



## AAC Publications

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### **The Golden Age**

Twenty-one New Routes in the High Sierra in a Single Season

**TIME STANDS STILL** as the warm rays of the setting sun illuminate the surrounding ridgelines. As the lush meadows a thousand feet below gradually succumb to darkness, a south-facing fence of jagged High Sierra giants jets out of the earth, glowing gold.

In the midst of the moment, the split fingernails, burning muscles, and cut-up limbs are forgotten. Even the smoke from a nearby fire has cleared, allowing us to put off the mysterious descent we still have to complete before night falls. Captured by the dramatic view from the top of Eagle Scout Creek Dome, my friend Brian Prince and I make no effort to move. Are we dreaming?

Across the deep valley is the south face of Hamilton Dome and surrounding spires. We've seen no record of any climbing activity on these 500- to 1,500-foot walls, which appear to be made of good rock. It seems as if we've discovered a Shangri-la of alpine rock climbing. The potential for adventurous first ascents within the few square miles that surround us is enormous.

This is my third trip into the Valhalla region of the High Sierra and was supposed to be my last long approach of the busy season—my friends and I have already completed about ten new routes. Blessed with the ability to ruin a perfect moment, I stand up and throw my hands in the air: "One day, Simba, all of this will be yours," I joke to Brian, sweeping my arm dramatically across the valley before us. "But for now, let's figure out how to get down."

Less than a week later, we return and make six first ascents—all grade IV—in as many days. With so many new routes to climb, it feels like it should be 1915, not the summer of 2015.

**MANY PEOPLE** would be surprised to hear there are large unclimbed walls with high-quality rock in a well-known, fair-weather mountain range like the Sierra Nevada. Three years ago I was one of them, but the last few seasons have proven otherwise.

My improbable journey into the wild began in late October 1986, near the Chernobyl nuclear reactor, only a few months after the catastrophic accident. To the world, it is known as one of the worst nuclear disasters in history. For me, it's the reason why most of my preteen youth was spent going from one medical facility to another in constant search of treatments for various complications. After my mother moved our family of two to the United States, it wasn't easy to force change onto an overweight, asthmatic teen. But I joined the high school football team, where I learned about discipline, hard work, and dedication. A few years later, I was more than 100 pounds lighter. The qualities I learned on the football field later helped me earn a degree and a job as a registered nurse. With the job came new friends and a newfound hobby of hiking peaks near Lake Tahoe.

In December 2009, I learned to use crampons and, soon after, a winter climb of Mt. Whitney's Mountaineer's Route changed the course of my life. I joined an online climbing forum.

"Where are the unclimbed peaks in California?" I asked.

The only productive response I recall was, “Start rock climbing.”

People on the Internet wouldn't reveal the hidden gems of the Sierra, but after bagging close to 50 peaks during my first season in the mountains, I felt confident enough to attempt Denali in 2011 and then test my growing skills in the Cordillera Blanca and Patagonia. However, I would return home with buyer's remorse, wondering why I hadn't spent my vacation exploring the local mountains instead. I now realized I could climb as many peaks in a 27-hour car-to-car push in California as I had in a seven-week trip to Peru. The climbing in the contiguous United States won't earn you a Piolet d'Or, but personally I enjoy the stable weather, lack of bureaucracy, and temperatures in which one can actually free climb. I love the challenge of finding a place no one has revealed in written or online reports, and finding such places only half a day's drive away makes the Sierra that much more appealing.

In 2012, I began shifting my focus toward first ascents, after a few guys invited me on an attempt of an unclimbed 1,000-foot tower in the Castle Rocks area of Sequoia National Park. With some beginner's luck, we sent and had the honor to name it the Fortress. Fifth-class bushwhacking, lichen-infested cracks, and getting stung by over a dozen yellow jackets aren't moments I'd want to relive, but they still evoke a big smile each time I reminisce.

My friends and I later climbed some new routes in the Tokopah Valley, a scenic area with 800-foot domes of solid granite. There we learned to be creative and draw our own history up a nearly blank canvas. Gaining confidence and the necessary skills was a gradual process, and finding a challenge was never a problem.

In 2014, I started a direct line splitting the 2,000-foot Bubbs Creek Wall in Kings Canyon National Park. At the time the wall had only one free route, the crux of which was a full grade harder than I could redpoint. But nothing makes one want to improve quicker than an ambitious goal, and by the end of the summer the new route was complete. With 18 pitches, 13 of which were 5.11 or harder, the Emperor (V 5.12a) became one of the most sustained free climbs in the range when I finally redpointed it in 2015.

About a month later, I found myself climbing a new, almost entirely free route on the mythical Angel Wings. Moving over varied terrain, I was gazing over unknown ridgelines into the future. Being surrounded by such beauty reminded me that the joy of the mountains was not in chasing difficulty, but in finding freedom. That season, in 2015, alongside various friends, I completed 17 new routes and first free ascents.

Unfortunately, it took the passing of a dear friend to lead me even deeper into exploring the Sierra. Edward Lau was a dedicated climber who passed away unexpectedly. He and I had climbed together often and spent a lot of time dreaming of the limitless possibilities for the future. One of his goals for the year was to recover from an injured knee so we could go somewhere remote and attempt a new route, which would have been a first for Ed. His premature departure was a sad reminder that, even for the fittest and healthiest, the next day is never guaranteed. For someone born in the aftermath of a nuclear disaster, this rang especially true for me. I wanted to be in the mountains more than I wanted to trade my time on Earth for money, so before the summer of 2016 I decided to quit the job I'd held for seven years and spend most of my time in the place I adore the most—the Sierra Nevada.

The east face of the Mt. Whitney group, with the 2016 new routes in red. See the caption below for more details. Photo by John Scurlock

**IN LATE JUNE, my extended vacation began with ascents of two potentially new routes on the Gambler's Special (12,927') and a formation we named the Dark Tower (see Climbs and Expeditions).** The day after one of these climbs, dropping 7,000 feet during the hike out, I was exhausted. But along with my morning coffee, I picked up a permit for the Mt. Whitney zone. I already had plans to climb with Austin Siadak, a traveling photographer with as much enthusiasm for the mountains as me, so I decided to roll the dice and texted him a proposition. “Hey, want to attempt a

new route on Mt. Whitney?" The next day we drove up to the trailhead. Armed with several overlays of what had been done on Whitney's 1,600-foot east face, we headed to the base to have a look at the possibilities. I was especially drawn to the blank space between Left Wing Extremist (V 5.11-, Rowell-Wilson) and If At First (V 5.10+), which was climbed by Seth Dilles and Michael Strassman after six epic attempts and a bivouac during the first ascent.

Patagonian winds followed us up the granite wall, where we felt as small and vulnerable as a lone ship on the ocean. Bailing from high up with our 100-foot, 5mm tagline would have been difficult even in perfect weather, so luckily we didn't have to. At the end of the day, we had completed a new, mostly independent, all-free route, onsight, with no fixed gear left behind. We called our line the Inyo Face (2,200' of climbing, V 5.11), as the east face of Whitney marks the western edge of the Inyo County. In addition, a photo of the winter winds blowing snow from the top of Whitney had hung above my bed since the winter of 2010, when I climbed the peak for the first time—it had been in my face for years.

There was another intriguing crack system parallel to the one we'd just climbed, so I returned three weeks later with Adam Ferro. Since meeting Adam in Patagonia a few years ago, we've joined forces every year for a trip into the Sierra, with a focus on enjoying the mountains, not enduring them. Together we are on a lucky roll, and every new route we've found has been as enjoyable as many established classics.

Cameron Burns and Steve Porcella had attempted the crack system I had in mind in 1991, but altitude sickness forced them to retreat two pitches above the approach pedestal. Completing a climb started by two prolific explorers of the range felt like an honor. The new route matched the style of the Inyo Face, albeit slightly more difficult and sustained. With Cameron and Steve's help, we named it the Uncertainty Principle (V 5.11/5.10 R), as the outcome felt uncertain from the bottom of the climb until nearly 14,000 feet, where Adam onsighted the crux and we joined terrain I had climbed with Austin a few weeks prior.

Two quality new lines on one of California's most iconic peaks would be enough for anyone, and maybe we were pushing our luck. But the elegant prow splitting the wall between Hairline (V 5.10 A3) and the Direct East Face (IV 5.10c) looked like a great challenge to tackle with my good friend Brian Prince, who had returned from working in Alaska just in time for another Sierra binge. Though the proposed line looked clean, we found loose, run-out climbing on flaky rock, with just a few decent pitches. Neither of us would recommend the route. We named the line Happy To Be Here (V 5.11-), a very sarcastic reference, yet the sunshine and the views from the summit were as glorious as ever. Whitney was the first peak I ever climbed in the High Sierra, and revisiting it by three new routes in one season was an incredible experience.

