



## AAC Publications

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### **Mt. Whitney Area, Upper Boy Scout Lake, The Magic Mushroom**

California, Eastern Sierra

**In July, I backpacked to Upper Boy Scout Lake with my friend Steve Yamamoto and my wife Giselle Field.** It was to be Steve's first true rock climbing experience, and we had the intention of climbing standard routes on Mt. Whitney and Mt. Russell. However, the weather forecast was so rotten that we decided to forego those plans and instead stick to exploring the crags around our campsite. Earlier in the summer, my interest had been piqued by a spectacular granite formation with an 800' east face rising above the inlet of Upper Boy Scout Lake.

After asking around, I received second-hand information that the formation was called Sorcerer Needle and had been climbed by Fred Beckey more than 45 years earlier (see AAJ 1975). A gear-shop manager in Lone Pine had even copied the sparse words of the AAJ report into the store copy of the Secor guide to the Sierra, including an arrow pointing to the spire in a photo—the summit directly above Upper Boy Scout Lake. I was inspired to repeat this so-called Beckey line, but the AAJ report seemed vague and I didn't see any conclusive evidence connecting the Beckey report to that particular spire. The breakthrough came shortly thereafter when I was able to positively identify the route to which Beckey refers in his article as the climb called Pinhead (5.10d, or 5.7 A2 in Beckey's day) on the Sorcerer formation in the well-known Needles group, farther south in the Sierra Nevada. The route descriptions match perfectly.

On July 23, the final day of our trip, Steve, Giselle, and I climbed a striking line on the highest (east) aspect of the spire above Upper Boy Scout Lake. We started in the main gully/alcove at the base of the wall with a pitch of spicy face climbing (5.8) to gain a long, right-trending ramp—the most obvious weakness on the face. Five pitches of mostly 4th-class scrambling with isolated sections up to 5.8 brought us to the base of the crux pitch, at the bottom of the final steep arête. The 110' pitch delivered a slightly overhung, 1.5-inch splitter crack (5.10+), culminating in a short but wild traverse into a chimney on the left.

Near the end of my lead, a violent electrical storm moved in and brought ferocious hail and terrifyingly proximal lightning strikes. Reversing the pitch was out of the question. Giselle and Steve courageously coped by employing a creative style of team-aiding to ascend the pitch despite the ongoing storm. Given that Steve had never really been rock climbing, Giselle's heroic efforts here cannot be overstated, nor can Steve's tenacity. By and by, they reached my miniature belay stance. The three of us huddled together, hanging helplessly from our anchor as lightning struck repeatedly within one mile of us and hail continued to batter our bodies and souls. The option to retreat back down the line was soon ruled out as we watched the low-angle 600' ramp transform into a cascade of mud and loose stones. The best strategy, we agreed, was to continue to the top of the tower, which appeared to be less than 200' above, and from which we were banking on the ability to swiftly walk off.

By some miracle, we made it. Our final two pitches of discontinuous cracks (5.9) traced the uppermost part of the exposed arête. Hailstones surged into my jacket sleeves as I fought to maintain a free ascent. Upward progress proved extremely challenging with frozen wet hands and wet granite. Just below the summit, I stepped into the shelter of a large, room-like cave beneath the enormous, mushroom-shaped summit cap and decided to belay my partners up. Here we were able to tend to our moderate hypothermia and frozen extremities, relying on sopping-wet hand-warmers and body heat to regain hope and strength. When we felt ready to leave the relative comfort of the dry

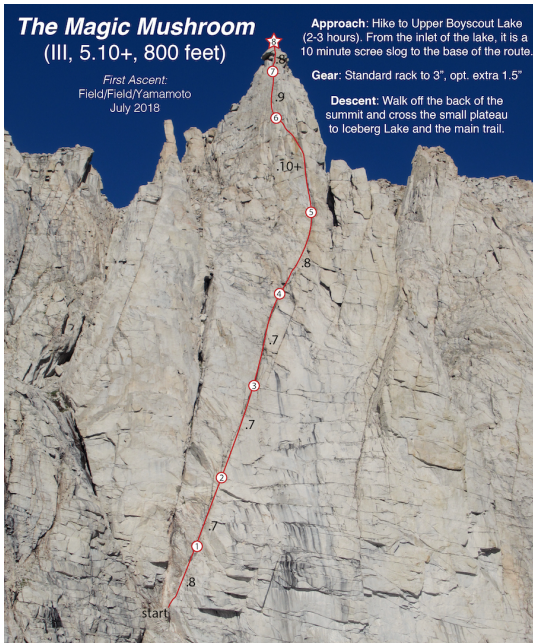
room, a short jug haul (5.8) got us onto the true summit. I cannot describe our mutual relief upon reaching the top and seeing how straightforward our descent would be.

We walked due west off a drawbridge-like feature on top of the tower and across the scree plateau to join the main trail system near Iceberg Lake. The rainstorm continued beyond sunset, and the North Fork of Lone Pine Creek Trail was completely washed out at the lowermost river crossings, forcing us to ford across thigh-deep water. It was long past dark when we got back to the parking lot, and still the rain had not let up.

Unfortunately, our phones (which we used to take photos) were totally destroyed by the storm; the few photos that Steve had sent to his wife during the climb were the only ones that survived. We're pretty sure Beckey didn't climb this formation, but someone else might have. As far as I can determine, though, there's no record of it ever having been climbed or named. We called it the Magic Mushroom (800', III 5.10+).

– Derek Field

## Images



Topo for the Magic Mushroom (800', III 5.10d), a tower-like formation near Upper Boy Scout Lake, below Mt. Whitney, that was believed to have been climbed by Fred Beckey in 1973 but in fact had no previously documented ascents.



Derek Field leads up the first 5.8 pitch of the Magic Mushroom (800', III 5.10d), a tower formation near Upper Boy Scout Lake that had no previously documented ascents.



Derek Field leads the crux sixth pitch, a steep and sustained tight-hands splitter, on the Magic Mushroom (800', III 5.10d). This east-facing, tower-like formation sits in the Mt. Whitney basin, above the inlet to Upper Boy Scout Lake.



The Magic Mushroom (the prominent capped summit in the skyline) as seen from Upper Boy Scout Lake.

## Article Details

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