



AAC Publications

Oak Creek Drainage, Na-Gah's Wall, First Free Ascent

United States, Utah, Zion National Park

In February 2020, on a rest-day hike into the Oak Creek drainage, I observed a striking splitter 1,000' off the ground leading to the top of a west-facing wall south of Meridian Tower. I returned a week later with George Perkins. We arrived at the top of the clean first pitch to discover a set of anchors with a few threads of tat blowing in the wind. Our hopes of a first ascent dashed, we continued anyway on a series of long parallel-sided cracks connected by old anchors, stopping one pitch below the dream splitter as nightfall engulfed us.

A couple of weeks later, I returned with Jonathan Esack to attempt a ground-up free ascent, only to discover that a fine veneer of sand now coated the cracks, left there by a rainstorm. After some dramatic whippers, we hobbled away, having reached the same high point as George and I did.

The line sat dormant over the next year, but the length and flawlessness of the crack systems gnawed at me. In the archives at the Zion wilderness desk, I found an old topo indicating that John Allen, James Funsten, and Scott Rourke had completed the first ascent in October 1993 at VI 5.10 A3. The route apparently had yet to be free climbed. So, in February 2021, with a dose of inspiration, I started to work on freeing the line, rope-soloing when I could not find a partner.

I made the journey from Salt Lake City to Zion on a near weekly basis, driving myself to border-line insanity. I convinced several partners to come up on the project, including Elliott Bernhagen, Levi Call, Jonathan Esack, Ryan Little, and Alex Parker. We endured stuck ropes, late nights, and an unexpected snowstorm. Every outing resulted in a hike out that finished after midnight. However, on each trip we made minute progress. Everyone contributed beta to unlock the crux pitches.

The 1,200' 10-pitch route has several pitches in the 5.11 to 5.12 range. The standout leads (names courtesy of the 1993 first ascensionists) include the Enduro Pitch, a 5.11+ corner; the Sandbox Pitch, a one-inch crack that turns into bouldery face climbing and ends in a tight corner; the Mo' Splitter Pitch, a hand crack that terminates in a seam which can be bypassed by a boulder problem on the face; and the Son of Mo' Pitch, a glorious 5.10 wide-hands crack at the top of the wall. At the end of March, with the help of Ryan Little, I made it to the summit without any falls in a single push. We got back to the cars before midnight for the first time.

The 1993 first ascensionists named the route after the Paiute legend of Na-Gah. Na-Gah was the son of the mountain goat Shinoh, and one day he scaled a peak so high and difficult that he became stranded. Because he could not move, his father turned him into the north star to guide all others in the night sky.

— Forest Atherr

Images



The line of Na-Gah's Wall (1,200', 10 pitches, 5.12), on the west face of a wall south of Meridian Tower, Zion National Park, Utah.



Elliott Bernhagen on the "Enduro Pitch" (5.11+), Na-Gah's Wall (1,200', 10 pitches, 5.12).



Elliott Bernhagen on the "Enduro Pitch" (5.11+), Na-Gah's Wall (1,200', 10 pitches, 5.12).



Forest Altherr starting up the "Mo' Splitter Pitch," on Na-Gah's Wall (1,200', 10 pitches, 5.12). After a hand crack that narrows to a seam, the pitch culminates with a boulder problem on the face.



Forest Altherr on the "Mo' Splitter Pitch," on Na-Gah's Wall (1,200', 10 pitches, 5.12). After a hand crack that narrows to a seam, the pitch culminates with a boulder problem on the face.



Forest Altherr in the crux sequence of the "Mo' Splitter Pitch," on Na-Gah's Wall (1,200', 10 pitches, 5.12), on the west face of a wall south of Meridian Tower, Zion National Park, Utah.



The line of Na-Gah's Wall (1,200', 10 pitches, 5.12), on the west face of a wall south of Meridian Tower, Zion National Park, Utah.

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