, and Jean Delataillade created a handful of lines. However, the 1996 Dome Wilderness Fire drastically changed the access and appearance.

The canyon lay quiet for 15 years or so, until Josh Smith, an ambitious local climber, rediscovered the area in 2010. Since then, Josh, with help from a small band of scruffy climbers—such as George Perkins, Jason Halladay, and me—have opened up a plethora of newly minted crack climbs, many of which are awaiting a second or third ascent. With nary abolt-protected move, the routes range from 50' single-pitch lines to multi-pitch routes that top out at 200' or higher; the average seems to be around 90' to 100'. Grades range from 5.10- to 5.12, with a few token 5.9 and 5.13- lines. Overall, Capulin Canyon has a distinct flavor and texture that distinguish it from desert-style sandstone crack climbing and make this a unique and memorable place to climb.

There are currently four crags. The Main Wall contains the longest lines, with several 170' pitches, many of which are broken into two where a natural ledge exists. The Upper Wall has the greatest variety and a good density of routes. Capulet Canyon is the only crag that faces west, and it boasts a high density of four-star lines. The other walls face south and get strong sun exposure; however the complexity of the corners and alcoves allows one to seek lines in the sun or shade most of the day.

If you are looking for quality challenges just under 80', try Trojan (5.11) on the Upper Wall (a perfect lightning-bolt splitter with a wild mantel finish from under a roof block), the Viking (5.10) on the Hinterlands Wall (a steep fingers to hands corner with some interesting texture for the feet and exposed face climbing past a bolt), or Futuristic (5.12) in Capulet Canyon (fingers to overhanging tight hands). The longer classics abound but tend to be concentrated more on the Main Wall. Here, the Capulin Classic (2 pitches, 5.11+) and the Widowmaker (150', 5.12-) are the lines to do.

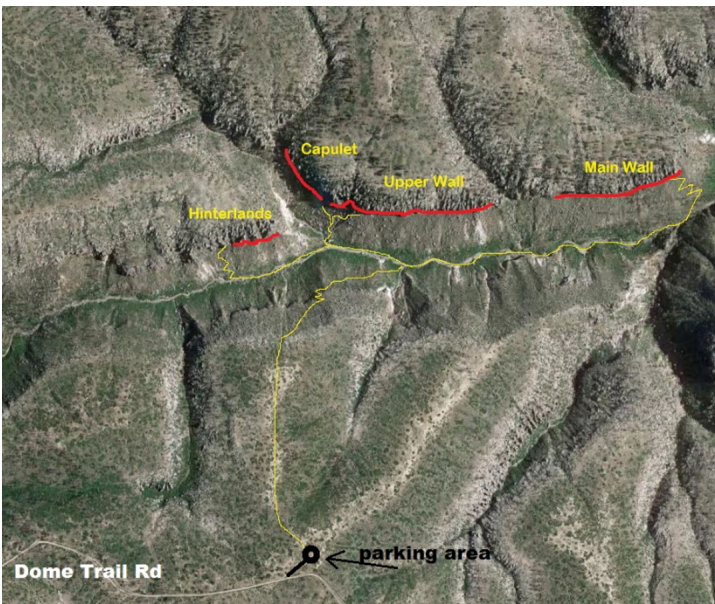
The canyon can be accessed from either Albuquerque or Santa Fe, with the trailhead located on Dome Trail Road. The climbing is best between October and May and there is open camping throughout the area; however, the road is often closed from January through February due to snowpack; contact the Jemez Ranger District before making a trip out there during this time.

– Aaron Miller

Images



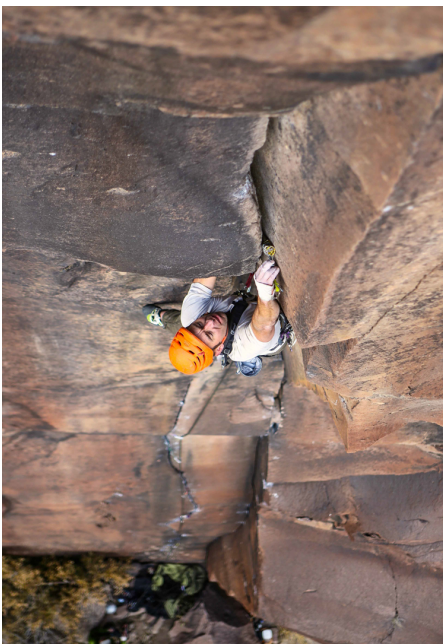
An overview map of the Jemez Mountains, showing Capulin Canyon in relation to the nearest cities.



A close-up map of Capulin Canyon showing the four main crags and the access.



Aaron Miller in the midst of the crux of Petrivor Crack (5.12-) on Capulin Tower.



Josh Smith on the steep hands section of Tip of the Toe (5.12-) at the Upper Wall in Capulin Canyon.



Ian Donnelly working the clean corner of 8oz of Guinness (5.10+) at the Hinterlands.

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