



AAC Publications

Neptuak Mountain: The Hammer and the Dance

Canada, Alberta, Canadian Rockies, Valley of the Ten Peaks

August 3, 2020: The world is in shambles. The global pandemic is riding rampant, borders are closed, countries are in lockdown. I am an American expat temporarily residing in Canada. Amid a seemingly endless stream of doom-scrolling, I read an article by Tomas Pueyo—"The Hammer and the Dance"—which paints a grim picture of the world, describing the fluctuations to which society would ebb and flow according to epidemiology.

Lying on a lakeshore outside of Regina, Saskatchewan, I check the weather for the Canadian Rockies on my phone. The little yellow sun icon has finally replaced the sad cloud that has resided there for months. I dial up my friend Tony McLane, over in Squamish.

"Tony, can you meet me in Golden tomorrow evening? Weather looks good."

I know this will be our best shot at getting the right conditions to try Neptuak's northeast face. I first scouted the face during the summer of 2016 with Marc-André Leclerc. He had noticed the striking rock quality (by chossy Canadian Rockies standards, anyway) while climbing in the Valley of the Ten Peaks earlier that spring with Luka Lindič (see AAJ 2017). [Neptuak Mountain (3,241m) is part of the steep wall at the west end of the Valley of the Ten Peaks, rising just to the northwest of Deltaform Mountain, the highest peak in the group.] The face on Neptuak was large and imposing. We assumed it would have 5.11 run-out rock climbing on quartzite bands. Four years after we scoped it, the northeast face still has never been climbed. Tony is game, and a day later we are preparing for what will turn out to be the most engaging alpine rock route either of us has ever climbed.

At five in the morning of August 5, at the Moraine Lake car park, we do not find the usual quietude and stillness of the mountains one might expect. Throngs of tourists are bustling around with cameras at hand, hurrying to catch the iconic photo of Moraine Lake at sunrise. Tony and I sneak through all the chaos unnoticed and head up the dark forest path toward Wenkchemna Pass.

We make our way over to the prominent pillar just left of the central face on Neptuak, and separated from it by a large gully. The rock on the pillar appears to be better quality than on the main face, and is steeper and less threatened by overhead hazard.

Tony takes the first lead block, meandering through chimneys and choss, while I battle with the haulbag, helping to push it up while following the pitch. The next block is mid-5.10 up a steep face of bulletproof black quartzite speckled with tiny edges. I tack my way upward carefully. With nothing for gear but the occasional birdbeak placement, it feels more like free soloing than roped climbing.

Around 4 p.m. we arrive at a ledge big enough to bivvy. We fix our lead line 60m above to get a head start in the morning, then begin unpacking our "bivy kit essentials" from the haulbag: my ultralight G7 hanging pod and Tony's Grinch Who Stole Christmas fleece pajama pants. We are set to sleep like angels, but a bit of rockfall in the night keeps me awake. The gully to the right sees quite a lot of action from the melting snow up high, and I am glad we aren't over there.

The next day we awake with vibrant energy and begin picking our way through the maze of flakes and roofs. Around midday, from a belay behind a giant tower, I begin to climb the first crux of the route. Tricky moves across a pegmatite band lead into a shallow groove. Tony is now around the corner and out of sight. Jaws of choss point down at me from under a small roof. I find some sparse gear and gingerly start up. Out to my left is a single white rock sticking out amid the orange. This one looks to be connected to the mountain better than the rest. I gently swing my left foot from under the roof and dig my heel in to the white rock. I slowly transition my weight, matching my left hand onto the hold, then gradually pull up and over, breathing a sigh of relief when I am clear of the dangerous choss.

The northeast face of Neptuak Mountain. (1) Psychological Effect (700m, M7 WI5+, Leclerc-Lindič, April 2016). (2) The Hammer and the Dance (750m, 5.11c, Harrington-McLane, August 2020). Photo by Brette Harrington

Tony leads through an offwidth and then onto some of the worst rock on the entire mountain—the red bands before the rock transitions to limestone. The red material is so decrepit, I hesitate to even call it rock. But Tony keeps a clear head and guides us safely through.

We are making decent time and at this point are high on the wall, but our options are narrowing. To the left, a blue limestone wall with dark fissures hangs above the deep gray basin. The wall drops steeply below as I traverse a thin flake. A limestone tooth the size of a microwave hangs down, and with one gentle touch it nearly detaches. To keep it from slicing my rope, I give it a powerful shove and it sails off the wall and into the sea of gray below.

Feeling somewhat relieved, but now jittery from my lack of confidence in the rock, I tech my way up delicate 5.11c climbing. It isn't till dusk that we find ourselves on the summit, completely exhilarated and exhausted. We snap some summit pictures, set up our bivy, and go to sleep

We wake at 5 a.m. to beat the rainstorm that is forecasted to hit midmorning. We descend the ridgeline to the north—downclimbing and rappelling—and make it back to the base just as a torrential storm hits. Soaked to the bone but completely satisfied, we slosh our way down the trail and back to the car.

Our climb, as harrowing as it was at times, feels like a reprieve from a shattered world. Returning to civilization and the endless news cycle is a rude awakening.

"What should we call it?" Tony asks.

"How about The Hammer and the Dance?" I reply.

Tony nods his head, smiling. "Sounds appropriate."

Editor's Note: The Hammer and the Dance (750m, 5.11c) is the second route up the northeast face of Neptuak and the first completed as a summer rock climb. Harrington and McLane team-freed the climb, onsight, taking no falls on lead. In the spring of 2016, Marc-André Leclerc and Luka Lindič established a mixed line on the left side of the face (Psychological Effect, 700m, M7 WI5+).

Images



Tony McLane follows the upper crux of The Hammer and the Dance (750m, 5.11c) on the northeast face of Neptuak Mountain. His and Harrington's route is the first summer rock climb to ascend the face.



Tony McLane tackles steep, solid quartzite above the bivy on the first day of his and Brette Harrington's The Hammer and the Dance (750m, 5.11c) on the northeast face of Neptuak Mountain.



Brette Harrington and Tony McLane settle in to bivy at the end of their first day on The Hammer and the Dance (750m, 5.11c) on the northeast face of Neptuak Mountain.



Brette Harrington takes in an unreal sunset from atop the northeast face of Neptuak Mountain in The Valley of the Ten Peaks, following her and Tony McLane's climb of The Hammer and the Dance (750m, 5.11c).



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Article Details

Author	Brette Harrington
Publication	AAJ
Volume	63
Issue	95
Page	113
Copyright Date	2021
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions