



AAC Publications

Birch Mountain, North Ridge, Mutually Assured Choss

California, Eastern Sierra

I'm trying to keep it together. The moves aren't that hard, but the precariousness of the stacked blocks is terrifying. Spread your weight, Jack. Pull down, not out. No mistakes...

Just then a sickening thud.

It's over, **I think**. A block has wiggled out and now the whole pitch will come crashing down.

Another thud—but strangely not the sound of rock striking rock. I pry open my eyelids and peer down to see a backpack cartwheeling into space, and with it my partner McKenzie Long's full overnight kit. With each bounce a different piece of gear shoots from the unsecured lid.

I equalize a few suspect nuts and gingerly lower back to the belay, where McKenzie and our third partner, Chance Traub, are waiting. Despite the dropped pack, we still have a stove and a sleeping bag to share. However, the loss of McKenzie's approach shoes seals the decision to bail. The thought of a snowy, 4-mile walk-off in rock shoes just seems too reckless.

Rather than retreat down the convoluted ridge, we elect to rappel the unknown face below. Each rope length we recover a different item from her pack. By the time the three of us reach the base of the wall we've found both approach shoes, so McKenzie will get to keep her toenails.

Although the sun has set and we're thoroughly disappointed to bail, our attempt has confirmed the worthiness of the objective. We vow to return to the north ridge of Birch Mountain (13,608').

Despite its resemblance to Temple Crag and position on the edge of the Palisades, Birch Mountain has not received nearly as much attention from climbers as its geologic cousins to the northwest. In the mid-2000s there were a trio of attempts on the 2,400-foot, Dark Star-like buttress that divides Birch's complex north face [see AAJ 2004, AAJ 2005, and AAJ 2005]. Doug Robinson and Terry Kearney topped out the face in 2004, but only after escaping off the ridge and taking an adjacent couloir to the summit.

Our goal was the complete ridge. On July 7, a month after the backpack calamity, McKenzie, Chance, and I returned. This time we tried a system of cracks to the right of the loose left-facing corner we had previously used. The rock quality was substantially better, with pleasant in-cut holds and moderate climbing. A thousand feet up we passed our previous highpoint, and soon after reached the top of the second prominent tower where we rappelled into the notch that connects to the upper ridge. It was barely 3 p.m., but we settled in for the night to be fully rested for the steeper climbing above.

The next day, we agreed we had made the right choice—seven intricate pitches passed before we found another suitable bivy site. The climbing over this intimidating section was loose but spectacular, with gobs of exposure to either side. Halfway along we hauled our packs up a short vertical crux (5.10-), but otherwise it was long leads over moderate terrain. Two more pitches took us to the terminus of the ridge and a tattered piece of webbing. This was likely the spot where in 2004 a bonking Seth Dilles and Mike Strassman retreated just 500' shy of the summit. We placed a new sling and rappelled into a loose gully that appeared to connect with the summit plateau. Opting for a prouder

finish, we traversed across the gully and onto an adjacent buttress. Two pitches (5.6) deposited us on the summit slopes, where we unroped and strolled to the top.

Inside the summit register, we found mention of another attempt from a pair of friends the week before. After at least five attempts, including that one, the complete north ridge finally goes. It awaits anyone interested in a Temple Crag-style ridge away from the crowds. Just be aware of Doug Robinson's Atomic Broom Theory: This is the idea that shockwaves from atomic testing swept loose rock off any Sierra wall with an unobstructed view of the Nevada Test Site. Since atmospheric testing there ceased in 1962, frost wedging has been slowly returning the range to a natural state of looseness. So, don't blame us for the precarious blocks on Mutually Assured Choss (V 5.10-). Blame the anti-nuke hippies!

– Jack Cramer

Images



McKenzie Long leading the penultimate pitch before the summit slopes during the first ascent of Mutually Assured Choss (V 5.10-), which climbs the complete north ridge of Birch Mountain (13,608') in the Palisades of the Eastern Sierra.



The complex north face of Birch Mountain (13,608') and the line of Mutually Assured Choss (V 5.10-) from below.



The north ridge of Birch Mountain (13,608') viewed from the east, with the line of Mutually Assured Choss (V 5.10-) and the 2019 team's bivy site indicated.



McKenzie Long and Chance Traub below the final two-pitch buttress that led to the summit of Birch Mountain (13,608') during the first ascent of Mutually Assured Choss (V 5.10-), which climbs the complete north ridge of the peak. There had been at least five previous attempts on the ridge.



Chance Traub on a loose section of the upper ridge during the first ascent of Mutually Assured Choss (V 5.10-), which climbs the complete north ridge of Birch Mountain (13,608') in the Palisades of the Eastern Sierra.

Article Details

Author	Jack Cramer
Publication	AAJ
Volume	62
Issue	94
Page	0
Copyright Date	2020
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions