



AAC Publications

South Early Winters Spire, Two Hard New Routes

United States, Washington, North Cascades

Nathan Hadley on pitch two of Rubbernecker (600', IV 5.14-). Photo by Jeremiah Watt

Shortly after moving to Washington in 2015, I was scouring the guidebooks for aid lines to free. In 2016, I found Midnight Ride (600', 5.9 A4) in Fred Beckey's Cascade Alpine Guide. The route climbs the southeastern aspect of South Early Winters Spire (SEWS), just left of the classic route The Passenger (800', IV 5.12a), in the Washington Pass area. The wall is not as big as the 1,200' east face of Liberty Bell, the most prominent spire in the area, but it is steep and clean, and it's easily accessible in just 1.5 to two hours on a good trail. I had been thinking about checking it out ever since, but it wasn't until the summer of 2021 that I finally did.

My friend Andy Wyatt and I rappelled into the face to take a look. We couldn't find the old aid route, but it seemed like there were plenty of features to make a new route possible. The most exciting find was 50' of continuous pockets leading up the headwall of the southeast face. It was like a pitch stolen from Wild Iris or Smith Rock and placed 500' off the deck. These pockets, atypical for granite, ranged from big enough for your entire hand to shallow two-finger divots. The most overhung section had the smallest pockets and seemed barely possible. But more concerning was a long seam lower down that would need to be climbed to reach the pocket pitch. The line was appealing, but just looked too hard to tackle at the time; we opted to move our ropes to corner systems to the right.

After several weekends of work—with additional help from Matt Carroll—we uncovered a striking line up some of the steepest rock in Washington Pass. This route, which we later named Backseat Driver (600', 7 pitches, IV 5.13), weaves together an elegant series of cracks, shallow corners, and powerful left-facing laybacks on immaculate stone. A few improbable and fun boulder problems provide key passage between the generally left-facing features. The route is well protected with a combination of gear and bolts, and has bolted anchors. On the last pitch, it merges with the right-hand finish of The Passenger. I freed the route on July 11, 2021, with Andy's support.

Later that summer, I spent a couple of days looking into the line we'd scoped on the first reconnaissance. After some cleaning and examining each pitch, I found that it would likely go.

After a wet spring, I made it back in late June 2022. I spent the weekends of the following month working alone and sometimes with friends—notably Adrian Vanoni and Gus Nava—cleaning and prepping the route, which had a great mix of movement. Each pitch served up something different than the last, and the hard climbing was spread out nicely versus being concentrated all in one hard boulder. The difficulty was perhaps distributed too well, though: Four of the route's seven pitches were 5.13 or harder. Some pitches have a sport-climbing feel, including the crux pitch, an off-vertical closed-down splitter, and most of the pocket pitch at the top. However, the second-hardest pitch is a gear-protected 5.13+ steep crack. I named the route Rubbernecker (600', 7 pitches, IV 5.14-) because of the way I and others always stare up at the Washington Pass spires from our car windows as we drive by.

On August 2, 2022, after about 10 days of cleaning and working the route, I sent Rubbernecker on my first ground-up effort. I fell numerous times on both the crux pitch and the next one before sending them, including a harrowing fall where I ripped out two pieces of gear. I have done a handful of 5.13+ and 5.14- multi-pitch routes, and none required as much effort as Rubbernecker. I reached the top of the wall just after dusk, climbing the last pitch by headlamp. I sat at the top, looking out at the layers

of dark mountains as the stars started to appear overhead, and had a moment of gratitude that I have the health and ability to enjoy places like this in this unique way.

– **Nathan Hadley**

Images



Rubbernecker (600', 7 pitches, IV 5.14-), left, and Backseat Driver (600', 7 pitches, IV 5.13), right, two new routes established by Nathan Hadley and friends on the southeast side of South Early Winters Spire, North Cascades, Washington. The two routes are just left of The Passenger, a well-known classic.



Nathan Hadley on the 5.13 pitch two of Rubbernecker (7 pitches, IV 5.14-), on the southeast face of South Early Winters Spire, North Cascades, Washington.



Nathan Hadley on pitch two of Rubbernecker (600', IV 5.14-).



Nathan Hadley on the 5.13 pitch two of Rubbernecker (600', 7 pitches, IV 5.14-), on the southeast face of South Early Winters Spire.



Pitch three of Rubbernecker is 5.14-. It is completely bolted because the crack is sealed shut, according to first ascensionist Nathan Hadley. The pitch has difficult laybacking on slopers and no jams or locks.



Some of the tenuous laybacking and smearing on the initial seam of Rubberneckers' crux third pitch, a 5.14-, before one transfers to a second seam.



Nathan Hadley executing the last hard move on the 5.13 seventh and final pitch of Rubbernecker (600', IV 5.14-), on the southeast face of South Early Winters Spire, North Cascades.



Pitch seven of Rubbernecker begins with a pocketed face, leads to the rail climbed here by first ascensionist Nathan Hadley, and ends with a splitter crack.

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