**EARLIER THAT SPRING, Daniel Jeffcoach and I had made a moderate, long first ascent on Happy Dome in Kings Canyon, an enjoyable climb with exhilarating views of the High Sierra.** Especially intriguing to me were two big, northwest-facing walls that dominated the skyline to the east. Mt. Gardiner (12,907') features a pair of needlelike buttresses with a snow couloir separating them down the middle. The big face on Mt. Clarence King (12,905'), to the north, looked like a perfect pyramid, elegant yet intimidating—almost as large as the northwest face of Half Dome, but very deep in the backcountry. There was no history of previous ascents up either face.

In early July, after my first trip into the Whitney cirque, I spent a week exploring these intriguing formations with my friend Chaz Langelier, an infectious disease specialist at UCSF. The day after marching in for 15 miles, we climbed a direct line up the middle of Clarence King's 1,500-foot face. The biggest surprise was finding ancient bail anchors until approximately halfway up. From what I could tell, the unknown climbers likely rappelled with a single rope and were in a hurry—one of the anchors was an eight-foot sling with the knot jammed in a constriction. Who were they? Who knows?

Even with the Internet and other resources, the physical evidence of some past ascents and attempts can only fuel our imagination. It would be a boring world if all the questions had answers.

The line of anchors ended before an overhang where the rock noticeably deteriorated in quality. Instead of trying to climb through the kitty litter rock above, I executed a delicate traverse, pulling off loose blocks and finding hidden openings for protection as I went. Another wild overhang took us to a series of enjoyable, high-quality crack systems that brought us directly to the summit in five more pitches. We named the climb the Dreamer (V 5.11). Finding such a large, likely unclimbed wall in 2016 just half a day's drive from home keeps me dreaming of even bigger, steeper peaks tucked into scenic backcountry locations.

The next day Chaz and I hiked over to the Gardiner Basin, then around to the valley below Gardiner Pass, setting camp at 11,500 feet near another stunning lake. In the glow of the setting sun, the needle-like central buttress of Mt. Gardiner assumed the profile of a standing bear—at least according to Chaz. In the morning, we started climbing at the toe and followed a direct line of cracks straight to the exposed summit.

"If Fred Beckey climbed this wall long ago, it would be a North American classic," Chaz said as we relaxed on the summit.

"Without a doubt."

After taking in the gorgeous scenery, descending a knife-edge ridge, and bathing in an ice-cold pool near camp, I too suddenly noticed the tower's resemblance to a bear. We dubbed the central buttress the Golden Bear Tower and our route the Polemonium (IV 5.10a), after all the beautiful purple flowers growing from cracks along our line.

The following day, we climbed the other, slightly shorter of the peak's two prominent buttresses, which packed sustained difficulties and exciting climbing. The highlights included a memorable traverse above a flake I dubbed the Impaler, a dislodged rock that exploded within a meter of my head, and the mental and physical crux coming 30 feet above a ledge, protected by gear I wouldn't trust to hold body weight on an aid climb. Knowing that we were midway up a wall, with no cell phone reception, 15 miles from the road, was great motivation to send. A wild sequence up in-cut crimps guarded the high point of the buttress, completing Vermillion Pt. 1 (IV 5.11- R/X).

**THOUGH EVERY TRIP into the wilderness is unique, the outing I anticipated most last summer was a return to the Tehipite Valley, a place that feels lost in time.** Imagine Yosemite Valley but requiring more than 20 miles of hiking from the nearest trailhead—no roads, crowds, or opportunity for quick rescue. A wild place with poison oak, rattlesnakes the size of anacondas, the last grizzly bear in the state of California, uncontacted Native American tribes, and dinosaurs. Well, some of those things anyway. Tehipite only sees a team of climbers every couple of years. Daniel Jeffcoach and I planned to return for a rematch with the largest unclimbed wall we have ever encountered.

Daniel and I met on the climb of the Fortress, which was both of our first first ascent. Daniel was once close to becoming a pro snowboarder, before deciding annual concussions and broken bones were not for him, and he switched his focus to starting a family. A father of two with a full-time teaching job, one of his biggest passions is finding new rock climbs, mainly in Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, a place that is like his second home. And he's not keeping his finds a secret—he created [seki climbing.com](http://seki climbing.com) to supply free climbing beta to anyone with a taste for backcountry adventure.

The wall we hoped to climb was another two miles upstream from the fairly well-known Tehipite Dome and on the opposite side of the Middle Fork of the Kings River. We gave the wall our best effort in 2015, but after two days and 1,600' of climbing, we were only two-thirds of the way up and out of

time. During the 22-mile hike back to the trailhead, carrying crushing 50-pound packs, we wondered what we could have done differently. Allowing more time and bringing Brian Prince into the mix turned out to be the solution. With a bigger team, we'd be able to stay positive and divide the mentally taxing leads, as well as the labor of cooking freshly caught fish down in camp.

With an earlier start and knowledge of the lower terrain, we managed to climb three pitches above our previous high point by the end of our first day on the wall. We found a sloping ledge big enough for the three of us to spend the night sitting up. Above us was a blank overhang, which didn't look possible without a bolt ladder. But killing the impossible was not in our plans. The next morning, to our surprise, some sketchy aid with a slim rack of thin gear got us past the overhang. From there, we free climbed another 700 feet all the way to the elusive summit. The descent was a great adventure of its own, making our way down a beautiful canyon with dreamy pools for cooling off. We named the formation the Watsi Wall, after the Mono people's word for "Lost," and the 21-pitch route the Infinity Pool (VI 5.11+ R A2+).

As I had after new climbs all summer, I scattered some of Ed Lau's ashes on top, remembering all the positive qualities my friend possessed, many of which I am still trying to adopt. It was Ed's seventh summit of the summer and his ninth first ascent. The wind spread his unforgettable spirit over the infinite landscape of the western Sierra.

**AS THE SUMMER came to a close, I had made about 30 trips into the mountains, completed 21 new routes, and hiked countless miles.** Yet the year's highlight was not a new route but a first solo of the full Evolution Crest traverse—a grade VI climb that traverses over 20 thirteeners. By distance it doubles the size of the full Palisade Traverse, and the first team, in 2008, needed eight days to complete it. For me it took three monster days and allowed me to explore my limits—and the vast Sierra—like nothing I'd ever done.

It was the opportunity to push my mental and physical boundaries in an incredible setting that got me hooked on climbing, but it's the friendships I've formed and the endless opportunities to see new places that keep me going back to the mountains. Exploring the High Sierra has brought me an intimate connection to things that have been hiding deep within me—all the imperfections and weaknesses but also positive attributes and strength. For the first time in my life, I feel like I'm exercising my creativity close to its potential.

For reasons like these, it is important not to take wilderness for granted, as the future is not guaranteed for anyone or anything, especially in an era of rapid climate change and a time when small changes to current laws could completely alter access and funding for our public lands. The coming generations should have their chance to see the wild corners of the Sierra in the same ways that earlier explorers did. In the same ways that I have.

Finding new places to explore is much harder than it used to be, but for those who claim the golden age has long passed, I will say this: The fact that in one summer a person could climb more virgin Sierra rock than the height of Mt. Everest above sea level demonstrates that—as long as we protect our wild lands—the future of exploration is bright.

**About the Author:** Vitaliy Musiyenko is a 30-year-old registered nurse. After his extended vacation, he found a new job in an emergency medicine department close to the mountains of the Sierra Nevada.

## Images



Austin Siadak savors the alpenglow after a new route on Mt. Whitney.



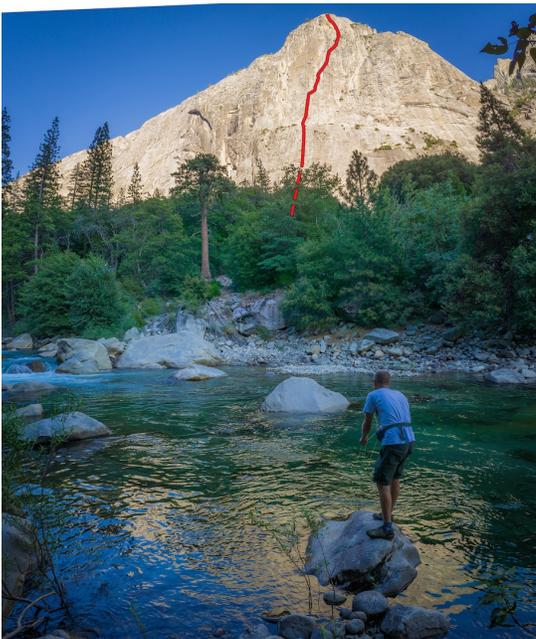
“Brian Prince enjoying the finer things in life in our favorite range.”



