



AAC Publications

Wolfs Head, Brass Monkey and Green Dragon

Wyoming, Wind River Range, Cirque of the Towers

The south face of Wolfs Head, in the Cirque of the Towers, appears to have been scratched by the claws of a large creature, leaving gouges that look perfect for climbing. In 2012, I spotted a clean slab lacerated with discontinuous finger cracks. Above, a labyrinth of roofs criss-crossed the square arête leading to the summit.

The next year I convinced Paul Kimbrough to have a look. Amazed by the quality of the cracks, we chuckled our way up the moderate slab until we were dead-ended by incipient seams. Above us, several overhanging pitches hovered like a tsunami suspended in time. Our skimpy selection of hardware was reason enough to make a hasty retreat. We vowed to return the following season.

In 2014, armed to the teeth with an arsenal of big-wall paraphernalia, we retraced our steps from the previous year. Higher on the line, substantial difficulties and unrelenting steepness forced us to pull on gear. While leading what would become the crux pitch, the rope was gobbled up by a flake and became hopelessly stuck. I lumped together some climbing tape and plugged the offending flake. Luckily, this worked and we continued up, elated to be granted passage to the top, but perturbed by the aid the upper half of the route had required. Again we swore to return, intent on a free ascent.

Another winter passed, and in 2015 we once again queued up at the base and prepared for battle. Progress was smooth as we freed all of the pitches up to the crux. To our astonishment, many of the pins we had fixed for anchors had fallen out over the winter, but the plug of tape had held. Our new strategy for negotiating the rope-drag dilemma was to fold our rope in half and use a hodgepodge double-rope system that would utilize the left rope for the first half of the pitch and the right side for the top. From a bad rest at the tape, the left rope would be pulled through a Mini Traxion, alleviating any rope drag but consequently rendering it useless in the event of a fall. Our knuckleheaded plan proved effective until the horrid burning pump welled up inside my forearms. Run-out above a single green Camalot clipped to the right-hand rope, I stabbed for a flaring jam, and then I was flying. I fell for what seemed like eternity until finally coming to a halt level with Paul at the belay. We swapped rope ends. I clenched the rope, eagerly anticipating Paul sending the pitch. His fate was the same. After dropping countless F-bombs we retreated down to our camp and the Cirque Lake Bar to wash down another failure and numb our bludgeoned extremities.

I became obsessed with the route and returned alone the following season, this time scrambling to the top of the line with heaps of static line. A case of steel brushes was obliterated as I cleaned lichen and scabby rock from cracks. I replaced the rotting tape nugget with a bolt, which would serve as a directional around the rope-eating constriction. (I realized it made more sense to create a quality route that people would have fun repeating than to fuel our egos by pushing it ground-up.) Our work schedules only allowed for one real go at the route that year. Wolfs Head came out on top, and again we went home empty-handed.

In 2017 more brushes were destroyed, more bolts were added, and the route began to seem more reasonable. I started to feel at home on the south face of Wolfs Head. An energy boost of knowing it would go replaced the looming uncertainty of failing again. Nevertheless, the X-factor persisted in the crux pitch. Over the course of the four years we had invested, both of us had redpointed every pitch save the crux. Now it was time to see if we could link all the moves, all the pitches, in one continuous flow to the top. At each belay our energy multiplied, but in no way was it in the bag until we sunk our

mitts into the last splitter hand crack of the climb.

Words are incapable of capturing the pleasure of completing a goal that so much energy has been poured into. An enigma exists in our desire to finish climbs like these, but by witnessing the transformation we both went through over the years to make this vision a reality, I now realize that instant gratification is nice but the slow burn stays with you much longer.

In the years working Brass Monkey (III 5.12c), I couldn't help but yearn for an easier way up the south face of Wolfs Head, and from the crux pitch belay I kept looking down and left across a series of positive flakes leading to what appeared like pleasant, vertical hand cracks. Brass Monkey was kicking our ass, and I liked the idea of establishing a route that the average Cirque climber could enjoy.

Upon finishing Brass Monkey, we decided to investigate the crack systems we had seen to the west. There appeared to be a blank section about three pitches up, so on the last day of our trip we climbed the initial three pitches of Brass Monkey and Paul lowered down the "Question Mark" to clean, top-rope, and see if it was indeed climbable. After scrubbing dirt and vegetation from the cracks, he gave it an honest go, and with the exception of a few broken holds and various cuss words he top-roped the pitch. The missing link was there and with it an exciting and slightly run-out finish on amazing quartz knoblets!

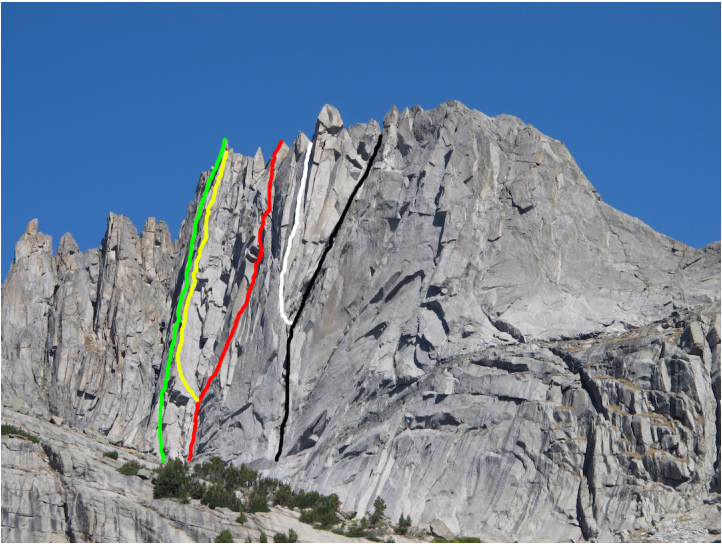
We returned a few weeks later with hopes of finishing the climb in a ground-up push, and after hoofing the familiar slog from Big Sandy we climbed the first two pitches, ground up and on sight, and fixed to the ground with a plan to return the next day and climb to the top.

