



AAC Publications

Haystack Mountain, Dihedral in a Haystack; Little El Capitan, California Dreamin'

Wyoming, Wind River Range

On August 3, Jamey Sellew, Ben Spannuth, and I set off from the Big Sandy trailhead to take a look at the unclimbed southwest face of a formation named Little El Capitan (12,825'). This was my fourth trip into the range, and the previous year I had scrambled up Steeple Peak and looked east to the divide to see what looked like the top half of possibly one of the biggest, steepest walls in the area.

Little El Capitan is a half mile northwest of Wind River Peak (13,197'), separated by the very dramatic notch referred to in the old version of Joe Kelsey's guide as "the V." Kelsey claims that it looks like Yosemite's El Cap, and from the south it kind of does. We approached from the west via Black Joe Lake, which is approximately 10 miles from Big Sandy. Another two miles took us to Little El Capitan.

Jamey is a talented 20-year-old competition climber from Georgia, and Ben is one of America's top sport climbers, with whom we had climbed at home in the New River Gorge. Neither of them had much trad climbing experience, but they both had toughness, work ethic, and skill. I was excited to share the experience of climbing a backcountry wall with them, and possibly learn some new tricks myself. I explained that there was some degree of uncertainty about the quality of the wall. It was a gamble, and I felt terrible pressure as we did the long hike in to camp.

We started the trip camped below the east face of Haystack, where we noticed a possible new line on an obvious buttress to the right of the remote and rarely climbed East Pillar (IV 5.9), which we also ended up climbing later in the trip. The next day we went ground-up, onsight for seven pitches, much of it up a clean dihedral. Dihedral in a Haystack (1,200', 7 pitches, IV 5.10) turned out to be a pretty good moderate. After that we decided that we were ready to have a go at the main objective and moved our camp up to Lake 11,400', immediately below Little El Capitan.

Only one previous ascent had been reported on the wall: the Southeast Face (Alzner-McGown, 1991), for which the report in AAJ 1992 was a bit ambiguous but mentioned offwidth cracks and a triple-tiered roof below the summit. The most obvious new line to us was a right-angling dihedral that ran up the center of the face, but the scale of the mountain was very hard to determine while looking up from the base—we weren't sure if the wall was 500' or 1,500' tall. One thing was certain, though: Being that close to the biggest peak in the area and on the Continental Divide meant lots of wind and weather.

Our first two days on the wall, the rain came early and turned us back to our tents. We climbed and fixed 500', including difficult aid and free climbing up to 5.12; the harder sections required cleaning and the going was slow. On the third day the wind blew so hard that as I climbed the rack of big cams was flying above my head, only to come slamming down on me as the gusts abated. On the fourth day, Jamey sent the super-clean 5.12 dihedral pitch, and I aided through the final 300' of 12+ corner to top out the wall.

We enjoyed a few moments on the summit, taking in the view and not noticing as the afternoon clouds snuck up on us. With no time to get all the way down before the rain arrived, we decided to

weather what we figured would be a short storm, but soon we watched in horror as lightning struck all the lower formations on its way toward us. We boogied down from the summit, found the most sheltered spot we could, and waited. We believe that lightning struck the summit about 150' away, and we all experienced a substantial jolt. Luckily the storm passed quickly. We were relieved, but I couldn't help but wonder—if it had hit closer, how long it would've taken someone to find us? When the adrenaline wore off, we all became suddenly aware of how lucky we were, and we made our way back to camp, humbled by the mountains and Mother Nature yet again.

Our close call was too close for Ben, and he understandably made plans to pack out and return to the sport climbing around Lander. We spent two more days working on freeing the route, but the full send escaped us for now. Several sections up high will be in the 5.12+ range and require more cleaning. As it stands now, California Dreamin' (1,000', 5.12b A2+) is a beautiful, all-natural line with no fixed protection necessary, a rare gift in a world where sport climbing is finding its way into the mountains. We cleaned every single piece of gear, leaving nothing but chalk and a few blood stains.

– Matt Fanning

Images



The southwest face of Little El Capitan, northwest of Wind River Peak in the Wind River Range. California Dreamin' (1,000', 5.12b A2+) follows the line of right-facing corners trending up and right. The bottom third of the wall is out of frame.



Jamey Sellew mid-crux on the first 5.12 pitch of California Dreamin' (1,000', 5.12b A2+) on Little El Capitan in the Wind River Range.



Standing on the shore of Lake 11,400', with the southwest face of Little El Capitan above.



Ben Spannuth leading pitch two (5.12b) of California Dreamin' (1,000', 5.12b A2+) on the southwest face of Little El Capitan (12,825').



Ben Spannuth top-roping the aesthetic upper corner of California Dreamin' (1,000', 5.12b A2+) on the southwest face of Little El Capitan (12,825').



The east face of Haystack Mountain, showing the line of Dihedral in a Haystack (1,200', 7 pitches, IV 5.10). The East Pillar climbs the obvious sunny buttress to the left.



A portion of the east face of Haystack Mountain, showing the approximate line of the East Pillar (IV 5.9) in blue, and Dihedral in a Haystack (1,200', 7 pitches, IV 5.10).

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