



## AAC Publications

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### **Discovery: A 30-Year Dream Comes True in the Wind Rivers**

Wyoming, Wind River Range, The Monolith

**"Sam, you need a copy of Bonney and Bonney's Guide to the Wyoming Mountains and Wilderness Areas," said Paul Piana as we sunned ourselves on Vedauwoo's Clamshell boulder in 1986. "It's a right of passage to becoming a Wyoming climber... you aren't worth your salt without that book."**

I remembered those words the following spring, when my friend Bill Walker offered me his old copy. "I'm kinda sick of this sport, and you're just getting going," he'd said. "I want this book to go to a good home." I thanked Bill profusely, then drove straight home with the scruffy book and began poring over its yellowed pages.

First published in 1960, Orrin and Lorraine Bonney created 702 pages of mountain info and wilderness know-how that any self-respecting Wyoming climber would want. The book was chock full of traditional bushcraft, like how to field dress a pronghorn so you preserved the most meat, or how to determine north with nothing more than a couple of twigs. It explained what mountain ranges hid the best amethyst crystals and dinosaur bones, and how to make a proper SOS distress call with a fading flashlight. It also had the established route information of every known peak, cliff, and crag across the Cowboy State. Sure, you had the well-documented Devil's Tower ascents, and the very debatable 1872 ascent of the Grand Teton, but also ascents of mysterious and seldom-seen knobs and spires like the Boar's Tusk in the Red Desert and the Sitting Camel south of Laramie.

After only a couple minutes of page-turning, there it was on page 498. The simple caption read, "Monolith, N. face. Photo Arthur C." The black and white photo showed a perfect granite buttress worthy of Yosemite, but deep in the Wind River Wilderness of my home state. The text claimed only two routes had been completed on the mountain: the first ascent by Doug Tompkins and friends in '63 (see AAJ 1964) and a Fred Beckey route in '66 (see AAJ 1967). Beckey claimed in his vague report that he had, "never seen better rock, anywhere." Strangely, neither party had chosen to scale the obvious and direct line up the central face. "It must be damn hard," I thought. "I'll have to get better for that." Grabbing a pen from my book bag, I drew in what seemed to be the obvious line, folded the corner of the page, and turned to another chapter.

Fast forward 28 years, past numerous chapters of my climbing life. Somehow trips to far-flung mountains in Asia, Europe, Africa, and South America had overshadowed my nearby home range. So in the summer of 2015 my friends Shep Vail, Mike Lilygren and I decided we would put together an expedition to the face I'd fallen for nearly three decades before, and we'd do it in style.

We invited a few friends along, noting it would be easier to handle the coming bills with more wallets. Our trip would be ten days, and the dinner menu contained things like boiled shrimp cocktail, beef tenderloin, fresh apple-strawberry pie, and of course libations to wash it all down. We threw in enough wall gear to get us up Great Trango, all of which added up to more than just a backpack of supplies. This led to a phone call The Diamond 4 Ranch, which operates out of Dickinson Park, a mere 14 miles from the Monolith. The chief wrangler at the Diamond 4 is Jessie Allen, who not only was the 2014 Miss America contestant from Wyoming, but also sleeps under the stars for a third of the year, calms macho big-game hunters in grizzly country, and cares for a remuda of 75 horses and mules through the Wyoming winter.

Jessie hauled our basecamp, climbing gear, and a half dozen other friends to a level site near Papoose Lake, about three miles east of Pingora. This gave our friends targets to tackle in the nearby Cirque of the Towers and on Dogtooth Peak, while the Monolith was only about two miles and 1,700' of elevation gain away. Shep, Mike and I attacked the line I'd drawn on the photograph so many years before and found that Fred Beckey had aptly described the granite. At the top of pitch two we found bail gear from a previous attempt by an unknown party. We pushed on, and about 500 feet above the talus, found what looked to be at least one party's retreat point below a bulging and blank stretch of rock. We could see two possible ways to tackle this headwall and decided on the left variation. It was the wrong decision, and to make a long story a few words shorter, we failed in 2015. Our tails tucked, we vowed to be back the following summer.

In 2016 we came in with determination to figure out the headwall and get into the splitter crack system above. We also brought more fixed rope, less bourbon, and a designated cook, Elyse Guarino, to speed up the mornings and extend our climbing time. Coming in from the right and hanging on hooks, we managed to get in a few pieces of fixed gear and then free the blank bulge at 5.11d. The ledge above it, a beer cooler-sized pedestal in the sky on flawless granite, showed no signs of human disturbance. Above was 200 feet of perfect hand crack that had obviously not been climbed, then a hard finger crack that led to the base of the overhanging upper wall.

After seven days of routefinding and cleaning, we made it 14 pitches into the sky, but there ran into a problem. The climbing below was world class, but the easiest cracks through the upper headwall had been anything but stellar. We wanted this to be a classic, but needed days to figure out a line through the overhanging upper wall that befit the rest of the route. With a severe thunderstorm and cold front approaching, we bailed again.

On a warm afternoon in 2017, four friends disappeared with big empty packs down the western slope of Big Sandy Mountain toward the Big Sandy trailhead, and Mike, Shep and I were left alone on the summit of the Monolith. (Editor's Note: Big Sandy Mountain (12,416') lies on the Continental Divide between the Monolith Cirque and Big Sandy Lake. The plateau atop the Monolith is just north of Big Sandy's summit.) Instead of the comforts of basecamp, we now had a few packets of freeze-dried food, the necessary rack, two static lines, and only one bottle of bourbon. This time our camp was situated on the Monolith's summit plateau, above 12,000 feet. We would find the finish to this line according to quality, not ease, and it would be established moss- and choss-free to inspire future climbers.

In a matter of 50 hours we'd extensively cleaned and worked four pitches through the overhangs. We then rapped down and gave it our best. Sadly, 25 feet of pitch 12, a tips and stemming nightmare, did not go free on that try. It will likely go at 5.13a. We climbed this 25-foot section French-free at C1 on #00-#2 microcams with a .12a start and .11b finish. Another pitch of 5.11 face climbing on a mix of fixed gear and cams led to a large ledge, followed by a 5.12 pitch of fingers and hands that qualifies as the steepest crack any of us have ever scaled. One more 5.10 pitch and we were back at our summit bivy.

We made Discovery (1,600', IV 5.12a C1) the focus of three years of climbing. Dozens of hours of cleaning moss and lichen from cracks and placing camouflaged, stainless steel rappel anchors helped to make this a spectacular route. We will be back in 2018 to free that 25 feet of aid and climb the complete route in a push. Amazingly, it follows the exact line I'd drawn in the Bonney and Bonney guide, 30 years before.

– Sam Lightner Jr.

**Final Pitches Redpointed:** In July 2018, during a spell of unstable weather, Sam Lightner Jr., Mike Lilygren, and Shep Vail returned to the Monolith along with Alex Bridgewater, and the climbers freed the remaining aid on Discovery. Rappelling in from the top of the formation, as the team did in 2017, Bridgewater redpointed pitch 12 at 5.13a, freeing the 25 feet of tips and stemming that had gone at C1

before. The team also created a more direct ascent and rappel line through the middle of the route, freeing a new 5.12a pitch in the process. As of late August 2018, Discovery (1,600', 15 pitches, 5.13a) had not yet seen a continuous free ascent.

## Images



Sam Lightner Jr. and Shep Vail glassing the Monolith from their basecamp near Papoose Lake.



Jessie Allen leading a string of pack horses into the camp below the Monolith. The east facing buttresses of Dog Tooth Peak are on right, including the Dogtooth Pinnacle, the Wisdom Tooth and the A-Frame Buttress.



Sam Lightner Jr. battles a steep corner on pitch 14 of Discovery (1,600', IV 5.12a C1). Lightner, Mike Lilygren and Shep Vail made three trips into the Monolith Cirque to establish the route, freeing everything but 25 feet of desperate stemming they believe will go at 5.13a.



