



## AAC Publications

---

### **Gilson Butte, Gazing Rights and Alice in Sandland**

Utah, San Rafael Swell

**Gilson Butte is a hefty formation just west of Highway 24, midway between Green River and Hanksville, with a quarter-mile plateau summit surrounded by 400' cliffs of shale (or worse).** The formation promised lousy free climbing but stimulating aiding and solitude.

In late April, Chip Wilson and I went to have a look. The highest bands appeared to be the most rotten, so for a first climb we picked an outlying summit with a sturdy-looking blob top, which we named the Moai. Over three days, we completed Gazing Rights (240', 3 pitches, 5.7 A3). The first pitch started with soft, persnickety aid to a bolt at 35'. Beyond, the rock improved, the cracks grew larger, and I grew happier. A rubbly shoulder at 120' made for a fine belay from which we could have headed to the big plateau or to our outlying summit.

Ninety feet up toward the latter, Chip stopped, belayed (on natural gear), and, after the happy sounds of "Off Belay!" "Rope's Fixed!" and the like, began yelling odder phrases. Wind obscured the words, but I sensed a slightly horrified tone. On joining him I discovered why: The summit block—30' tall, 20' broad—was perched on a crumbling plinth 10' long by 2' wide. The normal rules of gravity evidently did not matter here. Enactments of what would happen if the Moai toppled, with us riding it to the ground, bounced around my head. I hesitated long enough that Chip, not so prone to overthinking things, jumped on the short lead to the top. The 120' rappel from the summit to the big shoulder below was terrifying, but this Moai stayed put.

In October, I returned with Joe Shultz and Keiko Tanaka, and we completed a route to the top of Gilson Butte proper: Alice in Sandland (280', 5.4 A3+). Again, the climb took three days.

We chose a line up a clean, steep buttress (near the Moai), where it appeared we might be able to scramble through the crumbly white bands up high. The base of the route sat atop a 100' sand dune, so we were able to conveniently bypass the soft bands that guarded the start of our previous climb.

Keiko led a 90' pitch of standard desert choss to a ledge. Above, Joe wrestled overhanging seams to a muddy slot and a brief, deep hand crack. With perfect cams for protection, he eased past a couple car-doors hanging from, and blocking the start of, a splitter crack that led to the shoulder far above. The final pitch negotiated the white bands. I post-holed through dust with occasional aid moves to a point where we could unrope and scramble several hundred yards to the summit.

The plateau on top was speckled with red chert and wind-polished stones and no footprints, neither human nor animal. We felt privileged to visit such a place, as isolated from the rest of the world as a mid-ocean island. We had assumed we would be the first climbers to summit Gilson Butte, but on top we found a makeshift register left by a soloist, "Max Supertramp," in late October 2017. Ours was likely the second ascent of the butte by climbers, though we also found a decrepit metal sculpture on top held together by baling wire. We surmised that probably had been left long ago by USGS surveyors, who would have arrived by helicopter.

– Steve "Crusher" Bartlett

## Images



Chip Wilson surmounting the wild blob summit of the Moai on the last pitch of Gazing Rights (240', 3 pitches, 5.7 A3) on Gilson Butte.



Crusher Bartlett leading the first pitch of Gazing Rights (240', 3 pitches, 5.7 A3).



The Moai, part of the greater Gilson Butte, showing the route Gazing Rights.



Keiko Tanaka leading the first pitch of Alice In Sandland (280', 5.4 A3+) on Gilson Butte.



Joe Shultz leading the second pitch of Alice In Sandland (280', 5.4 A3+) on Gilson Butte.



Keiko Tanaka (in red) and Joe Shultz nearing the top of the third and final pitch during the first ascent of Alice In Sandland (280', 5.4 A3+) on Gilson Butte. This was likely only the second ascent of the formation by climbers—the first was by an unknown soloist just months earlier.



Joe Shultz and Keiko Tanaka on the otherworldly summit of Gilson Butte after making the first ascent of Alice In Sandland (280', 5.4 A3+). The climbers found a bizarre metal sculpture on the plateau, likely left by USGS surveyors who would have arrived by helicopter.

Article Details

Author	Steve "Crusher" Bartlett
Publication	AAJ
Volume	62
Issue	94
Page	
Copyright Date	2020
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions