



AAC Publications

Mt. Rearguard, North Face, Rite of Groot

Montana, Beartooth Mountains

I first noted the 1,200' north face of Mt. Rearguard while skiing underneath it 11 years ago on the way to the Bears Tooth—a prominent granite/gneiss spire jutting out of the east face of Beartooth Mountain and the namesake for the entire range—and vowed to return someday to attempt it. I couldn't find any reports of a prior ascent or attempt on the Rearguard face, but the Beartooths are vast and plenty of large formations await first ascents. Many don't even have names. I started this labor of love alone by carrying ropes and aid gear up the seven-mile approach to stunning Black Canyon Lake in June, figuring I'd have a partner or two when I came back.

I returned a month later with Kyle Eaton and Jim Rott, still undecided on the exact line we should take. We agreed on an obvious start and planned to angle toward a prominent corner system on the right side of the face. We pushed a high point four pitches up over a few days, stopping under a formation that looked like the face of Groot, the talking tree from the film *Guardians of the Galaxy*. I encountered thin nailing and hooking up to A3-, but felt that most of it could eventually go free, especially with a key variation that would require some more work.

We left ropes fixed to Groot and climbing and camping gear cached in two different locations. When I returned over a month later with Kyle and Bill Oxendahl, rodents (likely at least one bushy tailed woodrat) had chewed through our haul bag at the base, as well as our camp cache, and destroyed some essential gear. It wasn't our time to climb.

I returned again in August with Spencer Gray and Kate Mylan. The climbing in the corner system we'd targeted was generally good, with wild exposure, creative pro, and a mix of face and crack moves. Everything above pitch four went free up to 5.11-, mostly onsight. Jumaring the ropes each day was getting to be a bit much, so we committed to topping out on Kate's last vacation day, hitting the summit at dark after Spencer led a fantastic 70-meter 5.10+ pitch that had the most continuous splitter cracks of the entire route.

Spencer and I hiked back a final time after waiting out days of heavy rain at my house, an hour's drive from the trailhead. We juggled our lines to drill some key bolts and work the crux moves on the third pitch, then returned to the ground to mount a full free attempt. We went for it on August 23, the last day of climbable but still cold weather (the wall gets no sunshine after the summer solstice). Spencer dispatched the crux third pitch at 5.12b and then did the same with the fourth pitch at 5.11+. My contribution was freeing the eighth pitch, a chimney and offwidth, at 5.11-. After 15 hours, we completed the free ascent of Rite of Groot (V 5.12b or 5.9 A3-). We endured a marginal bivy near the top, and by the next afternoon the wall was fully cleaned up. Kyle, Jim, and Bill joined us to haul the huge kit back to the trailhead.

To our knowledge, this is the only rock climb in the Black Canyon drainage (and possibly in the entire Lake Fork drainage), aside from the standard four-pitch route on the Bears Tooth. (There are excellent ice climbs here, though.) Then again, this is the Beartooths, where over the decades people climbed but didn't report much of anything.

The route is equipped with stainless-steel belay anchors and rap rings, and was done with only seven protection bolts. (The aid variation has one bathook and two rivets.) Aid ascents will need pins, but it goes free without them.

Images



Kate Mylan investigates sequences on the crux third pitch of Rite of Groot on Mt. Rearguard's north face.



Kate Mylan following a pitch high on Rite of Groot, on the north face of Mt. Rearguard, during the first ascent.



Rite of Groot, likely the first route on the north face of Mt. Rearguard, in the Beartooth mountains. This photo was taken from just above Black Canyon Lake.

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