



AAC Publications

Mt. Le Conte, Space Force

California, Eastern Sierra

Since Roger Putnam and I are in the process of writing a guidebook to the High Sierra, we had planned a scouting mission to figure out all the routes on Mt. Chamberlin. While approaching Crabtree Lakes from the Cottonwood Lakes trailhead in early July, we were stopped short of our destination by a raging thunderstorm. I knew of an intriguing south-facing wall nearby, on the western aspect of Mt. Le Conte (ca 13,960'), and proposed we climb it the following day before continuing the journey. It was only about 30 minutes from our camp at Sky Blue Lake!

We woke before dawn, hoping to beat the weather, and got to the base soon after sunrise. The skies were clear and the crack system we chose on the approach looked like a good challenge. I have seen Roger hike 5.12 in the past, so when I saw him hesitating on the first pitch, I knew it was no gimme. The thin layback to a large overhang felt at least 11a. My pitch was much more moderate, but wide. A single number 4 was our biggest cam, so I expected to be semi-soloing the long wide section, yet I was able to protect the pitch well with medium-size gear in occasional constrictions. Because we didn't plan to do new routes on this trip, we hadn't brought a bolt kit. Roger then swung into another difficult pitch, with a solid 5.11 finger crack through a bulge.

At this point we noticed clouds building up in the distance. By the time I was midway up the following pitch—a perfect crack in a corner we dubbed the Stormy Daniels Crack—the clouds had rolled over the summit and covered the sky, and it started to hail. Roger's pregnant wife was expecting his safe return. He ran up a mid-5.10 pitch in no time, and since he still had nearly the whole rack after the quick lead, he started right up the last pitch of the climb. At this point we were in a full-on hailstorm, with occasional flashes of lightning in the distance.

Because we were so high up, it seemed safer to climb over the summit ridge than attempt to rap 900' with a single 60m rope and lose half of our rack in the process. As Roger ran to the summit ridge on 4th-class terrain, I was feeding out slack fast. He encountered a step of 5.9, which was not slowing him down. All of a sudden a huge flash of lightning hit, with a simultaneous explosion of thunder, and a split second later, Roger's handhold broke and he went airborne, with a giant ledge 25 feet below him. Luckily, I was paying enough attention to jump back and take in enough slack to keep him from decking.

As I neared the top following the last pitch, the clouds left as quickly as they came in. We had blue sky overhead about 15 minutes after the ominous lightning strike. We scrambled to the summit of the wall (which felt like its own formation) before starting the descent—Space Force (1,000', 5.11b).

Midway down to camp the clouds returned. The storm resumed and its strength kept on increasing. In about 20 minutes it got so bad that we had to take cover under a boulder, even though we were only a 15-minute walk from camp. As the intensity decreased, we ran down the hill, with the valley floor covered in white pebbles. We were back in the tent by 1 p.m., and the storm kept on for the next three hours. We did not make it to Crabtree Lakes until the following morning.

– Vitaliy Musiyenko

Images



A south-facing wall on the western aspect of Mt. Le Conte (ca 13,960') in California's High Sierra. The line of Space Force (1,000', 5.11b), climbed by Vitaliy Musiyenko and Roger Putnam in July 2018, is shown.

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