



South Hozomeen Mountain, North Face

Washington, North Cascades

On August 13 and 14, Rolf Larson and I made the first ascent of the steep and intimidating north face of South Hozomeen Mountain (8,003'). This rarely climbed peak is among the steepest in the Lower 48. We'd gawked at it from neighboring North Hozomeen three years prior, speculating that a massive, slanting dihedral feature might yield a feasible route. [Larson and Wehrly completed the first ascent of the Zorro Face (west face) of North Hozomeen in late August 2013; see [AAJ 2014](#).]

Our all-free, 13-pitch line (15 pitches to the summit) begins directly beneath the overhanging summit, travels three pitches more or less straight up to gain the dihedral, and then grinds up the right-hand facet of this giant corner for 10 more pitches to reach the summit ridge. The last two pitches to the top belong to the Southwest Route, pioneered by Fred Beckey and crew during the impressive first ascent of the peak in 1947.

The pitches on the face were all 5.7 to 5.9, with a long stretch of 4th class in the middle (some simul-climbing), plus two mid-5th class pitches on the Beckey route to the top. The first three pitches were quite solid and a lot of fun. However, the remaining pitches, while moderate in technical difficulty, do not offer straightforward climbing—careful route-finding and hold selection were mandatory. We'd hoped the giant dihedral would hold a nice crack system, but the feature was generally comprised of very rotten and decomposing rock, or filled with copious humus. Some of our 60m “moderate” leads took over 1.5 hours, with abundant loose flakes, rotten and flaring cracks, and infrequent and mostly ornamental gear.

After 11 pitches of hyper-vigilant climbing, we shiver-bivied on a sloping ledge perched on the exposed right margin of the dihedral, a couple of thousand feet above the basin. The next morning we dispatched the tenuous and traversing crux pitch to regain the big corner, then a relatively nice pitch to the ridge crest, where we joined the Southwest Route to the summit. We placed no bolts and used only two pins to supplement our 11th-pitch belay and bivy anchor. The descent of the Southwest Route was complex and time-consuming.

We feel fortunate to have solved—and survived—this problem. Unfortunately, we can't really recommend the route, although it might appeal to those aspiring to exercise their risk-management skills.

– Eric Wehrly

Images



The north face of South Hozomeen Mountain (8,003'), deep in Washington's North Cascades, showing the route taken by Rolf Larson and Eric Wehrly in August 2016. Theirs was the first ascent of the face.



Approaching the north face of South Hozomeen. The full approach ascends steep forest, brush, talus, and slabs to reach a col, from which the first ascensionists descended to the base of the north face.



Rolf Larson following pitch 11 during the first ascent of the north face of South Hozomeen Mountain. In the background is the Lightning Creek drainage with origins in Canada, a few miles to the north.



Rolf Larson on the fourth pitch of the north face of South Hozomeen Mountain. Larson and Eric Wehrly climbed 13 pitches (bivying atop the 11th) to reach the Southwest Route (Beckey-Marcus-O'Neil-Prestrud-Staley-Welsh, 1947), which they followed for two more pitches to the summit.

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