A beautiful meadow on the approach to the northwest face of Mt. Clarence King.



Chaz Langelier on the summit ridge of Mt. Gardiner, completing the new route Polemonium.



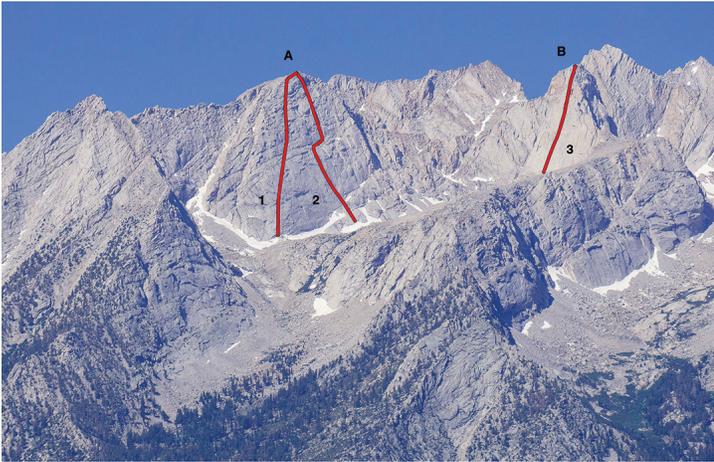
Daniel Jeffcoach fishing in the Middle Fork of the King River, below the Watsi Wall. The approximate line of Infinity Pool (21 pitches, VI 5.11+ R A2+) is shown.



The northwest side of Mt. Clarence King (12,905'). The Dreamer (V 5.11) follows the prominent gray streak to the foot of the headwall, then climbs directly to the summit. Chaz Langelier and Vitaliy Musiyenko found bail anchors up to about the halfway point on the 1,500-foot face, but their line from July 2016 is likely the first complete route.



The northwest side of Mt. Gardner (12,907', left), showing the new routes from July 2016. (1) Polemonium (1,500', IV 5.10-) on the "Golden Bear Tower." (2) Vermillion Pt. 1 (1,300', IV 5.11- R/X).



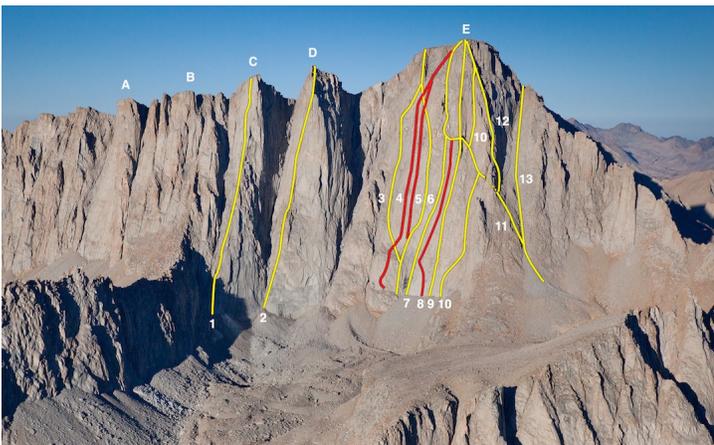
The northeast side of (A) Gambler's Special and (B) Dark Tower, southeast of the Cleaver. (1) Ghostriders in the Sky. (2) Wait and Bleed. (3) Roland's Journey.



The author scatters ashes of Edward Lau from the summit of Mt. Hitchcock after another new route. Lau's death at a young age inspired Musiyenko to make the most of his summer in the Sierra.



Topo for the Infinity Pool, Middle Fork of the King River.



The east face of the Mt. Whitney group, with the 2016 routes in red. (A) Aiguille Extra. (B) Third Needle. (C) Crooks Peak (Day Needle). (1) Beckey Route. (D) Keeler Needle. (2) Harding Route. (E) Mt. Whitney. (3) If At First. (4) Inyo Face. (5) The Uncertainty Principle. (6) Left Wing Extremist. (7) Direct East Face. (8) Happy to Be Here. (9) Hairline. (10) Great Book. (11) East Face. (12) Sunshine-Pewee (East Buttress). (13) Mountaineer's Route. All lines approximate.

## Article Details

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