Sam Lightner Jr. on pitch two of Discovery (1,600', IV 5.12a C1).



Sam Lightner Jr. belaying Mike Lilygren to the top of pitch two on Discovery (1,600', IV 5.12a C1). Discovery is the third established route on the impressive Monolith, and the first new route on the formation since the 1960s.



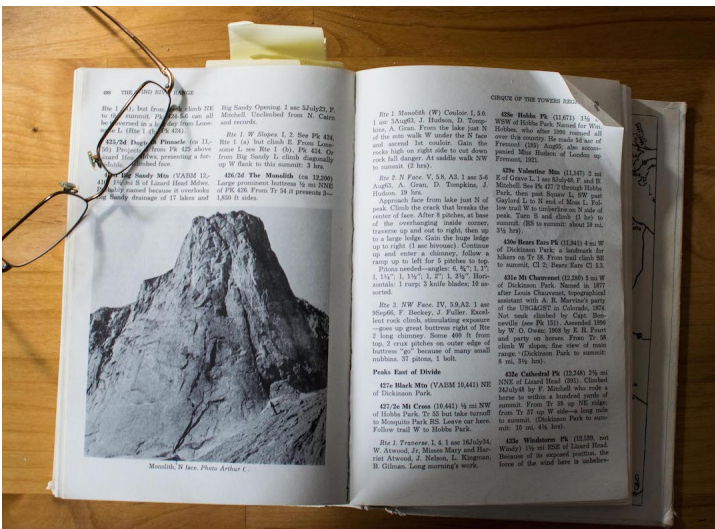
Mike Lilygren and Sam Lightner Jr. at their bivy site on top of the Monolith. Lightner, Lilygren and Shep Vail spent three trips completing Discovery (1,600', IV 5.12a C1), going ground up for two seasons and coming in from the top in 2017 to find a clean, aesthetic finish through the upper headwall.



Sam Lightner Jr. finishing pitch five (5.11d) of Discovery (1,600', IV 5.12a C1).



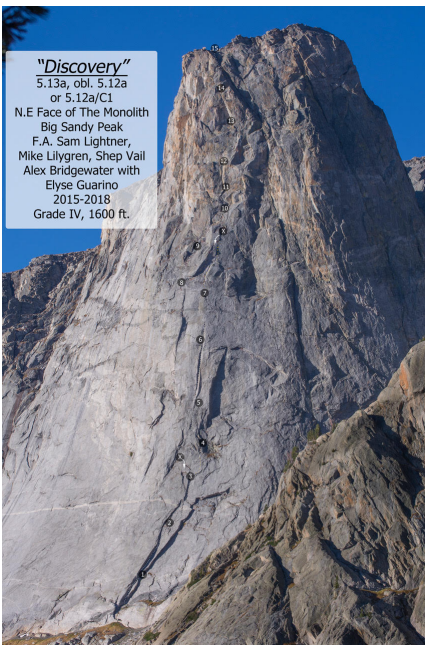
Sam Lightner Jr. and Mike Lilygren approaching the base of the Monolith. Doug Tompkins, Arthur Gran and John Hudson made the first ascent of the Monolith in 1963 via a prominent chimney system on the peak's north face.



Sam Lightner Jr.'s original copy of Bonney and Bonney's Guide to the Wyoming Mountains and Wilderness Areas, which planted the seed for a new route on the Monolith nearly 30 years ago. The line Lightner drew in the late '80s is a near perfect match of what ended up becoming Discovery (1,600', I V 5.12a C1).



Alex Bridgewater belayed by Mike Lilygren on Pitch 12 (5.13a) of Discovery on the Monolith, freed in July 2018.



Topo for Discovery (1,600', IV 5.13a or 5.12a C1) on the Monolith in Wyoming's Wind River Range. The Monolith is the second largest wall in the range, behind Mt. Hooker.



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