



AAC Publications

Lost Twin Lakes: A Little-Known Alpine Wall Gets Six Long New Routes

Wyoming, Bighorn Mountains

At roughly 10,000', the Lost Twin Lakes of Wyoming's Bighorn Mountains sit right at timberline. Above the upper lake loom two 1,000' walls: The western Spider Web Wall is closer to the upper Lost Twin Lake, while the Thundercloud Wall sits back a little farther to the south. This area is home to many pika, marmots, martens, and the occasional visiting fisherman seeking large lake trout. Many climbers have hiked in the seven miles to investigate, but few have ascended the walls.

To the best of my knowledge, development of this tucked-away cirque began with Paul Piana in the early 1990s. He and the late Todd Skinner flew over the area and immediately were awestruck by the steep left side of the Spider Web Wall. While Skinner never climbed here, Piana returned several times throughout the decade, with Heidi Badaracco, Pete DeLannoy, and probably others. In 1996 he established Great Spirit (14 pitches, IV 5.12-) and later put up Coup Stick (7 pitches, III 5.10+).

Piana kept these climbs quiet for years, sharing them only with a few friends. In 2011, he revealed his best-kept secret to me while climbing near our homes in the Black Hills, and a friend and I ventured out the next summer to check it out. We managed what was likely the second ascent of Great Spirit and were blown away by the rock quality and potential. Since that trip, I've returned every summer to further develop the Spider Web Wall. In the last three summers, we've put in six new lines that average one bolt per pitch. With Paul's blessing, I'm sharing this information now.

Labor Day weekend of 2013 was our first attempt at ground-up new routing in this cirque. After scrutinizing many photos all winter, antsy to test these potential lines, I recruited Lee Terveen to help me. Our first choice of line failed when the free climbing came to an abrupt stop on the second pitch. We did not want an A or C attached to the grading of this route. So we eyed up another line on the shorter, western side of the wall. An obvious line of cracks and dikes split the center of this smoother section. Two days of route-finding, hand-drilling bolts, and trundling blocks led us to the summit and the FA of Strange Designs (7 pitches, III 5.11-).

With my fire stoked even more for the alpine season of 2014, I planned to spend two weeks in the Bighorns that year, the first with Tony Schwartz and the second with Dan Brazil.

In August, Tony and I set out with intentions of establishing a new route on the nose of the formation, just to the right of Great Spirit. With a portaledge, gear, food and water, and several printed pictures of the proposed line as our topo, we hoped to make a single-push, ground-up ascent in two days. The first day went very smoothly—each pitch was falling into place perfectly, with no storms, and we made it halfway up the wall.

The next morning we tackled the most questionable section. To our relief, it gave way to some thin 5.12- laybacking and required only two protection bolts. At the top of this seventh pitch, however, it began raining. We quickly deployed the portaledge rainfly and hung from the inside like we were in a giant cocoon, our legs going numb. (Naturally, this was the only hanging belay on the whole route.) Tony wanted to bail after the first clap of thunder, but with no rap stations, and being only 200' from

the top of the 1,000' wall, I said "Hell no!" The rain still hadn't subsided after a couple of hours and it was getting too late to try for the summit. So, we decided to spend another night on the wall and struggled for a good hour to set up the ledge from inside the rain fly.

We woke the next day to a helicopter buzzing into the cirque. A rescue? No, they were just stocking the upper lake with cutthroats, a unique sight from our vantage. Blue sky and only two pitches remaining had us psyched to finish. But with an unplanned night on the wall, we were cramping from lack of water. Thankfully the climbing didn't get any harder than 5.10. We hiked back to camp, and the next morning went back up and freed the full route, Vision Quest (9 pitches, IV 5.12-), in five hours.

Dan's week in the Bighorns would be part of his "50x50" project (50 significant climbs before he turns 50). One of his goals was to achieve an alpine first ascent, and I had just the line picked out: a linear set of creases up the center, lower-angled part of the wall. With support Dan received from the AAC Live Your Dream Grant, we set out to tick this off his list. Despite Dan's inexperience with drilling bolts and ground-up venturing, we established five pitches the first day, even after hitting a dead end and having to reroute. The fifth pitch was a phenomenal, varied corner system that checked in around mid-5.11. We rapped and fixed a couple of the pitches for easier access to our high point the next day. Only two pitches remained, but the last one had to break through the overhanging capstones that make up the summit rim. After a chimney/offwidth on pitch six, we reached the critical moment. A weakness revealed itself through some pumpy 5.11+ terrain, followed by the worst top-out of all the routes, with loose scree and moss. We dubbed our route Wild, Wild West (7 pitches, IV 5.11+).

With time remaining, I wanted to make a start on another route for the following summer. So, just to the left, we established two long pitches of what I've been calling the Greenway Project. I returned in July 2015 with Harrison Teuber to push the route higher, but immediately above the 2014 high point, some 5.11 face climbing required a couple bolts. Before we'd finished the third pitch, the sky let loose, so we rapped and then hiked out in the rain.

I called my friend Luke Ross to join me over Labor Day weekend. Back on the Greenway Project, I navigated through unknown ground, running it out more than I would have liked, because time and Luke's patience and body heat were limited (bolts still need to be added). On the last pitch, a wet transition between cracks forced our retreat just 30' from joining Wild, Wild West and 60' from the summit. The Greenway Project (6 1/2 pitches, IV 5.11+?) remains unfinished.

Luke and I returned in June 2016, but mid-June, as it turned out, was a little early for Lost Twin Lakes—they were still partially frozen! However, comfortable temps could be found on the sunny southeast face of the Spider Web Wall. A ways to the left of Great Spirit, we climbed three pitches before rappelling down and finishing our trip with some fly-fishing.

A couple of weeks later, on July 4, Harrison came back and we swapped leads to the summit on the new line. Pitch seven, which looked like 5.9, turned out to be the crux, at 5.11+. Surprise! Our nine-pitch route became Astro-Pika (IV 5.11+ PG-13). Every multi-pitch crag needs an Astro route, right?

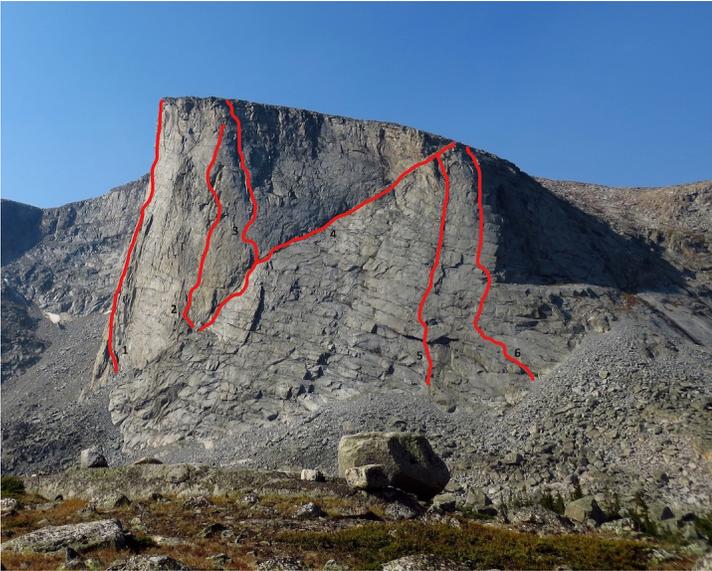
For my third trip of the summer, Tony and I spent a week at Lost Twin Lakes in August. Of the many potential lines remaining, we chose a set of very steep dihedrals on the far left side of the wall, not visible from the lake. The first three pitches varied from 5.7 to 5.9, but above that it was on. The crux fourth pitch was amazing, but we were unable to piece together the last 15 feet all free. After a couple of pitches of superb corner climbing, we encountered a large suspect flake, ready to calve from a roof with the slightest touch—there was no passing it safely. After much deliberation, we opted to descend and rap in from the top the next day to remove the flake. We made the 1,000'-plus trudge and rappelled to the flake, and to my amazement it wouldn't budge! We finished placing anchors and protection bolts, and rehearsed pitches on top-rope. After three days of work and a rest day, we came back to climb our brilliant new route Mixed Signals (8 pitches, IV 5.12+ C1).

Editor's note: The Thundercloud Wall, at the head of the cirque, has seen some activity by others, but to

the author's knowledge it remains unclimbed.

– **Chris Hirsch**

Images



The northeast face of the Spider Web Wall, above Lost Twin Lakes in Wyoming's Bighorn Mountains. From left to right: Vision Quest (IV 5.12-, Hirsch-Schwartz, 2014); Greenway Project (IV 5.11+ unfinished, Brazil-Hirsch-Ross-Teuber, 2015); Wild, Wild West (IV 5.11+, Brazil-Hirsch, 2014); Wandering Spirit (III 5.6, Badaracco-Tolle, 1996?); Coup Stick (III 5.10+, DeLannoy-Piana, early '90s); Strange Designs (III 5.11-, Hirsch-Terveen, 2013).



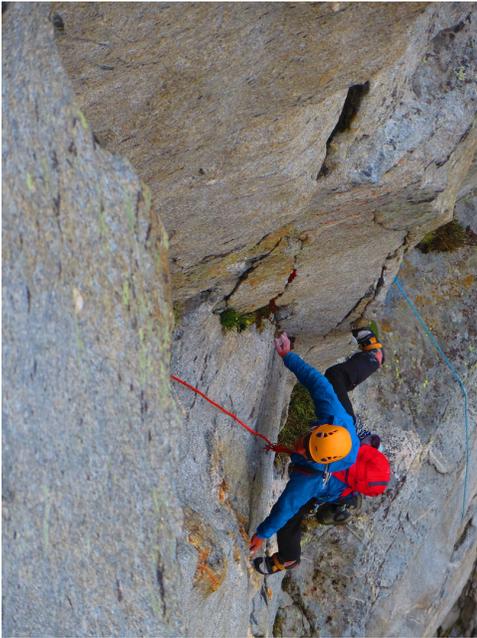
The southeast face of the Spider Web Wall, above Lost Twin Lakes in Wyoming's Bighorn Mountains. (1) Mixed Signals (IV 5.12+ C1, Hirsch-Schwartz, 2016). (2) Astro-Pika (IV 5.11+ PG13, Hirsch-Ross-Schwartz-Teuber, 2016). (3) Great Spirit (IV 5.12-, Badaracco-Piana, 1996). (4) Vision Quest (IV 5.12-, Hirsch-Schwartz, 2014).



Tony Schwartz on pitch five of Vision Quest (9 pitches, IV 5.12-), completed in August 2014. The two established the route ground-up, using a portaledge, and returned to make a free ascent in just five hours.



Tony Schwartz contemplates the clean corner on pitch two of Vision Quest (9 pitches, IV 5.12-), which he and Chris Hirsch completed in August 2014.



Dan Brazil stemmed out on the fifth pitch of Wild, Wild West (7 pitches, IV 5.11+). The first ascent, aided by an AAC Live Your Dreams grant, was part of Brazil's project to climb 50 significant routes before turning 50.



Luke Ross coming up a mossy flare on the sixth pitch of the Greenway Project (6½ pitches, IV 5.11+, incomplete). A wet transition between cracks forced the climbers' retreat a mere 30 feet from joining the route Wild, Wild West—and only 60 feet from the summit.



