



AAC Publications

The Crack in the Cosmic Egg, First Free Ascent

United States, Utah, Zion National Park

Nearing the end of the crux of pitch three, “The Intergalactic Hitman” pitch, which went free at 5.13a R.

IN DECEMBER 2004, American climber Mike Anderson did the first free ascent of the Lowe Route on the striking north face of Angels Landing. In an article in *Alpinist* 11, Anderson wrote, “For decades, climbers in Yosemite have been systematically eliminating aid from any route that will go. In Zion, apart from Douglas Heinrich, most climbers just don’t bother. I decided to bother.” I taped Anderson’s article to the ceiling of my minivan.

Seventeen years later, on November 3, having decided to bother, I tied my rope around a coffin-size boulder at the base of The Crack in the Cosmic Egg, gave the rope a reassuring tug, and started up the first pitch alone, equal parts determined and terrified.

Les Ellison and Brian Smoot did the first ascent of The Crack in the Cosmic Egg (11 pitches, V 5.10 C2+) in 1984. The bulk of the route is a continuous five-pitch seam that rockets up Mt. Moroni’s steep east face. A friend pointed it out once last fall and said it “might” go. I was in Zion alone and had the month of November free. I planned to aid solo the first five pitches to investigate the potential, and after seven afternoons the ropes were fixed and I began to see a possible free climbing path.

The first big question mark was the second pitch: a two-meter bolt ladder that connected a blank-looking section of sandstone to the route’s dominant crack system. To the left of the bolt ladder I noticed a promising-looking secondary seam leading to a Braille trail of face holds that cut right, back to the major crack system. The second question mark was pitch three, a fierce 0.1 cam-size splitter with a few blown-out pin scars. For a few meters, it overhangs 20 degrees. There was just enough bomber gear to convince me to keep investigating.

The month rolled on. I toiled away at the slow, methodical, and very real labor of vision and dreams, speaking only to sandy holds and two California condors. It was coming together, but I was tired, eager to share the experience, and needed a proper belay.

Desperate, I called my friend Hoai-Nam Bui and offered to pay for her gas from Bishop if she’d come up on the wall with me. Her visit turned the page on the process. With new perspectives and a proper belay, the path forward became clearer. To avoid the bolt ladder on pitch two, I hand-drilled three bolts up the thin seam to the left. My variation then traversed back into the main crack system, which was pumpy, technical, and protected by very specific nut placements. Pitch three—where the seam kicks back—was proving to be the kind of pitch my teenage self only dreamed of finding: hard and scary, with just enough gear for it to be safe.

I returned with my friend (and hero) Drew Marshall for one final prep day. With some advice from Drew and motivation from The Pixies, I sorted out the moves on the pitch-two variation and felt confident I could climb the pitch. Drew, however, saw the original aid line engineering its way across a blank slab and was convinced it would go free. He quickly did all the moves. My personal definition of “blank” sandstone was redefined in an instant. Pitch two could go free two different ways: 5.13b using my variation or heinous 5.12+ slab following the original line.

It was finally time to try to lead all the pitches, bottom to top. On November 21, with my friend Steffan Hadeed on belay, I sent the 5.13b version of pitch two on my first try of the day, spending almost an hour climbing through the delicate and spicy seam after the crux boulder. It was late and the fall sun was already low. Steffan and I descended fixed ropes and returned the next day, gung-ho about sending pitch three and blasting to the summit. I gave everything I had on it, but came up short. I was bummed, but still determined to see my vision through.

I went back up two days later with Drew and our friend Jérôme St-Michel, whom I invited to take pictures. Once again, I couldn't do pitch three. Drew—an experienced technician—had found some alternate beta to my sequence, and he was looking smooth. His eyes met mine with empathy.

“You should do it, man,” I said, breaking the silence. “You should lead this pitch.”

Drew, a good friend, was hesitant. He said he didn't mind waiting for me to try again, but I had nothing left to give. I put on my puffy and a brave face and told Drew to go for it. He flipped the switch and fired it. To be honest, it hurt. I knew there was a lot to learn from Drew's graceful navigation of intense climbing and the nuances of friendship, but in the moment I felt more sad and conflicted than noble and wise.

Dejected or not, I was in for a ride on the next pitch, scrapping and screaming upward. Fearing more failure, I desperately yelled on the last boulder problem and slumped onto the anchor after clipping it, one of the best pitches of 5.12 I have ever climbed. The next day, we ascended our fixed lines to try pitch five for the first time. I was excited about the idea of a quasi-onsight and stepped off the belay ready to quest. I squeaked out a tricky traverse and groveled up an obligatory Zion chimney of sand, fear-screaming my way through the slopey exit. We were going to the summit!

Above this, pitch nine was the only one no one had yet freed. Drew and I took one look at the original aid line and knew that it wasn't the way. To our left, an easy looking sea of holds led to an arete. It was scrappy Zion climbing at its finest: tempting jugs held on by unknown forces, thorny bushes, and granular white rock that always climbs in a more engaging manner than it looks. We detoured around the aid line in two leads, dubbed the “Guide's Intuition Pitches.”

On top we lingered as the sun set. I felt a warm wave of gratitude. For Zion. For Drew. In all, we had added six new free pitches: The Crack in the Cosmic Egg Free (10 pitches, IV 5.13b R). Drew and our friend Meghan Denny graciously offered to come back with me after a rest day, and I sent pitch three with Drew's beta. I didn't feel euphoria so much as a sort of peaceful sadness. I'm learning that when you give something life, you inherently give it a death as well. I ran out of time to make a continuous free ascent—that is someone else's dream, and I'm excited for them. To anyone reading this, I encourage you to tune out of the dogma of things that just won't go and tune into your vision. Go bother.

— Nat Bailey, Canada

Images



Drew Marshall eyes up the last hold of the crux during the first free ascent of pitch three (5.13a R) on The Crack in the Cosmic Egg Free (10 pitches, 5.13b), on the east face of Mt. Moroni, Zion National Park, Utah. Marshall and Nat Bailey named this the “The Intergalactic Hitman” pitch.



Nat Bailey about to take a whip while attempting to free pitch three (5.13a R) on The Crack in the Cosmic Egg (10 pitches 5.13b).



Nat Bailey attempting pitch three (5.13a R) on The Crack in the Cosmic Egg Free, the free version of a 1984 aid route on the east face of Mt. Moroni, Zion National Park, Utah.



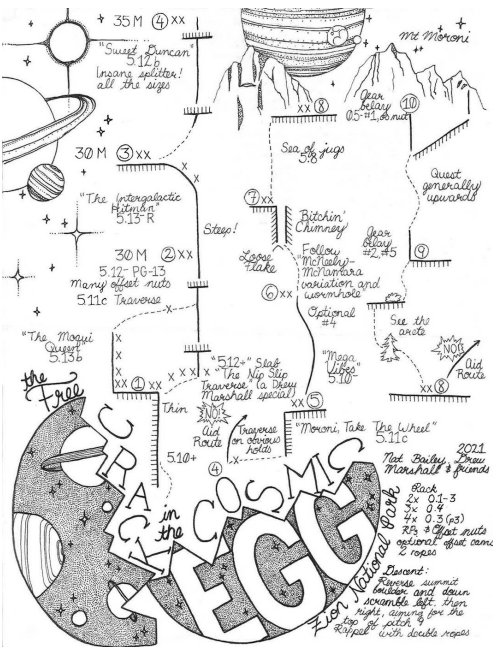
Nat Bailey on the crux moves of pitch three on The Crack in the Cosmic Egg. The successful sequence that both he and Drew Marshall used to free the pitch ended up going right, not left.



Nearing the end of the crux of pitch three, "The Intergalactic Hitman" pitch," which went free at 5.13a R.



Drew Marshall follows pitch four of The Crack in the Cosmic Egg Free. Nat and Drew dubbed this pitch "Sweet Duncan" (5.12b).



Topo of The Crack in the Cosmic Egg Free (10 pitches, 5.13b), on the east face of Mt. Moroni, Zion National Park, Utah. Topo by Brittany Goris.



The approximate line of The Crack in the Cosmic Egg Free. The square at the bottom shows the choose-your-own-adventure of pitch two.

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