The following day I placed two anchor bolts to facilitate the belay for the long and involved Question Mark pitch. Paul took the lead and launched into a balancy traverse above our freshly hand-drilled anchor to reach a wide crack and more discontinuous cracks above. He climbed for what felt like an eternity, conserving gear, backcleaning, downclimbing and climbing back up. He was trying in earnest to free the pitch first go. Nearing the top of the pitch, he placed a small cam from a tenuous stance and high-stepped, rocking up onto the unprotected slab. 170 feet of rope trailed below and the small cam protruded well below his sweating feet as he pinched little nipples of quartz in the silent breeze of the Winds. He chalked again and again before committing to the last tiny foot edge and balancing to easier ground, protection, and the very welcome bolted belay of Brass Monkey's third pitch.

I followed the pitch clean and took the lead, blasting out across incredible flakes to gain a steep hand AND fist crack leading to a wild chimney and a nice belay ledge. Above, easier climbing took us to an eye-catching eyebrow roof and surprisingly moderate climbing around the roof to reach the classic East Ridge route. Paul thought we were done, but I had other ideas. Above us stood a short, pointed feature like the scaly tail of a dragon—I had to climb it. Paul obliged and held the rope while I did battle with the Dragon's Tail. Fidgeting with imperfect protection and dirty holds, I scaled the tail and belayed Paul to the top for an all-free first ascent of Green Dragon (III 5.11 PG-13).

– Brandon Gust

Images



The south face of Wolfs Head, in the Cirque of the Towers in Wyoming's Wind River Range. Green: Green Dragon (III 5.11 PG-13, Gust-Kimbrough, 2017). Yellow: Brass Monkey (III 5.12c, Gust-Kimbrough, 2017). Red: Red Cloud (III 5.12b, Collins-Gust, 2012). White: White Buffalo (III 5.12d, Collins-McBride, 2005). Black: South Face (5.8, Beckey-Fuller, 1966). The classic East Ridge (5.6, Buckingham-Plummer, 1959) follows the skyline.



Paul Kimbrough on the second pitch of Brass Monkey (III 5.12c) during a 2015 free attempt. Brandon Gust first spotted the line in 2012, and he and Kimbrough spent four years working and cleaning the route before completing it in the summer of 2017.



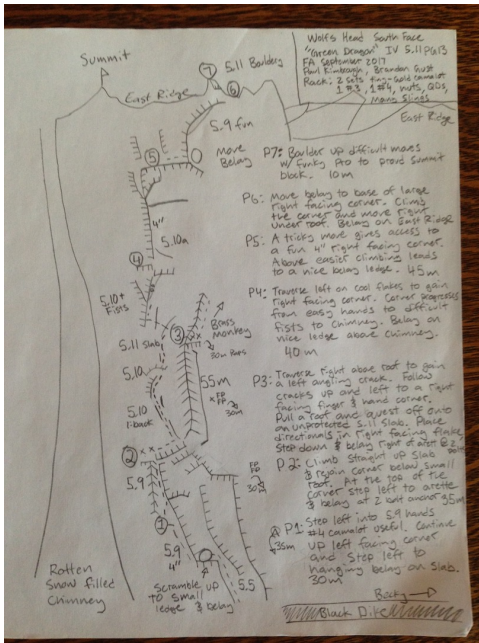
Paul Kimbrough following pitch three on Brass Monkey (III 5.12c) on the south face of Wolfs Head in the Cirque of the Towers.



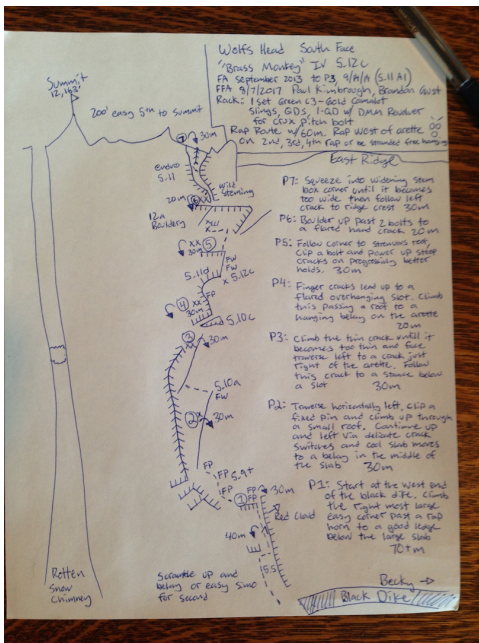
Paul Kimbrough on the crux pitch of Brass Monkey (III 5.12c) in 2015.



Brandon Gust climbing the 5.11c enduro finishing pitch of Brass Monkey (III 5.12c) during the first free ascent in summer 2017.



Topo for Green Dragon (III 5.11 PG-13) on the south face of Wolfs Head, in the Cirque of the Towers of Wyoming's Wind River Range.



Topo for Brass Monkey (III 5.12c) on the south face of Wolfs Head, in the Cirque of the Towers of Wyoming's Wind River Range.



New Routes on Wolfs Head

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