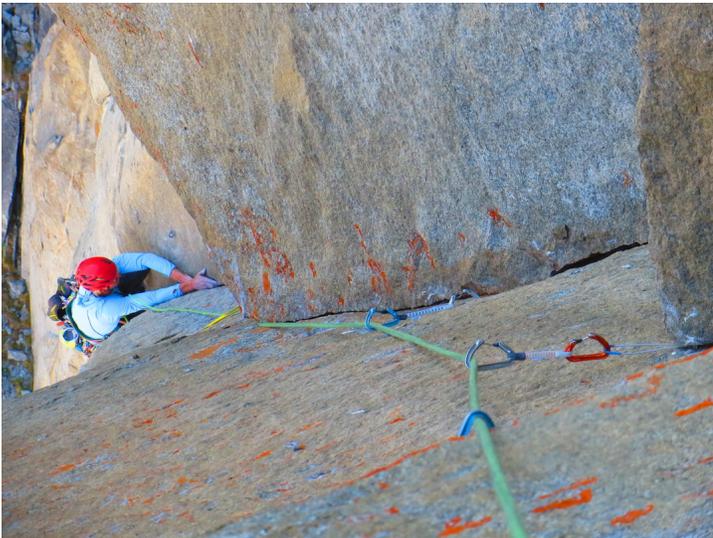
Harrison Teuber starts up the first pitch of Astro-Pika (IV 5.11+ PG-13), which required two attempts and some run-out climbing to complete, though the two later discovered an easier path that avoided the runout.



Harrison Teuber traversing to the belay on pitch eight of Astro-Pika (IV 5.11+ PG-13), high above Lost Twin Lakes in Wyoming's Bighorn Mountains.



Tony Schwartz casts off on the crux fourth pitch of Mixed Signals (8 pitches, IV 5.12+ C1), the most difficult of Chris Hirsch's new routes on the Spider Web Wall, above Lost Twin Lakes. The route took Hirsch and Schwartz three days of preparation—including an attempt to trundle a massive roof flake that wouldn't budge—before they made a complete ascent.



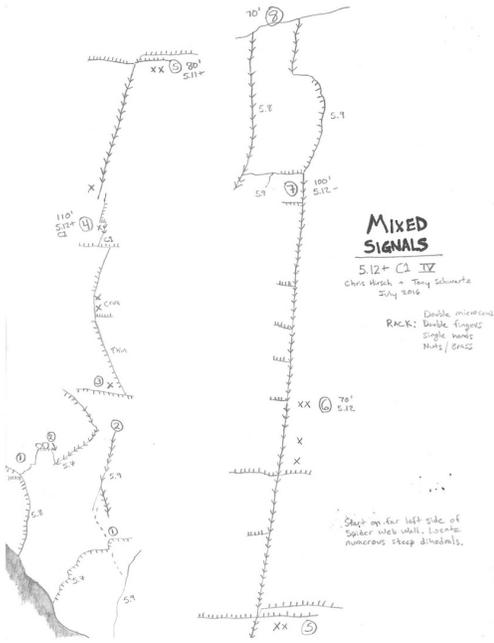
Tony Schwartz coming up the immaculate corners of pitch six on Mixed Signals (8 pitches, IV 5.12+ C1), on the Spider Web Wall in Wyoming's Bighorn Mountains.



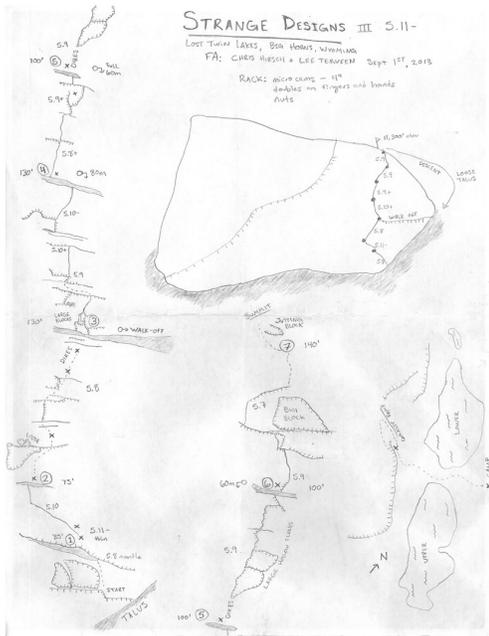
Tony Schwartz stemming up to the belay on pitch six of Mixed Signals (8 pitches, IV 5.12+ C1), on the Spider Web Wall in Wyoming's Bighorn Mountains.



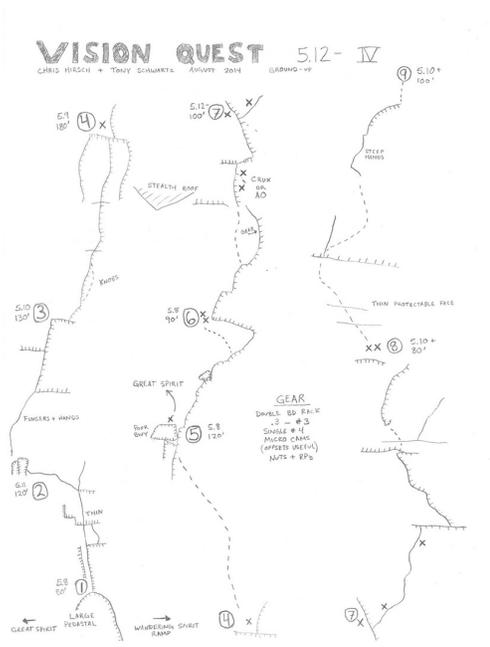
Topo for Astro-Pika (IV 5.11+ PG-13), on the southeast face of the Spider Web Wall in the Lost Twin Lakes cirque of Wyoming's Bighorn Mountains. The route was completed by Chris Hirsch and Harrison Teuber in July 2016.



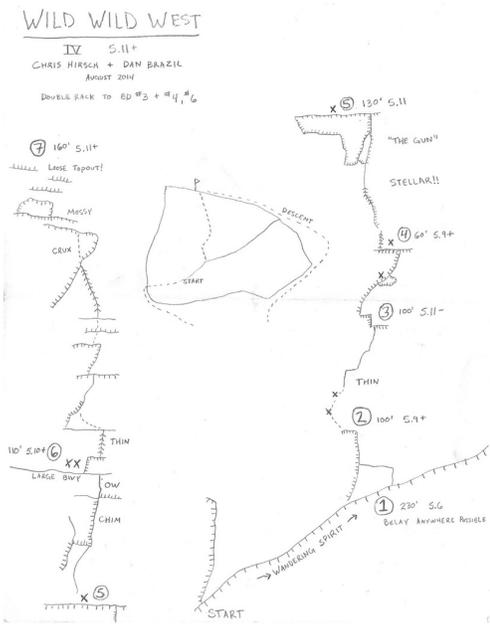
Topo for Mixed Signals (8 pitches, IV 5.12+ C1), on the southeast face of the Spider Web Wall in the Lost Twin Lakes cirque of Wyoming's Bighorn Mountains. The route was completed by Chris Hirsch and Tony Schwartz in August 2016.



Topo for Strange Designs (7 pitches, III 5.11-), on the northeast face of the Spider Web Wall in the Lost Twin Lakes cirque of Wyoming's Bighorn Mountains. The route was completed by Chris Hirsch and Lee Terveen in the summer of 2013.



Topo for Vision Quest (9 pitches, IV 5.12-), on the southeast face of the Spider Web Wall in the Lost Twin Lakes cirque of Wyoming's Bighorn Mountains. The route was completed by Chris Hirsch and Tony Schwartz in August 2014.



Topo for Wild, Wild West (7 pitches, IV 5.11+), on the northeast face of the Spider Web Wall in the Lost Twin Lakes cirque of Wyoming's Bighorn Mountains. The route was completed by Chris Hirsch and Dan Brazil in August 2014.

Article Details

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